The Cunning Present: On the Siege of Yarmouk, the torn document, and the tragicomic

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There'll be no plot, with its promise of a beginning and hope of an end.

—Andrzej Stasiuk, Dukla (2011)

Abstract: Set during and in the aftermath of the siege of Yarmouk, when the Palestinian camp 7km south of Damascus was subjected to periods of starvation siege by Assad forces and their allies for periods between 2013 and 2018, this essay analyses the temporality experienced by a young group of activists, filmmakers and writers and its relation to the narrative forms they produced. By defying the warnings of their elders and joining the Syrian revolution, these young Palestinian-Syrians found themselves stranded in what one writer and filmmaker, Abdallah al-Khatib, called "the cunning present", when neither the lessons of the past nor hope for the future manage to plot a way out. First, drawing on David Scott's reading of Mannheim (Scott 2014b), I theorise their experience of time under siege through the concept of a generation; second, I draw on a number of recent readings of Palestinian and Syrian temporality post-2011 (Abourahme 2016; Tawil-Souri 2017; McManus 2021). Finally, following theorisations on the links between temporality and narrativity (Kermode 1967; Ricœur 1984; Koselleck 2004; Scott 2014a), the

article analyses their subsequent experiments with narrative form across image and text in order to document the contradictory experience of time passing as *stasis*. Under siege, stranded between past and future, between familiarity with the older generation's discourse and alienation from it, their documentary experiments follow what I theorise as a tragicomic mode, an inconclusive form of narrative tension, which offers no resolution to its contradictions.

Figure 1. Stills from a rough cut of Abdallah al-Khatib's film

When it was Abdallah al-Khatib's turn to play his footage, he began with a clip of a market street on a grey winter's day. From the high angle, shot from a balcony overlooking the street, it looked like people were walking back and forth through the market stalls as usual, or perhaps slightly slower than usual. The camera starts to zoom into the deep space. "It looks like a normal scene," Abdallah remarked. "But everyone's bags are empty, and there's nothing to buy." Only then did it dawn on the room that something wasn't quite right. The next clip showed a dog chasing a cat on a similarly grey street. The scene is cartoonish at first. Passers-by stop and stare. The terrified cat runs so fast it seems to skid perpendicular along the concrete walls of the encircling buildings. Then brutal, when we realise that the dog, in desperate hunger, is chasing to kill. The scene cuts before the expected end; we never learn whether the cat gets caught.

The clips continued with the same mixture of tenderness and brutality for fifteen minutes. There was no plot, no narrative, just a collection of scenes. Not beginnings and endings, but inconclusive middles. At first, Abdallah al-Khatib spoke infrequently, interjecting a simple comment that would turn, as in a gestalt-shift, a normal-looking scene into something altogether more ominous. A young boy gingerly riding a bicycle that looks too big for him. He turns the corner, wobbles, and places a foot down on the ground. Only then do we realise he only has one leg, but that he keeps resolutely riding.

As the scenes accumulated, Abdallah began to read a brief passage from *The Forty Rules of Siege*, a piece of writing he composed during the siege of Yarmouk. *The Forty Rules of Siege* was one of the strangest and most evocative pieces of writing I'd read from the Syrian revolution. It's a list of rules, more poem than prose, without narrative structure, through which the reader enters the siege *in medias res*. Despite being a piece of writing about siege, with its

obvious implications of being confined, of having one's movements in and out restricted, the

piece shifts the reader or listener's attention shifts from space to time:

> *Rule number 29:*
> *The siege is an eternal wager between two times that will never meet, that's how the besieged feels*
> *A cunning present [hādir mākir] witnessing a war within us between the past and the future, a*
> *struggle over which of the two will produce hope from the midst of massacres*
> *This siege will be a raging epidemic spreading like oil over your personal past, it will eradicate*
> *within you that which you once tried to become*
> *Neither tomorrow's future nor yesterday's past, says the siege*
> *And yet the siege is only a temporary crossing between two times, says the historian:*
> *An endless past and a future yet to come*
> *A deep wound within your personal history, ripping out your past like a fistful of wool by a gloved*
> *hand*
> *The siege is an interruption in rational time; so, make do with the irrational*
> (Al-Khatib n.d. author's translation)

The starvation siege and its violence, his prose-poetry suggested, had inscribed a peculiar

experience of time passing. It's a temporality that doesn't fit into the schema of either the

chronological time of history or cyclical time of seasons. It's neither *chronos*, time progressing

in successive units, nor *kairos*, the moment of crisis, the opportune moment "charged with

meaning from its relation to the end" (Kermode 1967, 46–47). Rather, siege is an in-between, a

contradictory time of time passing as *stasis*, of neither the rational order of progress; the divine

order of apocalypse, damnation, or redemption; nor the natural order of cyclical repetition. "So,

make do with the irrational", Abdallah counsels.

Figure 2. Still from a rough cut of Abdallah al-Khatib's film

Abdallah al-Khatib had arrived in Istanbul a week earlier from northern Syria. It was July 2018, the siege of Yarmouk had ended two months earlier, and he was on the last convoy of 'green busses' out after a 'local ceasefire' had been brokered. The workshop in Istanbul was organized by Bidayyat, a Syrian diasporic documentary film production non-profit founded in 2013 in Beirut.[1] For the last five years, Bidayyat had been running regular workshops to train young Syrians and Palestinian-Syrians – many of whom had spent long periods of the Syrian revolution and war as media activists – to produce their first "experimental documentaries". At the workshop in Istanbul, many of the participants had crossed over from northern Syrian specially to participate in the workshop. They brought hard-drives storing footage they'd shot themselves, or that belonged to the Media Office (*maktab iʿlāmī*) they were part of, claiming a share of the footage's collective ownership.

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[1] https://bidayyat.org/ (accessed 18 August 2023). On Bidayyat, see the dossier for the documentary media journal *World Records* I edited. https://worldrecordsjournal.org/category/volume-8/ (accessed 18 August 2023)

Abdallah al-Khatib's writing drew on a canonical Palestinian poetic tradition linked to the national bard Mahmoud Darwish, who had written about the experience of siege in West Beirut in 1982, the Second Intifada, and finally Gaza (Darwish 2010). But Abdallah al-Khatib was also pairing his prose-poetry with footage shot on a small handheld digital camera. He documented how the inhabitants of Yarmouk came to know every inch of the territory enclosed within the siege, a space of contradiction between liberation and domination: liberated from the Assad regime yet its perimeter sealed by snipers and checkpoints. It's a precarious space: once liberated it's also infiltrated by ISIS, Abdallah explained. Finally, the space is sealed entirely for anything except hunger, no way in and no way out. As he played his clips, Abdallah explained how the inhabitants of Yarmouk scoured every inch of the camp for wasteland so as to sow it for food during the starvation siege, how they learnt to eat even seemingly inedible weeds, grasses, and cactus leaves. Across image and text, the city and the psyche, the space of Yarmouk under siege, and the inner space of psychic life under siege, Abdallah documented siege as a seemingly endless, and yet temporary, time. When the lights went up at the end of his presentation, the room was visibly shaken.

In our follow-up interviews, Abdallah al-Khatib explained to me that when the siege of Yarmouk began, he'd originally intended to record oral histories with elderly Palestinians in the camp in order to preserve their testimonies in an "archive (*arshīf*)". He feared the loss of a generation's memories of Palestine before the Nakba.[2] Gradually, his anxieties over the loss of a nation-in-waiting's memory gave way to a drive to document something of the quality of one of

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[2] For an in-depth account of the memory practices of Syrian-Palestinians in the years preceding and during the Syrian Revolution, see the ethnography of Yarmouk by Anaheed Al-Hardan (2016). Abdallah al-Khatib's documentary work during the siege can be seen as both a rupture with and complementary to the account given by Al-Hardan in her ethnography of memory practices in Yarmouk prior to 2011. Rupture because he joins the revolution; complementary because he heeds the advice of the older generation discussed by Al-Hardan.

the harshest sieges of the Syrian revolution and war. Eventually, Abdallah al-Khatib secured papers, and managed to claim asylum in Germany, where he finished the postproduction of the film with the editor Qutaiba Barhamji. It was through subtitling rushes for the project over a period of three years that I came to know the details of Abdallah's footage. I eventually also subtitled the final cut, title *Little Palestine (Diary of a Siege)* (2021) which would win prizes and go on general release in French cinemas.

From the camp elders' testimonies, it's clear that they interpreted the time of siege as a recurrence of the past, the *Nakba* re-enacted, whose lessons they'd learnt and must now pass on to Abdallah and others from the younger generation. They berated those who'd left their homes when fighting between the regime and Free Syrian Army broke out in the camp. The parents' generation seemed to agree. They had taken up arms in Jordan, Lebanon and across the world as part of the Palestinian revolution, and were subjected to a series of displacements, dispersals and defeats. Palestinians, both generations of elders argued, risked being dragged unwittingly into a struggle that wasn't theirs, exposing the camp, the largest concentration of Palestinians outside Palestine, to the present's political uncertainties.[3] They lamented that the camp's uneasy neutrality had been breached. They predicted another round of displacement, a recurrence of the past.

Abdallah al-Khatib, however, belonged to another, younger generation. He knew the lessons that had to be learnt from the past, as evidenced by his urge to document the Nakba generation's testimonies. But he'd also shed some of the past's burden. Like other writers and media activists from his generation, he refused to see the Syrian revolution as separate from the

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[3] Anaheed al-Hardan gives a detailed account of these anxieties in the conclusion to her ethnography of Yarmouk, see "The Catastrophes of Today, The Catastrophe of 1948", (2016, 184–92). See also the films by Samer Salamah (2017; 2018), also produced by Bidayyat, which record interactions between the late activist Hassan Hassan and his father.

plight of Palestinian-Syrians. He adopted the cause of the Syrian Revolution as his own. He also

rejected the Islamist politics that attracted both contemporaries and elders (see the account

Salamah 2016; and his own account in Al-Khatib, Rollins, and Shaheen 2020).

Abdallah and the younger generations would take up an ambivalent posture when

listening to the older generation's discourse. One particular scene I subtitled captures this stance.

It shows the camp elder Abu Ra'fat sitting crossed-legged in front of the rubble of a house after

the airstrike, holding a twig. He asks Abdallah to film a formal statement addressed to the

'International Community':

> I am here awaiting return to the West Bank and Gaza. Our martyr, Abu Ammar [Yasser Arafat], carried an olive branch in one hand and a rifle in the other. And you exiled him from Jordan. You expelled him from Syria. You chased him out of Lebanon. We want to go home! Or die and be buried here.

As he speaks, Abu Ra'fat loses control and starts to pound the ground with the twig in one hand

and piece of mangled plastic in the other. The solemnity of the speech, its references to the

anticolonial figures of yore, Abdallah's framing, combined with the elder's loss of control, all

combine to contradictory effect. One can't help but imagine a wry smile forming on Abdallah's

lips. A wry smile is a contradictory reaction: one side of the mouth twists up in laughter while

the other remains deathly serious. It typifies the tragicomic mode with which a young generation

of writers and filmmakers relate to the experience of siege, and to the *doxas* and discourses of

their elders. Perhaps it's this unwieldy contradictory effect that meant the scene wasn't included

in the final cut.[4]

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[4] See the co-authored introduction to a special issue of *World Records* for a longer analysis of this scene and the idea of a "wry smile" (Tarnowski and Estefan 2023).

Figure 3. The older generation's tragic discourse; the younger generation's tragicomic stance towards it. Stills I subtitled from a rough cut of Abdallah al-Khatib's film.

For the older generation, the sense of time as *kairos*, a cumulative repetition of an originary catastrophe, the *Nakba*, is ongoing; but for these younger revolutionaries, the sense of *chronos*, in the form of a hopeful longing for a new beginning and a revolutionary future, should be driving them forward.[5] But for Abdallah al-Khatib and others in his generation, who felt kinship with the older generation of Palestinians and solidarity with the Syrian revolution, the siege had left him stranded in what he called a "cunning present" [*ḥādir mākir*]. Cunning because despite feeling responsibility towards the past and enthusiasm for the future, the present stubbornly re-emerges, like Hegel's account of "Reason" in "History", untouched by setbacks or attempts to overcome it.[6] The present isn't cunning because nothing changes; it's not a nihilistic idea. It's cunning because neither the lessons of the past nor enthusiasm for the future, neither "the space of experience" nor the "horizon of expectation" (Koselleck 2004, 255–75), manage to plot a way out of their political dilemmas.

The intention here is to give an account of this contradictory experience of time, which Abdallah al-Khatib called 'the cunning present' – the feeling of time passing while standing still, of time passing as *stasis.* This, in turn, will lead me to argue that there is a connection between this temporality and the narrative forms and genres through which a young generation of Palestinian-Syrian media activists, writers, and filmmakers attempted to document the siege of Yarmouk.

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[5] For a longer discussion of these formulations of the concepts of *chronos* and *kairos*, see David Scott (2014a, 62–70).

[6] For discussions of Hegel's account of the "cunning of reason", see Charles Taylor (2015) and Richard Tuck (1956). For well-known critical accounts of cunning, one in relation to recognition of indigenous communities by the multicultural Australian state, see Elizabeth Povinelli (2002), and the other on second wave feminism by Nancy Fraser (2009)

Figure 4. Hassan Hassan's last interview, stills from *Little Palestine (Diary of a Siege)* (Al-Khatib 2021).

The Generations of Siege

In his ethnography of an Egyptian village before and after the Egyptian revolution, Samuli Schielke gives an account of youth boredom that he calls "life in the future tense", which he argues is "a major outcome of globally mediated promises of a good life" that makes "people around the world perceive their immediate lifeworld as worthless and hopeless" (Schielke 2015,

35). In the case of the siege of Yarmouk, I want to consider this same combination of three elements – society, technics, and generation – albeit perhaps in less existential terms, and in order to offer a generational formulation of temporality during the siege of Yarmouk and in the wake of a revolution's defeat.

Founding figures in both sociology and media studies have attempted to claim that the Kantian "forms of the intuition" – space and time – as well as the Kantian categories (e.g. causality) are in fact determined by their respective disciplinary objects. Both these disciplines have displaced these "conditions of possibility" for experience from the individual synthesising subject to society or a media technology. In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim ([1915] 2008) would famously argue that "the categories of the understanding", in which he included time and space, "are essentially collective, they translate in the first instance to states of collectivity." (Ibid., 17)

Since these foundational claims that the structure of society and its collective representations determine what Kant called "the conditions of intuition" and the "form of experience", time has been a means to categorise societies and analyse social structures. Levi-Strauss, for example, remarked that societies could be categorised as "hot" or "cold" depending on their attitudes to time. The former are "diachronic" having internalised an attitude to historicity and temporality (Levi-Strauss 1971); while the latter are "synchronic", meaning, in Alfred Gell's critique of Levi-Strauss, societies "whose cognitive schemes are static and unreceptive to change" (Gell 1992, 23).

Such temporal categorisations of a society or a culture have largely fallen out of fashion. More recently, social structure and temporality have been linked into an internally coherent system – or culture – through a relationship to narrativity. Joel Robbins, for example, has argued

that certain kinds of narrative are a "ritual performance" which allow a culture subjected to a historical rupture – e.g. colonialism, a religious conversion – "to see continuity in their social life" despite importing a foreign view of time, in this case millenarianism (Robbins 2001, 541). Here, narrative form functions as a means to "make sense of the changing world in which they live". In this theoretical move, narrativity – the way stories are structured and told – plays a functional role; it's a way of incorporating an external historical force into an internal cultural form so as to produce cultural stability in the face of historical transformation.

In parallel, media theorists have claimed time as a disciplinary object of their own. Media, as Kittler once argued, "determine our situation"; "media are anthropological *a prioris*" (Kittler 1999, 109) Although Kittler himself doesn't use the phrase, a number of scholars who follow him have attempted to explain the constitutive effects of media on consciousness by appropriating the same phrase from Kant as the sociologists, describing media as forming "conditions of possibility" for time, space, causality etc. Often the phrase is deployed without further elaboration; it simply signals media's foundational importance. A co-authored introduction by Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark exemplifies this tradition of scholarship on media: "Media are transformative. They affect conditions of possibility in general." (Galloway, Thacker, and Wark 2014, 1) The phrase recurs when WJT Mitchell and Mark Hansen offer their own parse of Kittler's opening statement:

> Packed into Kittler's statement is a crucial claim: that media form the infrastructural basis, the quasi-transcendental condition, for experience and understanding. Like the strata of the seeable and sayable that, in French philosopher Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, make knowledge possible in a given historical moment, media broker the giving of space and time within which concrete experience becomes possible. (Mitchell and Hansen 2010, vii)

In this quote, Mitchell and Hansen suggest that both sets of Kantian faculties—of the intuition ("space and time") and reason ("experience and understanding")—are in fact determined by or 'grounded' in external media. In turn, theorists of the post-modern, including Lyotard and Jameson have argued that the "remediation of the world through information" has led to the destruction of narrative, a claim also taken up by media scholars.[7]

The point of this digression is to show, briefly, that whether in social or media theory, displacing or claiming to have found the actual location of the Kantian categories has been a foundational disciplinary move. In this essay, I take a step back from such foundational claims. I don't argue that time is the Kantian form of the intuition (something the mind lays upon the world to make things appear as appearances); the variable outcome of a collective representation (something grounded in social structure); nor the aftereffect of a media technology's ontology (something grounded in technics). Instead, I want to think of time as saturating the experience of both subjects and objects – including my own writing of this essay – first through the concept of a generation. Second, I expand to include more general chronopolitical institutions that predate the 2011 Syrian revolution. In the process, I attempt to show how a particular generational temporality can also lead to a more general series of insights, ones that extend into Syrian history beyond 2011 and across regional experiences in the wake of the 2011 Arab revolutions.

The cunning present, I argued above, is tied to the experience of siege as well as to a *generational* experience of time. This meant that the young writers and filmmakers from Yarmouk were experiencing time differently from their elders, and were thus producing documentary and narrative forms that differentiated them from their elder's discourses and doxas, even while maintaining continuity in some generic elements within a tradition of

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[7] For an interesting critique of this line of thought, see Caroline Bassett (2007).

intellectual production. In turn, one can think of the siege of Yarmouk as a "milieu" (Larkin 2021), which imposed radical limits on technics, the essential and universalizing features of a form of mediation, and that structured the production of documentation. Cut off from electricity and without access to the cloud, Abdallah al-Khatib and other activists were frequently forced to make stark choices as to what to keep and what to delete on their hard-drives, how to write and what to post online. In short, while both (society and technics) are undoubtedly important forces at play, I don't argue that the social or the technical form the *grounds* for a collective representation of time through narrative.

Similarly, with this young generation's intellectual productions that attempt to document for their experiences of siege. As a mode of relation to an older generation, the tragicomic mode resembles what Diana Allan has called the "trickster element" of Palestinian refugees' stories, narrated by those living on after the Palestinian revolution has ended. When embedded in stories, anecdotes, jokes, trickster elements break what Diana Allan called the "stereotypes of nationalist discourse", the "doxa" of *sumud*, *isrār wa muqawama* – steadfastness, perseverance, and resistance (Allan 2014, 1–2). The contradictory reaction of the wry smile also recalls the kind of alienation and familiarity with mediated forms of violence theorised by Lori Allen as being *zahqan* or fed up. In her essay on settler-colonial violence during the Second Intifada (2000-2005), Lori Allen describes a kind of lassitude that develops towards spectacular and formatted modes of mediating violence, which makes it both "emerge randomly in the flow of everyday life, [and blend] into and out of the background of the prosaic." (Allen 2008, 469).

The accounts by the Sard writers of temporality under siege also has much in common with three recent articles, by Nasser Abourahme, Helga Tawil-Souri, and Anne-Marie McManus. Nasser Abourahme (2016) gives an account of temporality in the West Bank at a time when the

Arab revolutions were much anticipated, observed from a distance, but didn't arrive. He begins his piece about temporality under the Palestinian Authority (PA) with a joke that did the rounds in the West Bank in 2011: "The Arab Spring was on its way to Palestine but then got held up at a checkpoint" (ibid. 129).

Helga Tawil-Souri (2017) reworks the joke in her theorisation of "Checkpoint Time", arguing not only that the Arab Spring got held up at a checkpoint, but that "Palestine is stuck inside a checkpoint". Through the concept of "Checkpoint Time", she describes "a disruption of the chronological continuum of past-present-future" (ibid. 409), a disruption produced by the combination of settler colonial institutions such as the prison, the checkpoint's infrastructure and technics, and an imperial encounter denying coevalness.

Nasser Abourahme (2016) describes the PA's formation of power as an organisation that has been subcontracted security and governance by the Israeli settler-colonial occupation. He calls this temporality a "perpetual suspended present", which, like McManus, he suggests is particular to one place, in his case the West Bank, while arguing that it contains insights for elsewhere. In a memorable turn of phrase, he argued that "[w]e might think of this Palestine as the tragedy of the postcolonial without the triumph, however pyrrhic, of the anti-colonial." (ibid. 151)

Anne-Marie McManus (2021) draws on Derrida's hauntology to read Syria's cultural production since 2011 through the lens of ruin and ruination in the aftermath of revolution:

> Time is held, suspended but not empty. In an endless present—what the contemporary humanities dubs *living on*—this corpus' eschatology is propelled by a memory of revolutionary opening, a future whose contours were known and lived, now submerged by signs of an apocalypse that will not stop rearriving. (ibid. 47)

Syrian cultural production, she argues, treads a delicate line both "within and against a distinctive…regime of historicity". It must bear the "burden of showing time's dynamism (and stasis)" (49). But this isn't restricted to a national scale: the time of ruin in Syria "signal[s] a destruction that insinuates itself globally" (55).

Our dreams were killed when the revolution left Beirut.

Figure 5. Stills from *4th Floor After the Nakba* **(Salameh 2018). Hassan Hassan's father talks to him about the recurrence of the past.**

Despite many overlaps with these theorisations, my contention is that the cunning present is more specific and the temporality of siege more general as kinds of temporal experience. The temporality of siege was felt by everyone who lived through the siege of Yarmouk and suffered the starvation tactics – but it's also related by scholars to a series of "chronopolitical" institutions and historical experiences that stretch beyond the 2011 Arab revolutions. But that's not the identical to the cunning present, a phrase taken from Abdallah al-Khatib's writing, and which was particular to a younger generation of Palestinians who'd learnt the lessons of the 1948 Nakba and the defeats of the 1970s and '80s Palestinian revolution, but who nonetheless felt solidarity for the 2011 revolution. The cunning present, in other words, refers to a particular *generational* experience of time.

As David Scott has recently theorised in a re-reading of Karl Mannheim's essay on generations, a generation is a "social institution of time—or institutionalization of temporality." (Scott 2014b, 161) Unlike Mannheim, Scott's main focus is not the generation *per se*, but an intellectual generation, a cohort of thinkers similarly oriented by an event, which has formulated a shared set of intellectual questions – and a diverse set of answers to those questions – which distinguishes them from their elders and successors, and yet which also overlaps in time with successive generations of intellectuals with whom they share a tradition of critical inquiry.[8] As Scott argues, drawing here on Husserl, the concept of a generation as embodying an intellectual tradition entails thinking of both the subject and object of criticism as "saturated with time":

> there is not merely the historicity of the object but also the temporality of the *subject* to consider. We do not merely live *in* history, in the commonplace sense that we inhabit a social and political environment *conditioned* by historical forces; rather, as historical subjects our consciousness is

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[8] There's a voluminous literature on the role of youth, and thus generation, in the Arab revolutions. The aim here is not primarily to think of generation sociologically alongside other salient categories such as class, race, or gender, but rather to consider the frame of a generation for the purposes of intellectual production of various kinds, whether documentary film or writing.

itself saturated with time. Or, to put it another way, history is not merely an *object* of consciousness there to be apprehended by a timeless subject; rather, temporality itself is the objective content-of-the-form of experience. (Scott 2014b, 163)

Following Scott's suggestion, I argue that this generation of writers and filmmakers who lived through the siege of Yarmouk were *both* saturated by the experience of time under siege (the cunning present, *stasis*), *and* produced visual and textual artefacts that have a particular historicity. They attempt to give form to that temporality, to the content of that experience (the torn document, the tragicomic mode, X-Ray image etc.)

As Paul Ricoeur has argued, "time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal experience", meaning the two exist in what he (sometimes) theorises as a "vicious circle" (Ricœur 1984, 54 emphasis omitted). But there's also a difference here enacted by the "cunning present" on their documentary productions; in other words, by the relationship between temporality and narrativity. In the theorisation of "emplotment" – the mediating concept between temporality and narrativity, as well as between poetics and ethics – Ricoeur focusses on a paradigmatic narrative structure or plot composed of a beginning, a middle, and an end. One of the characteristic features, I argue, of the attempt to document the experience of siege is precisely its inconclusiveness, its ambiguity, the struggle to find what Frank Kermode called "the sense of an ending", even after the siege has ended.

But this isn't merely a description of a group's internal existential experience of time devoid of political and institutional content. The temporality the young writers and filmmakers from *Sard* describe isn't the result of an internal generational (dis)location (from their elders) marked by the rupture of revolution and siege, which gives rise to a certain temporality and generic narrativity in order to 'make sense of it'. This isn't only about these young people's

differential position within or internal to a social structure. There's still a more general set of technopolitical relations at play relating to Syrians' and Palestinian-Syrians' subjection at the hands of the Assadist state, one we can call, with Helga Tawil-Souri in her re-reading of Virilio, "chronopolitics", as a complementary concept to geopolitics (Tawil-Souri 2017, 387–88).

The time of siege extends beyond the sieges waged against Syrians and Palestinians in Syria. First, it also underlies a broader generational experience across the region for those who have felt the Arab revolutions but are now living in the aftermath. For example, after a belated uprising in Lebanon was cut prematurely short by the Covid pandemic and economic collapse, the sense of living "under siege" became a widespread way of describing the aftermath of the uprising. It was during that time and in that atmosphere that I wrote the first draft of this essay and began to take a keen interest in the notion of living "under siege" (Tarnowski 2021).[9]

As I touch on below, for Syrians who opposed the Assad regime, the sense of siege didn't necessarily end with the siege of Yarmouk.[10] Similarly, the siege didn't begin when the ways in and out of Yarmouk, or any other city or town that was besieged by the regime, were blocked. At least not in retrospect. In the wake of the 2011 revolution, it has become common to describe the history of Assad rule as a siege (and sometimes as an occupation, akin to the Israeli occupation).[11] Yasser Munif (2020) and Salwa Ismail have both variously argued that the "sense of siege felt by ordinary citizens" predates 2011 (Ismail 2018, 31), and the actual military sieges by Assad forces. Their critical accounts suggest that in the wake of the Syrian revolution and its

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[9] I don't have space to go into it here, but briefly, after questioning Abdallah al-Khatib about whether he felt any resonances between the experience of siege and lockdown, he responded by sending me a *Sard* essay by Khaldoun al-Mallah, which I recently translated as *On Sieges and Lockdowns: Some Classical Approaches* (Abū al-Khulūd 2020; al-Mallah 2023b).
[10] I discuss this in more ethnographic detail in the chapter devoted to siege in my dissertation (Tarnowski 2022).
[11] There are a number of Syrian intellectuals who theorise the Assad regime in those terms (including al-Haj Saleh 2017; Yazbek 2016)

defeat, siege is not just an actual experience of state and militia violence; it has also become an organising metaphor, a political concept for re-casting and theorising the past.

Since 2011, the 1982 Hama massacre is frequently been discussed by Syrians as exemplifying the violence the regime is capable of. In 1982, the city of Hama was encircled by the Syrian army's elite fourth division, commanded by the president's brother Rifaat al-Assad, who bombarded the city and massacred its inhabitants. Very little of the siege was documented (Seurat 1989). Hama 1982 marks Syrian time – there's a before and after Hama, and in relation to it, "individual and collective lives were emplotted", in Salwa Ismail's words (Ismail 2018, 152). Abdallah al-Khatib's mother would tell me that the 1982 Hama massacre and the dearth not just of images but of narrative forms (*sard*), was also the motivation for the founding of *Sard*, the publication platform I discuss below (conversation over WhatsApp, 25 February 2022).

The prison, as Foucault famously theorised, is an institution that produces a particular "distribution" of time, with implications on the formation of disciplined, or "docile", subjects.[12] Prisons, in this sense, are public institutions whose publicised practices have disciplinary effects on society as a whole. With Syrian prisons, however, very little documentation could emerge. Prisoners would often "disappear" into prison, families would sometimes hold funerals for them, only for loved-ones to re-emerge decades later, sometimes unrecognisable. This is exemplified by the opening to Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* (*Al-Qawqaʿ*) (2008), a novel that's also an account of his thirteen years spent in Tadmor Prison. In "the desert prison", he describes both the centrality and impossibility of "writing":

The majority of this diary was written in the desert prison. And the word "written" in the previous

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[12] I'm leaving aside here the important theoretical debate about whether Syrian prisons, as with other Arab authoritarian institutions, can follow the Foucauldian paradigm in producing docile subjects. See Ismail (2018) for an account that adopts a Foucauldian paradigm; and Abourahme (2016) for a counter-argument based on Lisa Wedeen's theory of outward compliance and inward alienation, acting "as if" (Wedeen 1999).

sentence is not precise. For in that prison, there are neither pens nor paper for writing. In that enormous prison, which numbers seven courtyards – not counting courtyard number zero – there are thirty-seven group cells, besides all the unnumbered more recently-built cells, all the rooms, all the "French-style" cells (*cellules*) of courtyard number 5; that prison, which at a certain point held more than ten thousand prisoners within its walls, and which contained the highest proportion of university graduates in the country; not a single prisoner – and some had been in more than twenty years – ever saw either pen or paper. Mental writing is a process developed by the Islamists. There was one who had memorised more than ten thousand names: the names of prisoners who had entered the desert prison, their family name, their town or village, their date of detention, their sentence, their fate…(ibid., 9)

Is *The Shell* a novel or a memoir? It's neither and both. As the "mental writing" described by Mustapha Khalifa suggests, oriented around events like Hama and institutions like the prison, the documentary fever that gripped Syria extends beyond the capacities and affordances of particular media devices, training the mind itself into a documentary medium.

Torn Document (Interior Documentary)

Across image and text, Abdallah al-Khatib was working in a documentary mode that he shared with others from the publishing platform *Sard* (trans. narrative).[13] *Sard* was founded in 2018, but the group of writers who founded it began publishing writing and images on their Facebook pages at the start of the siege. By 2018, as the siege was reaching its climax, they decided they needed a less ephemeral platform to gather, edit and preserve their documents.

Anthropologists looking for the critical forerunners of the Arab revolutions have frequently turned to the rise of blogging (Hirschkind 2011; Schielke 2015). These accounts have largely focussed on the practice of writing as opposed to intellectual production across media (for exceptions, see Jurkiewicz 2018; El-Ariss 2019). Instead of blogging, I consider these writers' critical production through the notion of documentary, by which I mean in part an amended

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[13] https://sard.network/ (accessed 11 August 2023). See al-Mallah (2023a) for an introduction to Sard.

version of Grierson's canonical definition, the "creative treatment of actuality" (Grierson 1966, 147), without positing a strong distinction between writing and filming, image and text, as recently theorised by Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (2016).

Mainly, however, I use the term because Ahmed Amir, one of the platform's founders, described the impetus behind Sard's images and texts with the phrase *al-tawthīq al-bālī* (author's interview, Berlin, 23 January 2023). I initially translated the phrase as documentary of the mind, the heart, of inner life, of anxiety—*interior documentary*—thinking the word came from *bāl* (trans. mind). However, I was soon corrected by Khaldoun al-Mallah (aka Abu al-Khuloud), a young writer and trained medical doctor from Yarmouk now living in internal exile in Idlib Province, northern Syria. *Al-tawthīq al-bālī*, he explained, means the *torn document*, as in the tear that siege rends between society and the psyche, as well as within each. The point of these 'torn documents', according Ahmed and Khaldoun, is their attempt not only to capture or document memory but also to intervene in it; to treat documentation as a critical and creative intervention in the memory of the siege. As such, the 'torn document' eschews strong distinctions between fiction and facticity in the attempt to account for the uneasy crossings between the psyche and the city in a collective experience of terror (Interview with Khaldoun al-Mallah, WhatsApp, 5 June 2023).

In their form of narration, what Ahmed Amer and Khaldoun al-Mallah call *al-tawthīq al-bālī* – the torn document – doesn't follow the canonical narrative genres generally employed for writing histories of revolutions and their defeats, neither tragedy nor romance, as recently theorised by David Scott (2014a; 2014c) in his readings of Fanon, CLR James, and the Haitian and Granadian revolutions. They're also not comedies. In Aristotle's well-known distinction with tragedy on the basis of the ethical qualities of the characters: "comedy prefers to imitate

persons who are worse, tragedy persons who are better, than the present generation" (quoted in

Ricœur 1984, 47). However, these documentary experiments are, I argue, constructed on the

basis of a generational difference. But they're neither are they pure tragedies. In Aristotle's

definition, "tragedy is the imitation of an action that is whole, complete in itself, and of a certain

magnitude" (quoted in Ricœur 1984, 239), which allows for the cathartic reconciliation with

defeat or suffering. In the *Sard* narratives, actions are never considered "complete"; thus, they

foreclose the very possibility of *catharsis*.

Equally, these torn documents don't just *surpass* those narrative and historiographical

genres. They remain in a critical relation to them; in other words, they belong to a shared

intellectual *tradition*. The response to tragedy is not to negate, but to find the comic core of the

still undoubtedly tragic situation. Under these extreme conditions of existential terror, torn

documents frequently suggest that the essence of comedy is tragedy and vice versa. As is

common in any intellectual tradition (Pocock 2009; Scott 2014c; Iqbal 2020), miscellaneous

genres and narrative forms can combine without resolving their contradictions. The result, in the

case of these 'torn documents' is a contradictory mode I call tragicomic.

For example, in a short essay titled "*Lamma tikhrā 'al-ḥājiz*" ("Shitting on/at the

checkpoint"),[14] Khaldoun al-Mallah opens with Samuel Beckett's image of the

interconnectedness of tragedy and comedy through two archetypal Greek philosophers:

"Democritus who laughed at Heraclitus & H. wept at D. laughing. Pick yr. fancy." (see Turley

2020) In the essay, Khaldoun al-Mallah, a practicing medical doctor, recounts a story about the

shifting meaning under siege of a well-known medical proverb: If the patient shits, they're

alright. Khaldoun tells the story of trying to treat a man suffering from severe constipation during

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[14] Abu al-Khuloud [Khaldoun al-Mallah], "لما تخرا عالحاجز" [Shitting on/at the checkpoint], *Sard* (blog), November 29, 2020.

the starvation siege. When all treatment failed, he managed with great difficulty to organise his transfer out of the besieged camp. The patient was taken by ambulance to the edge of Yarmouk, but then had to get out and walk. As he approached the checkpoint by foot, he came face to face with the Assad forces besieging him and immediately shat himself—and shat on the checkpoint. He was cured, he was alright; but he thought he was going be killed for defiling the checkpoint. He was terrified; was he going to be alright? Despite the metaphorical power of the act of shitting on/at the checkpoint, the regime soldiers show mercy and don't arrest the patient. The essay/story is inconclusive, the "ending" ambiguous and open to contradictory interpretations: the patient is cured, humiliated, terrified, saved, stranded in no man's land, still besieged…Is Khaldoun's narrative the imitation of an act? Is shitting an act? Is it the representation of suffering? In part, but it's also a kind of relief.

Writing on the historiographical value of fictional narratives, Reinhart Koselleck (2004, 205–21) described two dilemmas.[15] The first relates to the changing relation between fact and fiction in eighteenth-century historiography; the second to the particular value that an unambiguously fictional narrative, such as the account of a dream or nightmare, can assume under conditions of collective terror. Koselleck argues that since the eighteenth century, historians have reflected on the historiographical challenge relating to the construction of narratives around facts. In the process of giving fact a narrative form, historians became increasingly aware of the "devices of fiction" they employed – the narrative genres, devices, plots, structures, and techniques. This posed methodological and epistemological problems: "the historian was confronted with the demand, both in terms of techniques of representation and epistemologically, that he offer not a past reality, but the fiction of its facticity." (ibid., 206) In

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[15] I'm very grateful to Stefania Pandolfo for pointing me in the direction of this reference.

Hayden White's (1987) formulation, the historian became aware of the content of the form, the way that the generic emplotment of narration, such as tragedy or romance, had a bearing on the substance being narrated. This Enlightenment awareness, according to Koselleck, "forced *res fictae* and *res factae* out of their pure relation of opposition" (op cit., 207). As history writing left the chronicle form behind, dramatic genres reserved for fictional narrations (romance, tragedy, comedy) were employed, consciously or not, for the narration of historical events.

But there are also certain kinds of historical experience, Koselleck argues, ones relating to generalised conditions of terror and arbitrary killing, in which the relation between *res fictae* and *res factae* go through another modulation. It's under such conditions in the Nazi camps that Koselleck analyses the historiographical value of the dream or nightmare. As dreams, he argues, they offer "no real representation of reality", and yet they remain a fundamental part of human experience, "a realm which is part of the daily and nightly world of acting and suffering mankind" (Koselleck 2004, 209). For historians, Koselleck argues, under collective existential conditions of terror, dreams can be "sources which testify to a past reality in a manner which perhaps could not be surpassed by any other source." (ibid.) "[T]hey resemble psychic 'X-ray' images contrasting with the countless images we have on film depicting the external aspect of this horror." (ibid., 217) They are "X-Ray images" in the sense that they accurately, even scientifically, index an inner experience of external conditions. In other words, Koselleck argues, "considered rigorously, dreams testify to an irresistible facticity of the fictive, and for this reason the historian should not do without them." (ibid., 209) Finally, under these conditions of terror, "the Freudian categorical framework" with its logic of repression, interpretation, and decoding "is no longer adequate to this exceptional situation and its logic of inversion" (ibid., 217).

Ahmed Amer, the writer who coined the term 'torn document', which at first I misunderstood to mean 'interior documentary', wrote an essay *partly* composed by such X-Ray images. However, the essay is not a recounting of Amer's nightmares, but rather an intervention in them. In other words, what makes the piece of writing a series of 'torn documents' rather than 'X-ray images' is the fact that he attempts to intervene in the narrative of his recurring nightmare, and the events he interprets the nightmares as indexing. Titled *Nightmare Chase* [مطاردة كوابيس] (2021),[16] the Arabic brings to mind a car chase, as in a Hollywood film. As with Khaldoun's piece on the checkpoint, it's also an essay that attempts and finally refuses to settle on a unified narrative form or genre. Neither tragedy, romance, nor comedy, it's an unstable combination of genres.

Ahmed Amer begins at the end, describing his time spent in and out of various psychiatric clinics in France since his forced displacement from Yarmouk. He's subjected to various therapies and medications, "all to no avail". That is, until he meets a psychiatrist with a novel technique:

> "Right, let's begin at the end," the therapist said during the first session, handing me a pen and a pile of paper without any of the usual pleasantries I'd become accustomed to at psychiatric clinics … The treatment was based on the idea of recalling nightmares and noting them down with alternative endings. It was like a scriptwriting workshop. I liked the idea of recycling nightmares. I chased after one, remembering the incident indexed by it, giving it a title, and not letting it out of my grasp until I had an alternative ending for it. (Amer 2023, 110)

As a writer, Ahmed was intrigued by a therapy that places writing at its centre. "Write to survive," the psychiatrist tells him (ibid.).

Ahmed revisits scenes from the siege of Yarmouk mediated, in the sense of communicated and transformed, by his nightmares and his therapy. Time is scrambled,

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[16] For a full translation, see Amer (2023).

unreliable. We know, for example, that an event happened in the past, but it's still there, plaguing his nights in the present. Time is being pieced together like a puzzle: the recurring nightmare at the top, the episode from the siege below, which the nightmare indexes. The reader doesn't know whether the end of each episode is the end he actually experienced, the one he remembers, or the new ending he's written with the help of his therapist. Time is dismembered; narrative fragmented; the document torn.

Like all the preceding, the final episode titled "Charles de Gaulle Airport", begins with a recurring nightmare.

> *An angry man is coming toward me with a knife. I jump up from my seat to run out of the cinema.*
> *But I fall down immediately. Everyone around me starts laughing. I crawl out of the cinema, my*
> *legs amputated. The marble floor is smeared with blood, a woman won't stop laughing.* (Amer
> 2023, 115 emphasis in original)

Ahmed walks with the help of crutches. He describes himself in the opening section as *a'raj*, a word dictionaries label as "dated" and "offensive" – a "cripple" (Amer 2023, 111) . But he uses his position as a "cripple" to fashion a seemingly privileged status as an observer. For example, in a "burying" episode titled "For Whom the Bell Tolls" related earlier in the essay, he can't escape the brutal scene of a vagrant's killing, but nor is he expected to join in the mob violence. He watches on from the side-lines, observing without participating.

The episode recounted after the "Charles de Gaulle Airport" nightmare sequence begins with a lengthy description of his farewell to his family in Damascus and ends with his arrival in France. Language isn't up to the task of his sorrow, but it's also all he's got:

> I never needed my skilful ability to hide my tears under words as much as I did that day. Thirty
> hours had passed since I kissed my father's hands for the last time before leaving Damascus. I
> needed a little bit of calm to check whether my heart was weeping, the heart that had been
> separated from my body ever since I made the decision to leave. (Amer 2023, 115)

As a supporter of the revolution, perhaps unlike his parents in the generation above him, he has to leave. (I would later learn that when he left, he took a hard-drive of Abdallah al-Khatib's rushes with him, hidden in a compartment inside his crutches – again, using his 'disability' to his advantage.) Ahmed manages to get a *laissez-passer* to make it through Beirut airport, and the Lebanese security who collaborate with the Syrian *mukhabarat*. He details these bureaucratic and emotional hurdles.

The sorrow and reverie of looming exile is broken upon his arrival in France. He calls up a friend to ask him to meet at the airport. The friend agrees to schedule a meeting "tomorrow". He calls another friend, hoping he'll come instead:

> I'll meet you in Chatelet, I'm tired. I don't want to go all the way to the airport. Don't worry, it's easy to get there from the airport on the RER B.
> Chatelet?! *Ayr oh ayr beh*?[17]
> (Amer 2023, 116)

He realizes that he's on his own in Europe, that no one's coming. He's made it to Europe, he's safe, he's overcome all the hurdles; but he's left his heart behind in Yarmouk, and his old friends in this new place aren't quite the same. That in their own forced displacement, they'd also lost some of their heart. He ponders what to do as he makes his way through the airport to arrivals:

> Immersed in my own world, I hadn't noticed the person pushing my wheelchair had completed all the entry procedures. I registered his impatience only when I saw his foaming mouth, speaking in a foreign language I couldn't understand. I shook my head to indicate that I couldn't understand what he wanted. I tried talking to him in English, but his face went even redder, and at last he pushed the chair angrily, tipping it forward slightly like a truck driver trying to dump his load. I realized that he wanted me to get out of the wheelchair immediately, and while I was still curled up in the [foetal] position with my crutches and my bag, I tried to stand up, forgetting that I couldn't. As soon as my feet touched the ground, I felt knives being sunk into my knees. I

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[17] Ayr sounds like the slang for 'cock' or 'dick' in Arabic.

staggered forward slightly, then fell flat on my face. Fragments of my laptop were scattered around me. He stretched out his hand to help me, but I pushed it away petulantly. People were looking at me. Tears amassed, a flood then an explosion. (Amer 2023, 117)

The essay ends there, where it began, alone and stranded in exile, at this tragicomic moment after the enigma of arrival, after a political and actual odyssey that has left him and his city dismembered. Remember, this is the ideal ending that his psychiatrist is helping him write. His heart is in Damascus, and he has forgotten, momentarily, that his legs are there too. He's dismembered, he remembers. Like his laptop, he's shattered. Is he saved, is he broken? It's inconclusive. The siege is over, and he survived; which means, for him, the siege never ends.

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