

Mediating Anthropology in Beirut

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Abstract

The increased accessibility of digital video has facilitated the proliferation of self-representations and “autoethnographies,” which provide important critiques of anthropological and postcolonial idioms. For example, video has played an instrumental role in the emergence of Lebanon’s independent cinema, creating many linkages between documentary, narrative, and experimental films. Some filmmakers utilize conventional models to get the perspective of underrepresented populations broadcast and screened internationally, while others use more experimental approaches to challenge presumptions of objectivity and realism as well as the tautology of the Orientalist critique. This paper discusses the way these filmmakers enhance and complicate the project of “audiovisual anthropology.”

Visual media have become a pervasive and highly desired form of cultural expression for those dispossessed of their histories, traditions, and land. Teaming with transformational and constraining qualities, visual mediation has not been adequately explored in alternative, non-western settings. For this reason, I am interested in the interface between video and the historic record in recent documentaries made in Lebanon. Nearly 15 years since the Lebanese militias laid down their arms, the representation of violence and trauma continues to overwhelm the national imagination, but official amnesia continues to restrict the representation of this conflict.

In this paper I would like to introduce several Lebanese artists using video for documentary research, not in an endeavor to establish a factual record, but to situate “representation itself as a politicized practice” (Jayce Salloum²). Each of these artists combines documentary filmmaking and personalized narratives to critically engage the fantastic tendencies of media and its ability to make certain “realities” believably real. In this way, I wish to more closely consider how the guise of documentary research allows new critiques of representation to emerge and fosters alternative theories about the mediation of postwar society.

In a recent conversation I had with Lebanese video-maker Mohamad Soueid, he spoke with frustration that most debates between the West and the Middle East are unable to even agree on the terms of this dialogue. For instance, the veil and violence dictate the frame of reference in the West, but for those in the Middle East the issues center on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This discrepancy proves debilitating for productive dialogue to emerge. And yet, these videos begin to create visual arguments about this framework, which should help audiences redefine the terms of the argument. For instance, *Introduction to the End of an Argument/Muqaddimah Li-Nihayat Jidal* (1990, 45m) shows how a very redundant set of parameters structures the relationship

between the West and the Middle East. This early video by the now highly acclaimed Palestinian filmmaker, Elia Suleiman, and Canadian artist of Lebanese ancestry, Jayce Salloum, features an astounding array of footage pulled from western popular media to articulate a convincing, if skewed, representational framework.

Of course, like ethnographic films, these videos enjoy only limited exhibition and those already “in the know” tend to benefit more than the uninitiated. Having said this, the authors of these videos do deserve the attention of those trying to comprehend the representational frameworks in the Middle East as well as those interested in alternative approaches to the use of documentary media in general. These filmmakers creatively approach the problems of representation through mimicry of the dominant media, thus “attempting to arrest the imagery and ideology, decolonizing and recontextualizing it to provide a space for a marginalized voice consistently denied expression in the media” (JS&ES³). Borrowing from western mass media as well as local and personal collections, these works try to revise the images and narratives that dominate the western imagination. In fact, video documentary in Lebanon consistently revisits and reinterprets the visual archive, trying to recalibrate the framework for mediating the conditions of this region.

In Up to the South/Talaeen a Junuub (1993, 60m), Salloum teams with Walid Ra’ad to offer a documentary about the conditions in southern Lebanon under Israeli occupation. They offer an autoethnographic account of a particular context, while simultaneously critiquing the frames of representation that govern documentary endeavors. By joining abstract theoretical critiques with subject interviews and quotidian experience, they illuminate terrain typically taken for granted in western media practices. Under these conditions, Salloum and Ra’ad address the restrictive terminology that frames every discussion around resistance vs. terrorism dichotomy. The authors of this video extrapolate from this context a critique of “the representation of other cultures by the West in documentary, ethnography and anthropological practise” (JS⁴). This enables the filmmakers to bring the critique of Orientalism through the eye of a needle, by continually shuttling between the critique and practice of representation.

In Salloum’s *(This Is Not Beirut)/There Was and There Was Not* (1994, 49m), he continues his critique of western representations of the Middle East, but more forcefully problematizes his own mediated relationship to Lebanon’s capital city. As a place he largely knows through western media, he examines the representational processes that govern his approach to the acquisition of visual material and the way they are used to comment on their content. This self-reflexive awareness of the processes of representation and mediation inspires several other artists concerned with documenting the conditions in Lebanon.

Like many other Lebanese artists and filmmakers, Walid Ra’ad began collecting materials and chronicling his experiences during the war from a young age. He formalized this endeavor by establishing the Atlas Group (www.theatlasgroup.org), an imaginary foundation created for the purpose of researching the contemporary history of Lebanon. The fastidious nature of the Atlas Group’s projects enables Ra’ad to convincingly combine the practices of traditional historic research with fictitious narratives. Set within the political environment of Lebanon, these narrative excursions allow Ra’ad to make fabulous critiques about the representational models inherited from

western modernity. In multimedia demonstrations that draws on a real archive of images, objects, and documents, Ra'ad's fictitious histories exploits the power of narrative and image to present a visual approach to critical theory. In this way, Ra'ad examines "the ways film, video, and photography function as documents of physical and psychological violence" (WR⁵).

In his project entitled, *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1999-2001), Ra'ad presents a number of imaginary individuals who have reputedly documented their existence during the war. For instance, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, who is introduced as the foremost historian of the Lebanese civil war, has archived a series of photo finishes at the racetrack. These documents include notes on wagers made by different historians, who were not gambling on the race itself but the position of the winning horse at the moment the finishing photo is snapped. The comical element of this scenario should make the audience suspicious of its authenticity, but also works to deconstruct the way the war has come to be represented.

The "mimicry of the archive" thus helps bring into question the authenticity of history (Rogers 2002). And since Ra'ad hints at his disguise, his performance becomes a self-reflexive effort to trace the transformation of objects into documents and documents into facts. This not only dismantles the presumed opposition between fiction and history, but also reveals the performance of memory. This differs significantly from the traditional use of visible evidence to establish "what really happened." The documents and archives serve not as "emblems of fact or scraps of evidence but traces, symptoms, and strange structural links between history, memory, and fantasy, between what is known and what is needed to be believed" (Wilson-Goldie 2004:20). For Ra'ad fiction offers the opportunity to imagine the impossible – the traumatic memories of the war in the case of Lebanon. These draw attention to unconscious fantasies and their Freudian potential to heal if appropriately revealed.

Bringing these types of fictive histories to bear on discourses about terrorism, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2000, 18m) aims to address "the western hostage crisis" from the perspective of the subaltern Arab man. Soheil Bachar, who claims to be the sixth hostage taken captive in Lebanon in the 1980s, is an imaginary character inspired by Soha Bechara. This "living martyr" spent 10 years in the infamous Khiam prison in southern Lebanon for her involvement with the Lebanese National Resistance.⁶ In this way, Ra'ad pairs the narratives of the western hostages with the occupation of southern Lebanon and the captivity of its people. So instead of trying to author a narrative that stands in opposition to the dominant one, Ra'ad inserts an alternative story within the master narrative. And using the guise and terminology of historical research allows Ra'ad to cloak his fictions in fact and thus to subvert the meaning constructed in western discourse about the Middle East.

For example, he analyzes the way the other five hostages depoliticized their captivity narratives. Removed from the historical context, these men use their kidnapping to tell a tale of personal transformation. Driven to the Middle East to escape social norms at home, or as Bachar/Ra'ad say, "failed masculinity relations to heterosexual domesticity" (Raad 2002:135), the perceived threat of homosexual desire among each other and by their captors apparently rehabilitates each of them. Bachar thus uses his fictional experience, as an Arab hostage among these western men, to analyze the way they

document their captivity to both emasculate Arab masculinity and strip their captivity of social and political context.

While Ra'ad mocks the archive, he also serves as a member of the Arab Image Foundation (Fondation Arabe pour l'Image),⁷ which has helped these artists to avoid making a redundant critique of Orientalist representations of the Middle East. By simultaneously promoting photographic practices and collecting the photographic heritage of the Middle East and North Africa, AIF offers an alternative archive from which to advance critiques about the visual record of the region. As one of the masterminds behind this organization, Akram Zaatari has overseen the collection of an extensive photographic archive from art collectors, photographic studios, and family albums. Utilizing this emergent archive, Zaatari has produced several publications, videos, and exhibitions. These efforts help galvanize the importance of reassessing the western archive vis-à-vis this emergent collection.

In his efforts to chronicle the work of Middle Eastern photographers, Zaatari joins biographical narratives about photography with an analysis of modern desires to mediate the transformation of social identity. In this way the modern history of the Middle East re-emerges from this alternative record of snapshots and portraits. Middle class sensibilities showcase new acquisitions and modern lifestyles, but it is in the semiprivate space of the photographic studio that individuals imagine an alternative self-identity – dressing up or dressing down depending on one's whim.

In *Her+Him Van Leo* (2001, 32m), Zaatari utilizes the AIF archive to explore the work of Van Leo, a prominent Cairene studio photographer during the mid-20th century. At the beginning of the video we are told that the filmmaker has found a Van Leo portrait of his grandmother in his mother's closet. This discovery of this semi-nude photo among his family's belongings prompts Zaatari to immediately visit Van Leo in Cairo. As the video progresses the story about the photo of his grandmother starts to change. By destabilizing her identity Zaatari apprehends the desires of women like his grandmother to use these secret meetings at the studio to explore new forms of self-expression. His conversation with Van Leo also allows Zaatari to call into question the relationship between the photographer and his subjects, and to juxtapose the tradition of studio photography with the practice of video art.

In his more recent video, *This Day* (2003, 87m), Zaatari demonstrates the various frames from which the Middle East is seen. A vision of the desert emerges as we see images of a manuscript, an archive, and a windshield. Indeed, "an aesthetic sense for the desert" emerges around certain modes of transportation – like a broken down jeep, camels, and, of course, the nomadic Bedouin, "whole and noble." While digitally panning across several ethnographic photographs taken by prominent Syrian Arabist Jabrail Jabbur, his granddaughter narrates her memories of these images and Jabbur's quest to document this "vanishing" culture. Zaatari's research then leads him into the Syrian desert in search of the participants photographed by Jabbur 50 years earlier. Zaatari's work fascinates me the most with his ethnographic explorations into the archive's history, "at once an extroverted voyage in geography and an introverted voyage in the recording of everyday" (Zaatari 2005:162).

In *This House* (2005, 30m), Zaatari traces the history of a simple letter in order to explore "the dynamics that govern image-making in situations of war." After interviewing

a colleague about photojournalism, Zaatari discovers a back-story about this man's participation in the Lebanese resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. But rather than sensational stories of war, the man tells the story of the house he and his troop based their resistance. When the Taif amnesty was signed and he was ordered to surrender his weapons, he buried a letter for the owners of the house in their garden. Compelled to unearth this object, Zaatari reveals the way political forces become engaged by the search for wartime documents. Indeed, the idea of something buried in the garden was enough to prompt several members of the police and military to be present during excavation. By showing the way this banal object suddenly requires surveillance, Zaatari tries to demystify the process of intelligence gathering. Instead of claiming to uncover undisclosed images or even alternative histories, which would privilege the status of the archive, he endeavors to map a terrain of permissible visibility. Zaatari thus endeavors to trace the production, acquisition, and circulation of images, by utilizing various methods and perspectives available to the digital researcher.

The video-makers in Beirut thus open an important 'parallax' perspective to both western representation and national narratives. The reflexive treatment of the archive and the acquisition of documents in these videos invigorate new ways of mediating postwar society and analyzing the visual heritage of the Middle East. In Lebanon, where society has undergone a "surpassing disaster," it is important to acknowledge that not only is justice withdrawn but also the materials of tradition (Toufic 2000). So in the absence of legal redress, Borneman (2004a; 2004b) argues that new narratives must emerge able to disturb ossified perspectives, situate accountability, and release future generations from permanent liability. A reinvention of the archive in Lebanon may provide these potentials.

Note: In my visual presentation I will combine textual documents with audiovisual media in much the same way these artists present their visual research. This multimedia layering will highlight some of the visual material referenced in the written portion of the paper and demonstrate key aspects of their visual techniques.

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² See http://www.111101.net/Artworks/index.php?Jayce_Salloum/index.php

³ See [http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi\\$apedetail?INTRODUCTI](http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi$apedetail?INTRODUCTI)

⁴ See http://www.111101.net/Artworks/index.php?Jayce_Salloum/index.php

⁵ See http://www.cooper.edu/art/bio_raad.html

⁶ Jayce Salloum features Soha Bechara in *untitled part 1: everything and nothing* (2002, 40m).

⁷ See <http://www.fai.org.lb/CurrentSite/index.htm>