15 As It Were: Narrative Struggles, Historiopraxy, and the Stakes of the Future in the Documentation of the Syrian Uprising

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Thirteen years can seem like an eternity when viewed in relation to the Syrian tragedy. It is hard to fathom the immensity of the hopes unleashed in March 2011 and now, these many years later, to reflect on what has passed. Not only were the hopes of the demonstrators thwarted and willfully destroyed by the Syrian army supported by Russian and Iranian forces, but the narrative of an otherwise, of a different way forward, is now also being actively silenced by the Syrian regime. In a sense, the active and ongoing writing of history has taken a novel form in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising as evidence, testimony, and historical experience have been documented so abundantly by way of cameras and cell phones and through memories graphically engraved on the bodies and minds of the Syrian population (Bandak 2014; Bandak, Crone, and Mollerup 2024; Wedeen 2019; McManus 2021).

In this chapter, I consider the struggle over a narrative that now takes place in relation to the bourgeoning production of Syrian documentaries (cf. Wessels 2018; Della Ratta 2018; Tarnowski 2021; Weiss 2022), but which also has been evident in the production of Syrian TV serials (Salamandra 2019). As such, this chapter meditates on the role of speech, freedom, and history in the aftermath of an uprising that turned into what Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2017) has termed a tragedy. My central concern is to unravel the changing registers of historical experience and the narrative efforts placed in keeping particular pasts alive in order to make way for the future. Inspired by Simon Coleman (2011), I reflect on this as a particular form of historiopraxy, which rearranges and reorders experiences as they oscillate between the singular and the collective, the particular and the generic, in the wake of violence and atrocities committed on a massive scale. As a central trope, I consider the wording "as it were." According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, "as it were" sometimes is used after a figurative

or unusual expression.[1] "As it were" in this sense may not just point to how things actually were but also to how they potentially could be. This play between actuality, factuality, and potentiality is critical for the work on the past both in the aftermath of severe crisis and tragedy but also in any ordinary sense. Accordingly, the freedom to tell and keep particular pasts alive is a burden, which demands the work of a Penelope, a constant reweaving and retying of memory and narrative in the meeting with the gradual changes of actual remembrance and the passing of generations with different stakes in what took place.

Taking my point of departure in ongoing research on Syrian image production and memory work, I reflect on material collected over the last years among exiled Syrians. This chapter opens this exploration by engaging the work of Syrian documentarists Ali Atassi and Rami Farah, who both have won international acclaim for their films. My entry to this discussion has been prepared by long-term fieldwork in Syria before the uprising in 2011, subsequent fieldwork in Lebanon, and current ethnographic work in Jordan and Denmark on displaced Syrians (cf. Bandak 2014, 2015a). Centrally, this chapter argues that the changing tempo of conflict allows for novel engagements with the past, both the past considered historical and more increasingly the past considered as the personal and private registers of experiences and memories not neatly folded into any grand narrative. The chapter accordingly is an attempt at excavating what Reinhart Koselleck (2018) aptly has described as sediments of time, exploring the forms of sedimentation of time that Syrians reflecting on the past are starting to embark on in their engagements with what came to pass. Tracking the unfolding human powers of making history, of unleashing destruction as well as coming to terms with defeat and disappointment, is but a feeble attempt at orienting the scholarly debate towards the writing and rewriting of history, as well as engaging with what Syrian playwright Mohammad Al Attar refers to as an attempt to create a "realistic narrative of hope, and not a nostalgia of the revolution" (Jadalliya 2021). Freedom of speech in this context, I posit, takes on a particular salience as a narrative effort of keeping alive what came to pass not submitting to the Syrian regime's deliberate attempts at creating its official representation of history. Keeping open the possibility for speech outside and contrary to the regime's discourse, speech of the events, personal stakes, and the price paid on the part of the Syrian population are critical for the general conversation instigated by Syrian cultural producers such as Atassi and Farah when they reflect on their own roles in the course of events. As such, this freedom to narrate is critical as it invites a pensive engagement with not just what was but also with what still eventually may come.

1 *Cambridge Dictionary*, s.v. "as it were," accessed 4 June 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/as-it-were#google_vignette.

Pensiveness and Spaces of Reflection

A central concern of this chapter is to reflect on the role of history for exiled Syrians who are reflecting on the recent past. History of and reflections on the past take on a particular salience when people experience major upheavals. For Syrians – as for Egyptians, Tunisians, and Yemenites – a high-pitched sense of not merely witnessing history but actively writing it with one's actions was a marked experience in late 2010 and the early part of 2011 (Schielke 2017; Armbrust 2019; Porter 2017; al-Khalili 2021). At that time, taking the streets was by many actors seen as the only right thing to do. In Eelco Runia's (2014, 18) insightful treatment, such sublime historical events present a certain "readiness to put a way of life, a culture, on the line." To some extent, this was a time of and for actions and not one of reflection and pause. As Paul Virilio (2006) points out, revolutions are about speed and tempo, to allow for drastic accelerations towards change. The moment of the uprising allowed Syrians to see themselves as one, as one of the slogans frequently chanted had it: "Wahid, wahid, wahid, al-shab al-suri wahid!" (One, one, one, the Syrian people are one!)

In a Syrian context, what moved people may not have been the same in the southern city of Deraa as in cities such as Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. However, the initial feeling that past and entrenched forms of politics were about to fall led to an outpouring and a coming together of people more collectively. New alliances and friendships were forged (Brønds 2017), and different and repressed memories were resuscitated from neglect. As Salwa Ismail (2018) has shown, past violence from the 1980s was readily readdressed in light of the regime's violent assault on the uprising in the present. Early 2011 was a moment of change.

With the passing of time, the tempo and immediacy of events changed. After an initially peaceful start, the regime responded with enormous vehemence, and violence became integral not just to the crushing of the revolution but also to various factions taking up arms in response to it. The Syrian situation became increasingly protracted. The regime's brutalization was met by the radicalization of contingents of Islamic factions in parts of Syria. With the lack of actual engagement from the United States and European powers, the regime, greatly helped by Iranian forces and, from September 2015, by Russian forces, slowly succeeded in defeating the uprising. Accordingly, the world witnessed a massive displacement and upheaval of Syrians inside the country, with refugees flowing into neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, and into Europe, Canada, and the United States. With the protracted nature of the Syrian tragedy, the tempo today, thirteen years after the hopeful beginnings, is not marked by urgency of action but by the slower pace of reflection or a living on with what came to pass (see Bandak and Anderson 2022; Bandak 2024). Some Syrians keep the past open by referring to "al-thawra" (the revolution),

while others now talk about "al-ahdath" (the happenings) as a piecemeal way of getting on with life. As Theodor Adorno (1978) points out in *Minima Moralia*, such reflections on a damaged life open up different registers of thought. More particularly, they open up a space of pensiveness, which albeit painful and hurting, is a critical move towards keeping the past alive without falling prey to either cynicism or uncritical forms of nostalgia, regret, and remorse. "Pensiveness" is a term I take from Jacques Ranciére, who addresses the virtue of such slow engagement. In his *The Emancipated Spectator*, Ranciére (2009, 107) describes pensiveness as a certain state of being overtaken by thoughts: "In pensiveness, the act of thinking seems to be encroached upon by a certain passivity." Such thinking opens spaces of possibility, where a coming to terms with and through narrative as well as visual representation are worked out not in order to accept what has happened but in order to understand it.

Ethnographically, pensiveness is not a virtue for the few; rather, it is a condition, which all actors in different ways may find themselves thrown into, certainly in the aftermath of war and tragedy. Engaging the Syrian tragedy necessitates what Veena Das (2007) describes as a descent into the ordinary, which may lead to a different form of meditation on the ways taken during conflict, or what could – or should have been known – and what to retain for keeping the past for future reengagements. In Runia's (2014, 6) apt phrasing, "coming to terms with a historical trauma is the result of answering the commemorative question 'Who are we that this could have happened?'" Answering such a hard question forces us to move between what happened, accepting the course of events, and keeping the promise, which initially sparked the fatal events (Haugbølle and Bandak 2017). Accordingly, we need to assert a particular tension between the ending, *eschaton*, and the end, *telos*, in order to reflect on the work of time and the lasting imprint of what happened on the sediments and sedimentation that are taking place in the aftermath of the Syrian uprising. Pensiveness, I posit, is critical to keep open the factuality of past events, while admitting to the changing registers of experience and circumstances being lived through in the time coming after what happened.

Sediments of Time and the Rewriting of History

One key feature of history is to single out and sort things, events, and persons' deeds for later evocation. In Hannah Arendt's (1958, [1961] 1993) profound reading of ancient and modern concepts of history, we see how the role of memory is critical, that history, albeit changing in scope and character, needs to keep store of deeds, of immortalizing them to safeguard them for posterity (see also H. White 1980; Hartog 2015). In Arendt's ([1961] 1993) treatment of the modern concept of history, she argues for a disregard of taking sides, be that in national interest, or in one's own favour. She deliberately advocates

for discarding "the alternative of victory or defeat, which moderns have felt expresses the 'objective' judgment of history itself, and does not permit it to interfere with what is judged to be worthy of immortalizing praise" (51). Where this may be an obvious lesson for critical scholarship, it is a hard ideal to aspire to, when located in a context of immediate war, conflict, and tragedy.

Reinhart Koselleck (2018) extends a similar line of thought across several of his brilliant essays in the recently released *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*. In this collection published posthumously, Koselleck unravels the diverse configurations of time and experience also known in his seminal *Futures Past* (2004). Koselleck (2018, 105) has observed that particular events in history have marked the consciousness on either side of a divide, or in his wording, "participants experienced particular thrusts of events as high points of all previous histories, whether they belonged to the victors or the vanquished, although the vanquished were often compelled to write better, more clear-sighted histories." In his understanding, history is constantly being rewoven and rewritten.

The clear and neat division between winners and losers in the game of history is further complicated by Koselleck (2018, 215) when he asserts that "not every victory remains a victory, nor every defeat a defeat." The malleability of experience, but also the ongoingness of time, complicates the neatness of such binary categorizations. Or, as Koselleck continues: "It thus is not just victory or defeat but also the kind of victory and the kind of defeat that lead to numerous refractions in the formation of consciousness, such that it becomes difficult to define minimal commonalities of collective spaces of consciousness" (215). Adding to this insight, we could also point to the work of David Scott (2014, 29) in deciphering the failed Grenada Revolution (1979–83), of which he writes: "They succeeded. They failed." The tragic experience of failing happened against the background of hopes and a social experiment, which attests to the human freedom and capability of initiating actions, actions with dire consequences that never quite could be anticipated.

The relationship between past, present, and future also has been pressing in recent anthropological work. Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart (2005) advocate for ethnographies of historicity (see also C. Stewart 2016). The move towards addressing historicity is one that they advance in order to elucidate the ways temporal ordering are made sense of in social terms. Hirsch and Stewart (2005, 262) write that "'historicity' describes a human situation in flow, where versions of the past and future (of persons, collectives or things) assume present form in relation to events, political needs, available cultural forms and emotional dispositions." They deliberately contrasts the notion of "history" as an adding up of events with "historicity," which, as they explain, "focuses on the complex temporal nexus of past-present-future. Historicity, in our formulation, concerns ongoing social production of accounts of pasts and futures" (262).

In discussing this conceptualization, Coleman (2011) has proposed the term "historiopraxy." According to Coleman, historiopraxy is formulated to hone in on the agency that social actors have in using their pasts to move towards or even jump into the future. In his formulation, historiopraxy relates to the notion of historicity, however, as he points out: "What I preserve for historiopraxy is a stronger, proleptic sense of *making* the future, or more precisely of creating a present that, from the perspective of the future, will be recognized to *have been* a radical transformation" (435). Where Coleman underscores such agentive uses of the past, of historiopraxy, I find it useful to see the discrepant dimensions he finds in his material. Coleman asserts that historiopraxy can alternate between a "making" of history and an "invoking" of history. These modalities both imply action and recourse to the past, however the degree to which agency is asserted varies.

In these different conceptualizations, we see that the ordering of time actively involves actors, who use and mobilize the past in orienting their present and future. The circumstances for doing so, however, allow for plural engagements with the past, and even plural pasts to coexist (Henig 2018). This is where the aftermath of historical events situates actors with disappointed hopes and hence private and individual memories, which no longer are carried forward by a strong social impetus. In D. Scott's (2014, 6) eloquent wording: "What we are left with are *aftermaths* in which the present seems stricken with immobility and pain and ruin; a certain experience of temporal *afterness* prevails in which the trace of futures past hangs like the remnant of a voile curtain over what feels uncannily like an endlessly extending present." Such afterness may easily draw people towards grief and mourning over what was. This is almost unavoidable. However, in the active rethinking and grappling with what came to pass, there is also a remedy of reasserting the value of what happened even if nothing ended as was hoped for, which perhaps also points to the more general point observed by Arendt (1981, 103): "Every thought is an afterthought."

Engaging Ali Atassi: "We Lost the Battle for Freedom … but We Didn't Lose Our Narrative!"

In late April 2021, I hosted a meeting on Zoom with Beirut-based Syrian journalist and director Ali Atassi. We met for the first time some years back at a workshop but had not been in contact since then. Atassi is known for his critical role in making documentaries featuring Syrian intellectuals, such as Riyad al-Turk, both in 2001 with *Ibn al-Am* and also more recently in 2012 with *Ibn al-Am Online*, but also for initiating Bidayyat, literally "Beginnings," launched in 2013, a collective of artists and intellectuals who assist Syrian artists and filmmakers (see https://bidayyat.org). On an overall level, the Syrian tragedy

sparked an enormous effort to document the uprising and the destinies and stories of Syrian actors from all walks of life. Bidayyat has had a central role in educating and forming part of the conversation as the Syrian uprising turned violent and the regime brutally forced Syrian activists and civilians to flee.

In an interview with SyriaUntold (Milani and De Angelis 2020), Atassi explains: "With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, a new generation emerged in covering the hopes and tragedies of the Syrian revolution. A new space to rebel and create emerged, which accompanied the birth of a new cinematic language, different ways of filming, and different forms of cinematic expression. These ways of making cinema were different from the approach of the [government-affiliated] General Organization of Cinema, which focused on fictional movies with higher budgets." The documentary that serves as a background for the conversation with Atassi is his *Baladna Rahib* (Our terrible country) that features the prominent Syrian intellectual and regime critic Yassin al-Haj Saleh. Al-Haj Saleh (2017) is known as a persistently outspoken critic of the regime, who both in Arabic and in translated works has called for an understanding of the regime's nefarious politics. The film is a moving testimony to al-Haj Saleh's clarity and courage as it follows him in the early phases of the uprising, his cordial and trustful cooperation with the young activist Ziad al-Homsi, and his move from besieged parts of Damascus to his childhood city of Raqqa only to finally be forced into exile and arrive in Turkey.

The film is moving on many accounts. It is moving because al-Haj Saleh with enormous clear sightedness and dignity is presented as he is forced to leave his wife and partner Samira Khalil. It is moving because the film follows al-Haj Saleh on his path, which ends up not as a victory but as the defeat of his dreams and hopes for a peaceful revolution. The film is also moving since many viewers will know that Samira was abducted in 2013 and never heard from again. The film is moving because we follow the demise of a dream, a hope, and a future, which seemed to be within grasp at that moment. The documentary allays these hopes and follows al-Haj Saleh on his travels through a country that is being destroyed first by the regime and later by the so-called Islamic State, also known under the acronym ISIS. What we watch is a futures past in Koselleck's (2004) sense, a particular moment with a specific horizon of expectation and space of possibility.

In the film, we meet not only al-Haj Saleh but also the young activist Ziad al-Homsi, who at this point is in his early twenties. Al-Homsi's cordial and respectful relationship with al-Haj Saleh is similarly touching. The two men from different generations share the same hopes, and also come to share the same fate while travelling towards Raqqa. We hear their profound conversations on what is happening, while we as viewers are situated in a markedly different present. We know that their moment in the unfolding chain of events is carrying them towards tragedy, while we are witnessing the enormous dignity

with which they both carry on their assiduous labour of thinking and remembering despite the violence and destruction they face.

When I meet with Atassi, he is very frank and forthcoming in our conversations. He explains how he felt "a need to document" Yassin al-Haj Saleh and his life. At the same time, he is also aware of the specificities of the film being somehow his own personal view of al-Haj Saleh. Further to this, Atassi explains that as seen from today the enterprise back then was marked by "not very rational decisions." The sense of time was different, Atassi says: "We thought it was a matter of weeks, not months, back then!" In a sense, it all just unravelled. He pauses and says: "We were anticipating something different!"

Atassi explains al-Haj Saleh's decision to actually travel to Raqqa at that point. "We thought it would take some days, but it ended up taking weeks!" Further to this, Atassi explains how ISIS was taking over Raqqa with dire consequences for Yassin's brothers. To add to this, Atassi explains about his choice to go on a journey on his own to meet with al-Haj Saleh and al-Homsi in Raqqa under the control of ISIS. Laughing, he explains how he had to grow a full beard to go to Raqqa incognito. "Today I see it as stupid!" he exclaims. After a short pause, Atassi asserts the following: "We have to see it from the perspective of that moment … It was a particular moment …" In this way he explains how things were done at that moment, which now in retrospect appears rather differently.

Atassi elaborates on the film, explaining that it is "not only about the journey, but how I as a director in the editing room tell the story." In that vein, Atassi asserts that the film gestures at what he calls a "public visibility of the left in society." In the course of the conversation, Atassi focuses on two scenes from the film, which he sees as highly important. These scenes are both tracking al-Haj Saleh's engagement with ordinary people. In the first scene, he ends up in a heated discussion with an elderly man and a restaurant owner in Gaziantep. The second scene takes place in Duma, in greater Damascus, where al-Haj Saleh is trying to convince people to engage in a cleaning-the-street project with very little success.

Attasi asserts that his film is a documentation of a period marked by secular and peaceful movements just before they were overtaken by jihadist groups and a wider radicalization. He explains about Yassin's approval of the film, when he first watched the final cut in Istanbul. Later, he was less happy about it, or in Atassi's formulation: "Yassin would tell his story differently!"

Towards the end of our conversation, Atassi raises an important point: "We need a self-conscious reflection on our own roles. We were not able to face our own destiny. And we have to reflect on the enemies within and outside, which allowed this to pass." Atassi thinks for a short while before continuing: "Now is a time of reflection and critique. We lost the battle for freedom … but we didn't lose our narrative! What we are doing now is about what narrative,

which will prevail." A little later, when responding to some of my questions on the important changes in visual culture and what these changes imply for the possible audiences, perspectives, and identifications, Atassi says: "We have archives, people, and narratives! We have different tools beyond the cinema … It is about a narrative battle. We need to be more honest, to discuss and complicate the established narrative … We are building for the future." After a short pause, Atassi asserts: "In the Syrian case, reality sometimes is beyond fiction! This is why we make documentary films."

Engaging Rami Farah: "Yes, We Lost. But We Still Have Our Memory"

Indeed, the Syrian reality does seem to transcend fiction in the wake of the horrors that were unleashed. However, the actual engagement with concrete persons is a highly important avenue for not just Ali Atassi but also prominent documentarists such as Waad al-Khatib, Abdullah al-Khatib, Yasmin Fedda, Firas Fayad, Ossama Mohammad, Obaidah Zeitoun, and Rami Farah. All these documentarists have made heartbreaking films covering the realities of the Syrian tragedy. All documentaries assert the need to take stock of what happened both for individual lives as well as for the broader context and story of the Syrian tragedy. In the following, I focus on the work of Rami Farah in order to reflect on the ways he is addressing the need for engaging memories of the past in their own right but also from the side of ordinary citizens and exiled Syrians.

On a Thursday morning in mid-May 2021, we in the research group had scheduled a Zoom conversation with Farah. We had long awaited this moment, as the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions made it impossible for us to meet physically when Farah, supported by International Media Support, was editing his film in Copenhagen at the Kong Gulerod Studio in December 2020. Farah was living in Paris and had over the last couple of years established himself as one of the most important and reflective Syrian documentarists of his generation with his films *A Comedian in a Syrian Tragedy* (2020) and *Our Memory Belongs to Us* (2021).

Both films elucidate significant aspects of the Syrian tragedy, in particular the changing temporal dynamics following enforced exile and displacement. The first film focuses on the famous Syrian actor Fares Helou, which the film follows as he joins the revolution, comes under attack from the regime, and ends up fleeing Syria to France. The film follows this forced move, which also has become Farah's own fate. Farah's own voice is important in the film, even if we hardly see him in front of the camera.

While still in Syria, we follow Helou in his endeavour of building an art space in al-Bustan. The art space is to be an open space for artists doing all sorts of exhibitions and performances. The energy Helou is putting into the makings of the space is palpable. However, with his speaking up against the

regime, thugs send a strong message by destroying his art space. In the next scenes, Helou talks on the phone with various persons from the regime who either try to sweet talk him into coming back to their ranks or with sheer force try to cajole him into submitting to authority. He is targeted as a popular figure, but also as a Syrian hailing from a Christian background and, accordingly, critical of the regime narrative and its framing of the entire revolution as being just about Islamic extremists, not a popular and peaceful protest movement.

Later, we follow Helou in Paris. He stays with a Syrian acquaintance, who starts to question his narrative. Hence, the reflection on whether the revolution was worth its price is forced upon Helou. Devoid of the fame and importance bestowed upon him in Syria, Helou's life in Paris is somewhat more humble. Life goes on, surely, but life in exile is markedly different from the hopes and elated spirits of the early revolution. The film presents an uprooted figure who is tied to the revolutionary moment but appears to be cut loose and trying to find his footing in France.

Farah's second film is rather different. It presents three Syrian men in exile, namely, Odai, Rani, and Yadan, whom Farah summons to meet him in Paris to talk about what happened in Syria. The three men live in different European countries, and the film therefore brings them together to reflect on these events. All three were activists in the uprisings in Syria in Deraa. They were engaged in filming and documenting the unfolding events as they unravelled in 2011 and 2012. Yadan had arranged to bring the entire collection of digital files out of Syria to Jordan, and later, in 2013, he entrusted the digital collection to Farah. Hence, Farah received the entire collection of some 12,756 videos in order to make a film out of them. A copy of the digital collection was also passed on to Dima Saber at Birmingham City University so she and Paul Long could make a digital archive (Saber 2020; Saber and Long 2017). For this film, Farah had arranged for four days of collective watching of these videos on the stage of a Parisian cinema. This microcosm of friends on stage, reorganizing events and talking about their hopes, their fears, and the lost friends and loss of home presents a cathartic moment. The three men reassert their memories through their laughter and tears. Poignant scenes abound, and Farah frequently figures on the stage talking with Odai, Rani, and Yadan about the footage and their reactions to it. At different times, Yadan asks for the camera to stop filming, which Farah respects. The film accordingly gives respect, autonomy, and dignity back to these three ordinary persons. Significantly, the film ends by Farah asserting his voice and narrative alongside those of Odai, Rani, and Yadan. One of their friends, Abu Nimr, who is a major presence in the film, was killed while documenting what was happening, and his death was captured on camera. As the three men are about to watch this scene, Yadan asks Farah not to show it, saying, "I don't want to remember him that way!" Farah respects this choice. However, after ending the scene on the stage in Paris, the film ends with this

very scene of Abu Nimr being shot dead by a sniper as he crosses a dangerous street. Farah's voice concludes the movie, saying: "I chose to remember."

In our conversation, Farah reflects on the stakes of Syrian archiving processes but also of generations holding different positions and memories regarding what happened. "The older generation lived in Syria and has to reconstruct their memories now," he comments. He then goes on to say: "The younger generation, by contrast, has a different memory. Their memory structure is different." As he explains, they did not hold any memories before the bombs struck. He elaborates on how he sees the idea of images as evidence and proof as particularly important before, when it all happened. Things are different now, he says: "Now, after ten years, it is a different approach, it is about our own archive, our own narratives, and not about collective experience."

Farah asserts that his own ambition is to "give the narrative back." This ambition ties in to what Farah wants to accomplish with the film: "The film is both for now and for the future." This implies making the international community aware of the persisting role of the regime in perpetrating violence. He explains how allowing embassies to reopen in Syria will give legitimacy and authority to the regime. "It is also important to show the film in Denmark with the current situation," Farah asserts, pointing to the fact that the Danish authorities at the time of writing still intend to send back Syrians to the Damascus area as it is deemed a "safe" area contrary to all official reports. Farah pauses before he goes on: "It is also important for my daughter, she needs to understand how it all was." Farah recounts how his own family was displaced from the Golan Heights in 1967. "I had questions for my parents, and I expect my daughter will have [questions for] me as well."

Farah points to the problematic situation regarding the active denial currently orchestrated by the Syrian regime. "The statue which was taken down in Deraa is now back up … We need to keep [hold of] these moments," Farah explains, referring to one of the opening scenes in the film that shows the statue of Hafiz al-Assad being taken down.

Regarding the second film, Farah explains how he was in Copenhagen in 2013 meeting up with Signe Byrge Sørensen from the Danish Film Institute. However, what for him was a straightforward story was less easy to communicate. Supported by his partner Lyana Salem, who co-produced the film, Farah explains the idea of getting Odai, Rani, and Yadan to meet him in Jordan and film their conversation. They were supposed to meet for Yadan's wedding, but only Yadan was able to make it on a theatre stage in Jordan. Odai and Rani were Skyped in. "I studied theatre, and I feel secure on the stage … As a dancer, I toured the world and performed in many different places. I feel at home on the stage. It is taking me out of time and space, whether Odai, Yadan, and Rani were in the Netherlands, the UK … We wanted to take the persons out of their context … This film gave us the tools to do this." Salem joins in,

describing their film as "history telling," which "was about the revolution, how it started, how it became militarized, Islamized, internationalized."

At this point in the conversation, I comment on the dignity of the characters presented in the film, observing that they all come across very powerfully and with dignity. Farah responds: "I was observing and just following Fares, we were experiencing the end of the Syrian regime!" He sighs. "I was naïve, I didn't see what was happening." He explains the details around the second film as being very different: "I had 12,756 videos and four days of shooting. Here it was on how their lives were affected." He elaborates further on this: "We chose 18 March because it was [then that] the statue was destroyed … It was a start [for them] to narrate their own stories, to fix the narrative and give dignity back to people!" Salem joins in again: "All became equal after the revolution, and even more so in France." She adds: "You lose your ground beneath!" Reflecting on this, she continues: "The revolution and [what comes] after is always different. Yes, we lost. But we still have our memory. It is the most important tool."

The footage allowed for a different form of intervention and telling of the past. One specific impetus was to circumvent the traffic in what Farah calls "graphic images." Farah and Salem both point to the way Syria has been turned into a global repository of images of destruction and violence. "My nightmares need not be relived in the context of films," Farah says, then continues: "People are traumatized as they are denied memories." He ties this back to his second film and their method of elicitation: "On stage in the theatre there is a space of reflection between them and the screen." Salem adds to this: "This led us to make this film, to keep the violent photos out. To keep it out in order to reflect on it." She continues this line of thought: "We need to control the memories. We need to confront what happened to us!"

As It Were: Critical Events and the Work of Time

In the work of Syrian documentarists such as Ali Atassi and Rami Farah, we see the changed conditions for narrating what happened in Syria. The revolutionary present is long gone, but its aftereffects are still alive, albeit on a much more personal level. The general problem here is how to keep and protect such memories, to keep that reality alive and present the narratives of what happened without romanticizing them. As such, the narrative efforts in these critical works attest to a freedom of speaking up but also speaking out after what came to pass. Here, documentaries present themselves as a particular way to narrate events, to make feelings palatable, and to offer a space of pensiveness. The various engagements with the past in the work and reflections of Atassi and Farah gives what Catherine Z. Elgin (2017) has called "epistemic access" to the efforts of living with what happened. It does so by opening up

our understanding to the work of time on the experiences and narratives of what was. It does so by playing with the fidelity of staying true to the memories and documentations of particular persons' lives in the unfolding of events, while situating those present times as forms of futures past. Fixing the narrative, as formulated by Lyana Salem and Rami Farah, accordingly plays on the ambiguity of "as it were": trying to speak even if such an attempt may be less solid when moving to personal and intimate terrains. By moving from the collective to the personal, the narrative forms and memories also move towards new articulations, where pause and reflection become critical.

In my conception, the modality of "as it were" is a productive way to think about the relationship between actuality, factuality, and potentiality. As time passes, what happened in the Syrian context is articulated in new ways, and the narrative becomes more fragmented and personalized, as evidenced by the documentaries by Farah and Atassi. Here, the "as it were" plays on the ambiguity of the "as if," which Lisa Wedeen (1999, 2019) so aptly describes in her important works on Syria. A politics of "as if" in Wedeen's reading is based on the fact that much of Syrian politics has been based on a symbolism, where people would act "as if" they revere the leader and state, while for many this was hardly the case. For some of Syria's minorities, such as many Christians, the vision of a multicultural state was indeed a possible aspiration in the years preceding 2011. In moments of crisis, the "as if" frequently risks collapsing into an "as is" – that the reality at hand actually could promise something if not good, then at least workable (Bandak 2015b; see also Bandak 2014, 2015a). With the "as it were," my contention is to open up for the reconstructing and reworking of the past that now takes place in the memory work of exiled Syrians. These memories draw from what happened but also often inadvertently play with that reality, changing one's position, making one either more or less responsible for what actually took place. In that sense, I see "as it were" as contrasted with "as it was," which appears "solidly" to be grounded in fact. The "as it were" is in this context a persistent attempt to speak about what happened, to retain that freedom, all the while one is moving into new terrains. In moving to the modality of "as it were," we are afforded a different frame, which engages the temporal ordering and allows the work of time to become visible by playing off on the intersecting yet diverse registers of the past, present, and future, but particularly so in the attempts to put them into words. The "as it were" operates as a particular form of freedom of speech that opens up the personal and private registers and continuously attempts engaging what happened, without the fixity of an official form of narrative, and perhaps even allows for a certain playfulness.

Venna Das (2000, 59; 2007, 80) eloquently captures the relationship between temporality and narrative in her work on violence in an Indian context. When attending to violence and unsettling forms of brutality, Das contends, we may

need to stand back and avoid easy conclusions and fast opinions. In her formulation, what is of concern is "the *work* of time, not its image or representation." A general line of thought is that a coming to terms with what has passed, implies a descent into the ordinary. Hereby we are pointed to the critical role that stories have in establishing a sense of control over one's narrative, a point that anthropologist Michael Jackson (1998, 2002, 2005) has unravelled across his oeuvre (see also Lambek 2010). Jackson frequently points to Arendt's (1958) reading of the human condition as constantly torn by situations in which the human actor finds himself/herself an object of others' decisions and actions, and the reverse, situations in which the human actor finds himself/herself to be the subject and narrator of his/her life. Thus, Jackson designates this hard balance as an existential imperative, which is a trait seen cross-culturally, albeit circumstances and articulations obviously vary. Violence inscribes memories vividly on the bodies and minds of the victims and witnesses. Violence freezes the normal flow of experience and articulation, arresting time's flow. Simultaneously, what comes after attests to life as ongoing, even if guilt, shame, and uneasiness with having survived may mark those who live on. Time, inadvertently goes on, but it is never quite the same. Violence accordingly affords a particular haunting of memories, as what one would want to leave behind may constantly be reactivated, willingly or unwillingly (Bandak and Coleman 2019; Bryant 2010; Knight 2021).

The need for time to move on also presents a paradox as, in moral terms, a moving on cannot happen without, in some measure, learning to live with one's actions and their consequences. One of the key faculties allowing for such a transition is storytelling. Storytelling and speech allow the work of time to happen in a retaking of one's own narrative, even though that may be messy and require constant effort to achieve. For Venna Das (2007, 87) this implies that "time is not purely something represented but is an agent that 'works' on relationships – allowing them to be reinterpreted, rewritten, sometimes overwritten – as different social actors struggle to author stories in which collectivities are created or re-created."

Time may indeed work on the consciousness of both individual actors as well as the broader social webs in which one is inscribed. Acknowledging that one was and forever will be marked by the events of a moment as decisive as the Syrian uprising is a starting point for engaging personally with the ways "history" happened and one's role in it without falling into unwanted forms of nostalgia and romanticizing. Nostalgia may frequently be seen as patently bound to an idealized past, on fantasies with no bearing on the future as when Appadurai (1996, 77) talks of "imagined nostalgia" as a nostalgia "for things that never were" (see also Özyürek 2006). However, following Svetlana Boym (2001, 41ff), we need to discern different forms of nostalgia, as she points to both a restorative and a reflective modality of nostalgia. Critically, she points

out that restorative nostalgia is bound to the re-establishment of a past order that evokes national pasts as well as national futures. Reflective nostalgia has a different openness to it as it points to aspects of memory in cultural and individual terms. In Boym's formulation: "Re-flection suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time" (49). As such, Boym points to the role of such reflective nostalgia being to allow for critical thinking even if it may frequently be fragmentary and inconclusive. Reflective nostalgia is a going-back that allows for a moving forward, not a going-back in order to turn back time. Nostalgia in its reflective modality opens up for a meditation on the relation between past, present, and future. However, this happens not because of ease and accommodation with the past but rather because of the pain and "defamiliarization and sense of distance that drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future" (50).

Such reflective work, and such freedom of reflection, has certainly come at a high cost for Syrians in or outside the country's national boundaries. However, by allowing reflective re-engagements with the past, the sedimentation of what took place can be given a more mature and conscious form, and perhaps, perhaps, also become the potential for new forms of freedom and experimentations beyond the fixity and unfreedom of the Syrian regime. This, *as it were*, would allow for the work of time but also for an active reworking of time.

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