

Comments on Mark Westmoreland's paper
Akram's Reproduction Machine:
Reimagining Lebanese Resistance

by
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Can cultural representations made outside the academy, outside the first-world, outside the conventional logocentric format contribute to ethnographic, political, economic, social research? Mark Westmoreland's essay, "Akram's Reproduction Machine," is a strong affirmation of visual ethnography's potential to bring otherwise inaccessible and, hence, dispensable aspects of culturally structured experience into the realm of analysis and response. In the case of Lebanon, and more broadly, of societies centered on rapidly shifting political, economic, and territorial configurations, these oft-neglected aspects are the imaginary, the materiality of mediation, and the quotidian. Westmoreland's essay also raises important questions about the limits of visual ethnography, and, likewise, about the politics of prizing visual media to cross cultural differences. It makes for a valuable read and worthy discussion piece. The questions I articulate from having read this work are not to the author in particular but to all of us working in this field.

By opening his analysis with close scrutiny of physical structure one of Zaatari's films, **This Day**, Westmoreland is able to detail the kind of viewing experience that watching it offers Zaatari's audiences, entailing simultaneously a heightened sense of proximity, to "real Bedouins," and absurdity, in the notion of authenticity and the exotic. Likewise, Westmoreland foregrounds the collage construction of **All Is Well on the Border**, and lets the confrontation between the types of material "support" guide his understanding of the "tension" viewers of such media everyday experience "between the mythical importance of deterritorialized homelands and the revolutionary imaginaries" (p. 26). This visually motivated interaction with the film makes a strong case for Westmoreland's argument that the imaginary is as much fact—concrete and compelling—as is physically lived, daily experience.

Moreover, by detailing the process of Zaatari's bringing another film into being, **In this House**, Westmoreland is able to take seriously visual evidence which does not fit the prevalent ideology (based in Lacan's psychologizing) explaining the relationship of experimental Lebanese contemporary art to its society. Having noted that both materially and intellectually, Ali Hashisho's story, and not the secreted capsule, is the motor of the film, Westmoreland is able to call attention to the erasure of the everyday that conventional interpretations of the film have produced: Faisal, the hired-hand who "silently digging bears the burden of representation" (p. 15). A laborer, without the uniform that puts his peers in poverty a step, literally above, without the social status to authorize or legalize interruptions of Lebanon's surface features, Faisal is the human mechanism guiding viewers' experience of sifting without getting hands dirty, of waiting and expecting meaning without actually seeking it, of being part of an unarticulated hierarchy that prompt burial of some messages, but not others. It is Faisal's presence, so commonplace in Lebanese society and so central in this film, Westmoreland argues, that evokes the horizons of power and possibility that make the visible and visuality so important and contested in Lebanon, and international politics today. Here Westmoreland brilliantly reveals the danger of a purely semiotic approach which does not question its own realisms, and inadvertently renders treats "culture" like just another style in the universal museum.

To me, the socially grounded approach to the visual Westmoreland undertakes demonstrates its value to understanding social conditions, such as deterritorialization or the quest for authenticity, which have not been neatly wrapped into hegemonic discourses. More can be done here. Below, I'm going to map out four areas in which I think Westmoreland's approach can be strengthened. 1) A political critique of the art circulation; 2) An ethnographic critique of the visual; 3) A historical critique of the mythical.

At different points in the paper, Westmoreland raises the question of art circulation, and particularly, of the disproportional interest of western art institutions in contemporary art production associated with post-war Lebanon. Yet, in his one sustained foray to explain this phenomenon he rather vaguely invokes a confluence of political and economic opportunities and strong, creative personalities (pp. 6-7). As the Future was privatized, high-tech jobs became available for media-based artists who could ply their externally acquired education in locally funded ventures. Within that structure, some artists developed special skills that launched them far beyond the local art sphere. Zaatari was one. But this slippage from the social to the heroic directs Westmoreland away from a wider sense of the range of possibilities contained in that historical confluence, and hence, from a critical appreciation of the strategies and claims by which Zaatari's work has had its particular impact and trajectory.

For one, the dissatisfaction many "deeply hungry" westerners have felt before the platter of "tired caricatures and racist propaganda" does not guarantee that more truthful, less constraining images will not be sought. Mahmood Mamdani (2002) has identified the insidiousness of one particular new caricature, the "good Muslim." Zaatari's work may challenge some stereotypes, just when people are ready to have them challenged, but it still circulates in a stereotype-framed market. The story of Zaatari's barely secured visa illustrates this well, for it must be proceeded, even in Westmoreland's account by a hegemonic narrative (see p. 8) which, apparently factual, is still yet one of many possible and thus, importantly fantastic, too. Was the "Muslim world" that Zaatari could bring, visually, artistically, "good," in a stereotypical way, that importantly, doesn't require exploring the usage of sight to know a limited range of human experience?

So, too, the interest in a "localized world-view," as a better source of understanding than one cross-culturally imposed (for example, the civilizing mission), carries its own set of constraints, whereby artists must be seen to be operating with some degree of "local" authority or access. But given that Zaatari's work has been understood by some of his peers and co-nationalists as feeding a western hunger, whose "world-view" is represented as part of Zaatari's locality? Could Westmoreland tell us more about the contestation of "the local," that visual representations provoke? Could he embody further, in the everyday as well as class and political membership, the viewpoints that he invokes?

Both of these factors politicize the visual in Zaatari's work, as the medium by which ideas can be attached to circulating objects. When many are searching for "something more" (p.6), what is the value added by the visual aspect, and what is the tax that follows? Given that apprehension of the visual by "self-reflective" thinkers has been an index of modernity and enlightenment, it behooves anthropologists using visual material to avoid fetishizing it, most effectively, I think by re-contextualizing it. This would require a more detailed account by Westmoreland, on the one hand, of the actual steps of circulation of a film like **In this House**, along the lines of actor-network theory (Becker 1982, Latour 1979), and on the other hand, a more detailed tracing of the social life of certain images associated with visuality and reflexivity.

In the case of Zaatari's work, the Bedouins who open the paper provide an excellent opportunity to politicize the visual. Bedouins have been part of the very foundations of an art world associated

with Lebanon; the first visual ethnographers and crafters of visual representations worked in Bedouin imagery. Contemporaries of Sulayman Jabbour, “pioneer” painters produced innumerable pictures of Bedouins just on the fringe of urban society (and sexuality), but rarely figured them in that society, and in only one instance I know of, actually positioned them as viewing subjects. Generally, Bedouins were the objects of viewing experience that allied the subject with civilization and modernity. It was this contrast that launched “Lebanese” art-making and claimed the attention of the citizenry and government for art as a political asset. While there was a parallel interest in Bedouins as the pre-modern authentic form of Arabness, they did not escape this binary existence. Therefore, the Bedouins encountered in Jabbour’s archive and Zaatari’s **This Day** are not merely visual traces of a vanishing culture but, rather, materializations of a conceptual framework, content-specific to the history and sensibility of Lebanese urbanity. When Jabbour’s granddaughter maintains that, “The spirit to document such a thing is a western idea, I think” (p. 3) she produces an essentialized East via construction of an essentialized West. Zaatari’s work is, to an extent, implicated in this binary: seeing **via** media is being not-Bedouin. Does the visual format of his work allow for critiquing that foundational structure? If not, it seems a visual ethnography must be accompanied by an ethnography of the visual.

In other words, I wish to extend further Westmoreland’s critique of Laura Mark’s self-blinding to the laborer’s presence. The different possible viewings of **All Is Well on the Border** should not be reduced to a quarrel over meaning but should be expanded to an exploration of the contentiousness of meaning-making. Here the elitism of contemporary experimental art that is circulated for its ability to present a “localized world-view” should be confronted, with the goal of a richer understanding the potentials of visual experience and knowledge for both social interaction and academic research. Westmoreland briefly relates his somewhat alienating experience at the BAC opening of Zaatari’s solo exhibition, **Earth of Endless Secrets**. Increasingly, the vanguard, critical art world has become more and more cloistered in Lebanon, to the point where one of the most prominent galleries has to rely on a single taxi driver to chauffeur in guests, “because he is the only one who knows the directions,” as it was put to me during my fieldwork. This is not necessarily intentional on the part of art workers, nor has it escaped their notice, but it does point to the degree to which certain everydays, certain audiences and world-views are categorically excluded from this realm of exploration and representation. It is because of such exclusions that visual art has its specific access to important resources. It is in this rarified realm that assertions like the following can be made and make sense:

“Unlike an earlier period when Western art practices and aesthetics became markers of a nonwestern nation’s (lack of) modernity and were used politically by European empires as part of their civilizing missions, the critically infused postmodernity of visual culture has enabled contemporary Lebanese artists to challenge the derivative associations assailed on earlier generations. (p. 7)”

I’m not so sure about that. It sounds to me as if Westmoreland hasn’t done his own footwork to document this statement properly. The artists of today are still accused of derivativeness, but by a sector or Lebanese and western society that they can afford to ignore. Some of them, on some occasions, affiliate with European institutions or audiences to criticize the “anti-modern, backward” stance of their not-visually-inclined compatriots, but in so doing, they make themselves vulnerable to being provincialized as “Lebanese, but exceptional” for non-Lebanese audiences, or again, for audiences emphasizing their local-living, as “just global” and relevant only to elite western circles.

Does being original really set one apart from a civilizing mission? How is now so different? Just because of war-weariness? Were previous Lebanese really so politically unsavvy? Who made art

practices that could be inscribed onto the West into markers of modernity, and who deployed civilizing discourse? Just European imperialists? I cannot help remembering Jabbour's granddaughter as I pose that question to the field of visual ethnography. In fact, I would assert that today's critical postwar art scene is animated by many of the same impulses of its predecessors. It is only a series of myths structuring the art world today, as before, that provides the sense of a gap between past and present, or between dormancy and revelation, or between amnesia and awareness. Westmoreland has explored so richly the visual material of Zaatari's archives – surely one could go further and do the rest of the footwork to set that visual in a larger context and see its impact and implication. For example, has anyone done the statistical documentation that would support a generational analysis of “pre-war” vs. “post-war” production being divided along the lines of radicalism, or even trends in usage of medium? Westmoreland asserts that Zaatari's work “brings latent visual histories into the present” (p.13), but who has forgotten? Could this not be embodied in certain agents of memories' repression? It has become fashionable, and at least partially reasonable, to assert nation-wide amnesia, but has the fieldwork been done to prove that, and from it, the singular role of visual aesthetics in countering it? For me, there is an uncanny parallel between today's myth of “Lebanese amnesia” and the myth of “Ottoman slumber” that launched the pioneer's generation of art-making. The role of radicalism allocated to visual sensibility in each case suggests an essentializing of vision that simply should not be taken for granted.

In sum, I think Mark Westmoreland takes significant steps towards exploring the relationship between visual forms made in Lebanon to visual (and broader) research of the Middle East. He successfully points to places where research lacunae can be filled by this type of research. More importantly, perhaps, he offers the possibility to ask questions that previously went unnoticed, regarding the experience of the visual and the imaginary, not “in its own world” (p. 29), I would say, but in the world it makes possible.

References:

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