Media Anthropology Network
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)
E-Seminar Series
http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm

30th E-Seminar

Mark Westmoreland
American University in Cairo

Akram's Reproduction Machine:
Reimagining Lebanese Resistance

Discussant: Kirsten Scheid
American University of Beirut

23 February - 9 March 2010

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Tue Feb 23 02:11:42 PST 2010

Dear all

Our 30th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar opens now on this mailing list. As previously announced, for a period of two weeks we'll be discussing a working paper by Dr Mark Westmoreland entitled "Akram's Reproduction Machine: Reimagining Lebanese Resistance". Mark is an assistant professor of anthropology at the American University in Cairo. He has a PhD from the University of Texas and specialises in the study of visual culture. You can see the abstract below and the full paper here http://www.media-anthropology.net/westmoreland_akrams_reproductionmachine.pdf

The discussant will be Dr Kirsten Scheid who is an assistant professor of anthropology at the American University of Beirut. Kirsten received her PhD from Princeton University and writes regularly on modern and contemporary art in the Middle East.

As usual, the session with start with our discussant's comments posted to the list later today or by tomorrow morning GMT. The presenter will then respond to those comments, after which the discussion will be open to the floor for further questions and comments. To post your thoughts, simply write directly to the list (medianthro at easaonline.org) with no attachments once the floor is open. If your post doesn't reach the list please let me know offlist rather than resending it, as our listserv has been known to act strangely once or twice in the past.

Looking forward to a lively session, it's over to Kirsten now!

John

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Abstract

Akram Zaatari recently had his first solo show in Beirut. As one of the most successful artists in Lebanon, Zaatari has shown his work at exhibitions and biennials around the world. Due to the focus on war and memory, Lebanese art in general has become a fetish in the international art world. Considered part of the first generation of postwar artists (followed by two since), Zaatari has a prolific body of work dating from the mid-90s, and earlier if you consider the way he incorporates photos and diaries from his childhood into his exhibits. The rarity of solo shows in Lebanon means it is unusual to experience one artist's entire body of work at a single event. While I am interested in what this tells us about the shortages of public venues for artists in Lebanon, the limited access to previous works, and the global flow of these discourses, in this paper I want to consider instead how Zaatari's collection resonates with a broader effort by artists in Lebanon to trace the violence of the past into the present (and perhaps the future) by engaging the strengths and weaknesses of modern media. In Zaatari's solo show, Earth of Endless Secrets, most of the pieces focus on the way that political violence in southern Lebanon has been experienced by the people, places, and objects that have "survived" it. Indeed, much of his work examines media objects as fossils of forgotten histories. By using photography and video as "reproduction machines" to document and catalog his research materials, he does not so much reveal behind the scene "secrets" of video production as show the "endless" amount of secrets as yet unearthed. According to Zaatari, this identifies the boundary of permissible representation.

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Thu Feb 25 00:49:04 PST 2010

Dear e-seminar participants

Our discussant, Kirsten Scheid, sends her apologies for the delay in posting her comments on Mark Westmoreland's paper about the Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari . She'll be doing so later today.

The good news is that those of you who haven't yet read Mark's paper still have time to do so today!!

Meantime some of you may want to follow these links about Akram Zaatari recommended by Mark:

Zaatari's presentation of Earth of Endless Secrets: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37fwJJOBFOc

KM Artist talk: http://www.kunstverein-muenchen.de/2008/gallery_akram_zaatari_interview.php

In addition, Gabi Aguero has kindly forwarded the following Zaatari links:

http://www.videosurf.com/video/akram-zaatari-at-kunstverein-muenchen-63928080?vlt=ffext
A video of Akram Zaatari speaking about his work and a tour of his show in Germany.

http://www.videosurf.com/video/the-8th-fea-student-conference-akram-zaatari-earth-of-endless-secrets-86286820
Earth of Endless Secrets a lecture by the artist. Fast forward the first part while they are giving him an award if you like.

http://www.vdb.org/smackn.acgi$artistdetail?ZAATARIA
Some of his video work

All the best

John

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Thu Feb 25 09:41:20 PST 2010

Dear e-seminar participants

Please find below Kirsten Scheid's comments on Mark Westmoreland's working paper. Thanking Kirsten for these thoughts, I'd now like to invite Mark to post a brief response, after which the discussion will be open to all of us on this list.

John

------ Original Message ------
Received: Thu, 25 Feb 2010 04:21:21 PM GMT
From: k scheid <ks28 at aub.edu.lb>
To: John Postill <jpostill at usa.net>
Subject: For your attention:

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, Westermoreland 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-nationals 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 leas 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:

Becker, Howard 1982 Art Worlds. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Latour, Bruno 1979 Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mamdani, Mahmood 2002 Good Muslim, Bad Muslim. American Anthropologist 104(3):766-775.

Mark Westmoreland mrw at aucegypt.edu
Fri Feb 26 01:40:56 PST 2010

I want to thank Kirsten Scheid for her extended comments about and unreserved challenges to my paper. Scheid has provided me with a generous and enriching critique. Her rich understanding of the history of Lebanese art brings fruitful questions to bear on the contemporary state of the arts. In a most useful manner, she reveals an underlying tension between social criticism and "critical appreciation" that I have felt in much of my fieldwork. My project that aims to insert Akram Zaatari into disciplinary debates (outside his field) inadvertently sequesters him from social

scrutiny. (Partly since it is already a long paper,) Scheid rightly points out that I reify an elitist narrative of Lebanese art that is premised on notions of "good" (urban and modern) and "local" (nonwestern). Accordingly, my response aims to briefly engage these discursive formations in an effort to think through some of their contours and the difficulties it poses for an ethnography of the visual.

To start, I believe that Scheid's critique gestures toward the limits of reflexivity although she does not address this directly. These limitations can be articulated in two ways, I think. First, drawing on her comments about the representation of the Bedouin as always the object of "seeing *via* media," she asks, "Does the visual format of his work allow for critiquing that foundational structure?" I would argue and have argued that Zaatari and his contemporaries have done a great deal to challenge representational structures by turning mediated codes in on themselves. In other words, rather than dismissing media representation on account of its inherent misrepresentations, they have tried to make it work reflexively to expose these structures. But this means that such a strategy necessarily must replicate these structures in order to call them into question. This may be another instantiation of "diminishing returns."

The second point about the limits of reflexivity relates to her suggestion, "a visual ethnography must be accompanied by an ethnography of the visual." By this, I take her to mean an ethnography of the circulation and social life of images, in which she champions an actor-network theory. This has important ramifications for (visual) anthropologists who advocate and deploy reflexive techniques. It clearly implies that a reflexivity of the ethnographic encounter is not enough, but it also suggests that binaries too easily inform these reflexive techniques. Premised on the idea of a western anthropologist working with nonwestern subjects, the reflexive critique of (neo)colonial power relations reproduces this binary. Indeed, even as he tries to reflexively critique the representation of the Bedouin, Scheid implicates Zaatari within a series of binary analogies (photographer:Bedouin::subject::object::modern:tradition). While I have sequestered him from this critique by situating him within a discussion of visual anthropology, Scheid's challenge to this should also be extended to anthropologists. In other words, in critical engagements about ethnographic filmmakers rarely do we understand their social position within "their" societies.

And yet, I am troubled by this trap of the binary. The essentialization of East/West by Jabbur's granddaughter is necessary reproduced in saying, "seeing *via* media is being not-Bedouin." I wonder if Scheid envisions a manner of seeing that does not reproduce this type of identity politics. If we deploy an indigenous media project that gives voice to, or in this case gives vision to, the Bedouin are we really breaking down this binary? Or is this not the point? How do we address our blind spots without blinding ourselves in other ways?

While I am tempted to respond to several other points brought up by Scheid, I'll keep this short in order to allow others to join the discussion. Again, many thanks for the fruitful engagement.

Mark R. Westmoreland

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Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Fri Feb 26 01:55:47 PST 2010

Many thanks to Mark Westmoreland for that swift response!

I'd now like to invite brief comments and questions from the floor. Please post directly to the list (medianthro at easaonline.org) with cc: to me (j.postill at shu.ac.uk) (but do let me know offlist if for some reason your post hasn't got through to the list).

John

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Sat Feb 27 02:34:06 PST 2010

While we are waiting for questions and comments from the floor, perhaps I can ask Mark Westmoreland about his intriguing discussion of the 'impossibility of representation' in the context of Lebanon's wars.

On the one hand, you say that Zaatari turned to the quotidian in his work because he faced 'the impossibility of representation' (p. 11). But earlier on you quote Zaatari and Feldman as saying that "assertions of representation's impossibility threaten to trap representation in a cycle of diminishing returns" (p. 11) - as if to imply that such assertions of impossibility should be avoided? Where is the impossibility? Can one at least seek to create *partial* reconstructions of the country's recent history of conflict? And why the cycle of diminishing returns? What is this cycle?

I was also wondering if you could say a bit more about how actor-network theory or 'social life of things' (which are very different) approaches might take your analysis of Zaatari's work in new directions.

Many thanks in advance

John

Mark Pedelty pedeltmh at umn.edu
Sat Feb 27 07:47:26 PST 2010

My apologies, my question for Mark is brief, but the preamble is not.

Feel free to skip to the question at the end if you like:

Mark,

I enjoyed the paper very much.

Midway through the paper you imply that you are writing "in order to theoretically and methodologically situate Zaatari." At the end, however, it seems that you are

asking reflexive questions about the search for purpose as an anthropological author. Very good questions.

I have always assumed that one of the good things about Anthropology is that we go somewhere and do something in order to develop new knowledge. It could be into virtual space or across the globe, but time and space matter to our particular genre of nonfiction narrative. It is one of the things that distinguishes our work from other scholars in the interpretive tradition, for example, who make their stock in trade from privileged readings, what anthropologists used to derisively call "armchair anthropology." That has been one of the dominant distinctions between musicologists and ethnomusicologists, for example. The latter feel somewhat obligated to ask at least a few other people: "What do you think?" or "What does this mean?" It is not to denigrate the former, because musicologists use their own tools to delve into text, it is just that an engineer's "black box" is placed around context for sake of exclusive examination within the text, if that is possible. Ideally, we go much further than that, but the point is that it is more than an implicit argument that our personal reading of a sign, code, text, or culture is inordinately important, enough so to merit other's reading not only the "original" text (which you nicely problematize as intertextual, polysemic and evasive), but the new text we create about that text.

Much of the early part of your work is comprised of your retelling of the visual images in a way that might, "theoretically and methodologically situate Zaatari." Essentially, you ask for the charity of the reader to accept that there is a reason to privilege your interpretation and let you take our hand as interlocutor or tour guide. I, for one, know nothing about your subject, but am now quite interested. To be honest, until you actually bring in the interaction with Zaatari, however, I was having a hard time with it, probably because at heart I want a bit of empiricism with my criticism. Not positivism or even naturalism per se, but something that is more than an interpretive retelling. Our "post-ethnographic" move could in some ways be a move back to "armchair anthropology" if we are not careful.

Having taken us to Zaatari, the piece gathers some of the contextual bits that help turn it into a productive discourse on a place, time, and people (not a "people" writ large, but the specific people invoked). It is not the essentialists "real" time, place, and people, but a set of each that allows for comprehensible narrative, including an interesting meta-narrative, an intertextual ethnography rather than simply trapping us in the head of a seminarian as he examines a film. Perhaps I should say you are producing images about images as well, but let's face it, text is not the best medium for explicating, analyzing, or synthesizing images.

The existential, professional, and theoretical questions at the end are nicely crafted and it is a brave act to put them on the table in that way. I appreciated that very much and reread the entire paper in a new light after, in a sense, finding purpose in those final pages.

Your work and Zaatari's help us to critically reflect on the "value-added" of academic renderings of "popular" work (for lack of better terms for both). I have fallen back on a somewhat traditional justification for academic research and publication: that although academic publications are somewhat incestuous in their circulation, new knowledge can be created in this domain, partly because we do more than opine. Sadly, nonfiction narrative that gains greater public traction has a tendency toward ideological reproduction, more so than does academic research and writing. Through our intersections with other discourses, students, journalists, etc., academic work can

do some good beyond ourselves. Whereas the goal sometimes appears to see who can cause niche readers to most effectively "rethink" the last minute's certitudes and effectively brand the new "post"-whatever, there is great value in the good old Hegelian dialectic of thesis-antithesis producing new truths, especially if that debate is informed by something other than theoretical renderings of other's texts. As you bring in worlds of texts and human networks beyond the film, including Zaatari's voice, the paper becomes more and more insightful. I would suggest even more attention to those contexts.

This is all a very long-winded way of saying that your piece got me thinking. A simple question:

As long as you opened up the autoethnographic box by asking questions about authorship at the end, what is it exactly that you want to accomplish with this paper? Using this work as a specific example might help us move toward answering the larger conundrums and questions you so effectively raise at the end of your paper.

Thanks for presenting this thought-provoking paper for discussion.

Mark Pedelty

Gabi Aguero gaguero at shaw.ca
Sat Feb 27 16:22:57 PST 2010

I have to say I really enjoyed the paper mostly because it raises a lot of questions that I have been pondering with. Specifically relating to issues of reflexivity, representation, binary opposites when we speak about images and the quest to make significant contributions to anthropological ideas... from other arenas of thought that are not just opinions but are based on our sacrosanct ethnographic approach. We strive to make sense of things by asking these questions and like Mark (Pedelty) said, we sometimes do not arrive to answering them or achieving what we set out to do, but the intention is there.

I have to say that I come from that other field. As a visual artist I am still resisting writing as the ultimate form of expression and although artists have to train to read and write about images, the difference with the ethnographic gaze in anthropology is that we are invested in the social meaning of the images as Mark (Westmoreland) rightly says, and the degrees of distance that this creates as images exist trapped between the different gazes.

I honestly looked at the show on the videos before I even read the paper because I did not want to have a pre-concieved idea about it (artist resist words about art I should tell you). As an artist I can give it one read, as an anthropologist another, both readings though are situated from this very precise way of perceiving images that comes from our pre-concepts, constructions and expectations of what an image does to us when the encounter happens (in my case I can¹t help the training). As an artist I am interested in the voyeuristic stance Zaatari has of the war, the camera panning through a bombed series of photographs, others are collaged together but they don¹t really make a whole, the clinical whiteness of the gallery and the sharp tidiness of the installations, gloves, light tables, the stillness of the photographs, the careful articulation of memory imbedded in the almost obsessive cataloging of objects, the distance to the war as a spectator that borders on scientific. Yet it is precisely this distancing that I feel makes it so powerful to the viewer. But this is my own opinion

as Mark (Westomoreland) puts it so well, it has to do with degrees of distance and the medium of video used in a quasi documentary way:

Mediation practices in experimental documentary in Lebanon characteristically embodied modes of spectatorship and accentuates feelings of proximity to the media objects as they are recovered from a state of dormancy. At the same time, the proximity to media objects engender feelings of distance from the people and places represented[2](2) I feel the discussion of the post-modern approach to the image making, the gallery setting, the role of Lebanese artists in the market to be interesting from an anthropological point of view because it situates this work within a social context, but I am not interested as a viewer in knowing this because the images exist beyond the social arena in which we contextualize them as well. When we stand in front of them there are other aspects of our perception at work that have to do with our other irrational reactions to art based (maybe) on an anthropology of emotion. Post-modern work such as this is far removed from what other work war artists who, such as Anselm Kiefer to just name one, have struggled with in order to arrive at the idea of representing violence, the ravages of war... but from a different stage of things, maybe focusing on the devastation rather than the memory of what it left behind. Zaatari by removing himself is even more effective, or perhaps it is the sharp contrast of the messiness of war with the clean pieces the artist is presenting that works so well. Further, as in the Catherine Wants to Know protest show, Zaatari's work is part of or is catalogued as that [3]kind[2] or art that is elitist, western, and uses ways of representation that is part of the global market of art making that caters to a connaisseur public and is so removed from the water jug piece, the woman uninterested in the image itself, and all those [3]who don't get it[2] and has a social, class and knowledge base to it. Yet I find when he does this he is also questioning himself, the method and the image. Therefore it is self-reflexive and non-literal or has more than one read, as it also questions the artist himself and the image as well as the process. I have personally struggled with these questions in a body of work I did after the news of the disappeared erupted in Argentina and the notion of representing violence although now, having raised my [3]anthropological awareness[2], I feel totally different about that same work, so I was very interested to read this passage in Marks paper because I am after the same thing in my work: [3]More than mere moral lessons, I am interested in this critical practice from the perspective of a practicing visual anthropologist. I wish to understand the way artists and filmmakers, who have long-term auto-ethnographic experience and a refined propensity for reflexive critiques of representation, endeavor to visually depict the lived and imaginary experience of violence (in the Middle East)(p.9) I would like therefore to ask Mark (Westmoreland) to speak about the methods, the interviews, the answers, the questions and to open up for me the methods, how he did this research and what the artist, the subject in the photographs or the viewers who were involved in the research as they became part of the work of the artist was aiming at representing had to tell. And in his view how he experienced this interaction as he found out more about the work. Did it change? Did it became clearer?

Finally Mark, I liked this very much in your response:

If we deploy an indigenous media project that gives voice to, or in this case gives vision to, the Bedouin are we really breaking down this binary? Or is this not the point? How do we address our blind spots without blinding ourselves in other ways I would answer to you we can't, and we never will, but we approximate the stretching of the gaps in between by listening deeply as a very seasoned anthropologist once told

me just to brush off post-modernist theory to get to the essence of things...by looking closely, by sharing experiences that amount to understanding how others see and striving to strip ourselves of what we already know and wish we didn't. It is perhaps what you also do as an artist and I had not realized it until you brought all this up.

Great paper. Thanks for your work. It was inspiring to read.

Gabi Aguero

Mark Westmoreland mrw at aucegypt.edu
Mon Mar 1 02:16:54 PST 2010

Dear list,

Sorry for the delay in my reply. I very much appreciate the comments made so far by Kirsten, John, Mark, and Gabi. I have been preparing a response, but got waylaid. I will try to respond to everybody by later today.

best,
Mark

Mark Westmoreland mrw at aucegypt.edu
Tue Mar 2 01:12:25 PST 2010

IMPOSSIBILITY/DIMINISHING RETURN

First, let me address the issue John has brought up about impossibility of representation. I take this notion of impossibility to be operating on different levels. In one sense, I see a general application toward a broadly felt crisis of representation in a 'postmodern' world. In other words, if one accepts that representation of any kind cannot provide 'truth,' 'reality,' or 'objectivity', then how can we justify a documentary enterprise? Or, perhaps more crudely, why bother to make representations if all representations are mis-representations? This is a trap, because to suggest that something is a mis-representation, invariably references the very possibility of representation and privileges a false/true dichotomy. This uncompromising situation has made Jayce Salloum identify his work as "reluctant documentary."

In the context of Lebanon, this assertion of impossibility is made very much with certain limitations in mind. The civil war was hyper-mediated and dominates the popular visual record. This record is very narrow, but that does not mean that a corrective is possible – as if one could replace the other. On one hand, the war (like life experience itself) is too vast and diverse to be able to be capture in the whole. Due to the diversity of Lebanese society and the ambiguity of winners and losers at the end of the civil war, a definitive history is impossible. There are very strong forces at play that censor the way the war can be brought into public discourse. On the issue of history, Hady Zaccak has recently made a documentary about how Lebanese history is treated in the school system and shows all the competing discourses playing out in the educational landscape. On the other, experimental documentaries in Lebanon typically avoid telling histories in favor of personal stories. But even these are treated as fragmented and contested (perhaps, Mona Hatoum's Measures of Distance is the best early example of this).

Scheid questions the Lebanese trope of forgetting and amnesia. I agree with her suspicion of the "series of myths structuring the art world" and their applicability to Lebanese amnesia. Perhaps, "forgetting" is the euphemism for articulating what remains repressed, especially if the "agents of memories' repression" cannot be easily named or shown (as in Zaatari's In This House). But then again, forgetting is very much an embodied experience that may have as much to do with lived experience as it does psychological trauma. I argue that the production of 'alternative' media representations provide opportunities for embodied experiences of remembering and forgetting, knowing and not knowing. This is not reducible to "the singular role of visual aesthetics in countering it" as similar themes can be traced in Lebanese literature. Nor is "art" the only domain of alternative aesthetics. Much of my background research has been on Lebanese cinema. Here I would argue that there is a much stronger connection between the current generation and an earlier one, particularly those who made 'high-brow' films during the war like Maroun Baghdadi, Borhan Alouie, Joycelynn Saab, Randa Chahal, etc. The forgotten aesthetics in this history is perhaps the action 'b-films' made during the war in the 1980s that told ambiguous stories of war that any side of the conflict could relate to. Going to the cinema was a common past time during the war to pass the time and escape the violence on the streets.

Back to today, indeed, some people 'want' to forget and some do not. Forgetting is not absolute. This is brilliantly demonstrated in Lamia Joreige's work, particularly Here and Perhaps Elsewhere, where she asks people about kidnappings. Lamia is someone else who I feel has turned to the quotidian to break from the restrictions of impossibility. And gesturing to the other part of your question, Lamia's Objects of War (an on-going series that includes narratives about the civil war and the 2006 war) also shows how people attach traumatic narratives to mundane objects.

To finish my thoughts on impossibility, Zaatari and Feldman also scrutinize the common characterization of Lebanese media art as mixing fact and fiction. They find this distinction problematic along the same lines as representation/mis-representation. In this case, I think the "cycle" of diminishing returns, as John asked, is where viewers/critics still assume that a distinction can be made between these two sides of the binary – that there is a "truth" to be recovered. The issue of course is one of value – facts presumably carry more value. But thinking of Mick Taussig's work on mimesis and alterity, I'm drawn to the 'space' between true and false. Taussig says that the 'buffer,' somehow dividing yet also joining, is the secret of the system.

But here we can generate more suspicion about the circulation of these ideas in the Lebanese art world. One sort of *truth* is that Lebanese contemporary artists generally identify with a Leftist/secular perspective that is antagonistic to christian fascism, shi'a islamism, sunni liberalism, and israeli militarism. Zaatari goes so far as to say that his work cannot engage Hezbollah resistance the way it does an earlier secular resistance, because it is still in the present.

In sum, impossibility, like forgetting, is an artifice that enables certain types of representations and narratives, but to privilege this notion is to restrict other possibilities. On one level, of course representation of the civil war is possible, otherwise there would be no contemporary Lebanese art scene (unless is was

something completely different). But, on another level, while responding to certain types of representational impossibilities, I think Zaatari's concern is that possible/impossible become as over-determined as fact/fiction.

Let me send this off while I work on some of the other comments made.

Many thanks.
Mark

Nicole Wolf nicole.wolf0 at googlemail.com
Tue Mar 2 02:24:10 PST 2010

dear all,

thanks to Mark for a paper that i very much enjoyed reading, as well as Kirsten's and other's interesting responses so far!

i wanted to add a few thoughts and questions that came up when reading the paper, some of which are also parallel to questions that arose and still arise during my own work. I will make my comments through separate though related points rather then within a text flow.

Relating to one point in the paper about the possible lack of anthropologists taking part in Visual Culture debates (which i am not sure about but i haven't really studied it more closely) - i am an anthropologist by training and am now teaching in a Visual Cultures department which focuses on Contemporary Art. I am also teaching on documentary practices such as Zaatari's and Walid Raad's - both of which i find very inspiring.

> i enjoyed the ethnography of the encounter with the work of Zaatari at the beginning of the paper and i think that although one might always feel a lack and something missing when attempting to convey an experience of a visual work, i see the point of that precisely in producing a text that responds to the visual work and tries to find an appropriate expression for not copying the visuals but conveying one's experience of it, as a trained anthropologist, somebody who appreciates the art work, maybe a documentarist, a fan, a friend. Each work comes into existence once again when someone looks at it. the question here is if, and more importantly how we include looking at film and art as an ethnographic encounter, how we include our own media practice and reflect on what this is informed by, how our position of looking is informed.

> in relation to the above - i also enjoyed reading an alternative to Laura Mark's relation and reading of Zaatari's work and think that Mark makes a very crucial observation here. Maybe it would be useful to see both ways of looking together (that's the proposal i understand?) and see both as coming from particular perspectives which are informed by the authors' training, their theoretical interests, what they are with and besides their academic training. I wonder whether one can so easily privilege the terms artifact and ethnographic, without looking at the theoretical parameters where these come from as well as and the multiple connotations and uses that might be inherent. If one writes with terms such as "fossil" or "ethnography" one surely has a whole pile of references to each term in one's head and thus places the work under discussion in relation to these

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discourses, but both acts are then somehow appropriations for a particular discourse, non of them can be naturalized or easily privileged. this is not to counter Mark's observation but how one could possibly extend it by further investigating what is meant by ethnographic, how the term relates to the work and how the art work maybe alters it as well, how we can let it impact what we do as ethnographers.

In a small footnote Mark refers to the "insufficiency" of official language regarding Fulbright Funding schemes and says that rather then using "access", "contact" would be the more appropriate word here. This made me think that an anthropological study of the rhetoric of funding schemes might be a useful undertaking and that maybe access is rather fitting then insufficient. New Funding schemes that foster studies on the 'new superpowers' India and China are e.g. very much about 'access' and i find it very illuminating to read between the lines of those schemes - very much related to a 'hunger for...', maybe a fear to be left out, to be overtaken

....

somewhat related and i think a very interesting part in the paper is also the desire of the author to relate, to relate to a so called zone of conflict without having a close experience of it. The question of how we relate is a very crucial one and one that i have been asking myself a lot. It's to me also a question of ethics and in the words of Judith Butler one of recognizing a 'shared precarity' with acknowledging very different conditions. In order to relate one doesn't necessarily have to go far of course, as part of the conflicts elsewhere are made or negotiated in front of our doorsteps. The question is, what are we relating to when we find we can access an experience of precariousness and war in Lebanon through a works such as Zaatari's. This also relates to the question of how not to fall into binaries of East and West and Eastern art practices catering to western art markets. What i see happening now is the development and the circulation of an international art/theoretical discourse which is shared by artists/ critics/ academics from various places who interact on a certain level, meet at particular institutions, read the same critical theory etc. To my liking there are very interesting debates happening here, but also a danger of gobal sameness and a development of gate keeping. a development of moving away from specifics to meet at a place of general theorizing about documentation of conflict, archiving violent histories etc. , which is inspiring and thought provoking and important i think, but can also become self serving and not necessarily support our wish to relate.

further - i for one didn't need to be convinced that anthropology and ethnographic practice can benefit from looking at sophisticated art and film practices from many different places (this has also been an important point in my own work wit documentarists in India) - the question that i still have, also for myself, is the how to include that in one;s practice, what are the implications for research and for writing then. this relates to Gabi's question and interest in research methods which i would hereby like to stress. In the last part of the paper Mark refers to visiting an opening, which is a good opportunity for ethnography and to meet one's 'subjects'. I wonder though what the subject of the paper and the research is - is the artist the subject and if so, how does he become a part or partner in the writing of the ethnography of his work? Is the art practice the subject and if so, how do we

do ethnography of art practice (relating to discussions on practice on this list some time ago). Or is image and text making in relation to violence and war the subject (ethnography of the visual as brought up before) and then who are the participants or protagonists of this subject and how do we actively include our own desires as researchers and political subjects in this. Again, i think the paper starts to address these issues and i wonder how these points are developed in the overall book which i really look forward to!

i will leave it at that - thanks again for the paper and the discussion so far!

Nicole

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Mark Westmoreland <u>mrw at aucegypt.edu</u>
Tue Mar 2 03:56:32 PST 2010

Still working through all these great comments and questions, but here is a short response to some of Pedelty's and Wolf's comments.

I appreciate Mark Pedelty's comments about interpretation and the struggle to textually render something from another medium or register. I try to approach these "texts" as ethnographic sites in order to imbue them with different readings. I feel that this is what informs my "reading" of In This House with Faisal digging. I'm not sure I would qualify this as "post-ethnography," however, as I meant to apply this concept to Zaatari's revisitation of the earlier ethnographic site in This Day. In fact, I apply this terminology specifically because Zaatari does go to the field and revisits the people from Jabbur's 1950s study, thus breaking from the interpretive "armchair" paradigm – as Pedelty says, "an intertextual ethnography." Also, 'post' here also implies a certain relationship with the past, partly as the material accumulation, as in his longterm engagement with the Madani Studio.

Thanks to Nicole Wolf for joining the discussion. I think that she is making an important contribution to this topic. What exactly does it mean to watch a film ethnographically? Or how do we watch a film (or photograph or painting) as an ethnographic site? I think she is right to say that this should/must entail a recognition of the encounter, rather than an ambition to copy or reproduce the image in words. In following Wolf's comments, I think she is right to be cautious of the deployment of "artifact" and "ethnographic" and the discourses they move within. In part, I am deploying these to shift the discussion away from archaeological excavation, because I fear that privileging a materialist reading alone neglects a human dimension. But to replace one set of terminology with another is not in itself satisfying. I hope that these types of terms and discourses help offer new understandings of Zaatari's work and offer possibilities for ethnographers to see parallels with their own work. Wolf's comments deserve more attention than I can give them here.

best,
Mark

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Tue Mar 2 09:29:45 PST 2010

I would just like to throw in some comments on some of the issued raised:

"First, it hints at the way
representational critiques of Lebanon's history becomes mired in over-determined
categories, like cosmopolitan excess (Lebanese polyglots identifying with exilic
and postcolonial subjectivities of translation) and nationalist violence (multi-
sectarian power-sharing system flawed by hierarchical inequality). Moving away
from uniform totalities and toward the "divisions and misidentifications" of the
margins, these border approaches favor engaging the "contradiction,
irreconcilability, and multiplicity" of these images and objects (2007:53)."

What seems important here is to note the wealth of interpretations and meanings
indicated.

"This quotidian aspect of Zaatari's work emerged from "habits of recording"
that he developed during the war in order to counter the boredom of a childhood
spent in the safety of indoor environments. Zaatari's first photographs, mundane
journal entries, and banal objects reveals a desire to witness and collect evidence
of a world falling apart. Zaatari's early practice of recording and collecting will
foreshadow his professional filmmaking and archivist pursuits. Suzanne Cotter,
who had curated the Oxford show, argues that Zaatari's work conveys a "sense of
a quotidian that contains within it extraordinary events" "

This implies that we was atttempting to gain some traction on people's lives and how
they constitute them, an ethnographic endevour as I see it.

""paleontological fossils," as an unearthed artifact with "both its original integrity
and its transformation over time" "

Here is the nub of the issue. If you take Goodman's languagues of art it elucidates
this. The central question is, in terms of "truth" are you looking at a quest for a perfect
copy? Re-presentation as replication. This is clearly impossible, a perfect copy is co-
terminus with the thing in itself.

But if you are looking to present something again, than that act of re-presentation is
not necessarily invalid because it is not a perfect copy. Are you looking for "truth" or
traction?

If the practice of mediating one presentation to another, whilst transformative, serves
as some basis for understanding the original its mediation and the resulting

presentation. The problem is not of diminishing returns, but of a hopeless embrassment of riches.

It is important to understand that there is embedded in this a notion of communication not necessarily aimed at establishing order / predictability, but rather understanding. In this context a wealth of meanings, and them being transitive accross time and space and contextualisations is actually rather an advantage, as far as I can see.

" A potential problem with the latter part of this definition, which Taylor rightly addresses, is the slipperiness of "visual culture" as an object of study. Since the visual is ubiquitously present in nearly all aspects of culture, defining a subfield by this parameter would in effect rendered its significance null – all anthropology is potentially visual."

This is reminiscent of Latour's account of material vs non-material culture, or structure vs agency. It fragments things in a way that cuts accross chains of events, which weave constantly through all such "fields".

What is interesting in Latour is how he distributes agency through material life, and also how he considers relations in terms of predictability and unpredictability as implicated closely with the distribution of agency.

If a relation is medaiting, it renders things unpredictable in a way that defies it being merely a transparent "conduit" to agency and this an intermediary. Interestingly, a copy-based idea of truth corresponds very much with this sense of a intermediary, conduit relation. As does an information model of communication, which systematically excludes the unpredictability of human agency. Point being that the "visual" is as implicated in such issues as anything else.

"Accordingly, it is necessary to explore the way these fields have encountered an ideological 'crisis of representation' in an effort to articulate a common ground as well as potential oversights. Considering the recent interdisciplinary turns in the humanities and social sciences – the narrative turn, the pictorial turn, the visual turn, the sensory turn, and the ethnographic turn – this convergence of disciplinary frameworks that reflect a broad critique of representation should help to elucidate the visual aesthetics and cultural conditions that inform Lebanese documentary video. "

Which really does open up the question of reading a text ethnographically again. Again the question arises, are we looking at how two communities (senders and receivers, us [I] as receiving community if in textual analysis mode) are mediating a text, or, more ethnographically, trying to get traction on peoples lives by seeing how a text/image/media mediates the realtionships between two groups?

Again is this media-related practice or practice-related media? Because in a way Zatari is a medium, both as a teacher and a film-maker, between Lebanon and America, but can he be understood as such outside an understanding of the lives of those others he became implicated with?

These are late-night comments, so a bit speculative.

Daniel

Daniel Taghioff

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Zeynep Gürsel zgursel at umich.edu
Tue Mar 2 13:24:27 PST 2010

Firstly, thank you Mark for sharing this paper which has raised a very interesting set of questions and thanks to all the prior respondents.

Forgive me for merely listing some reactions/provocations. Building on several excellent comments (many by Mark W himself,) I will plunge into the list but suffice it to say that I found this is a very thought-provoking piece.

1. My biggest comment echoes Mark Pedelty's question about what you want to accomplish with this paper. One possible answer might connect to a comment on p. 9 claiming that Lebanese art and media practices,   as a "body of work obsessed with its wars, can and does tell 'us' something about the practices of representing violent conflict."   Representing violent conflict in general? What does it tell?

2. One of the things that is interesting though not explicitly stated on pg. 2 is that the opening shots frame a subject position that collapses not only the viewer, the camera and Zaatari's body also collapse the archivist with the image producer and the viewer. Could you speak more to the temporal collapse implied in Zaatari's projects of representation and their implications for how history is made manifest?

3. As Zaatari uses title cards and given his subject matter, perhaps it is fitting to invoke early ethnographic film here. In fact one film in particular comes to mind which is Grass: A Nation's Battle with Life (1925) by Cooper and Schoedsack. Though the geography is not Lebanon the film does open with several intertitles mentioning "The way of the world is West" and continuing: Back in the East behind us are the secrets of our own past, and a tradition of our brothers still living in the cradle of the race - a long since Forgotten People. I think given the segue into ethnographic film later in the paper it might be an interesting point of comparision. I mention this particular film out of dozens of early ethnographic films because a few scenes later the film employs the gesture of flipping through a book - turning the pages - mentioned in Mark's description of The Day.

Intertitle sequence from Grass:

"So for months we traveled – met with many strange peoples – endured many hardships –

But going ahead, we were turning the pages backwards – on and on further back into the centuries –

Till we reached the first Chapter, arrived at the very beginning—

Map with The Forgotten People.

We know them by the ancient life of tent and tribe and herd, the life of three thousand years ago. "

4. On a related note, I believe the first heading—East Meets West -- does a disservice to the paper at large. The paper argues against this sort of binary but then at times still uses the same categories.   I understand that it comes from one of Zaatari's title cards but what is lost in the recontextualization of it as a heading? (I'd argue the ironic tone.)

   There is a claim by art historian Jülide Aker that "no photographic image of the Middle East escapes the net of Western ideas about the region." Jabbur's grandaughter seems to share such a technologically deterministic view. What is less clear to me is the paper's position on this. The Arab Image Foundation seems to have a similarly essentialist view that images taken by residents reveal different things than images taken by travellers but how are these two groups so neatly divided? Many of the late 19ᵗʰ c photographs of the region were produced by residents of the region (though many foreigners residing in one of the capitals) often traveling in order to take photographs. In other words, what makes an image indigenous? Its circulation or the maker's identity?

   4.5 To my mind as an anthropologist of the visual and a visual anthropologist (as in ethnographic filmmaker) the greatest difference between text and image is that there is alot more room in visuals for irony and innuendo than is usually tolerated in academic text.

   There is a line in the recent documentary Tehran Has No More Pomegranates: "It's a geographic obligation that you're born in the Middle East!" Yet the tone of the entire film is sarcastic.   Conversely perhaps what I was hoping for more of in this paper was an unpacking of irony or deliberate ambiguity in Zaatari's work that I presume Mark you must be able to read/see/grasp because of your ethnographic research on the Lebanese art scene. That's what seeing ethnographically would be no? Otherwise are you really arguing that one watches differently as an ethnographer? "Seeing ethnographically" is more about not necessarily visible knowledge that one brings to what one is looking at rather than a skill inherent in the ethnographer's eye, no?

   I agree completely with Mark Pedelty that the paper gets much more insightful once we get to Zataari himself and would argue that if you can weave more of the argument hinted at in the title at the beginning it will strengthen the piece overall.

5. Does the Davey article acknowledge what % of other mainstream anthropological journal articles deal with the Middle East? (What percentage of Cultural Anthropology or American Ethnologist etc articles over the same period deal with the Middle East?) Or is the argument that there is something particular about the visual that gets overlooked in the Middle East?
6. On the issue of revolutionary or activist identities performed in front of the camera let me recommend Karen Strassler's excellent work on Indonesian phtoography.
7. I think there is a difference between fieldwork and ethnography so I am curious whether Zaatari strictly uses the first term to define his work or ever refers to it as an ethnography?

Thanks again for a compelling paper.
Zeynep

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Mark Westmoreland mrw at aucegypt.edu
Tue Mar 2 23:57:03 PST 2010

Gabi,

I appreciate the 'artist' perspective you are bringing to this discussion. You hit on a few things that I'd like to try to expand upon.

For instance, you suggest two perspectives (the artist and the viewer) that are not invested in knowing about the social context in the way anthropologists are interested in their analyses of these cultural productions. First, you mention, "artist resist words about art." Here I find a fundamental difference between artists and anthropologists. Artists seem to irk easily with questions about their intentions, e.g., "what are you intending to say with this work?" The proverbial artist wants her/his artwork to "speak for itself." Then again, I believe artists thrive by necessity on people writing about and thus interpreting their work. In order to understand the actor-network system (that commentators have asked me about), it is crucial to situate this secondary cultural production in relation to the *primary* artworks. Indeed, much of my work depends on this secondary material, even if actually produced by the artist him/herself. In contrast, I think intentions are at the baseline of ethnographic evaluations. The ethnographic intentions are used as an evaluative means for assessing the producer's thesis, methods, ethics, politics, etc. The primacy of words for explaining ethnographic work are privileged to such an extent as to produce a type of "iconophobia" (Lucien Taylor in Transition 1996). And here is a sore point for many visual anthropologists who don't think the visual should be subservient to words. This is also related to what Nicole Wolf said about the difficulty in writing about images. So I wonder if you could perhaps elaborate on why artists resists words and why as an artists you are drawn to anthropology?

Second, you say, "I am not interested as a viewer in knowing this [the social context] because the images exist beyond the social arena in which we contextualize them as well." I don't think you are alone in this feeling, particularly among artists, but I can only agree to an extent with this assessment. Since we (you with the disappeared in Argentina) are dealing with artwork specifically about the *social contexts* of political violence, there is already an implicit desire to understand where this work comes from and how it interfaces with the social and political conditions. Why would we bracket this type of knowledge off from understanding the work within the circuitry of the global art world? I think for me there is a fear that by obsessing about

the elite global art world will diminish the significance of the political context that informs the artist's intentions. And yet, I think that there are important ways that these two seemingly distinct social contexts interpolate one another.

On another topic, the juxtaposition you bring out in the messiness of war and the tidiness of archivist/artists treatment of materials perhaps says in a few words what I was trying to get at over pages. Referring back to the issues of impossibility that I responded to earlier, I like very much the way the proximity of these artifacts in the archivist's hands or becoming aware of the frame of the TV monitor makes me feel closer to them as material objects, but also distances me from the possibilities of accessing representational authenticity. Thanks for these lucid comments.

Since there has been additional questions about methods, I will respond to this issue separately.

best regards,
Mark

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Thu Mar 4 14:50:25 PST 2010

Dear e-seminar participants

A quick reminder that our e-seminar ends on Tuesday night GMT, so please post your final comments and questions (incl. follow-ups to previous posts) in good time by writing directly to medianthro at easaonline.org (with cc. to me)

Many thanks!

John

Mark Westmoreland mrw at aucegypt.edu
Sun Mar 7 15:58:51 PST 2010

Dear all,

Sorry for the delay in responding to all these great comments. There has been much to digest and think through. Here I will try to respond to most of these issues.

There was some issues that Kirsten Scheid's initial comments addressed that I want to return to here. I appreciated Kirsten's nuanced critique about the way categories of "good Muslims" and "local knowledge" get reproduced without question, which I think helps to reveal the strategies of artists working within "a stereotype-framed market." In the case of someone like Zaatari, he is not engaged only on the level of the local. By necessity, as a transnational artist, he must work between different cultural localities. But this multiplicity of global localities does not necessarily mean that Zaatari is engaging the range of localities available in Lebanon. Even if this were possible, artists like Zaatari become international 'spokespersons' because they can conform to categories like the "good Muslim." It is intriguing to me that he is able to do this by focusing his work on a secular past of violent national resistance. In a

sense, the violence of this narrative can be and is set aside in part because these former resistance fighters are not "bad Muslims."

I have argued elsewhere that these individuals embody the euphemistically "absent (Muslim) moderates" – a sensibility that western pundits and politicians frequently say is missing in the Middle East. In between notions of fanatic Islamic fundamentalists on the one hand and passive Muslim women on the other, exists a diverse spectrum of ideological perspectives neither passive nor fatalistic, but necessarily politicized by the ever-present violence and instability of routine lived experience. And yet, Scheid's critique rightly problematizes this characterization. The absent moderates constitute exactly that category that is being reproduced in Mamdani's arguments about "good Muslims." That said, these categories are not absolute, but rather exist alongside other points of contestation such as derivative vs. authentic cultural production or the series of myths that Scheid mentions.

One thing that I try to resist is this notion of these artists/filmmakers being 'sell-outs', which Scheid rightly points out is a feeling that some of Zaatari's countrymen/women express. But this simplistic assessment is also reproduced by scholars. For instance, speaking more to Lebanese cinema (and Arab cinema more generally), despite the hardship of having no industry, limited access to audiences, and a relationship of foreign dependency, contemporary Arab filmmakers are typically critiqued for giving up on ideological critiques of power and catering instead to a cosmopolitan sense of taste. As many of these filmmakers are now based in Europe and make their films in a relationship of international co-production, Bresheeth (who is speaking of Palestinian filmmakers) says that their conceptual and ideological projects "must operate on the interstitial space between cultures" (Bresheeth 2002:37).

Also referring to the Lebanese's neighbors, Alexander argues that Palestinian filmmakers work aesthetically fits within "the European art house sensibility" circulating "primarily on the international film festival circuit" (2005:154). According to Alexander, the collapse of revolutionary nationalist cinema has been "replaced by a depoliticized, universally humanist cinema" (2005:161). This seems excessively dismissive given that the transformation of nationalist to humanist aesthetics has also revealed tension between revolutionary ideology and critical discourse around other (more domestic) sites of oppression in the Palestinian context. Why does non-revolutionary cinema become reduced to art house humanism? If, in which case, all these art house showings qualify as universally humanist, then are they all read the same way? If these films indicate a prevailing transnational genre, then how do the recurrent critical inquires in which Alexander participates reduce understandings of these films? Is it merely that they prevail among Western intellectual circles?

These flaws of logic assume that the incorporation of radical Arab art within European art circles and international festivals is not transformative for western audiences, not to mention the reception in Arab cities, even if limited in comparison to places like New York. While some work indulges in contemplations on bourgeois suffering, much of this work may actually radicalize western artists. Even if we accept this reductive assessment, the impact of these films on audiences abroad does more than merely inform them. These films are often challenging and there is a prerequisite level of knowledge needed to assign meaning, such as the names of places, certain dates, and historical figures that remain unexplained even if mentioned. These

documentaries and video performances refuse to give themselves away too easily. In this context, I would argue, Beirut's visual culture disrupts the identity making process of the nation-state and the depoliticization of neoliberal humanism. The vibrant, if elitist, visual public culture in Beirut becomes an alternative site to New York and Paris. The deterritorialized Beirut thus becomes an essential hub in the reworking of representational paradigms. Of course, the decentering of critical discourse to the "periphery" does not preclude other forms of over-determination.

Perhaps, it is in suggestions for actor-network theory that can open up these rather closed debates. As time on this discussion is quickly running out, I do want to still address John's initial question about the different conceptual frameworks of actor-network theory and the 'social life of things' and their bearing on my project. This question as well as Kirsten's initial comments to this end sent me on a deep rumination and I hope to speak to it shortly. But for now, let me turn to some of the other comments.

As David Taghioff indicates, our reading of representation becomes very different depending on our acceptance of its perfection or authenticity. I, for one, am not interested in a search for "truth" or a perfect-copy and this is exactly what inspires me in Zaatari's work, particularly the way he returns the material back to media. This is in part why I question the absence of "artifact" from his rhetorical repertoire. Furthermore, I feel that this return of the material has actually played a significant role in him engaging with an ethnographic dimension in his work. The material object exists within a social world as much as the image it contains. In this way, I feel that Zaatari is invested in a version of "the social life of things." Thus, I think Zaatari is also invested in the "traction" media bears on peoples lives. And so, I think Zaatari's work, and mine as well, enable both media-related practice and practice-related media.

Zeynep, thanks for your comments. First, the easier and ultimately less satisfying answers to your questions.

5. The Davey article is specifically about the contents over 20 years of the Visual Anthropology journal. It provides a statistical analysis of the journal's publishing record. Within the scope of this broad survey the author notes the lack of material on the Middle East. I suspect that the same cannot be said of the other journals you listed, or at least not at the same levels.

7. Zaatari has never to my knowledge identified his "fieldwork" as ethnographic. While he does use the notion of archaeological fieldwork, I understand this to be largely metaphorical. And though I haven't asked him this explicitly, I read it as an archaeology in the Foucauldian sense. Nevertheless, I feel that he is deploying these notions of fieldwork in an effort to try to conceptualize his own practices that do go beyond mere interpretation and desire to engage with things in their actual (lived) forms. I think this is why his terminology has been evolving. Given this searching on his part, I offer ethnography (and artifact) as a way to grapple with the limitations of the other options. One issue with ethnography that Nicole hits upon I think, is that archaeology may be more easily used metaphorically. There is a looseness to this term that ethnography does not have, partly because archaeology has a more common popular usage. This is not to say that "ethnography" is not bandied about, but I doubt

archaeologists are asked about their ethnographic engagements as often as I'm asked about my excavations.

4. Thanks for your honest opinion about the "East meets West" title. Perhaps, the irony is lost. As for Jülide Aker's notion of representational entrapment, let me clarify something about the AIF. When I reference this archive as 'indigenous' (page 11), I intentionally use scare-quotes so as not to deploy this term unquestioned or loosely. And yet, I think this particular word presents problems. I had Faye Ginsburg challenge me on this at a conference, too. But, again, it was a misunderstanding of usage and her issue seemed more in relation to a strict definition of "indigenous" as relating to 1st nation peoples. AIF very much does have an aim to produce a counter-visuality to a western dominated practice of representation, but as far as I know they have never used the word "indigenous" in their literature. While it has shifted over the years, they currently qualify their focus as "all types of photographs produced by residents of the Middle East and North Africa," but they are also interested in the "Arab diaspora." That said, Walid Raad's wife wrote an article about AIF that identified the project as building "an indigenous way of looking at modern Arab history" (Love 2001). Semantics aside, I think it would be very interesting to scrutinize how they operationalize the notion of "residents," as all the materials that I know of personally have come from Arab or Armenian photographers.

That said, I am uncomfortable with Aker's suggestion. What does she(?) means by a "net of Western ideas about the region"? This binary between authenticity and modernity tends to delimit possible readings. If she means this in a technological deterministic way (modern technology came from the west), then what is the point? But if she means that any and all representation is somehow enslaved by orientalist scopic regimes, then this too readily dismisses localized modernities. Intercultural influences and colonial/capitalist modernities notwithstanding, many of these photos show a visual history of mundane and localized photographic traditions. I don't think these are reducible to essentialist readings. In fact, I would argue that Zaatari's (and others') long-standing research with AIF's collections, shows great potential for bringing fresh readings to this material.

4.5 This idea of seeing ethnographically as a way to unpack irony is interesting. Honestly, this is something that I struggle with in this work. Since many of these artists like Zaatari are intentionally trying to avoid explanations that enable one to make sense of something that they consider incomprehensible, I feel that I am betraying this sensibility by elucidating these points. One could argue that this is what I'm supposed to do and to do otherwise is another type of betrayal. And of course, I invariably do connect dots, but I also try to replicate some of these poetics in my writing. I would argue that I am trying to create an affective experience that is present in their work, which must be frustrating and obtuse to some extent. Through this process one more slowly experiences an unfolding of meaning with resonances occurring in a non-linear and indirect manner. As problematic and presumptuous as it is to say, I think seeing ethnographically is like Malinowski's idea - an attempt to see through the 'native's' eyes. So the key is to find a balance of knowing and unknowing experience.

It is interesting that you and Pedelty say that it gets more interesting once we encounter Zaatari himself, whereas I feel that Nicole is suggesting something to the

contrary: "i enjoyed the ethnography of the encounter with the work of Zaatari at the beginning of the paper." Interesting note about this. I started my dissertation with this encounter with Zaatari and my committee wanted me to change it. They said that my ethnographic site is (to some degree) the filmic texts themselves and that I should start there.

1 and 2. As far as what I am trying to do by saying that this body of work tells 'us' something about the practices of representing violent conflict (generally?), I feel that this temporal collapse that you address is highly important. Indeed, since artists like Zaatari say they are not working on history but rather its effects and remnants, historic time exists only in the present as material and ephemeral traces. These documentary endeavors make manifest the imaginaries that haunt a landscape of forgetfulness, amnesia, and impossible representations. Documentary artifacts are thus not records of the real, but casings, hollow shells, empty remnants of remembering. By vacating the interiority of these media objects – films, photos, cassette tapes, televisions, cameras, etc. – these media carcasses makes the hollow object stand for itself. That is say, these media remnants exist as fossils always decaying, but also always as an object simultaneously of the past and of the present. As history repeats itself through ever-recurring disaster, the horizon becomes a wasteland of artifacts and relics of the past. Evocative of Walter Benjamin's Angel of Progress in its most literalized form, these radioactive media fossils drained of their representational veracity become powerful objects for addressing Benjamin's "state of emergency." By re-enchanting these mimetic artifacts, I argue that Lebanese documentary experimentalists break through the blockages of amnesia, to see around representational eclipses, and to rupture ossified narratives that reify violence.

Let me sign off for now with the promise to write once more before the seminar closes.

Thanks to all.

Mark

Works cited:

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Love, Lynn. 2001. The Pictures Between. Saudi Aramco World 52(1):28-37.

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Mon Mar 8 03:03:11 PST 2010

Many thanks to Mark Westmoreland for that detailed response to previous posts!

There is still time left until tomorrow (Tuesday) night at 9 pm GMT for a last round of brief questions and comments on his working paper and the issues arising from our discussion so far.

John

Postill, John J.Postill at shu.ac.uk
Tue Mar 9 14:34:14 PST 2010

Dear All

Our Media Anthropology Network e-seminar "Akram's Reproduction Machine: Reimagining Lebanese Resistance" is now closed.

I wish to thank our presenter Mark Westmoreland, discussant Kirsten Scheid and all other seminar participants for a great discussion of the work of Akram Zaatari. As always we shall be uploading a PDF transcript of this session on our website shortly.

Our next seminar will run from 20 April to 4 May on this mailing list. Sun Sun Lim and Minu Thomas (National University of Singapore, NUS) will be presenting a working paper entitled "Migrant workers' use of ICTs for interpersonal communication – The experience of female domestic workers in Singapore". This is the abstract:

This paper explores ICT use by Indian and Filipino female migrant workers who are employed as live-in maids in Singapore through ethnographic interviews with twenty women. Their particular employment circumstances translate into a circumscribed and isolated living and working experience which makes their access and use of ICTs even more significant. Our findings show that these women employ a variety of technologies for everyday communication, including letters, the mobile phone and the Internet, with the mobile phone being the most crucial communication device for most of them. Mobile communications enable them to foster emotional links with their friends and family, grow their social networks and afford them greater autonomy in seeking better job opportunities and the management of their personal matters. The paper concludes by making three policy recommendations aimed at improving ICT access for migrant workers. First, upon arrival in their host countries, all migrant workers should be educated about the access, use and cost of different communication devices and services available to them. Second, contracts between employers and migrant workers should have clear provisions for the employees' rights to communication and specifically, mobile communications. Third, governments, non-governmental organisations and the private sector should actively seek to narrow the technological divide between migrant workers' home and host countries so that these workers' communications with individuals and organisations in their home countries are not impeded.

Best wishes

John

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Mark Westmoreland mrw at aucegypt.edu
Tue Mar 9 14:50:33 PST 2010

Dear all,

Well, I was trying to put together one last response before the seminar closed, but too late. Enough is enough.

Thanks again for everyone's enriching comments and questions. Also, thanks to John Postill for moderating the list and to Sigurjon Hafsteinsson for the initial invitation. I've really appreciated this opportunity. I hope that I can reflect on everybody's ideas and turn this working paper into a fully *worked* article/chapter.

I look forward to the future seminar papers and discussions.

best regards,
Mark

End of seminar