

PEER REVIEW ARTICLE

Television and the Ethnographic Endeavor: The Case of Syrian Drama

Introduction

An often repeated truism about Arab literature holds that books are written in Cairo, published in Beirut and read in Baghdad. This is the character of transnational cultural flows in the Arab world, where production, commodification and consumption of a single cultural form may each take place in a different metropolis. Syria has not often formed a very significant node of modern pan-Arab cultural flows. Yet, if we were to look for the consumption and production centers of Arab television drama, we would find that series are written in Damascus, produced in Damascus, and watched throughout the Arab world, as well as numerous diasporic communities beyond. This paper examines the rise of Syria's television drama industry since its expansion during the 1990's, exploring the transformations. It argues that the ethnographic approach to Arab television must also change to accommodate the profound transformations wrought by globalization.

Ethnography and Arab Television

Over the past decade, Syria has developed a TV drama industry rivaling that of Cairo, long the center of Arab media production. Syrian dramatic series have even begun to attract attention from the Western press: Damascus was recently dubbed “Hollywood of the Middle East”, albeit with an ironic question mark, by the *Washington Post* (Lancaster 1998). Along with growing international success, local television has become the dominant cultural form in Syria.

My own recognition of television illustrates the power of the medium. When I arrived in Damascus to begin dissertation fieldwork in late 1992, I had no intention of focusing on media. My original project looked at the relationship between foodways and social distinction among the different groups living in Damascus. I had planned to explore the connection between a growing sense of Damascene local identity and a resurgence of interest in “authentic” Damascene foods. At the beginning of Ramadan, the time of year when showcase television productions are aired, I was advised by Syrians to watch a new 15 episode *musalsal*, or television miniseries, as it was likely to depict traditional local foodways. So with an eye to the treatment of food, I watched the first several episodes of *Ayyam Shamiyyah*, (*Damascene Days*).

Witnessing the controversy sparked by the series, I realized that to focus exclusively on food was to treat as tangential much of what was engaging those around me. And *Damascene Days* clearly was no tangent. Indeed, it is difficult to exaggerate the total rapture with which the series gripped Damascus dwellers that holiday season. *Damascene Days* was produced by Syrian Arab Television, and aired on one of one of

the only two state run channels. It was one of only a handful of local TV productions broadcast that season. Its rosy, sanitized, nostalgic depiction of the Old City of Damascus at the turn of the century produced devoted fans, equally fervent detractors, and a range of opinions in between.

Damascene Days married themes of local authenticity and resistance to foreign occupation. It depicted bygone customs and traditions, and presented them as folklore, didactically. The recent past was exoticized, truly rendered a foreign country. The series made for multivocal ethnography, combining formal analysis of the series with reactions from audiences, critics, and cultural producers alike (Salamandra 1998, 2000, 2004). The series provoked numerous debates, in the press, and in conversation, about Damascus, its people, and their often fraught relations with other Syrians.

These tensions revolve around the political demise of an old Sunni Muslim urban elite, and its replacement by a peasant regime from an historically stigmatized religious sect: the ^ʿAlawis. As in so many cities, an influx of migrants over the past forty years has dwarfed the population of established urbanites. But in Damascus, those outsiders, formerly subordinate country folk, have become the ruling elite. It is difficult and dangerous for Syrians to voice opposition to this group, whose very existence the state ideology disavows. In theory, the Ba^ʿth Arab socialist project sought to obliterate divisive class, regional and religious difference. In practice, these distinctions have intensified during the forty years of Ba^ʿth party rule.

While there has been a modest increase in freedom of expression during the late 1990's and early 2000's, public, and indeed private expressions of subnational affiliations, remain sensitive. Through the series *Damascene Days*, I was able to show how people use television to talk about issues that engage their everyday lives, but are also politically taboo.

The production and consumption of specific television drama series has produced some of the most innovative anthropology on the Middle East of recent years (Abu-Lughod 1993, 1995, 2005; Armbrust 1996). Yet recent fieldwork in Syria indicates that the ethnographic study of Arab television must now expand beyond the exploration of individual works, for reasons that have to do with transformations within the industry and the wider polity, as well as expanding audience access.

Themes explored in research of the 1980's and 1990's occasionally remerge in recent Syrian drama. In Ramadan 2001, *Damascene Days* director Bassam al-Malla has returned to early 20th century Old Damascus, with the series *al-Khawali*, (*Bygone Days*). This series revisited the resistance of an Old Damascene neighborhood against the dastardly Turks, but it also depicted the city's important role as a gathering spot on the old pilgrimage route to Mecca. *Bygone Days* brought back to life many of the same settings and characters that proved so popular—and so contentious—in *Damascene Days*, yet it did so with a higher production value, filmed not in a studio but in an actual Old Damascene quarter. *Bygone Days* reflected the current state of the industry: large-scale production, sophisticated technique, on-location filming.

The Boom

Bygone Days was considered a successful series in 2001 terms. Yet it failed to grip the nation in the way *Damascene Days* had. The reasons reflect the transformations wrought by the regionalization. By 2001, the Syrian mediascape, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's term, had completely transformed (1990). Firstly, satellite television access has increased dramatically. There are no accurate figures for this, for reasons which have to do with the structure of the Syrian state, in which resources are allocated by social networks, via unofficial, quasi-legal channels. But all industry estimates hold satellite access to be very widespread.

In addition, Arab satellite TV stations have proliferated, particularly those owned by the wealthy governments and individuals of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Syrian producers have been at the forefront of those producing material to fill these new outlets. A move toward economic liberalization in 1991 opened the door to private production companies. These have proliferated, in the most Syrian of ways: the most successful tend to be owned by individuals with strong links to the regime, most notably son of the vice president.

Increased production and expanded access have obliterated the annual media sensations that once both united the national audience in the act of viewing and responding, and created space for subnational identity expression. In place of the singular television event of the early 1990's are an average of twenty-five Syrian

musalsalat, aired on numerous terrestrial and Arab satellite stations, both private and public. One informant recently calculated that a viewer would have to spend 10 hours a day watching TV during Ramadan to get an accurate sense of the drama series on offer.

Drama, once the centerpiece of Arab production, no longer dominates the primetime, in Ramadan or the rest of the broadcast year. The *musalsalat*, perhaps the oldest local genre, and the one Syria arguably dominates, now cohabits a televisual torrent of game shows, satirical sketch programs, reality TV, and the news-as-entertainment debate shows offered by Al-Jazeera and its many competitors. There are more televisual texts and less cultural context. The kind of ethnography *Damascene Days* produced is no longer viable. I argue that this globalization of Syrian television products necessitates a rethinking of how we look at Arab television ethnographically.

The Approach

The expansion of Syrian television presents the ethnographer with a methodological paradox. Abundant textual material exists for content and reception analyses; but audience fragmentation renders these approaches less fruitful. Ignoring television is an unhelpful alternative, as the social and political significance of the medium has grown along with the production boom. To disregard television is to miss what might be gleaned from contemporary Syria's key cultural institution.

Several factors underlie television's increasing centrality. Syria is in many ways a post-literate society. There are no available readership figures; Syria is not the sort of polity that allows for the production of statistics. But the numbers recently published for neighboring Lebanon reflect a deep crisis of intellectual life. For a society in which the word is highly valued and the major forms of expressive culture, until recently, been literary, specifically, poetic, books sales are exceedingly low (Wilson-Goldie 2004).¹ Television has become the dominant public cultural form in the region.

Syrian television is becoming an increasingly significant symbol of national culture, transforming both the way Syrians see themselves in relation to other Arabs, and their image in the Middle East and beyond. Syrian television is more important than ever, in the sense that the industry is more powerful and prominent, and its products better funded and increasingly technically refined. Syrian *musalsalat* reach ever widening audiences. For instance, President Bashar al-Asad is purported to have remarked that whenever he meets with a foreign leader, the first thing he is asked about is satirical program *Maraya*, (*Mirrors*), as the series often frank social, and gentle political, critic is often read as a sign of the new leader's easing of restrictions on freedom of expression. Syrian historical series are taken so seriously as to produce diplomatic tensions. For instance, the Turkish government took issue with references to the Armenian genocide in 1996's *Ukhwat al-Turab* (*Brothers of the Earth*).

Ethnographers must develop new strategies to map this changing terrain. I do not advocate abandoning completely the detailed analysis of particular programs.

Reception remains critical to the process, as some programs resonate more than others.² But I propose moving ethnography behind the scenes, so to speak, looking more closely at the industry's workings, at cultural producers themselves. The issues of identity, authenticity and social distinction that occupy much current anthropological interest remain salient, in discourses of industry figures, in the TV products themselves, and in how they are read by different audiences.³

My fieldwork combines formal analysis of key productions with in-depth fieldwork within the industry—interviews with individuals involved in all aspects of production and distribution, as well as sitting in on various stages of development. An institution employing a significant segment of the educated middle and upper middle classes, the television industry offers a valuable point of entry into elite life in Syria. It promises not merely an anthropology of media production, but also one of consumption, as Syria's numerous TV makers are not only producers; they are also avid and critical viewers.⁴

Access into the television world necessitates a departure from the current trend towards “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus 1995).⁵ Paradoxically, this form of “studying up” requires the time-consuming intensity of conventional anthropological fieldwork. But it also involves the nurturing of multifaceted, enduring relationships, a building of what might be called thick rapport.⁶ Television makers are often powerful, busy, relatively wealthy professionals with neither the time, the inclination nor the vulnerability of more typical anthropological informants. An ethnography of their industry calls for

substantial fieldwork in a production center—in this case Damascus—and extends well beyond the moment of “return”, when anthropologists working with more marginal groups generally sever most ties through the device of departure. Successful fieldwork requires proving loyalty, seriousness and legitimacy through a multi-year, rather than a multi-sited approach.⁷ Familiarity with yearly productions and personal acquaintanceship with a burgeoning community of workers must be maintained. Return field trips and gifts of the anthropologist’s published writings on the industry help to garner acceptance and maintain interest. The “field” location is defined socially rather than spatially, and fieldwork extends when I meet television producers outside Syria, as often happens in this mobile, foreign educated milieu.

In the ethnography of television producers, fieldwork associates do not merely inform, they co-create in parallel fields of intellectual endeavor. Television projects interlace with the anthropologist’s own. Access, a dividend of returning to a previous field site, involves varying degrees of co-production. With Ghassan Jabri, one of my primary collaborators and an industry pioneer, I am co-authoring a history of Syrian drama to be published in Arabic for the local market. This undertaking greatly facilitates my entrée into the world of TV production. It also provides a partial solution to one of the problems anthropologists often face: we take from the societies we study and often fail to find ways to give back. I argue that doing fieldwork among elite cultural producers calls for a recasting of the participant side of the participant-observation process. My educated informants see my work not as a part of an academic world beyond their concern, but something that should be first and foremost for *them*, should

address their concerns, and be accessible. An ethnography of their industry should tell their story, to them as well as to the world beyond. This complicates, but I believe ultimately enriches the ethnographic endeavor.

This dual enterprise is a particularly compelling facet of fieldwork in the Syrian context, where political sensitivities and academic fashion render scholarship on recent history scarce. Upon hearing about my new project, one of my informants, a successful film director, told me I bore a huge responsibility, and went on to explain that given the paucity of academic work on Syria during the Ba^cth years, given the impossibility of doing local history in a police state, my own work on television drama would have to stand as the source on Syria's recent past.

This is perhaps less unlikely than it first appears. Television drama has become the contemporary Syrian cultural form *par excellence*, to the detriment of all other cultural forms. It attracts, and, to varying degrees employs, writers, directors, photographers, visual artists, designers, composers, musicians and actors, from a various sectarian and class backgrounds. Many were trained in disciplines unrelated to the industry. The TV industry reflects the changing fortunes of Syria's intelligentsia, and its relationship to an evolving Ba^cthist project. Informants note that when political parties were banned in the early 1970s, activists became writers and journalists, but employment opportunities have now rendered them TV makers. In a sense, the Syrian television industry is tasting the bitter fruits of its own success. Syrian television now encompasses entire local intellectual and artistic communities, and situates them in a growing pan-

Arab regional market, where numerous, well-financed, private and state-owned satellite stations buy Syrian productions.

Industry discourses reflect the dilemmas facing Syria's artists and intellectuals. Their world has widened. Syrian television is increasingly transnational, but must operate within the confines of a state whose attitude towards the medium remains ambivalent. Sometimes the state embraces TV as an emblem of Syrian national culture, or a safety valve for oppositional voices. At others it tightens the reins on television's potential subversion. For example, although President Asad acknowledged the significant role the television series *Mirrors* has played in making him appear a forward-thinking reformist, his promise to *Mirrors'* star and producer Yasir al-Azmeh that the series would remain beyond the reach of state censors was recently broken; two entire new episodes were confiscated by the secret police.

Most usually, television appears a low priority on the state's agenda. While government censorship persists, public sector involvement in other aspects of production shrinks. Syrian state television produces an occasional low-budget *musalsal*, and also buys some privately produced series. The state contributed only \$40,000 of the \$6 million spent on dramatic and satirical sketch programs in 2004. GCC satellite television stations, both private and public, finance and purchase the bulk of Syrian programming. Producers argue that a lack of state regulation exposes them to the capriciousness of Gulf business practice. Operating with mounting deficits, pan-Arab satellite stations rely on

state or private subsidies, and owe many long-standing debts to Syrian production companies.

All of this produces a sense of disenfranchisement within the industry. This feeling has increased in the past three years, as Syrians have faced an Egyptian comeback. Egypt's Foreign Ministry has acted as distributor, marketing packages of Ramadan series to GCC channels. The Syrians must fend for themselves in an increasingly fragmented market. As one scenarist puts it to me: "We have become like vegetable peddlers, selling series out of sacks on our backs as if they were potatoes."

It is not simply an ambivalent or indifferent Syrian state that TV makers have to deal with; they must now compete for funding from, and please and even more exacting set of censors and audiences in the conservative GCC states. Viewers and censors in these countries have very different concerns and tastes, and differing points of sensitivity. As one industry figure noted, "with satellite television, I now have twenty two censors".

Syrian TV makers are aware of—indeed perhaps exaggerate—the power of their medium to transform Syrian society, and often see themselves at the vanguard of a modernizing process. They feel that GCC domination of the market has usurped this important role. Elitist assumptions about mass culture persist in the absence of rating or viewer feedback, and TV producers see Arab audiences as unsophisticated and impressionable. Viewers, they believe, will absorb and conform to television's

messages. Industry figures argue that the potential for promoting progressive political or social agendas has actually decreased with regionalization. As a pioneer director put it:

In the old days, we were poor, but our art was our own. We produced work that we felt was good for Syria. Now we have become like merchandise, slaves to a bunch of Bedouin who have no appreciation for our urban civilization. We are reduced to doing silly comedies and fantasia.

Artists in many cultural contexts bemoan commercialism; laments over popular taste and ratings exigencies pervade media and publishing industries in America. Yet in Syria, the enemies of art are not a generalized national audience, or even amorphous “market forces”. Rather, they are specific group of wealthy foreigners perceived as over privileged and parochial, and out of touch with what Arab audiences need, if not what they want. With regionalization, industry informants point to a-worst-of both-worlds situation, as economic liberalization without democratization leaves them vulnerable to both Syrian censors and Gulf buyers. “People like me feel betrayed by authority, be it capital or the gun”, argued a well known cinema director, “We have lost the historical moment”.

Such dissatisfactions reveal a nostalgia for the Ba^cthist modernizing project, and the accompanying state support.⁸ They also point to an underlying faith in the benefits of a strong state, a belief that deregulation leads to disaster. Here Syrian television industry

figures employ a mode of expression akin to what Michael Herzfeld refers to as “structural nostalgia”. In Herzfeld’s formulation, both state and non-state actors refer to an edenic age of harmonious social relations, a time before social disintegration and moral decay mandated state intervention. This imagining legitimizes accommodation with the state as a necessary evil (1997: 109-138). Syrian television makers invoke what might be called a structural nostalgia in reverse, harkening back to a more recent era of state support for “art”, cushioning cultural producers from the vicissitudes of market forces. As one screenwriter put it:

Now art and money are intertwined. We used to think good art should not be dependant on money. That idea is over. If I create a company and make good *muslasalat*, but do not make money, how can I go on?

The Syrian television industry parallels, intersects and reflects the transformations occurring with Syria’s own deBa^cthification process. Throughout most of its history, Syrian television was state-owned as well as state controlled; its employees uniformly low in status, socially marginal and relatively impoverished. Economic liberalization has brought the rise of a star system, and increasing differences between the haves and the have nots within the industry. Regional recognition is both the product of and the precondition for raising production costs. This has little to do with audience ratings, as both Syrian and GCC television stations operate without reference to viewership research. Gulf stations provide funding for series, and receive exclusive right for

Ramadan broadcast in return. One significant development is the emergence of the star/executive producer, the actor with enough name recognition and industry clout to attract large-scale funding from sources in Saudi Arabia or Dubai, who then, informants argue, pockets much of the budget. “This affects their acting performances”, argued an advertising executive, “they become larger than life, literally fat”. Tales of price undercutting and other cut throat tactics abound.

Dissatisfactions and disappointments are often expressed through sectarian and regional idioms, as group affiliations are often perceived to determine access to positions of power and influence, and consequently to be the cause of all that is wrong with the TV industry in particular and Syria in general. These agonistic discourses form a mode of sociability common among elite groups in Syria, which I have referred to elsewhere as a “poetics of accusation” (2004). For instance, a Damascene screenwriter attributes the state’s indifference to the rural origins of those at its helm:

The state is not interested. They have a military mentality, and they have not been able to develop culture. Most of those in power (*al-mas^coulin*) come from peasant backgrounds. They are neither cultured, civilized nor urbane. I’m a daughter of the city, we used to go to the cinema, but not them. They like food money and power, but they don’t like ideas.

Themes

A shift in the content of serial dramas reflects the pressures of regionalization. Perhaps the most salient theme emerging throughout the 1990s was an exploration of local resistance against imperial powers. Series such as *Damascene Days* and *Brothers of the Earth* may have been intended as nation building celebrations of community united against oppression; yet they often provoked fierce discursive battles among both producers and viewers over depictions of collaboration with the Ottomans and the French. For instance, Damascene screenwriter Fouad Sharbaji wrote *Abu Kamil, Part Two* (1994) as a tribute to the city's valiant struggle against French Mandate forces, but audiences who value their association with Damascus objected to characters shown working with the occupation against fellow Syrians.

Such issues engage Syrians, but often fail to enamor Gulf audiences who share a very different recent history. The last few years has produced a movement away from series set in the early nationalist period—the late Ottoman and French mandate periods—and towards those set in the Golden Age of Islamic empire. Big-budget epics combine elaborate period sets and costumes and extra-filled battle scenes with themes of good and evil, Muslim community against foreign enemy. Dramatic biographies of heroic figures of the past such as Saladin and Omar al-Khayyam have largely replaced treatments of the more recent, more sensitive, and more local Syrian past.

The ambiguous messages encoded in these distant historical narratives can be ignored by censors and denied by producers. They avoid the social complexities of the contemporary world, gliding past conservative GCC censors, and appealing to GCC

buyers. A story of medieval heroism is simply more marketable than a contemporary urban tale featuring a policewoman, as one recent series did.

For many “have nots” in the industry, Golden Age themes pander to two dreaded enemies: the Syrian regime, and the Islamist movements. Themselves largely secular Muslims, Syrian cultural producers argue that heroic biopics work to bolster these two seemingly opposed forces, both united by non-urban orientations. A cinema director argues:

These works reviving the glories of the past amount to indirect support for the Islamists. The project is to make money, but the results play into the hands of the Islamists: look to the past, look to our own values, which should be revived. Their major crime is that they glorify the past, falsify the present, and ignore the future. This trend goes along with the Arab regimes. Tribal relations and values are promoted. Islam provides a framework for this: “obey those who are leading you”. It promotes regressive social values. This is all very much blessed by the people in charge, who want everything to remain as it is. This is why we see that there is no effort to deal with the actual lives of people. This is society as expressed by the ruling system, not society as it really is.

The move away from resistance narratives parallels the emergence, however fitfully, of a more Western-oriented tendency within the new regime. When resistance *is*

invoked, it takes a surprisingly conciliatory turn. Script writer Fouad Sharbaji, who enraged audiences with depictions of Damascene collaboration with the French in Abu Kamel, has rewritten the colonial narrative with the recent *al-Daya*, (The Midwife).

As the story unfolds, street battles rage against Mandate forces, the French general's wife goes into a difficult and dangerous labor. Unable to reach the French doctor, the commander's maid calls in a traditional Damascene midwife, who attends the birth successfully. Mutual respect between the two sides of the conflict flourishes, and each side begins to perceive the other in more human terms. According to Sharbaji, this series marks an important shift in Syria's view of itself and its relationship to the world beyond:

I believe the time for emphasizing resistance has passed. That was a very important phase for us to go through, but now I think we have to move on. History is not black and white. We refused French control, but we respect the principles of the French revolution. With "The Midwife", we moved beyond the issue of resistance, and began to introduce the notion of dialogue.

Conclusion

Television is a ubiquitous feature of modern life in much of the world. In contemporary Syria, the TV industry's centrality renders it a particularly revealing site of

ethnographic endeavor. It provides a valuable point of access to a complex and rapidly changing society. Although in some ways set apart by their social liberalism, Syria's media producers are very much embedded within their wider national community. They are also in the midst of a newly invigorated regionalism, driven by the spread of satellite technology, that is producing a new set of winners and losers. They experience acutely the failure of the modernist and nationalist projects they once participated in, some reluctantly, others enthusiastically. The disjunctures and contradictions produced by internal policies and global forces affect them much as they do their fellow citizens, as a handful become wealthy and famous, and many more struggle. The demise of socialism—globally and locally—and the promise of democracy produce a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty that media people share with other Syrians. Treating television makers as a social field worthy of ethnographic investigation requires intensive fieldwork within the industry as a community, and careful attention to the ever broadening contexts in which it operates. Such an endeavor promises insights into both the lives of television producers, and to the broader issues and processes they both experience and affect.

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¹ In Lebanon, with a population of approximately four million, leading authors rarely sell more than 200-300 copies of their books (Wilson-Goldie 2004).

² In the epilogue to her detailed study of Indian television, Mankekar makes a similar point regarding the proliferation of both production and access (1999).

³ Abu-Lughod promotes television production as a worthy object of ethnographic inquiry, but supplements her fieldwork among producers with the voices of more conventional subjects—working-class women (2005).

⁴ Peterson points to the value of treating media producers as consumers (2003).

⁵ Clifford argues that multi-sites fieldwork is oxymoronic, and notes that Marcus himself uses the term "ethnography" rather than "fieldwork" in his call for multiple localities, and thus evades issues of depth (1997, 190, 219).

⁶ Marcus sees a shift from rapport to alliance in the forging of fieldwork relationships (1997, 214-215). In fieldwork in the Syrian television industry, these questions are inseparable—mutual assistance necessarily occurs within a context of affinities and articulated differences.

⁷ I am grateful to Walter Armbrust for suggesting this formulation.

⁸ This can be compared to the current nostalgia for the Nasserist project among Egyptian intellectuals.