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Making Real-Time Drama: The Political Economy of Cultural Production in Syria's Uprising

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CARGC Paper 2

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Making Real-Time Drama: The Political Economy of Cultural Production in Syria's Uprising

Description

In CARGC Paper 2, Della Ratta explored how one 2013 Syrian television serial, *Wilada min al-Khasira* [Birth from the Waist] responded in real time to unfolding events of the Syrian revolution. She argued that the serial offers a living site for scholarly reflection on how cultural production and the power relations that shape it might shift, recombine, and adapt in the context of the three-year-old uprising turned into an armed conflict. Della Ratta mobilized the television serial to explore how the geopolitical relationships between Syrian and Gulf political elites had been dramatically reconfigured.

Disciplines

Communication | Critical and Cultural Studies | International and Intercultural Communication | Social Influence and Political Communication

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PARGC PAPER 2
FALL 2014

Making Real-Time Drama: The Political Economy of Cultural Production in Syria's Uprising

PARGC

PROJECT FOR
ADVANCED RESEARCH IN
GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

 **Annenberg**
SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA





We welcomed our first PARGC Postdoctoral Fellow, **Donatella Della Ratta**, in the fall of 2013. Donatella joined us from the University of Chicago, where she held another postdoc at the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture. A few months earlier, she obtained her PhD, after defending a dissertation on the politics of Syrian TV drama at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, New Islamic Public Sphere Program, University of Copenhagen.

A longtime journalist from Italy, Donatella had written extensively about Arab television before she entered doctoral study. She has also managed the Arabic speaking community of the international NGO Creative Commons for several years, and was affiliated with the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard.

The first thing I noticed meeting Donatella was her wealth of information about Arab media, based on an unusual ability to identify sources, a valuable though often overlooked research skill. Since then, we met occasionally, in Cairo's Tahrir Square, Beirut cafés, Copenhagen conference halls and Philadelphia offices, interlocutors on the ins and outs, twists and turns of the Arab media industries, parsing rumors from fact and discussing developments worth following.

At PARGC Press we are delighted to present PARGC Paper 2, "Making Real-Time Drama: The Political Economy of Cultural Production in Syria's Uprising." Based on a PARGC Postdoctoral Colloquium Della Ratta gave during her residence at the Annenberg School. It builds on Donatella's dissertation about the pan-Arab and national political and economic forces shaping television production in Syria, and feeds on the unparalleled access that she acquired among Syrian drama makers through extensive field research in Damascus and elsewhere.

Though tempting, it would be unfortunate to read this publication as a snapshot of cultural production in the Syrian conflict. That it is. But Donatella's *in situ* examination of the "production" and "reception" controversies surrounding *Al-Wilada min al-Khasira* analyzes the fraught imbrications of transnational financing with national ideological projects, and the multiple pressures experienced by cultural producers in a highly polarized environment. What is more, PARGC Paper 2 provides insight about the nature of wartime cultural work and the contested norms of representing reality.

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Making Real-Time Drama:¹ The Political Economy of Cultural Production in Syria's Uprising

INTRODUCTION

Screens of Contention

In the background, we can hear a crowd approaching, chanting and – supposedly – peacefully demonstrating. “Are you hearing what I am hearing? Are you seeing what I am seeing?” a man in a position of authority asks a soldier. “Yes, sir,” he promptly answers. “I want the sound of your gun to be much louder than this,” the officer says. “Sir, do you want me to shoot at people?” the soldier reacts, looking away from the crowd and staring at the man, a bit incredulous. “Life seriously harms health, my son,” the officer answers, impassibly, before shooting sounds are heard.

This scene² taken from a Syrian television series has been widely shared on social networking sites, and has sparked heated controversy for its resonance with an earlier period of the Syrian uprising in 2011, when peaceful demonstrations loosely initiated by citizens who lacked political leadership or immediate political goals turned to bloodshed at the orders of security officers. The “life seriously harms health” sequence is one of the most popular from the third season of *al-Wilada min al-Khasira* (“Birth from the Waist”), a television series that was produced by Syrian private company Klaket and aired during Ramadan (July) 2013.

The Muslim holy month of Ramadan is also the peak season for broadcasting locally produced fictional content. Advertising buyers in the Arab world invest a significant amount of their annual budget in Ramadan television productions that have a potential audience of more than 300 million Arabic speakers.³ A *musalsal* – serialized television drama, plural *musalsalat* – represents the quintessential Ramadan content, as its television format of 28-30 episodes matches with the length of the holy month and the beginning of the Eid festivities immediately following it. Additionally, local television series are “one of the most attractive ways for broadcasters to differentiate themselves in a competitive market.”⁴

In the history of regional broadcasting, Egypt was the first supplier of Ramadan television series to cater to pan-Arab networks,⁵ the majority of which are Gulf-based and Saudi-owned.⁶ During the past decade in particular, which corresponds to a blossoming of Arabic free-to-air satellite channels that increased demand for locally-originated content, Syrian *musalsalat* have become widely popular and Syria has positioned itself as the number two supplier of Arabic fiction, in terms of quantity, on the pan-Arab market.⁷ While Syrian television drama is an avowedly national asset – with Syrian themes, actors, dialect and locations – it thrives off of Gulf buyers’ appetite for television content, existing and prospering as a result of regional market needs.⁸

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Al-Wilada min al-Khasira is emblematic of this trend. Created by Syrian writer Samer Radwan⁹ and supported by emergent Syrian private company Klaket, the first season was commissioned in 2011 by Abu Dhabi TV, a government-owned media outlet in the UAE which becomes a major player – in terms of acquiring and commissioning serialized fiction – during the Ramadan season. Two more seasons were produced and aired in 2012 and 2013 by Abu Dhabi TV and by a number of other prestigious pan-Arab channels, such as MBC (the largest Arab entertainment network in terms of number of channels and amount of advertising revenue, owned by Saudi entrepreneur and member of the royal family Sheikh Waleed al-Ibrahim and LBC (a Lebanese television entertainment-oriented channel largely watched in Saudi Arabia and partially owned by Saudi prince and billionaire Waleed bin Talal).¹⁰

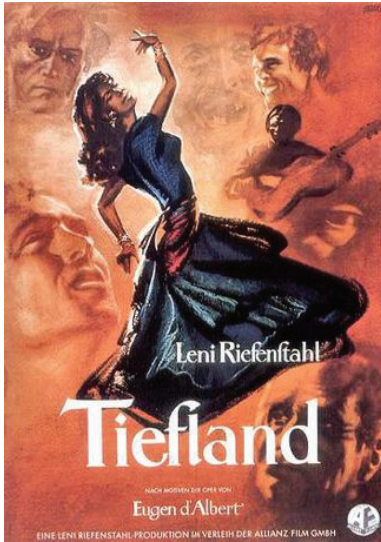
While largely successful as a pan-Arab product, the series revolves on settings, characters and themes that are markedly local. Through an intricate plot, the first two seasons focus on sensitive issues in Syrian contemporary society, such as corruption at the upper echelons of political and business powers, poverty and misery in degraded urban slums, and the daily abuses perpetrated by intelligence agencies over Syrian citizens. Both seasons dealt extensively with the question of power in Syria – whether regime power, business powers, or even gender power.¹¹ Yet it is season three (2013) which finally enters the realm of politics by openly approaching “the events unfolding in the country,” whereas the previous parts had just suggested sensitive issues “in an artistic way.”¹²

Season three of *al-Wilada min al-Khasira* turned a piece of television entertainment into a living site of contentious politics.¹³ The series tries to combine and perform two operations simultaneously: to act as a text attempting to make sense of a conflict that is still unfolding, and to do so in a context where its cultural producers – from the artistic cast to the technical crew – are all involved, as citizens of a war-torn country, in the events that they are trying to describe through their serialized television product.

Making Real-Time Drama in the Context of an Uprising

Making real-time drama in a time of unrest is not unprecedented in the history of filmmaking. An attempt at filming during the unfolding of a conflict was initiated during World War II by Leni Riefenstahl. Between 1940 and 1942, the German director started producing and tried to complete *Tiefenland*, a film which is infamously known because Riefenstahl reportedly sent children from the Sinti and Rom ethnic groups to Auschwitz concentration camp after using them as extras.¹⁴ On the opposite side of the ocean Walt Disney, at the request of the US government, also produced fiction films during the unfolding of World War II, with the goal of explaining to fellow Americans why the

country was waging war in such a remote continent. Throughout the war, Disney produced several animated films. Many of them, such as *Prelude to War* and *America Goes to War*, became widely popular with audiences in the US.



Yet, while making real-time drama, neither Riefenstahl nor Disney faced the same challenges as *Wilada*. On the one hand, *Tiefeland* is a fictional story whose plot and characters are completely unrelated to World War II; on the other hand, Disney's short movies, despite openly dealing with the conflict and trying to make sense of it, lack the involvement of human agency in the real events being narrated, as they take the form of cartoon animations. On the contrary, *Wilada* presents an exceptional context of production, where Syrian drama makers have to act simultaneously as observers and participants, while filming a fiction which attempts to describe and reflect upon on how the uprising turned into a civil war. The producers are affected by the very event being narrated in their television series. In this peculiar – and precarious – situation of being witnesses and protagonists, storytellers and participants, Syrian cultural producers have had to adopt multiple strategies of survival. Here survival means both surviving as *players in a market* where they have to sell their product as a commodity and surviving as *citizens of a country* undergoing a civil war, which requires navigating political instability and personal uncertainty on a daily basis.

By making drama in real time, *Wilada* offers a living site for scholarly reflection on how cultural production – and the power relations that shape it both domestically and in the broader region – might shift, recombine and adapt in the context of a three year old uprising turned into an armed conflict; where the geopolitical relationships between Syrian and Gulf political elites have been dramatically reconfigured. The peculiar context of production of this *musalsal* helps raise the question of what happens when a cultural text, such as a television fiction that is broadcast at the peak of an entertainment season, has to act both as *commodity* on a regional market and as a *national project* promoted by cultural producers in the framework of a civil war where their political beliefs, personal involvements, and even their lives might be at stake.

Building on scholarship that defines the political economy of media industries as a “specific set of social relations organized around *power*,”¹⁵ this paper explores *al-Wilada min al-Khasira* as a site of “struggle, contestation and negotiation between a broad range of stakeholders.”¹⁶ I argue that this television drama provides us with an emblematic case for studying the power dynamics that shape the political economy of Syrian television drama, and its dual nature as, first, a text which aims to reach a domestic audience with opposed views on Syria's crisis and, second, as a commodity on the pan-Arab market. This dual nature as a regional commodity and a national project is a foundational component of every Syrian *musalsalat* and embodies the paradox upon which the Syrian television drama industry thrives: dependence on transnational market demand in order to preserve itself as a domestic industry. However, the case of *Wilada* suggests that these multiple projects – economic and political, regional and domestic, commercially-driven and educationally-oriented – may no longer be able to successfully combine in the new context of the uprisings.

In particular, I look at *tanwir* (enlightenment) as the shared ideological ground between Syrian cultural elites and political elites surrounding president Bashar al-Assad, both of which advocate for reformism as a gradual process that should be engineered and guided by themselves.¹⁷ I argue that *Wilada*, while reproducing *tanwir*, the ideology undergirding cultural production in Syria, sheds light on its limits as a seemingly progressive ideology. In the new context of the uprising, *tanwir* has failed to fulfil the promises of national unity, multiculturalism, non-sectarianism that were widely promoted in the past decade through edgy media content, particularly television drama, and backed by reform-minded political elites.



I use *Wilada* to reflect upon the attempts by Syrian cultural producers, imbued with the values of *tanwir*, to use the *musalsal* as a sort of Habermasian platform for a rational, deliberative dialogue among Syrians with different political affiliations. This paper shows how these efforts have failed, both within the fictional text of *Wilada* – as a venue for contrasted ideas of nation, forgiveness, piety and solidarity to come together – and in the context surrounding the television series itself, characterized by the contentions that it has generated between audiences, television critics, journalists and the artistic crew in the public sphere of traditional media and on emerging social media platforms.

Ideas such as reality and realism – which lie at the basis of the Syrian “social realism”¹⁸ genre in television making – have been widely evoked by *Wilada*'s producers from different political affiliations to assess the success or failure of the series, to defend or attack it, and to justify their participation in or withdrawal from it. Using discourse analysis, I look at a variety of texts (television interviews, newspapers articles and social media statements). I reflect upon the assumptions of “realism” and “reality” made by *Wilada*'s makers and consider such assumptions as “ideologies”¹⁹ that give form and legitimacy to a set of power relations. Through an analysis of the disputes and polemics generated around clashing ideas of realism and reality, *Wilada* reveals how Syrian cultural producers, although fascinated and influenced by theories of filming reality as an exercise in social and economic critique, have failed at a core element of Italian neorealism: the process of *aiming at* reality.²⁰ My argument is that, while pursuing the *tanwir* ideology and trying to build a platform for national dialogue through seemingly progressive media such as *Wilada*, Syrian television drama has failed the politics of critical realism and its political function of questioning how things are represented at the level of the dominant discourse.²¹

While failing as a national political project, *Wilada* seems to have succeeded as a market good. The process of commodification put in place by pan-Arab entertainment networks has turned political arguments and contention over contrasting ideas of reality and truth, and representations of nation, forgiveness and piety, into sites for consumption. Viewers are encouraged to form an opinion on the Syrian uprising by favoring one character (and his or her life choices) over another, and are called to express political preferences in the participative form of market profiling of the *like/share* universe of social media.

In this way, *Wilada* underlines how a highly contentious event such as the uprising in Syria can be consumed in real-time, turned into a commodity and injected into the endless flow of informational goods, where it loses its potential of delivering a message and becomes a mere contribution within the circulation of data supported by networked communication technologies. This process of downgrading messages to basic contributions within the communication flow is a key feature of “communicative capitalism,” i.e. “that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies.”²² Here the Internet, particularly the interactive world of social networking sites, embodies a promise that every user can contribute his or her opinion to any given issue, and actively participate in shaping a public debate. However, this mechanism enabled by the Internet falls short of generating the kind of understanding that could lead to dialogue and deliberation within a model of communicative action *a’ la* Habermas.²³ Rather, the endless flow of content boosted by networked communication technologies relies on repetition, reproduction and circulation. This is why a political and educational project such as *Wilada*, embodying the promises of *tanwir* and aiming to create a platform for national dialogue, ultimately fails to do so. It fails in sending out a message, in generating understanding and deliberation. Yet, as a market project packaged for pan-Arab networks, it succeeds in adding more content, registering more opinions, and originating more *like/share* contributions to the networks, thus alighting the endless data flow on which communicative capitalism thrives.

One could object that the theoretical framework of communicative capitalism was developed, and can only work, in the context of neoliberal democracies. However, I argue that it can contribute significantly to our understanding of contemporary cultural production in the Arab world for at least two reasons. First, because countries such as Bashar al-Assad’s Syria have gradually shifted towards embracing their own versions of neoliberalism, which some scholars have interpreted as a strategic move in the direction of “upgrading authoritarianism,”²⁴ a process of opening up the economy to a selected elite of crony capitalists whose support could eventually enhance the regime’s power basis while giving the impression of reforms.²⁵ Other scholars have understood contemporary Syria as a fully-fledged “neoliberal autocracy” whose political economy “implies two contradictory logics of rule, cultivating an aspirational consciousness for freedom, upward mobility, and consumer pleasure, on the one hand, while continuing to tether possibilities for advancement to citizen obedience and coercive control, on the other.”²⁶ Therefore, Bashar al-Assad’s Syria is indeed imbued with neoliberal values, although they are combined with persistent features of authoritarianism. Second, the political economy of pan-Arab networks is closely intertwined with global media industries – and therefore with global capital – as they share the same technological infrastructure, rely on similar business models, and are nurtured by advertising investments which originate from few multinational firms, the majority of which are US-controlled. They prosper on the interconnections between regional and global capital in terms of ownership, personal friendships and business ties.

Situating cultural products originating from the Arab world in the global media market allows us to think of them as informational goods that are distributed and consumed within the data flow alimented by communicative capitalism. This is a more suitable context, I argue, for the analysis of a market commodity such as Syrian television drama. Although they are deeply tied to local politics through the shared ideology of *tanwir*, Syrian cultural producers are also active market players, entrenched in the complex nexus of networks of people and places that define cotemporary commodities. Interpreting the relationship between cultural elites and political powers only in light of a resistance-to-power narrative within an authoritarian setting would result in downplaying the importance of a global market framework in reading contemporary cultural production.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SYRIAN TELEVISION DRAMA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UPRISING

Shifting Patterns of Power Relations?

Before examining how the political economy of Syrian television drama has shifted in the context of the uprising, it is worth outlining its power holders and their ideas, visions, and political projects as they emerge in media content. As I have discussed elsewhere,²⁷ the political economy of Syrian television drama is mainly shaped by three players: Syrian drama makers, the multiple power centers which make up the complex structure of the Syrian regime (which I define using the Arabic world *sultat*, “powers”), and Gulf buyers.

Syrian drama makers are writers and directors who come primarily from a generation who studied filmmaking in the Soviet Union in the 1980s and Russia in the 1990s thanks to government scholarships. Syria also had a good acting school, the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts. This talented and well-trained generation converged to form a lively private television production sector, which has gradually grown since the 1970s, when state television allowed some of its most talented employees to produce television drama as private entrepreneurs without leaving their public sector jobs. They were also permitted to use the channel's facilities in return for giving state media a copy of their final products to be aired free of charge. This *de facto* Syrian private sector already operated mostly for the Gulf market, which at the time was witnessing the first oil price explosion, something which, as Sakr points out, represented the starting point of satellite television in the Arab world,²⁸ and the beginning of Gulf influence over television programming in the region.

Although the market and regional elements have been largely present in Syrian television drama since its origins, at the ideological and aesthetic levels Syrian drama makers have always understood their works as “critical depictions of society and politics.”²⁹ As Salamandra has asserted, in an increasingly commodified market such as the one shaped by pan-Arab entertainment networks, with viewer choice widening and social and political impacts of content narrowing, “many Syrian television makers still cling to Arab socialist ideals.” They are committed to “shed light on issues difficult to approach in non-fiction media, hoping to spark discussion and, ultimately, social and political transformation.”³⁰

Engaged in this progressive struggle, Syrian drama makers have distanced themselves from descriptive realism and connected with Italian neorealism and other forms of critical realism, which offer a critical reading of social and political structures. However, they have transposed the theoretical basis of these movements to the specific Arab context, where Egypt was the main supplier of fiction on the pan-Arab market. Hence, for Syrian cultural producers, social realism as a television genre was defined in opposition to Egyptian melodrama³¹ and has mostly meant on location filming, as opposed to shooting in studios, and using a single camera, instead of two or three, in the belief that this technique would be closer to the natural vision of the human eye.

Stylistically defined by this version of social realism, and commercially oriented toward the pan-Arab market, Syrian television drama has managed in recent decades to spread and carry out the ideals of *tanwir*, addressing sensitive topics concerning contemporary Syrian society – such as corruption, religious extremism, gender issues, etc. – in order to promote development through progressive media. In line with theories of modernism and developmentalism, which are widely supported by Arab intellectuals, *tanwir* is an educational project aimed at bringing progress and development to the masses under the guidance of enlightened elites; it is also a disciplinary tool, as it suggests how to think about citizen-related issues such as religion, nationalism and freedom. The commitment to *tanwir* is shared by Syrian television drama makers as part of the “secular and socially progressive”³² elite and Bashar al-Assad and his seemingly reform-minded circle at the palace. In the complex structure that defines the Syrian regime’s several power centers or *sultat* (intelligence agencies, security apparatus, state media, etc.) the relationship between cultural elites and the president is predicated upon elected affinities, i.e. a nexus of mutual fascination, shared interests and concerns, and a common belief in *tanwir* as an ideology of gradual reformism being engineered and mastered by enlightened minorities.

In order to underscore the elements of pleasure, fascination and mutual interest (as opposed to coercion or defiance) that mark this bond, I use the term “whisper strategy,”³³ defined as the communication mechanism through which Syrian cultural producers and some *sultat* – namely the president and his reform-minded collaborators – agree upon issues deemed *worthy* and suitable for public discussion via progressive media such as *musalsalat*. None of the Syrian *sultat* are directly involved in television drama production.³⁴ However, through the whisper strategy, the reform-minded side of the regime ensures that issues of its concerns are communicated to the drama makers – and the other way around – and discussed in edgy television dramas which, in turn, boost the elitist ideology of *tanwir*.

Yet, as previously noted, Syrian television drama is not only a national project nurtured by the ideology of *tanwir*; it is also a media industry which thrives on regional demand. In the absence of sufficient Gulf-made productions, and of a transparent and competitive market in Syria, cash-loaded pan-Arab television networks based in the Gulf commission and acquire Syrian television drama to fill their Ramadan schedules.³⁵ The bilateral and multilateral relations within the triangle of Syrian television drama production (between Syrian drama makers, *sultat*, and Gulf buyers) have traditionally succeeded in accommodating local politics and the regional market, and in making the national project of *tanwir* coexist within a commercial one. However, one could legitimately

ask what happens to the Syrian television drama industry now that the uprising has dramatically reshaped the geopolitics of the region, with Saudi Arabia openly siding against Bashar al-Assad, and Syrian media officially engaging in a propaganda war against Gulf countries and pan-Arab media.

Nevertheless, during the first two seasons of *Wilada* (2011-2012), local politics and the market did not appear to be at odds, even in the heated context of the uprising. Despite shifting geopolitics within the region, the multiple projects enabled by the *musalsal* – the political, disciplinary project of *tanwir* and the market project – did not appear to clash with one another. Syrian censorship authorized the filming of seasons one and two inside the country; both were broadcast by Syrian state media and pan-Arab channels, garnering a positive audience response, and a third season was commissioned.

Upon close examination, the first two seasons of *Wilada*, despite being apparently taboo breaking, clearly move within the boundaries of permissible social critique, in line with other media products inspired by the ideology of *tanwir* in the last decade. Through a compelling narrative and explicit visuals, the *musalsal* denounces extreme corruption, violence and arbitrary exercise of power by intelligence officers and businessmen from the upper echelons of the regime. Yet, these are familiar terrains in Syrian television drama under Bashar al-Assad. Denouncing corruption is worn-out, permitted territory. The need for corruption (*darurat al-fasad*) has been theorized by Imad Fawzi Shoaibi,³⁶ a professor of philosophy at Damascus University and chairman of the Syrian think tank, Data & Strategic Studies Centre. Shoaibi argues that corruption is a structural component of the political system, and indispensable to the leader in his claim of supreme moral authority when fighting it. Moreover, in *tanwir*-inspired television drama, corruption is reduced to a problem of individuals, which ultimately does not undermine the legitimacy of the system. While denouncing the abuses perpetrated by a violent security officer, *Wilada* also introduces his counterpart, the character of a “good” security officer who protects and ultimately saves those who are victims of injustice.

On the website of MBC Group, Syrian cultural producers describe the first two seasons of *Wilada* using language typical of *tanwir*. For Syrian actress Mona Wassef, the *musalsal* increases “the sense of responsibility toward the marginalized,” i.e. those who live in the slums (a well exploited trend in Syrian television drama under Bashar al-Assad). The series, she states, “was able to cross the red lines, and put at the center stage important problems, in addition to bringing social and human values.”³⁷ According to Salloum Haddad, another Syrian actor, *Wilada* sheds light on “abuse of power” and “extreme poverty;” problems that, if not solved, can destroy a society.³⁸ Here the national project of *tanwir*, jointly supported by Syrian political and cultural elites, does not seem to clash with the process of making *Wilada* a commodity suitable to pan-Arab market consumption, not even in the context of the ongoing uprising against Bashar al-Assad, which is openly – and militarily – supported by Gulf powers.

The MBC website provides a good example of this commodification process. In presenting *Wilada* and its characters and plots to the viewers, MBC engages the latter by asking questions such as: “Do you think that *al-Wilada min al-Khasira* reflects the bitter reality in which the Arab society

lives?”³⁹ Or, “If you were him, would you sell your body in order to make money?”⁴⁰ (referring to one of the protagonists of the series, who eventually ends up selling his kidney to feed his family).

This way MBC invites its viewers to use social media to join the debate around issues raised by each episode of the TV drama. With the addition of interactive features used to promote *Wilada's* episodes and push the audience not only to watch the series but to actively express its views, MBC reframes the Syrian political and cultural project of *tanwir* into a commodifying environment which fetishizes user power and celebrates the active readings enabled by web 2.0 platforms as expressions of the viewers' multiple freedoms. Therefore, a highly contentious piece of television becomes a playground where a variety of lifestyle choices and individual values can be expressed and exchanged by users while being commodified by the broadcaster.

Contention over *Wilada's* Third Season

If the first two seasons of *Wilada* confirmed a pattern of accommodation of the multiple projects pushed forward by Syrian television drama, something different occurred with the third season that helps us to further reflect upon how cultural production, and the power relations that shape it, might shift and adjust in the context of unrest. Initial disputes over season three started after Syrian censorship decided not to grant authorization to film inside Syria, in contrast with the previous two seasons. “We recommend that you wait” was the official answer given by Syrian authorities after a formal request was submitted. This was “a more gentle” way, according to writer Samer Radwan, of signaling that the production of season three should not happen.⁴¹ A snowball effect followed the official response of Syrian censorship. Rasha Shurbatji, the talented female director who had worked with Radwan on *Wilada* since the first season (and whose style of filming was part of the success of the series), decided to withdraw from the production,⁴² a decision that, although never explicitly stated, was probably due to political and security considerations, and to Shurbatji's personal evaluation of whether to pursue the project (as her husband is a prominent member of the military).

Despite Shurbatji's withdrawal after filming had already begun in Lebanon, the production company, which had secured business deals with pan-Arab networks for the Ramadan broadcast, decided to go ahead with the project and bring a new director on board. Seif Sbei was finally hired; a young yet established Syrian filmmaker and actor who was widely known for his staunchly pro-Assad position, and for having called upon other Syrian artists to unite around Bashar al-Assad's reformist project at the very beginning of the uprising.⁴³ The contention surrounding *Wilada* season three did not calm down after this “loyalist” hire, though. Radwan, the *musalsal*'s writer, was arrested twice by Syrian security agencies. Officially, this had no connection to the television series or Syrian censorship's refusal to grant filming permission. Yet, according to Radwan himself – in semi-public

conversations on Facebook pages belonging to Syrian artists and in interviews and articles that were released on Arab media – the arrest was likely to be related to *Wilada* season three and the way it dealt with the uprising.⁴⁴

The filming location itself became a site of daily struggle. Fights and negotiations broke out between *Wilada*'s main actors and actresses – all prominent members of the Arabic television drama star system and widely known across the region – who were divided over support for the regime or the opposition. According to Radwan, who entered a public controversy with director Seif Sbei which continued after the broadcast,⁴⁵ “several scenes were added; other sequences were redacted. Dialogues were modified by the actors and the directors without informing me.”⁴⁶ Ironically, Radwan's intention when putting together artists with diverse political affiliations and beliefs *vis-à-vis* the uprising (from open support to dismissal as a foreign conspiracy), had been to show that “dialogue and cohabitation” were still possible in Syria.

This notion that progressive media can act as a Habermasian platform of rational, deliberative dialogue is inscribed in the very idea of *tanwir*; in its confidence in a rational debate which should be orchestrated and led by the elites. To this extent, the Habermasian idea of the “public sphere”⁴⁷ and *tanwir* share an approach which puts elites at center stage in any process of discussion, rational deliberation and negotiation which aims to advance society socially and politically. Yet – perhaps inadvertently – *Wilada* sheds light on how these very elites who were responsible for “enlightening” society and making it progress have failed to do so.

In *this* sequence from season three,⁴⁸ a teacher (whose role is performed by the director of the series, Seif Sbei) tries to convince a group of his former students not to seek sectarian revenge for a friend who was allegedly killed by the protesters. This, he insists, would lead to a civil war, the price of which would be “too high, nobody can pay it.” Despite his quiet attitude and rational attempts at convincing the group of his argument in the name of the logic and for the sake of national unity, the teacher fails, and the discussion ends violently, almost degenerating into a fight. Interestingly, according to Radwan, Sbei arbitrarily decided to redact the sequence that followed this one, where the same group of youth – dressed in a way that would identify them as *shabbiha*, a word indicating an informal militia made up by Alawites – show up in a public square and throw the bodies of the people they had previously killed to revenge their friend.⁴⁹ Although this sequence is missing in the final editing of the episode, the failure of the teacher's rational attempt is portrayed in a different scene which shows him sitting with another member of the educated, progressive elite discussing possible solutions to the crisis. Ultimately, it seems that rational dialogue or any sort of political solution are unlikely to be achieved: the sequence ends with the teacher uttering bitterly “what happened to our project of living together, the project we have worked on so hard for so many years?”

If *Wilada* underlines the possibility that Syrian television drama operates “performatively,” acting as a living site of *tanwir* “to contain the diversity of opinions that make up the collectivity called Syria,”⁵⁰ this very attempt at the same time reveals its limits as a progressive ideology and elitist project. The frustration of having failed to build a national project based on multiculturalism and mutual respect

is not only exposed within the plot of *Wilada* and the development of its characters; the defeat of a generation who embraced *tanwir* and forged an alliance with Bashar al-Assad's political elites around the idea of enlightened reformism is also apparent in the context surrounding the making of the television series. The initial idea of a platform for rational, deliberative dialogue between individuals with contrasting political views has been replaced by highly contentious debates held on traditional media outlets with journalists, television critics, and the artists involved, as well as in the quasi-public venues of their personal Facebook pages, which continue to host heated comments.

The “life seriously harms health” sequence is exemplary of *Wilada's* failed attempt at acting as a quasi-public sphere. The scene was shared widely by both pro and anti-regime activists on their personal Facebook pages and groups, driving traffic to the clip on YouTube, where users' comments had to be disabled by system administrators.⁵¹ In keeping with YouTube's guidelines and policies, this was probably due to the inflammatory tones of the debate between pro and anti-regime supporters on the page, a far cry from any Habermasian notion of deliberative, rational dialogue or the elitist ideals of enlightenment through *tanwir*-inspired content.

REALITY REVISITED, REALISM RELOADED

“This television series is not a documentary: it is a fictional imitation of what happened and what is happening in our country” (al-Wilada min al-Khasira, season three).⁵²

Whose Reality is this?

In September 2013, during the first public interview that Samer Radwan granted after the broadcast of *Wilada* season three, a journalist commented: “the TV series has been attacked from both pro and anti-regime sides in the name of the *reality* of the events unfolding in Syria. Some critics, too, have criticized the work for not presenting the *real picture* of the violence that the regime has used against protesters.”⁵³ The concepts of reality, realism, and truth have become highly contentious in the third season of *Wilada*. They have been evoked by audience members, television critics, journalists, and even scholars⁵⁴ to attack or defend the series, and assess its failure or success. Prominent members of the artistic crew have appealed to these concepts in order to defend their participation in the series or justify their withdrawal from it. For Rasha Shurbatji, the director of the first two seasons who left during the making of season three, the series had gained “legitimacy” (*mashru'iyya*) because of its ability to “imitate reality” (*muhakat al-waqa'*).⁵⁵ However, its attempts to be realist were hindered because filming inside Syria was not allowed. Connecting her position ideologically to the tradition of Syrian social realism, as I have described it earlier, Shurbatji's withdrawal from the production was due to an alleged lack of realism in the series and to the impossibility of portraying reality due to the production constraints faced in season three.⁵⁶

Other artists involved in the show have toyed with the concepts of reality and realism, clearly employing these ideas to support their own political reading of events. For pro-regime actor Bassem Yakhour, who plays a prominent role in *Wilada*, the series does indeed reflect reality as it addresses “the condition of division unfortunately happening in Syrian society.”⁵⁷ This resonates with the regime’s thesis that the uprising is in fact a sectarian war being waged against religious minorities and the multiculturalism of the country, and strengthens the actor’s self-identification as a supporter of Bashar al-Assad. Ironically, another protagonist of the *musalsal*, regime opponent Abdel Halim Qutfan, also deems *Wilada* to be realistic, as it openly portrays regime’s brutality, the effect of which is that “every Syrian household has been turned into a movie.”⁵⁸ In parallel, Bassem Yakhour deems *Wilada* realistic because it emphasizes the humanitarian side of the conflict and downplays the political aspects of it, matching the way in which the regime has portrayed the crisis as a conspiracy orchestrated by obscure and corrupt powers where civilians are paying the highest price. Therefore, according to this pro-regime actor, as long as the series portrays the humanitarian side of the conflict rather than trying to give a political reading of the events, then it is “realistic.”⁵⁹

In the end, the clashing ideas of reality, realism, and truth that are injected into the fictional text by the artists involved result in *Wilada* sending “ambivalent”⁶⁰ messages based on phony patriotism and a romanticized notion that the people are the only way out of the crisis; where all of the political parties are equally corrupt, violent, and driven by personal and material interests, causing them to shift easily between the regime and opposition. In this chaotic situation, even the Ba’ath party, which was the main ideological driver during Hafiz al-Assad’s rule, is no longer able to provide a narrative with a meaningful reading of the situation; nor does it succeed in offering the Syrian people the ideological safeness once embodied in ideas such as unity and nation. In a symbolic sequence,⁶¹ a *shabbiha* militia is not only militarily trained in fighting and killing, but also ideologically reprogrammed. The original motto of the Ba’ath party, “one Arab nation with an eternal message,” is reformatted as: “one Arab nation... a science fiction story.” In the context of the uprising, ideas of unity, nation, and solidarity seem to have failed and party ideology has been replaced by personal “interest” (*maslah*, a recurrent word in the *musalsal*). The reference to “science fiction” (*khayal al-’ilm*) in the reformatted version of the former party slogan is yet another sign that reality does not exist, or that perhaps Syrians have failed to grasp it.

Stuck in the impossibility of aiming at reality in Deleuzian terms, *Wilada* over romanticizes humanitarianism, piety, and forgiveness and refers back to these three’s quintessential icon – the mother – to propose a solution to the crisis. In the closing sequence, two mothers are left negotiating an agreement, symbolic of a larger agreement over the country’s future. Both mothers have lost their sons who were killed by the two sides, the regime army and the rebels. In a highly dramatic scene, one mother tells the other, “Your son is a killer.” The other answers, “Maybe your son is a killer, too. Who knows?” The inability – or



unwillingness – to decide who is the *real* martyr – “who is the torturer and who is the victim”⁶² – leaves an open ending; we won't know whether one of the mothers decides to opt for forgiveness or pursue revenge. In the end, *Wilada* fails to propose that “understanding of things”⁶³ which Roberto Rossellini placed at the core of the critical process of portraying reality as a project intended to question the representation offered by the dominant discourse. As Deleuze points out when discussing Andre Bazin's reading of the movement initiated by Rossellini:

Against those who defined Italian neorealism by its social content, Bazin put forward the fundamental requirement of formal aesthetic criteria. According to him, it was a matter of a new form of reality, said to be dispersive, elliptical, errant or wavering, working in blocs, with deliberately weak connections and floating events. *The real was no longer represented or reproduced but “aimed at.”*⁶⁴

This failure – or unwillingness – to “question” reality and fathom “the real correspondences between facts and their process of birth”⁶⁵ sheds light on the crisis of *tanwir* as a reformist project in both the political and media domains. It reflects the frustrations of Syrian cultural producers at having failed to achieve the ideals of unity, multiculturalism, and non-sectarianism that were boosted, particularly over the past decade, through seemingly progressive and edgy television drama. According to *Wilada's* writer, this inability to aim at reality can be traced back to decades of totalitarian rule, which have resulted in an erasure of the past and, therefore, in the undoing of a shared sense of reality. As Walter Benjamin has pointed out, “Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.”⁶⁶ The “absence of documentation” and the erasing of the past have led Syrians to form their own “private truths” based on personal histories rather than on shared history.⁶⁷ In Radwan's opinion, this “absence of shared concepts to unite the Syrian street” is the major obstacle to representing and reading reality, and hence to finding a solution

to the crisis. From this perspective, Syrian society would fail to represent an “imagined community” a la Benedict Anderson⁶⁸ and instead would be made up of national identities that are reduced to “episodic utterances”⁶⁹ of nation and nationalism.

At the same time, the impossibility of defining a shared national platform for Syrians seems to have turned into a marketing opportunity for MBC, the pan-Arab entertainment giant which recently rebroadcast all three seasons of *Wilada*.



From MBC's official website:

January 22, 2014: There is a party which fights for a principle, and a second party which looks to pursue its personal interests; and several other parties trying to exploit the conflict and the crises in order to generate chaos. This is the Syrian revolution as portrayed by the *musalsal* "*al-Wilada min al-Khasira*" currently showing on MBC Drama.⁷⁰

January 21, 2014: Demonstrations in the streets, arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate killing; all this animated the heated events narrated in part three of the *musalsal* "*al-Wilada min al-Khasira*" which reviews the outbreak of the revolution in Syria. This has generated vehement discussions between brothers and colleagues, to the extent of turning violent when delivering judgments such as "this guy is pro-demonstrations and that guy is against the revolution." Grief has darkened households, whether in the form of a dead, a wounded or an arrested person, and no one knows where things are going. Learn about the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution through the *musalsal* "*al-Wilada min al-Khasira*" part three on MBC drama.⁷¹

Through these promotions, MBC has fetishized the conflicts and debates behind *Wilada* and, with the help of the interactivity granted by social media platforms, has turned potential political messages into "lifestyle meaning systems"⁷² and peripheral manifestations of personal choice and market freedom. In the endless flow of communicative capitalism, the Syrian uprising has been turned into yet another commodified good to be consumed and digested on the pan-Arab market.

CONCLUSION

A Failed Project of Here and Elsewhere

In 1970 French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard was commissioned by Palestinian political group Al Fatah to shoot a documentary intended to celebrate the "victory" (as the film was originally supposed to be called) of the Palestinian uprising. Yet, the uprising ended up being defeated, and so were the aspirations of the film. Godard went back to France and waited for more than five years before releasing *Ici et Ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1976), a film that John Drabinski calls a "failed documentary" which recovered itself "in the element of the fictional;" a peculiar mix between an "initial sense of impending victory" of the uprising and its "improvable failure";⁷³ between the place of consumption (France, the *here* of the film) and the place of memory (Palestine, the *elsewhere*).

Discussing Godard's movie at its New York premiere, film critic Serge Daney commented that "it is in the nature of cinema (delay between the time of shooting and the time of projection) to be *the art of here and elsewhere*."⁷⁴ The "delay as a work of art"⁷⁵ evoked by Daney seems to be precluded in the highly commodified environment of global media and entertainment networks, where the "idea of the work of time"⁷⁶ has been inevitably lost in the eternal present of endless information flow set by communicative capitalism. In the end, by being yet another "contribution to this ever-circulating content,"⁷⁷ *Wilada* seems to have failed its *here and elsewhere*.

This paper has addressed what happens when a cultural text, such as a serialized television fiction broadcast at peak time, operates both as a commodity on a regional market and as a national project promoted by cultural producers, in the context of a civil war where their political beliefs, personal involvements, and even their daily survival are at stake. Using *al-Wilada min al-Khasira* as a site of analysis, I have argued that the national project of tanwir supported by political and cultural elites in Syria has proven not to hold out in a highly contentious context such as that shaped by the uprising. At the same time, this impossibility or unwillingness of Syrian elites to define a shared national platform has become a marketing opportunity for pan-Arab entertainment networks, which have transformed contentious politics into contentions of lifestyles, market choices, and temporary exercises of users' freedom.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Except where noted, the author conducted all the personal interviews reported in this paper, in Arabic. Translations from Arabic to English are also the author's. I am grateful to Nour Halabi and Marina Krikorian for proofreading the final English version. I also wish to thank those who engaged with this paper, giving feedback and comments before and during my PARGC colloquium held at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, February 27, 2014. In particular, I want to thank Jodi Dean, Osama Esber, Marwan M. Kraidy, Youssef Salama, and Lisa Wedeen for their precious remarks.
- ² "Al-Wilada min al-Khasira (part III, 2013) – Life seriously harms health," YouTube Video, 0:59, from a series televised by MBC in July, 2013, posted by "TheDDR2011," April 17, 2014, <http://youtu.be/TDEySyueyJg>.
- ³ For further reading on the role of Ramadan in Arab media industries, particularly in fiction production, see Gabriel Chahine, Ahmed El Sharkawy, and Haitham Mahmoud, *Trends in Middle Eastern Arabic Television Series Production: Opportunities for Broadcasters and Producers* (Abu Dhabi: Booz Allen Hamilton, 2007); Dubai Press Club, *Arab Media Outlook 2009-2013: Inspiring Local Content* (Dubai: Dubai Press Club, 2010) accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/arabmedia.pdf>; and Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil, *Arab Television Industries* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).
- ⁴ Chahine, El Sharkawy, and Mahmoud, *Trends*, 3.
- ⁵ For example, in 2010 before the outbreak of the uprising, Egypt produced 65 Ramadan drama series. In the same year, industry estimates put Egypt among the top three Arab countries, together with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, in terms of market value and advertising spending. See Pan Arab Research Center, Advertising Markets Y2010 Jan-Dec (Dubai: Pan Arab Research Center, 2010), accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.mediame.com/sites/default/files/PARC%20Analysis-jan2dec-summary.pdf>. In comparison, that same year Syria only produced a total of 23 musalsalat, according to the Syrian Industry Commission for Cinema and Television, see Maher Mansour, Bassam Safar, and Maisoon Shabbani, "Imad al-Rifai', Head of the Industry Commission for Cinema and Television, Tells Tishiriyyin: Syrian TV Drama was not Boycotted... but Five Countries have Lost from a Marketing Point of View" [Arabic], Al Bostah, October 20, 2011, accessed September 9, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1rVa9ie>.
- ⁶ For a discussion of the role that the Gulf plays in shaping the pan-Arab market and its politics, see Marwan M. Kraidy and Joe F. Khalil, *Arab Television Industries*; Naomi Sakr, *Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization & the Middle East* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001). On the specifics of the Syrian drama industry being boosted and driven by the demand of Gulf-based pan-Arab networks, see Donatella Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State: The Politics of Syrian TV Serials in the Pan Arab Market" (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2013).
- ⁷ According to Chahine, El Sharkawy, and Mahmoud, in 2006, out of an annual production of 2,250 Arabic television drama hours, Syria was the second largest supplier, immediately behind Egypt, and ahead of Jordan. For a discussion on the qualitative assessment of Syrian television drama by pan-Arab buyers, see Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State" (2013).
- ⁸ The dilemma of a national industry depending on transnational demand was the key issue debated at a conference on Syrian *musalsalat*, hosted at al-Assad National Library, December 20, 2010, in Damascus, which I attended in the context of my PhD fieldwork.
- ⁹ Before *al-Wilada min al-Khasira*, Radwan had authored *La'nat al-Tin (The Curse of the Mud*, 2010), which attempted to portray life in Syria during the 1980s, a very sensitive period marked by an internal uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood that was crushed by the Syrian regime, resulting in thousands of deaths.
- ¹⁰ For ownership-related issues in Arab media industries see Kraidy and Khalil, *Arab Television Industries*; Sakr, *Satellite Realms*.

- 11 For a further reading on gender issues and Syrian television drama, particularly in *Wilada*, see Rebecca Joubin, *The Politics of Love: Sexuality, Gender, and Marriage in Syrian Television Drama* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2013).
- 12 Samer Radwan, Skype communication with author, February, 2014.
- 13 For further discussion on entertainment television and contentious politics in the Arab world, see Marwan M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 14 The film was only released in 1954. The controversy over the Sinti and Rom children went on until 2002, when Riefenstahl, at 100 years old, was again brought to court.
- 15 Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication* (London: Sage, 2009), 24 (emphasis in original).
- 16 Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds., *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*. (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 5.
- 17 I have extensively dealt with *tanwir* in Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State" (2013) and Donatella Della Ratta, "The Whisper Strategy: How Syrian Drama Makers Shape Television Fiction in the Context of Authoritarianism and Commodification," in *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Culture, Society and Religion*, eds. Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).
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- 19 Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Longman, 1989), 2.
- 20 See Gilles Deleuze, *The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 1 (emphasis mine).
- 21 The act of questioning reality in a critical way is central in the works of Zavattini, a prominent writer from Italian neorealism. See Christopher Williams, *Realism and the Cinema: a Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).
- 22 Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," *Cultural Politics* 1 (2005): 55.
- 23 "In Habermas' model of communicative action, the use value of a message depends on its orientation. A sender sends a message with the intention that the message be received and understood. Any acceptance or rejection of the message depends on this understanding. Understanding is thus a *necessary* part of the communicative exchange. In communicative capitalism, however, the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a larger pool, flow, or circulation of content." Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 27 (emphasis in original).
- 24 Steven Heydemann, *Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World*, Analysis Paper 13 (Washington DC: Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, 2007).
- 25 On Syrian business elite, see Bassam Haddad *Business Networks in Syria: The Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
- 26 Lisa Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria," *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 4 (2013): 843.
- 27 Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State" (2013).

- ²⁸ Sakr, *Satellite Realms*, 9.
- ²⁹ Christa Salamandra, "An Ethnography of Syrian Television Drama," *Les carnets de l'IFPO*, January 10, 2011, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/617>.
- ³⁰ Salamandra, "Dramatizing Damascus."
- ³¹ A comprehensive ethnography of Egyptian melodrama is offered in Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005).
- ³² Salamandra, "Dramatizing Damascus."
- ³³ I have dealt extensively with the whisper strategy in Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State (2013);" Della Ratta, "The "Whisper Strategy;" and Donatella Della Ratta "Dramas of the Authoritarian State," *Middle East Report Online* (February 2012), accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/dramas-authoritarian-state>.
- ³⁴ State media produced an average of two *musalsalat* per year prior to the uprising, see Della Ratta, "Dramas of the Authoritarian State" (2013).
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