

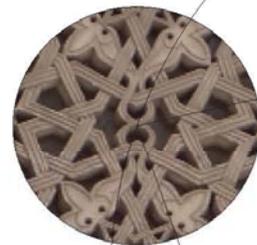


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Dramatizing Damascus: The Cultural Politics of Arab Television Production in the Satellite Era

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Dramatizing Damascus: The Cultural Politics of Arab Television Production in the Satellite Era.

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Syrian drama creators find themselves at the forefront of a pan-Arab satellite TV industry with a global reach. Their key product, the dramatic miniseries, or *musalsal*, dominates public culture in the Arab world. This is particularly true during Ramadan, which has given the genre its form, and has in turn been shaped by it. An average of 30 Syrian *musalsal-s* air on consecutive Ramadan evenings, when drama viewing becomes a secular ritual: streets empty after sunset, as families gather around television sets in homes, restaurants and cafés. In the period running up to the holy month—and peak broadcast season—the city of Damascus becomes a film set, as producers rush to finish their 30-episode programs. Through these miniseries, audiences throughout the Arab world have become familiar with the city’s streets, houses and lilting dialect. A distinctively Syrian production style of on-location filming with a single camera lends both a folkloric authenticity, and a gritty realism, to urban drama.

My recent fieldwork among drama creators in Damascus and programming executives in the United Arab Emirates focuses on the cultural politics of drama production in the satellite era. This research addresses the ways in which the demise of socialism, the perceived failures of nationalism, and the rise of Islamism are reshaping the work of cultural production. I argue that despite—indeed, in response to—these conditions and constraints, Syrian drama creators produce depictions of society and politics that resonate with Arab audiences. Damascus, and particularly the Damascene *hara*, neighborhood, plays a starring role in many of these works. By evoking the glories of the city’s past and the precariousness of its present, TV creators both accommodate and resist the liberalizing and Islamizing currents transforming Arab societies.

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It was through an interest in Damascus, its people, and its representation in various cultural forms that I discovered the social significance of television drama. When I arrived in the city to begin dissertation fieldwork in 1992, I had no intention of focusing on media. My original project looked at the relationship between foodways and social distinction among the various 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, Syrians suggested that I watch a series that was likely to depict traditional local foodways. So with an eye to the treatment of food, I watched the first several episodes of *Ayyam Shamiyya*, (*Damascene Days*).

Witnessing the controversy the series sparked, 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 two state run channels. It was one of a handful of Arab TV productions broadcast that season. Its rosy, sanitized, nostalgic depiction of Damascus at the turn of the twentieth century produced devoted fans, equally fervent detractors, and a range of opinions in between.

Damascene Days married themes of local authenticity and resistance to Ottoman occupation. The series made for rich, multivocal ethnography, combining formal content analysis with reactions from audiences, critics, and cultural producers alike. *Damascene Days* 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 urban elite, and its replacement by a peasant regime from an historically stigmatized religious sect: the ‘Alawis. 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‘th Arab socialist project

sought to obliterate divisive class, regional and religious differences. In practice, these distinctions have intensified during the forty years of Ba‘th party rule. While there has been a modest increase in freedom of expression in recent years, public—and indeed private—expressions of subnational affiliation remain sensitive. By exploring the varied responses to *Damascene Days* and other series set in the city, I was able to show how people use television to talk about issues that engage their everyday lives, but are also politically taboo.

But media sensations on the scale of *Damascene Days* are rare nowadays. The series’ director, Bassam al-Malla, has succeeded in producing one of the few satellite era blockbusters by returning to Old Damascus with *Bab al-Hara, The Quarter Gate*, (*Bab al-Hara*) Parts I to IV, aired each Ramadan from 2006-2009, with Part V coming this season. Al-Malla romanticizes an era at the cusp of living memory, with slice-of-life depictions of antiquated customs and traditions, and valiant acts of anti-colonial resistance. Old Damascus stock characters—barbers, merchants, storytellers, midwives, hummus sellers—migrate from series to series. The *hara*, the old city neighborhood, appears a utopia of social integration and mutual assistance, where disputes are settled amicably, and class differences barely ruffle the surface. Neighbors stand behind the leader they recognize, the za‘im, and scorn France’s well-armed representatives. They also pool resources to aid resistance fighters camped on the outskirts of the city, whose appearances are accompanied by heroic musical strains.

In keeping with the ongoing Islamification of the Arab public sphere, al-Malla’s Old Damascus has become increasingly religious. With the perceived failure of socialist and Arab nationalist ideologists, constructs of Islamic authenticity have become dominant modes of anti-colonial, anti-imperial critique. While most Syrian drama makers are secular and socially progressive, some have responded to the Islamising current by inflecting their works with religiosity. Al-Malla peppers *Bab al-Hara* with lingering prayer scenes, depictions of pilgrimage, and exemplary sheikhs. Some commentators nod approvingly. Prominent Syrian cleric Salah al-Kuftaru “honored” the series and its creators for “returning us to morality, nobility, tradition and authenticity” (Nayyuf 2007). Kuftaru argued the *Bab al-Hara* did a “great service to Islam” by “confronting the aggressive Hollywood globalization that is commanding the attention of

our young men and women” (ibid.). Yet by associating Islamic references with a bygone era al-Malla’s work betrays a secularist underpinning; making the *hajj* becomes, like wearing a fez or owning a donkey, a charmingly antiquated practice.

The *Bab al-Hara* phenomenon spurred an enormous amount of media attention and internet chatter. *Bab al-Hara* themed restaurants and cafes have sprung up in cities as far flung as Doha, Birmingham and Ottawa. Several series present a less idyllic old Damascus, notably the critically acclaimed *al-Hisrim al-Shami* (*hisrim* being the sour nectar of unripened grapes). But none of these dramas have attracted the huge following *Bab al-Hara* enjoyed. In fact, the expansion of Arabic language television fractured audiences, nearly obliterating the annual media events that once united the national audience in the act of viewing and responding. In place of the singular television event of the early 1990’s are an average of 30 Syrian *musalsal-s*, aired on numerous pan-Arab satellite stations.

From the mid 1990s, privatized production and satellite technology converged, producing what has become known Syrian television’s “drama outpouring” (*al-fawra al-dramiyya*). Syrian dramas now reach vast audiences, as television has become the Arab world’s dominant popular cultural form. Several factors underlie television’s centrality. In a tradition where the written word is highly valued, and the major forms of expressive culture have, until recently, been literary—specifically poetic—low readership figures and meager book production reflect what some Arab scholars see as a deep crisis of intellectual life (*Arab Human Development Report*, 2003:4). Books are relatively expensive; satellite dishes increasingly affordable, and television has largely supplanted cinema and theater.

In addition, pan-Arab satellite TV stations have proliferated, particularly those owned by the wealthy governments and citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Roughly 500 pan-Arab stations crowd the satellite mediascape. Some are specialty channels featuring news, arts, music videos, religious programming or cooking shows; others are variety networks broadcasting a range of programs. Drama series feature prominently on the grids of the most widely-watched stations, notably the Saudi owned, Dubai-based. As MBC producer Fadi Ismail boasted:

The influence of Arab television has been, in the last 10 years...more important and more serious in all Arab societies than 30, 50 or 60 years of work by political parties and ideologues for Arab unity...the most unifying factor is now TV, and maybe Arab drama (personal communication, August 13, 2008).

For drama creators, such success entails the steep cost of economic liberalization, a process rife with bittersweet consequences. Throughout most of its history, Syrian television was state-owned and controlled; its employees were uniformly low in status, socially marginal and relatively impoverished. Privatization and the rise of pan-Arab satellite stations coalesced to swell production. The vertiginous flow of capital has created a star system, making some wealthy and famous, and leaving many more struggling. Older professional hierarchies are overturned, as pioneers become has-beens, and upstarts become celebrities. A transnational industry of fan literature, in print and on the Internet, bestows social legitimacy on a lucky few (Weyman 2006). The rest endure the insecurities of a flexible labor market, and an unstable geopolitical situation.

Economic liberalization without democratization leaves drama creators controlled but unsupported. Syrian television is increasingly transnational, but must operate within the confines of a state whose attitude towards the industry remains ambivalent. Sometimes the regime embraces drama TV as an emblem of Syrian national culture, or a safety valve for oppositional voices. Frequently, it tightens the reins on television's potential subversion. Most usually, it appears to treat TV drama as a low priority. While government censorship persists, public sector involvement in production shrinks. GCC satellite networks now finance or purchase most dramas and receive exclusive Ramadan first broadcast rights in return. Series are aired throughout the year, but it is the coveted holy month primetime that makes fortunes and reputations. Syrian producers argue that a lack of state regulation or protection exposes them to the caprice of Gulf business practice. While Egypt's foreign ministry promotes packages of Egyptian series to Gulf networks, the Syrian state has left its drama producers to fend for themselves in a competitive market. As Syrian screenwriter Najib Nusair puts it, "We have become like

vegetable peddlers, selling series from sacks on our backs as if they were potatoes.” Some Syrian argue that the term “industry,” *sina‘a*, is a misnomer; drama production is merely an “activity” that has little infrastructure and could vanish at the slightest downturn. Nusair points to the black garbage bags Syrian producers use to distribute funding as a symbol of this precariousness:

They take a garbage bag, put money in it, and distribute it to the scenarist, the actors, equipment rental, and that’s it; nothing else. ...Bank notes come in a black bag and get distributed... The infrastructure we have amounts to a camera and editing machine.....And the filming locations, these are real sites they rent from the black bag, natural places: cafes, houses, hospitals... it’s built on relations not of industry, but of simple commerce. There are no advertising companies interfering, it’s a sector on its own, separate. The production companies are just investments: you buy *musalsal-s* the same way you buy Nescafe...this year there were thirty eight Syrian series; next year there might be zero. So there is nothing you could call an infrastructure, nothing. There’s the garbage bag, what we call the black bag, what they put money in, and make drama (personal communication, July 19, 2006).

Programming decisions appear equally haphazard. In addition to avoiding the Syrian state censors’ ever shifting red lines, drama creators must please buyers in the religiously and socially conservative GCC states. They complain of a “social censorship” harsher than the most draconian strictures of former Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad’s era. In the absence of reliable ratings or audience research, it is Gulf station owners and managers, often expatriate Arabs, who decide what is aired. Complaints about privatization reflect inter-Arab, and urban-rural tensions. Artists in many cultural contexts bemoan commercialism, and laments over popular taste and ratings exigencies abound. Yet Syrian television creators view the enemies of art not as a generalized national audience, or even amorphous “market forces,” but as a specific group of

wealthy, parochial and over-privileged foreigners who are and out of touch with what Arab audiences need, if not what they want. Industry figures point to a-worst-of both-worlds situation, as economic liberalization without democratization leaves them vulnerable to both Syrian censors and Gulf buyers.

For Syria's cultural producers, the drama stakes are high. The field encompasses much of the country's intellectual and artistic community. Industry figures note that when political parties were banned in the 1960s, activists became writers and journalists, but continual restrictions on press freedom and new employment opportunities have rendered them TV makers. Many of the country's leading directors, writers, actors, visual artists and photographers use television work to supplement meager incomes from more "serious" endeavors. Yet they understand the global reach and social significance of the *musalsal*. Syrian intellectual and activist drama creators believe in the power of their mass medium to transform Arab society, and often see themselves at the vanguard of a modernizing process. They seek to shed light on issues difficult to broach in non-fiction media, hoping to spark discussion and, ultimately, social and political transformation. But as they are keenly aware, they operate in commercial conditions not of their own choosing. Paradoxically, economic liberalization and globalization converge to increase production and expand audiences, but threaten to constrain social critique and derail reformist impulses. More social drama is produced, and aired to wider audiences, than ever before in Syrian TV history. Yet as viewer choice widens, social and political impact narrows. As they cope with the vagaries of conservative GCC buyers, drama creators reflect on what they feel they have lost. Resentments brew against the markets that seem to block progress. As a pioneer TV director, himself a European-educated urbanite, 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.

This urban civilization, past and present, inspires drama creator to both accommodate and challenge the neoliberal moment. With GCC domination of the pan-Arab market folkloric evocations of Old Damascus like *Bab al-Hara* attract large scale funding, and substantial media hype. Yet Syrians also continue produce contemporary urban dramas addressing “our problems,” as Arab viewers put it. These programs find loyal audiences and critical acclaim in Syria and beyond. They reflect an enduring secular, socialist tradition in an age of commercial nostalgia.

Many Syrian television makers still cling to Arab socialist ideals. Social dramas often take the state to task—usually gingerly, sometimes openly—for not living up to its social welfare rhetoric. In Syrian *musalsal-s* aired during my fieldwork period, Ramadan 2006, urban marginality—both social and physical—formed a significant theme. One series, *Echo of the Soul (Sada al-Ruh)*, portrayed patients in a humanistic experimental psychiatric facility. The protagonist, a young doctor returning from a residency in Great Britain, transfers patients to a hillside mansion overlooking the city, where the life stories he uncovers reflect the social and political traumas of recent Arab history. Another, the *Open Courtyard (Fusha Samawiyya)*, shed sympathetic light on another group of outcasts: single adults. Divorced women, struggling artists, impoverished bachelors build an unlikely family in their shared Old Damascus house. The series attacks Syria’s Ottoman-derived, Islam inspired personal status law, which grants fathers custody of boys from the age of nine and girls from eleven. Both series show complex, endearing characters facing—and more rarely overcoming—social and economic hardship.

Other works depicted the degrading conditions of the informal settlement, a pet cause for reform-minded scriptwriters. Damascus is largely absent from the scholarly literature on shantytowns, and is rarely invoked in discussions of urban poverty. Yet the United Nations estimates 40% of Damascus dwellers, and over one third of the total urban population in the Arab world—57 million people—live in informal settlements, “haphazard neighborhoods” (*al-harat al-‘ashwa’iyya*) as they are referred to in Arabic (UNEP 2006: 32). Also called *mukhalafat*—literally: violations—these unregulated, often illegal settlements share the afflictions of (sub)urban poverty in much of the Global South: deficient infrastructure, crowding, hazardous construction, inadequate services, unemployment and crime. Like informal districts elsewhere, they house recent migrants

from the countryside, a phenomenon signaled in drama through rural dialects, clothing, and the drinking of mate, a practice brought by emigrants returning from late Ottoman-era sojourns in Latin America. For many, these settlements that “encircle Damascus like a bracelet,” as one screenwriter put it, have become not a first stop to urban integration, but barriers to upward, or inward, mobility. Drama makers depict haphazard neighborhoods as sites of crime and cultural dissolution, in contrast to the traditional or popular quarters (*harat sha‘abiyya*) that they associate with high moral values and contiguous social relations. They are shown not as enduring tradition, but as a product of state corruption and neglect.

Syrian drama confronts audiences with the consequences of neoliberal policies in stark social realism. On-location filming distinguishes the Syrian industry from its studio-based Egyptian counterpart; series set in poor neighborhoods require months of filming in narrow, crumbling alleyways and tiny dilapidated houses. These works bring drama makers and their audiences into intimate contact with what are, for most middle class Syrians dangerous nether regions on the margins of consciousness. In Rasha Shartbaji’s *Gazelles in a Forest of Wolves* (*Ghazlan fi Ghabat al-Dha‘ab*), the cottage industries of a marginal economy prove as haphazard and precarious as the settlement itself.

The alienating poverty of the informal district lures power and corruption, in the form of a prime minister’s delinquent son, to a feeding frenzy on the innocent and vulnerable. Behind the smoky windows of his silver Mercedes, son-of-the-regime Samir prowls the settlement, finding easy prey among youth seeking a way out of deprecation and social stigma. These struggling university students face an unpromising future; and a powerful patron seems to offer a leg up. Yet like the political system itself, Samir takes without giving: in the end, his lackeys get no more than a broken hairdryer in return for their pandering.

The second series depicting (sub)urban poverty, *Waiting* (*al-Intizar*), forms the focal point of my ethnographic fieldwork. The script’s co-authors, journalist Najib Nusair and novelist Hassan Sami Yusuf are Syria’s highest paid screenwriters, with a reputation for artistic “depth” (*‘umq*). Directed by Laith Hajjo, best known for his biting satirical comedy sketch series *Spotlight* (*Buq‘at Daw’*), *Waiting* revolves around a Robin Hood figure and a low-level journalist. Both are sons of the haphazard *hara*,

neighborhood, in which most of the action takes place. Episode one begins with a pulsating set of establishing images taking viewers from the heart of middle class downtown Damascus, through increasingly downscale areas, and finally out to the dilapidated suburb of Dweila'a. Here 'Abbud, a foundling whose house the camera never visits, robs clothing from boutiques in the city's wealthy districts and distributes it among his neighbors in the dead of night. Two orphaned brothers eke out a living polishing middle class floors; one leaves to make his fortune in Dubai, but returns with little more than cosmopolitan pretensions and curry recipes. Their next door neighbors, the four beautiful daughters of vegetable seller Abu Asad, try different paths out of Dweila'a, but marriage, prostitution and affairs with wealthy married men all backfire. Journalist Wa'il remains loyal to the low-paying state newspaper; his wife Samira urges him to try al-Jazeera. His socialist ethos appears delusional. Given results of kleptocratic Ba'thist rule, and the harsh realities of economic liberalism, most *Waiting* characters, like so many urban Syrians, turn to the informal economy, as public sector employment shrinks, and private sector jobs require connections. Wa'il waxes romantic about the neighborhood's goodness and humanity; Samira rails against its dirt and danger, a position the series producers share, and underscore in the series' dramatic turning point. While playing soccer in the neighborhood's only available clearing—a rubble-strewn lot at the edge of a busy highway—the couple's youngest son is struck by a minivan and blinded.

The series' central concept is a myth of departure—most characters are waiting to move on from a neighborhood, and a state of being, they perceive as a mere way station to a better life; most, it is implied, will never leave. This frustrating limbo symbolizes what *Waiting's* creators see as the Arab condition. Self-improvement through education, the solution Arab drama of an earlier generation once offered, has lost credibility after decades of expanded university access has failed to stem growing levels of underemployment (Abu-Lughod 2005a. 2005b.). Bearing witness to abuse and suffering, and taking the system to task, becomes a dramatic preferred strategy. Cynical Syrian intellectuals speculate, in hushed tones over coffee, that the “powers that be,” (*al-sulta*) permit, even commission, such depictions to appear liberal, and at the same time remind viewers that resistance is futile (cooke 2007).

Drama creators certainly do not perceive themselves as state mouthpieces. But they concede that all they can do is expose problems, suggest causes and provoke discussion. Rather than pointing to tradition or illiteracy, *Gazelles* and *Waiting* blame structural inequality, and the ruling elite that perpetuates it, for social and economic ills. The recourse to “illegality” among the weak is used to underscore the state violence of the powerful. Power is exposed, resisted, but not overcome, in drama, as in daily life. In *Gazelles* the villainous son, thought to have been murdered by a young woman he harasses, secretly survives, recovers abroad, and returns to Syria and his dastardly ways. In *Waiting*, engagements are broken and marriages fail, a drug addict falls off the wagon, and ‘Abbud is murdered by a rival. Happy endings, it seems, are difficult for satellite era drama creators to envision.

Depictions of quotidian struggles in poor urban areas contrast ever more sharply with the heroic and the folkloric offerings crowding the Ramadan airways. Neither *Gazelles* nor *Waiting* won a coveted Ramadan time slot on any of the Gulf stations. Both appeared on Syria’ state satellite station, and *Gazelles* was aired on the country’s first private station, *Sham*. Both garnered an enthusiastic local following, and post Ramadan rebroadcasts on stations such as MBC and Infinity met with positive reviews. Their 2006 Ramadan competition included MBC’s celebratory biopic of Khalid bin al-Walid, a hero of the Islamic conquests, and part one of *Bab al-Hara*. Here the broadcast flow undermines authorial intent. The juxtaposition of *Gazelle’s* corruption, and *Waiting’s* quiet desperation, with the splendor of Islamic empire and the nobility of anticolonial struggle appears to buttress the Islamist cause, one anathema to Syria’s largely secular TV makers. Contemporary urban stories do not paint pretty pictures. Collectively, Syrian drama contrasts a degraded present with a magnificent past, and suggests a return to tradition as the solution to modern problems.

TV makers are aware of this contradiction, but feel all they can do is strive to maintain artistic integrity in the precarious, haphazard world that is pan-Arab satellite broadcasting. Social drama creators aim promote social and political transformation, but they must do so through the very institutions and structures they seek to reform. Series like *Waiting* and *Gazelles* are subject to levels of censorship from governments and television stations. Each Ramadan creators and broadcasters push the limits; states,

Islamists and others attempt, with varying degrees of success, to rein them in. Critical treatments of society and politics surface through layers of interference. They join a cacophony, a swollen televisual flow that threatens to drown them out. Nevertheless social drama creators continue to use the informal settlements of Damascus to critique the contemporary moment, most recently in last Ramadan's *City Dregs (Qa'al-Madina)* and *Summer Cloud (Sahabat al-Saif)*, which dealt with the plight of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees, and social problems such as child sexual abuse and cybercrime.

Drama makers take up the conditions of neoliberalism, in which they believe collective welfare gives way to individual ambition, and the disrupted social relations and frustrated ambitions of the haphazard neighborhood become ubiquitous. Screenwriter Najeeb Nusair, blames not just the regime, but a set of values drawn from a global marketplace of ideas. He argues:

Today, society is like any piece of cake, if everyone takes a bite, eventually that's it, it all goes, is lost. Meaning individual redemption destroys society more than crime, and other things that are illegal. Individual redemption in society is like someone taking his piece from the society, and then letting the rest burn. *Insha'allah* it will burn, it's nothing to us (personal communication, July 19, 2006).

Drama can go where non-fictional media cannot. And it often goes to Damascus. On the small screen, the city bears the burden of myriad hopes and fears. It embodies the glories of the past, and the failures of the present. In folkloric works it evokes an idyllic social cohesion; in historical realism, the bitter weight of tradition. In social drama, Damascus evokes the frustrations of everyday experience, and serves as a metaphor for the contemporary condition. The waning of socialism, the rise of Islamism and the unconvincing promise of political participation produce a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty that media makers share with the wider Arab world. The tensions these forces engender emerge in the discourses of industry professionals, in the dramas they produce, in the media debates surrounding them, and in their reception by a global Arab

audience. Here television drama provides a valuable point of access not only into the politics of Arab cultural production, but also into the wider complexities and contradictions of Middle Eastern modernity.

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