Time, Space and Subaltern Phenomenology in the Documentary Film Essay *Taste of Cement*

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Abstract

This article analyses how the film essay *Taste of Cement* by Ziad Kalthoum portrays Syrian construction labourers in Lebanon. It shows that the film's evocation of sensory experience makes two important contributions to the way we conceive of cities in general, and of post-civil war Beirut in particular. First, *Taste of Cement* succeeds in representing the workers as subaltern subjects without participating in their erasure. Second, the film presents a view that I call "oscillating urbanism," thus challenging conventional narratives of (post-)conflict cities.

Beirut, 45 years after the civil war has ended, is dotted with cranes constructing ever more luxury high-rises in a prolonged real estate boom that continues to unfold despite major economic crises. Meanwhile, Aleppo is recovering from a more recent war under the pretence of a return to Assadist 'normalcy.' This article analyses how the documentary film essay *Taste of Cement* (2017), directed by the Syrian filmmaker Ziad Kalthoum, takes the perspective of Syrian construction site workers in Beirut to poetically weave together the fate of Aleppo and Beirut, which are separated by less than three hundred kilometres. The main part of the film was shot on the construction site of a high-rise tower in Beirut. It portrays Syrian labourers working on the building during the day and spending their nights between the concrete walls of an underground pit. The narrator of the film relates his memories of Syria to the present situation at the construction site in Beirut. The scenes depicting the labourers' work and leisure on the construction site are interspersed with footage from war-torn Syria, as well as lingering drone and submarine footage from Beirut.

Conventional and neoliberal narratives of urban progress and regeneration, from policy documents to real estate advertisements, tend to erase the presence of migrant labourers (Sassen 174; Rose et al.). They are subaltern, in Gayatri Spivak's sense of the term, because they have been robbed of their voice to represent themselves. This paper argues that the perspective of the workers presented in *Taste of Cement* challenges conventional notions of teleological temporality and spatial separability underlying such "urban imaginaries" (Huyssen). Focusing on the film's evocation of sensory experience, this article draws on Sara Ahmed's work on phenomenology to make two interrelated arguments. First, I argue that the film succeeds in representing the community of Syrian refugee labourers in Beirut, which is usually silenced and hidden from view. Foregrounding touch and smell, the film presents the labourers, whose voices have been silenced and whose bodies have been exploited, as subjects with agency. Second, I contend that the urban imaginary emerging from their subaltern perspective challenges conventional conceptions of space and time framing our understanding of

post-war reconstruction. The movie weaves together the war-torn city of Aleppo and the post-war city of Beirut in an oscillating time-space.

Documenting Syrian Workers

Ziad Kalthoum was born in Homs in 1981 and graduated after studying film in Russia. In 2009, he debuted with a short film on Kurdish women who have chosen to live in a society without men in Northern Syria (*Oh My Heart!*), which was immediately banned after its release in Syria (Wessels 126). Kalthoum proceeded as an assistant director for various film projects including Mohammad Malas's *Ladder to Damascus* (2013). He was conscripted into military service, and when the Arab Spring reached Syria in 2011, he was working in the state national archive of propaganda film during the day and shooting on the set of *Ladder to Damascus* in the evening. The uprising erupted around them, and the government responded with lethal force. Kalthoum made intimate recordings of this twisted experience with his cell phone camera and edited the footage into his first feature length documentary *The Immortal Sergeant* (2012). At the end of this film, Kalthoum announced his defection from the army. After his defection, and before moving on to Berlin, he fled to Beirut. Having escaped the noise of war, Kalthoum arrived in Beirut only to be surrounded by the noise of construction. This experience of sonic continuity formed one of the departure points for *Taste of Cement* (Kalthoum).

Taste of Cement makes a statement against the exploitation of labourers by global capitalism in general, and of Syrian workers by Lebanese industrialists in particular. Kalthoum clarifies that

> it is a big mistake of the Lebanese that after the terrible experience of their civil war they decided to use these people as slaves for their reconstruction projects. […] Despite the short time I spent on the site, I felt that, if I were to be in their place, one day I would take a hammer and destroy everything I had built. (Kalthoum)

But Ziad Kalthoum *is* not in their place. While the director, like the men shown in the movie, was a Syrian refugee in Beirut at the time of the shooting, his cultural capital and professional network provided him with the skills, know-how, funding, crew and distribution channels needed for his film, which are clearly unavailable to the portrayed workers. This section reflects on the politics of representation at stake here, before analysing the film's evocation of sensory experience to mitigate these politics and to present an alternative perspective on urban reconstruction.

Like other migrant workers, Syrian labourers in Lebanon are racialized based on physical appearance, clothing style and language use; but their position differs considerably from that of other migrant workers. First of all, the geographical proximity, and shared language and culture makes the Syrian workers less isolated than those with more distant home countries. Most Syrians in Lebanon are embedded in social networks that extend across the Syria-Lebanon border (Monroe 86). Secondly, the two countries have a history of economic interdependence in which the Lebanese relied on significant labour reserves from Syria, while the poor Syrian hinterland was dependent on the remittances of their seasonal labourers abroad (Chalcraft 90).

The countries thus have relatively closely knit social and economic ties, but Lebanon's political relation to Syria has been a source of tension and conflict since its independence in 1943. While some consider Lebanon's state borders a colonial legacy which divided pan-Arab or pan-Syrian unity in the region, others have fought dearly against Syrian infringement of Lebanese sovereignty. Anti-Syrian sentiments of such political nature have been directed towards Syrian citizens working in Lebanon. Moreover, this geopolitical history has been translated into decidedly pro- and anti-Assad positions marking Lebanon's current political divisions, which are largely interpreted as running along sectarian lines. In addition to anti-Syrian sentiments, Syrians' presumed sectarian background has been additional cause for suspicion and sometimes abuse. Against this history of labour migration and political tensions, large numbers of Syrians have escaped war violence starting in 2011. Since Lebanon had no formal response to the refugee crisis until

2015, many refugees simply joined earlier labour migrants but under much more precarious conditions (Diongi; Proudfoot).

Understandably, the Syrian workers portrayed in *Taste of Cement* were unwilling to talk in front of the camera. Speaking out about their labour conditions could lead to immediate repercussions by their employers, and they refused to express their political subjectivity for fear of exposure to the Assad regime (Kalthoum). The difficulty of accessing and representing this demographic group also appears from the unusual shooting schedule. It took the film crew over six months to acquire permission to shoot on the construction site, and then only under the pretext of glorifying the building project. After this lengthy preparatory phase, the crew was allowed fifteen days of shooting on-site but prohibited from entering the underground pit where the workers sleep. Eventually, they managed to clandestinely shoot for five nights in the underground rooms, recording the private spaces and leisure activities of the workers before the proprietor found out and refused them further entry to the premises.[1] While the director and crew used the fifteen days to listen to the stories of the workers, this was not nearly enough to establish rapport and collect sufficient material for a conventional documentary with talking heads or dialogues (Kalthoum).

The film instead shows the labourers exiting the underground pit every morning, ascending with the elevator to pour concrete, carry bags and manage loads from the crane, then descending into the underground pit in the evening, where they eat together, do their laundry and follow the news on their smartphones, before they go to sleep on a mattress on the concrete floor. Early in the film, we see a banner prohibiting Syrian workers from entering the street after work, indicating that their entire lives unfold at the construction site. The static frames alternate scenes of work with close ups of the workers' skin, their eyes or hands (Image. 1-2). Zooming in on the texture of their skin, showing the pores, the lines and little hairs, the close-ups suggest that we can touch these men, thus contrasting a sense of intimacy with the alienation of the working rhythm. Not a single time do we hear the workers speak,

[1] The author points out the practical limitations and power relations at stake in filming Syrian refugee-workers, leaving it to the reader to navigate this ethical conundrum.

not even inaudibly with one another. Apart from the practical reasons laid out above, Kalthoum opted for this silence so as to "show the perspective of the system" (Kalthoum).

This 'voicelessness' in *Taste of Cement* has been interpreted by some Lebanese critics as a sign of the inaptitude of human language to document the "cultural devastation" that is post-revolutionary Syria (Lear qtd. in Frangieh). This article, in contrast, understands the Syrian workers portrayed by the film as subalterns that "cannot speak," in Gayatri Spivak's words. It seeks to draw attention to the very real political and socioeconomic repression that prevents these workers from voicing their position and interest, without denying the devastating effects of the Syrian catastrophe on language and representation. In discussing the role of the intellectual in mediating the voiceless subaltern, Spivak distinguishes between two forms of representation. The German *vertreten* has a stronger connotation of substitution and is used for political representation, whereas *darstellen* refers to representation in the sense of figuratively presenting reality in text or image. While the two meanings of the English 'representation' overlap, they cannot be collapsed into one (Spivak 275-279). Rather than speaking in the name of Syrian workers (*vertreten*), Kalthoum underlines that they have been silenced. The film represents them in the sense of *darstellen* by confronting the gaze of (mostly) European viewers with images of labouring bodies that are usually hidden from public view.

A film that depicts the exploitation of migrant workers without making their voices heard risks making a spectacle of their suffering. The impressive cinematography by Talal Khoury, offering breath-taking views of the construction site against a Mediterranean sunset, potentially aestheticizes the scenes of labour exploitation. However, the aesthetic power of *Taste of Cement* is not only produced by stunning cinematography but also by the narrative thread and creative editing of the film. In particular, as will be argued in the following section, the film's evocation of sensory experience in image and text allows for the workers' agency to emerge despite their voicelessness.

Image 1. Ziad Kalthoum. Film still (2013) of the pit that serves as entrance to the construction site.

Image 2. Ziad Kalthoum. Film still (2013) of the view of the construction site reflected in the eye of a worker.

Subaltern Phenomenology

Taste of Cement uses cinematic visuals and narratives to foreground other senses, mainly touch and smell. Between the lingering drone views of the landscape and the static frames in which we watch repetitive labour unfold, we are presented with extreme close-ups, such as the grinded texture of liquid cement, the rough skin of a hand and the tiny hairs on a cheek. The textures shift the representational mode from a gaze that distances subject and object to a visceral experience that evokes a sense of touch.

The close-ups also draw attention to how the labourers sense their surroundings, zooming in on hands that touch and eyes that watch, inviting us to identify with the workers, not only as objects of exploitation but also as subjects with sensing bodies. In one scene, we see how footage of bombing from Syria, screened on smartphones, reflects in the eyes of the workers in Beirut. The fluttering lashes, the eyelids lubricating the eyeballs and the quickly moving iris present the gaze as an embodied relation to the world (Fig. 2). Rather than objectifying images of war or inhumane labour conditions, *Taste of Cement* posits the labourer in this scene as an embodied subject, enmeshed in and responsive to the world of objects around him.

The evocation of sensory experience ties together the narrative voice-over, the scenes on the construction site and the footage from war-torn Syria. The semi-fictional first person voiceover recounts a childhood memory in Aleppo in which the narrator returns home from school and recognizes the smell of concrete, which means his father is on a return visit from his construction job in Beirut. The smell of concrete from the childhood memory returns in a more recent memory. The narrator was buried under concrete when his home in Aleppo was hit by a shell, the dust of cement filling nostrils, hair, eyes and mouth—hence the title of the film, *Taste of Cement*. The body both touches and smells the object, and this suggests an intimate relation between subject and object, the latter entering one of the body's crevices, blurring the boundary between self and surroundings. Finally, the voiceover expresses continuity with his current situation as a worker. Although he managed to escape from war in Syria, he is still buried in a pit of

concrete with no escape. The smell of concrete thus weaves together the childhood memory of the returning father, the bombing of the house the father had constructed in Aleppo with money earned in construction in Beirut, and the son who now works on the construction site in Beirut as a refugee. Likewise, the close-ups of the labourers' hands return in the childhood memory narrated through voiceover, when the boy touches the "rough and cracked" hand of his father, worn out by his work abroad, reading the lines as roads on a map of Beirut.

I contend that this sensory approach offers one way of mitigating the politics of representing the voiceless. This entails moving beyond a narrow rational notion of political representation to include an embodied understanding of subjectivity. Feminist critique has addressed the false divide between mind and body underlying the Cartesian notion of subjectivity that has long dominated knowledge production and served to privilege white male subjectivity. Within urban studies and attendant fields, such as geography, this critique has led to an array of studies into the ways in which bodies are racialized and gendered, and the ways in which space has been organized accordingly (Longhurst; Rose). The racial segregation of public and private space on and off the construction site does something similar. By focusing on sensory experience, the film moreover shows that bodies are not only passive objects to be restricted and exploited, but also the very vehicles through which subjects perceive and know reality.

Sara Ahmed, drawing on the philosophy of Husserl, has shown us how phenomenology can offer an alternative conception of subjectivity, one that is embodied and enmeshed in a world of objects. Rather than asking how subjects are silenced and oppression is inscribed upon their passive bodies, such an approach pushes us to ask "how [bodies] 'take up' space, and what they 'can do'" ("Phenomenology" 149). This includes investigating the ways in which subjects "tend to" and "orient towards" certain objects, because "[the body] extends itself (through objects) in order to act on and in the world" (*Queer* 139). Ahmed links diverse issues such as social cohesion, political alliance, epistemology and sexual desire to questions of how the body inhabits (social) space, its

direction towards—and alignment with—objects and others and how these may expand or delimit our scope of attention.

One way of responding to Spivak's question of voicelessness would be to expand our understanding of agency beyond the realm of signification. While 'voice' is a term that is associated with oral communication, including rhythm and timbre, Spivak's concern with exclusion and erasure is restricted to the realm of political deliberation and cultural representation. And yet, complementing 'voice' with other embodied forms of presence does not compensate the political and socio-economic exclusion discussed by Spivak. Indeed, Ahmed points out how European phenomenology takes for granted a body that is in place, that feels at home and is allowed and enabled to act on and in the world. A subaltern phenomenology should therefore also explore states of disorientation, and the ways in which sensing and desiring bodies are stopped, which means "not only not being extended by the contours of the world, but being diminished as an effect of the bodily extensions of others" (*Queer* 139).

Although "building is in principle a positive act" (Kalthoum), the productivity of the skilled and abled bodies shown in *Taste of Cement* is exploited for profit by others, while their mobility is radically restricted. These precarious conditions negate the progressive logic of construction. The static framing and repetitive editing of labour scenes emphasize the stifling routine of the workers who are locked in on the construction site. Central to representing this spatial and temporal restriction is the recurrent frame of the pit in the concrete ground floor, through which the workers enter the construction site in the mornings from their semi-private underground spaces, and through which they exit in the evenings (Fig. 1).

After work, we see scenes of care in this basement—laundry, shaving, eating and sleeping. Apart from exposing the poor living conditions, these scenes also foreground the body as dependent on care and sustenance. The scenes of 'leisure' time are, however, dominated by watching news broadcasts and YouTube videos of the destruction in Syria. These same bodies tend to their smartphone screens, oriented longingly towards their home country, and registering the unfolding

of its destruction. In Ahmed's terms, their bodies extend in the world through objects—the razor, the gas burner, the cell phone—to attend to the needs of self and others.

In conclusion, with the evocation of sensory experience, *Taste of Cement* succeeds in addressing the systematic silencing and diminishing of the workers' bodies without reducing them to voiceless objects. The workers emerge as sensing and desiring subjects even if inhibited to act upon their desires. It is through sensory experience, too, that spectators are invited to identify with the depicted labourers. The following section explores what sort of knowledge comes into view through this subaltern perspective, and what urban narrative is produced. A phenomenological approach to the destruction and construction of Aleppo and Beirut, from the perspective of Syrian refugee labourers, challenges more conventional narratives about conflict and post-conflict cities.

Oscillating Urbanism

Taste of Cement not only tells a story of Syrian workers, but also a tale of two cities: Beirut and Aleppo. The phenomenological approach of the film advances a particular spatio-temporality that challenges the spatial separation between here and there—Beirut and Aleppo—as well as the temporal one between then and now—war and post-war. Instead, we are presented with senses of contiguity, oscillation and looping, weaving Aleppo and Beirut, war and reconstruction together into one continuum. This reimagines narratives of urban construction and destruction, which conventionally presuppose neat phases of urban progress and downfall. It also challenges unidirectional imaginaries of migration and displacement that feature a linear narrative out of suffering into a new life.

As was mentioned above, the smell, taste and touch of cement tie together the childhood home in Aleppo, the migrant experience of the narrator's father, the bombing of the family house and the labour on the construction site. Footage from Aleppo shows a rescue operation in a bombed-out building. A victim is carefully carved out from the rubble, surrounded by the dust of cement and the drilling sound of construction sites. The continuity between urban destruction and construction is thus

suggested by the recurrent motif of cement—liquid, solid, crumbling and dusty. Another instance of contiguity in materiality and texture concerns steel. One striking scene depicting a giant metal crane in Beirut, which rotates to move its cargo, is cut with footage from a giant metal canon turning on top of a tank in Aleppo. Carefully cropped and edited, they neatly come full circle together; the machine of construction and the machine of destruction, each surrounded by the shells of concrete buildings.

The relation drawn between the two cities is not metaphorical—Beirut is *like* Aleppo—but metonymical. With the evocation of materiality and sensory experience, the two cities do not so much mirror, but rather 'touch' each other across time and space. This sensorial connection between the two cities is embedded within a pattern of spatio-temporal oscillation, shaped by a narrative and cinematography of loops and reversals. The circular camera movement of the crane and the tank comes back in footage shot from a drone circling the tower in Beirut, as well as in footage shot from a camera attached to a cement mill on the back of a truck driving through Beirut. The latter shows the world spinning around, dizzying the spectator ad nauseum. It expresses the film's overall sense of being stuck in a loop. The narrator of *Taste of Cement* explains: "When your palm corrodes, you stop counting the days. Time stops. You don't remember the first time you climbed out of that pit anymore." Elsewhere, I have argued that the experience of post-civil war Beirut is characterized by a suspended now, "a stretched out present, […] *suspended* between a past and future that remain out of reach" (*Precarious* 36, emphasis original). While this temporality is clearly informed by the weight of a violent past, I argued that it is also produced by continuing precarious conditions that prevent any confident anticipation of the future.[2] Sociologist Isabell Lorey, too, argues that "to live under precarious conditions today means that there is no continuity of time at all anymore. […] It is no more only a precarity of work time, but of time as a whole" (Puar 173). Such a dissolution of time has profound implications for spatial relations too.

[2] The revolutionary episode that started in Lebanon in October 2019 and continues to unfold at the time of writing clearly ushered in new dispositions towards the future, despite the increased precarity due the economic crisis.

For example, the representation of the repetitive loop of working life on the site focuses on the morning climb and evening descension of the labourers on the stairs to the basement. The construction elevator, too, is moving up and down the concrete floors. These movements are shot from above and below, in addition to shots of their reflection in a pool of rainwater (Fig. 1). The upward movement of the elevator, or the morning ascension of the workers, appears in the reflection as a movement from the top to the bottom of our screen. The narrator comments: "I thought our life was split in two. Twelve hours the city above us. And twelve hours us above the city. But then I realized, Beirut is above us 24 hours. Even when standing at the highest point of the building." The distinction between up- and downward is blurred, giving way to an oscillating movement without direction.

Such spatial indeterminacy moves beyond the representation of monotony. The tall building is one of the most powerful symbols of progress, "measure, parameter, or apotheosis of our consumer and corporate culture" (Huxtable). Its construction holds the promise of modernity, while its destruction signifies a Babylonian fall (Naeff, "Toren"). To undo the distinction between the top floor and the basement, between construction and destruction, is therefore to challenge two conventional urban tropes: the cyclical narrative of the rise and fall of empires, and the progressive narrative of urban modernity. *Taste of Cement* presents us instead with a narrative which collapses rising and falling buildings into one continuum of prolonged subjugation. This continuity on behalf of the Syrian worker is spelled out by the narrator: "I ran away. Into the void. Suddenly, I found myself buried in another hole. They told me: 'No bombing. No shelling here!' But still cement surrounds me. I can't escape."

The replacement of a discourse that juxtaposes construction and destruction with one that presents an oscillating urbanism affects the migratory relation between Beirut and Aleppo. Taking a phenomenological approach, the migrant subject orients towards the new destination, where they experience disorientation before aligning with other subjects and objects, longingly looking back to the home left behind. This is grounded in sensory experience. Ahmed, in reading a

migrant experience narrated through skin sensations, concludes that the migrant experience involves "the animating of the relation between the body and the space which it inhabits and is inhabited by" (*Strange* 92). In *Taste of Cement*, too, the imprints and traces that are carried from Beirut to Aleppo are remembered in sensory terms. The boy touches the lines in his father's hand, smells the concrete in the house.

This story of migration is narrated from the perspective of the family at home eagerly awaiting the father's return visit. The focus on the return visit destabilizes the *direction* of conventional tropes of migration. The narrator's position at home moreover reverses the *perspective* of such tropes. *Taste of Cement* therefore draws our attention to the reciprocity of the subject's relation with objects, spaces and others, showing how the migrant's journey profoundly affects the others and objects left behind. Additionally, the unidirectional journey of the migrant and his struggle to make a new life abroad is replaced by a story of oscillation, the back-and-forth spatio-temporality of short-distance migration and seasonal labour. The father brought Beirut into his home in Aleppo, and the son brings this memory back to Beirut, where his hands are lined, "rough and cracked" too. Again, progressive time and spatial separability are challenged by a pattern of oscillation that is marked by temporal repetition and spatial indeterminacy.

Conclusion

Representing Syrian workers in Lebanon, whose position can be considered subaltern, is a treacherous political terrain. Not only do they not have access to the means to speak for themselves, the catastrophic collapse of Syrian society also makes them at a loss for words in the face of cultural devastation. This article has analysed how *Taste of Cement* relies on a phenomenological approach, showing the workers as embodied subjects enmeshed in the world, tending to self and others. Their orientation towards objects and others within the radically restricted space of the construction site presents them as sensing and desiring subjects. In the face of the ongoing devastation and suffering in Syria, and with real estate investors eagerly awaiting the profitable reconstruction of the

country, such an approach articulates a much-needed critique of the exploitation and silencing of workers without participating in their erasure.

The urban narrative that emerges from this subaltern phenomenological approach could be characterized as "oscillating urbanism." My analysis of *Taste of Cement* points towards temporal repetitions and spatial reversals. These loops blur the distinction between above and below, as well as that between here and there. Challenging conventional tropes of the rise and fall of cities and modern urban progress, oscillating urbanism presents us with a bleak conception of urbanity as life stuck in a cement mill. Its violent rotation blurs distinctions between destruction and construction and between Beirut and Aleppo, collapsing them into one noisy cloud of dust that clutters the nostrils and roughens the skin.

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Biography

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