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Walid Raad: The Art of Fiction in a Post-Truth World *Walid Raad: Hakikat Sonrası Dünyada Kurgunun Sanatı*

Abstract

Recent years have seen an upsurge of fictional strategies in contemporary art. Generally referred to as parafiction, these artworks offer a construction of imaginary persons and events that function, and are perceived as real-life entities. As one of its foremost representatives in contemporary art, the Lebanese artist Walid Raad has long turned to fictional strategies in order to question the epistemological instability of various media in the construction of knowledge. Drawing particular attention to the discursive frameworks in which “objective” media participate, the aim of his art is not to deconstruct, but to localize truth. Deliberately blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, I argue in this paper that Raad’s art mirrors the aesthetic and epistemological structure of the post-truth era. At the same time, I offer a consideration of the epistemological role of fiction in his work and explore the political importance of parafiction in a post-truth world.

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Öz

Son yıllarda çağdaş sanatta kurgusal stratejilerde bir artış görülmektedir. Genellikle “parafiction” olarak adlandırılan bu sanat eserleri, gerçek hayattaki varlıklar olarak algılanan ve işlev gören hayali kişiler ve olaylardan oluşan bir kurgu sunar. Çağdaş sanatın önde gelen temsilcilerinden biri olan Lübnanlı sanatçı Walid Raad, bilginin inşasında çeşitli medyaların epistemolojik istikrarsızlığını sorgulamak için uzun süredir kurgusal stratejilere yönelmektedir. “Tarafsız” medyanın katıldığı söylemsel çerçevelere özellikle dikkat çeken sanatının amacı, hakikati yapıbozuma uğratmak değil, yerelleştirmektir. Bu makalede, gerçek ile kurgu arasındaki ayrımı bilinçli olarak bulanıklaştırarak, Raad’ın sanatının hakikat sonrası dönemin estetik ve epistemolojik yapısını yansıttığını savunuyorum. Aynı zamanda, onun çalışmasında kurgunun epistemolojik rolünün bir değerlendirmesini sunuyor ve gerçek-sonrası bir dünyada parafiction’ın politik önemini araştırıyorum.

Keywords

Post-Truth, parafiction, fiction, contemporary art, Walid Raad

Anahtar kelimeler

Hakikat sonrası, parafiction, kurgu, çağdaş sanat, Walid Raad

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“The primacy of facts must be questioned.”

- Walid Raad -

Introduction

I

Two years ago, in the midst of the pandemic, the Palestinian writer and journalist Ibtisam Azem (2020) published a short article in which she drew attention to the harsh reality that many Palestinians were facing during the Corona crisis. The problem that she pointed to was not so much the disease itself, but rather the way in which the Israeli government used the pandemic as an excuse to enhance political, social and security control while intensifying its violence toward the Palestinian people. To support her account, Azem’s article was accompanied by a series of untitled artworks from the Palestinian artist Suha Traboulsi. Although dating from 1999, these artworks were to offer an apt illustration of the violence, suppression, and humiliation that many Palestinians faced with increased frequency during the pandemic. As a collage of interconnected words, passages, and photos taken from newspapers, each of the artworks resembled a brief news report in which the detached tone of the language was sharply contrasted with personal drama portrayed in the pictures.¹

Complicating the distinction between artwork and journalism, the political and emotional appeal of Traboulsi’s collages depends at least in part on her identity as a Palestinian woman. Consciously or not, her position as an artist from the occupied territories lends authenticity to her work, turning her into an authentic witness of the tragedies she depicts. From this perspective, Traboulsi’s works could be seen as a fitting counterpart to Azem’s article. Although predating the pandemic by two decades, each of her collages seems to portray an authentic picture of the suffering and degradation that Palestinians started to experience on an even more regular basis since the outbreak of Covid19.

However convincing and realistic Traboulsi’s depictions may seem at first sight, their apparent meaning as illustrations of violence and suffering is severely compromised by the fact that the figure of Suha Traboulsi never existed. Although she became somewhat of a hit after the 2014 exhibition on contemporary Arab art in the New Museum, only few visitors and critics realized that she was actually a fictional character invented by the Lebanese artist Walid Raad.² Having made her appearance on several occasions since then, Traboulsi is not so much a pseudonym or alter ego of Raad, but rather an imaginary figure who functions, and is perceived as a distinct and autonomous person in real life. Blurring the line between fact and fiction, Raad’s imaginary construction of Suha Traboulsi forms a good example of what the American art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty (2009) has called parafiction. As she explains, parafictional strategies are “experiments in deception” that are at one and the same time both fictional and real; they are strategies “oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than

toward the pragmatics of trust. Simply put, with various degrees of success, for various durations, and for various purposes, these fictions are experienced as fact” (p. 54).

Published in 2009, Lambert-Beatty’s article offers an urgent foreboding of the impending information crisis that was then looming at the horizon. Making brief reference to the term “post-truth” long before it became Oxford Dictionaries’ word of the year in 2016, she understands parafiction as the artistic expression of a society in which information can no longer be trusted. As she argues, parafiction prepares us to be better information consumers, and therefore better citizens (Lambert-Beatty, 2009, p. 78). However, it not only trains us to be critical of the information we consume. In this respect, Lambert-Beatty (2009) sharply distinguishes parafiction from postmodern deconstruction. Instead of preaching that truth is inaccessible, parafiction also helps to determine when something is true enough: “Parafictions train us in scepticism and doubt, but also, oddly, in belief” (p. 78).

Radically altering their meaning when their fictional authorship is revealed, Traboulsi’s collages serve as a case in point. Whereas they at first seem to be rather straightforward depictions of the fate of the Palestinian people, as they were no doubt intended in conjunction with Azem’s article, the admission of their fake authorship transforms their primary meaning from a political to an epistemological one. Instead of offering an authentic testimony to the oppression of the Palestinians, the works now draw attention to the structures of knowledge and belief. Precisely by confronting the viewer with his failure of misrecognizing the fake for the true, the revelation of their fictional authorship comes to highlight the material and discursive conditions of knowledge production that constituted his former belief in the first place.

Although Lambert-Beatty wrote her article shortly before the boom of platforms as Facebook and Twitter, parafiction speaks particularly to a world dominated by social media; a world in which information travels at much greater speed and in which media have become ever more important agents in the construction of truth and knowledge (Gleisser, 2012, p. 209). Parafiction thus pays particular attention to the material base of knowledge production. Not merely as an exercise in scepticism, as Lambert-Beatty rightly argues, but as a means to stimulate awareness that truth and knowledge are irreducible to the media through which they are presented. In other words, rather than taking the truth and authenticity of the photos and news reports in Traboulsi’s collages at face value, parafiction points attention the institutional and discursive structures in which these media function. Not in order to dismiss truth, but to stimulate awareness of its ties with politics, which forms according to the philosopher Lee McIntyre (2018) the hallmark of the post-truth era (p. 11).

The work of Walid Raad is representative of the blurring of fact and fiction that characterize parafictional strategies in contemporary art. Concentrating largely on the history and aftermath of the Lebanese civil war, his work not merely probes the epistemological instability of media and testimony in the construction of knowledge, but also highlights the discursive frameworks in which the construction of truth takes place. In this paper, I will argue that Raad’s work reflects the aesthetic and epistemological structures of the post-truth era.

By focusing on Raad's experimental documentary *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* from 2000, I will demonstrate that his parafictional construction of the Lebanese hostage Souheil Bachar not merely exposes the western bias in the formation of knowledge, but also demonstrates that media and testimony can never be disentangled from politics. Yet, as Bachar's fictional testimony at the same time reveals concealed truths about the Lebanese civil war, Raad's video is not merely an exercise in deconstruction, but also in trust and belief. I will therefore close with a consideration of the epistemological role of fiction in Raad's work and explore the political importance of parafiction in a post-truth world.

II

The current conflict in Ukraine and its representation by the western media illustrate once again the central role of the image regarding questions of truth and authenticity. Whereas the Gulf War provided the occasion for the postmodern theorization of reality as simulacrum in the early 1990s (Baudrillard, 1995), it is fair to say that the Ukrainian conflict marks the return of the real. With the almost universal access to photography and the ease with which images are instantaneously transmitted by social media, the current image regime is one in which the ties between the image and reality are incessantly reaffirmed. This consequently means that truth has not receded from view, as it did with postmodernism, but has returned as contested; that is, as one competing take on reality among others.

One could therefore argue that the contemporary moment does not so much mark the end of grand narratives, but rather the struggle to find reliable ones. It is this change more than any other that marks the most important difference between the postmodern and post-truth condition. Whereas the postmodern condition involved the separation of knowledge from narrative, reducing the former to the state of mere information (Lyotard, 1984, p. 26), the post-truth condition reaffirms their connection by turning truth and knowledge into a function of political storytelling (Sergeant, 2020, pp. 16-17). This change is perhaps best reflected by the recent change of mainstream media. In the marketplace of truths, the media no longer provides value-free information. Instead, media outlets have become more and more ideological, increasingly concerned with pressing one particular take on reality at the expense of others (Fuller, 2018, p. 3). This transformation has important cultural and epistemological consequences. One of the features of the post-truth era is that people are now "provided with either conflicting news accounts, which they are then forced to resolve for themselves, or simply the news account that corresponds to their revealed preferences as a social media user. In either case, they are rendered more confident to decide matters of truth for themselves" (Fuller, 2018, p. 3).

It is within this context that the image has risen to new prominence. With its optimistic belief that media as photography and video can record reality objectively, the current image regime stands in a long tradition in which the alleged transparency of the image is regarded

as an authentic bearer of truth and memory. Yet, that things are not always that simple has been convincingly demonstrated by Susan Sontag. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she points to the work of the photographer Alexander Gardner whose *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter, Gettysburg* (1865) was long believed to give an accurate representation of the battlefield of the American civil war. As she points out, however, Gardner made crucial alterations to the scene before shooting his picture. He not only moved the body of the soldier so that it would face the camera, but also placed a long rifle vertically at his feet to highlight's the corpse's horizontality. What is most surprising to Sontag, however, is not that Gardner staged his scene, but the public's disappointment when it was confronted with the picture's inauthenticity (Sontag, 2003, pp. 54–55).

What we can gather from Sontag's observations is that the public's desire for authentic images is always already compromised by the urge to manipulate pictures for emotional effect. In this respect, Gettysburg in 1865 is not very different from Istanbul in 2016 and Ukraine today.³ What they all have in common is that the public's desire for authenticity is belied by the inherent risk of the image's manipulation to enhance its emotional, and ultimately political appeal. As a result, one of the novelties of the current war in Ukraine is that news agencies are publicly involved in the verification of images to safeguard not only the authenticity, but also the objectivity of the image. This recent development should be seen in relation to the recent forensic turn in art, journalism, and culture more broadly. Reaffirming the image as an ally in matters of truth and evidence, the forensic turn demonstrates that the post-truth era cannot be disentangled from the emergence of a new scientific positivism (Stankievec, 2019, pp. 50–52). In fact, the optimism that science and technology provide strongholds against fake news and alternative facts is deeply inscribed within today's media culture.⁴ Although the almost universal access to photography combined with the proliferation of images on the internet provide a major threat to the (geo-)political landscape, there is a widespread belief that forensic and digital techniques will safeguard the image as a harbinger of truth.⁵

III

All of this goes a long way to show that post-truth is often understood as a political or moral category. According to this understanding, post-truth is something that applies to others whose claims have no basis in – or may even contradict – reality. It is this understanding of post-truth that resembles the definition of the Oxford Dictionaries, and which has recently been further developed by the philosopher Lee McIntyre.⁶ According to McIntyre (2018), we can speak of post-truth when objective facts are subordinated to a political point of view (p. 11). Interestingly, McIntyre conceptualizes post-truth as a local phenomenon, situating it mostly at the right side of the political spectrum. However, by doing so, his argument is structured along a dichotomy in which politics based on objective, scientific facts is pivoted against ideologies that subvert truth for political effect: “In a world where ideology trumps science, post-truth is

the inevitable next step” (p. 34). In other words, for McIntyre, post-truth does not signify an epistemological condition, but a political defect. One that he pivots to his political adversaries on the right, but from which he himself remains crucially exempted.

As Steve Fuller (2018) has argued, moral and political understandings of post-truth are themselves deeply ideological. In fact, Fuller wittingly refers to them as post-truth understandings of post-truth; that is, as a position that attributes not merely moral, but also epistemological pre-eminence to its own knowledge claims. In these cases, as Fuller explains, post-truth automatically becomes a pejorative term that reflects “how those dominant in the relevant knowledge-and-power game want their opponents to be seen” (p. 1). At the same time, one does not have to be science sceptic to question whether scientifically oriented people are really exempt from post-truth politics. Not so much in order to question the content of McIntyre’s definition of post-truth, but rather its political bias. If it is true that the post-truth condition implies that arguments are subordinated to politics, what about McIntyre’s own definition in that case? In other words, does his understanding of post-truth not reflect the kind of ideological bias that he levels at others?

A more fruitful approach to post-truth would be to understand it not merely as a moral or political category, but rather as an epistemological condition that speaks particularly to the present moment. If McIntyre is right that the subjugation of truth to politics is a fundamental feature of the post-truth condition, would it then not make more sense to treat it as a universal that applies to everyone? Science itself seems to suggest so. As the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) has argued, the subjugation of truth to politics is deeply wired in the human brain. “Once people join a political team,” Haidt writes in *The Righteous Mind*, “they get ensnared in its moral matrix. They see confirmation of their grand narrative everywhere, and it’s difficult — perhaps impossible — to convince them that they are wrong if you argue with them from outside the matrix” (p. 365). In other words, the reason why we hold things for true or false is not so much determined by reality, but rather a function of an evolutionary impulse to reinforce the connection with our group. It is this particular quality that Haidt refers to as tribalism (p. 161-163).

As Haidt maintains, the post-truth era has made tribalism a bigger problem. Although tribalism is a human universal, the twin forces of globalization and digitalization have recently enhanced its social effects. Whereas globalization caused the proliferation of different cultures and ethnicities on the world stage, internet and social media only intensified the friction between different groups. Although the Arab Spring brought the hope that social media would lead to the unification of people under liberal democracy, it only made their differences more visible, creating polarization on a national level and causing the return of ideology on a global scale. And with tribalism getting more pronounced, Haidt (2022) argues that truth is one of the first qualities to suffer: “Twitter can overpower all the newspapers in the country, and stories cannot be shared (or at least trusted) across more than a few adjacent fragments.” What results is a process of ever-increasing fragmentation in which “truth cannot achieve

widespread adherence.” That is to say that Haidt does not understand post-truth as a political defect, but as a fundamental epistemological condition in which the illusion of a shared subjectivity has been lost once and for all.

When we understand post-truth epistemologically as an ever more pronounced form of political fragmentation, it becomes immediately clear that it directly undermines every possibility of a reliable visual discourse (Cappalletto, 2020, p. 202). In other words, if truth becomes ever more fragmented and contested, we could argue with Hannah Arendt (1982) that post-truth is not merely an epistemological but also an aesthetic problem; one that directly connects the domain of politics with our human capacity to judge (p. 27). Here, we may have one of the reasons why parafiction speaks particularly to the current historical moment. As Lambert-Beatty (2009) has argued, parafiction is not only about truth in the epistemological sense, but also about judging and mechanisms of belief. That is to say that parafictional strategies “produce and manage plausibility. But plausibility (as opposed to accuracy) is not an attribute of a story or image, but of its encounter with viewers, whose various configurations of knowledge and “horizons of expectation” determine whether something is plausible to them” (pp. 72-73).

It is precisely this stress on the interaction between image and viewer that undermines forensics’ claims to objectivity. The truth of the image is not located inside the frame, but in its encounter with the human being outside of it. Although forensics can provide scientific evidence of certain elements within the picture, the image’s truth is ultimately not a matter of scientific but political discourses. Yet, by effectively promoting an ideal of objective knowledge, forensics only depoliticizes the image. Requiring access to high levels of science and technology, forensics is not only a form of knowledge from which the majority of the world is excluded, but whose alleged objectivity also imposes a norm that other, less-scientific discourses can impossibly meet. As such, forensics is complicit with a western universality that sets a standard from which the rest of the world can only arise locally as a deviation from the norm.

It is this western bias of knowledge construction that Walid Raad’s parafictional strategies seek to expose. He does so through the creation of alternative subject positions that reveal the political bias of western claims to universality. At the same time, he draws attention to the ideological and discursive formations that govern the construction of truth and falsehood. As Chiara Cappalletto (2020) has argued, Raad collects “information from real life and use[s] it as evidence for unmasking the ideologies of the globalized world and putting its rationale to the test” (p. 206). His intention is not so much to question the authenticity or objectivity of the information collected. Quite the opposite. Raad’s work should be seen as realistic in the sense that he is not primarily interested in challenging the material base of knowledge itself, but rather seeks to reveal apparatuses of power that surround it (Cappalletto, 2020, p. 220). As I will argue below, it is in this way that Raad’s work mirrors the epistemological condition of the post-truth era. Rather than maintaining an opposition between truth and falsehood, his

work blurs the distinction between fact and fiction and gives rise to political positions the truth of which can only be expressed through fiction.

IV

The work of Walid Raad blurs the boundary between fact and fiction in multiple ways. On the one hand, his work offers a parafictional construction of characters and narratives that directly or indirectly participate in reality. On the other hand, he offers a fictionalization of the real, not in the least around his own identity and artisanship.⁷ One of the most effective ways in which Raad has enshrouded his own persona is through the “construction” of the so-called Atlas Group; an alleged collective of artists and scholars of which Raad may or may not be the only member, and whose origins date back to either 1947, 1967 or 1999.⁸ With the Atlas Group, Raad deliberately created the illusion of a collective artisanship whose uncertain genealogy and global connotations function as a “stand-in for the missing political collectivity” of our globalized world (Osborne, 2013, p. 35).

This emphasis on the fragmentation of global subject positions is mirrored by Raad’s personal life (Cappalotto, 2020, p. 209). Born in 1967 as the son of a Lebanese father and Palestinian mother, Raad grew up amidst the Christian minorities in Beirut before moving to the United States at the age of 15. In the United States, Raad continued his education, eventually obtaining his Ph.D. in Visual Culture at the University of Rochester. Working as a professor of art at The Cooper Union in New York, Raad combines his academic life in the United States with an almost exclusive occupation with the history of Lebanon and the Middle East in his art. Having left the country too soon to have first-hand experienced the most violent episodes of the Lebanese Civil War, Raad’s work does not depart from personal memory, but from materials that are connected to collective memories, which can be photographs, videos, newspapers, maps, etc. (Gilbert, 2002).

In his work, Raad questions how these documents give rise to a truthful representation of the Lebanese Civil War (Narusevicius, 2014, p. 44). This questioning is all the more important when one considers that many archives and museums were severely destroyed and that the historical record is compromised. Yet, at the same time, Raad insist that to speak of *the* Lebanese Civil War always already misconstrues its reality as a lived experience: “The Lebanese Civil War refers to an abstraction. We proceed with the project from the consideration that this abstraction is constituted by various individuals, groups, discourses, events, situations, and, more importantly, by modes of experience” (qtd. in Gilbert).

It is this gap between abstraction and reality that forms the thematic concern of Raad’s work. In his art, Raad not merely asks how photographs, videos and other forms of documentation give rise to knowledge, but also questions how this knowledge relates to the lived experience of war. Here, the emphasis is mostly on the discursive context in which film and photography function. In a process that the art critic Sven Lütticken (2019) described as “forensic fiction,”

Raad explores how titles, captions, and narratives shape the perception and interpretation of images. However, to portray Raad's art as solely being involved with the material base of knowledge is to forget about the important role of testimony in his work. What goes for film and photography also applies to witnessing. Revealing the multiple ways in which testimony is never merely the expression of a subjective point of view but always already political, the general aim of his work is precisely to foster "a critical understanding of what it means to 'produce meaning' through representations" (qtd. in Cappalletto, 2020, p. 212).

As a result, Raad does not concentrate on one form of representation at the expense of others but questions the construction of knowledge in its entirety. In fact, he shows that objectivity and subjectivity, documentation and testimony are not so much each other's opposites, but function together in the construction of one single truth. By doing so, Raad reveals that objective facts and subjective points of view are always already political and amenable to ideological manipulation. However, rather than drawing on postmodern deconstruction, he does so through the construction of fictional characters that not merely expose the fragmentation, but also the inherent politicization of truth. By blurring the line between fact and fiction, Raad's art mirrors the epistemological structure of the post-truth era. Drawing strongly on the absence of a geopolitical centre, his work reveals that truth is always partial and perspectival. In *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, Raad fittingly turns to the experience of war as an apt metaphor for the global and national fragmentation of subjectivity which forms the immediate occasion for the post-truth era.

V

Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version) is an experimental documentary about the Lebanese hostage crisis in which more than hundred people (mostly western citizens) were captured by the Islamist political organization Hezbollah in the period between 1982 and 1992.⁹ The crisis, which also formed the topic of Raad's doctoral dissertation, eventually costed the lives of eight hostages, and directly caused the so-called Iran-Contra Affair: a big political scandal in the United States in which high ranking officials made an illegal weapon deal with Khomeini's Iran in order to free seven American hostages and offer financial support to an anti-communist terrorist group in Nicaragua.

In *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, the crisis is told through the parafictional testimony of Souheil Bachar, who, as the prologue to the video explains, was held in solitary confinement for ten years, except for a period of 27 weeks in 1985 when he shared his cell with the Americans Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen. Directly from the outset, Raad sharply distinguishes Bachar from his American counterparts. He does so not merely along racial lines, but also in terms of class and sexuality. Whereas the American prisoners all hold prominent positions at western organizations, Bachar is described as a "low-level employee" of the Kuwaiti embassy in Beirut.¹⁰ This disbalance of power be-

tween westerners and non-westerners is underscored later in the video. Here, Bachar explains how his Arab body formed at once the object of revulsion and sexual desire for his American cellmates, thereby alluding to the Americans' oppression and abuse.

Whereas the staged scenes of Bachar's testimony resemble the raw and minimalistic quality of hostage videos made by terrorist groups, other parts of the tape form a collage-like structure that includes archival material that directly relates to the fate of the hostages (clips from the original hostage's videos, appeals by Anderson and Jacobsen for release, photos of former president Ronald Reagan and the military officer Oliver North, two key players in the Iran-Contra affair) or scenes that bare no obvious relationship to the crisis (shots of sunlight reflecting on the sea, a plane landing against a red evening sky). In the prologue to his testimony, we hear Bachar giving detailed and sometimes absurd instructions (presumably to the artist or producer) of how he wants his testimony to be presented. Since he wishes to address the audience in their native language, he summons that his Arabic be dubbed by a "neutral-toned female voice."¹¹ As a result, Bachar's testimony is throughout accompanied by a separate audio file that supposedly offers an English translation of his original testimony in Arabic.¹² At the same time, the majority of the other fragments are accompanied by the voice of a presumably British news anchor who reports in an official and detached mode about the hostage crisis. The still images on the screen often relate directly to his reporting, which could easily be taken for an actual news item from BBC or CNN.¹³

The news report, no doubt, creates the illusion that the figure of Souheil Bachar is real. This impression is underscored by the photographic imagery that accompanies it. Particularly striking is a passage almost one-third in the video when the introduction of the six hostages is supported by photos of their captivity. Crucially, all hostages, including Bachar, hold a newspaper to prove that they were still alive at a particular date. Whereas the photos, on the one hand, seem to confirm Bachar's existence, the scene also plays a more complex role in Raad's video. Drawing emphasis to the role in which photography is used as evidence, Raad simultaneously shows how the alleged objectivity of pictures can be used to conceal disparities of power. Whereas the photos of the five American hostages are authentic and played an important role in the negotiations with Hezbollah, the inclusion of Bachar is ambiguous as it remains unclear why he is pictured with a newspaper. His fate would surely have been of no concern to the American government, and it is even hard to imagine that the Lebanese would care much about someone of his stature amid a violent civil war. Yet, the fact that his picture is included among those of the Americans shows how easily the alleged objectivity of photography can be put into the service of fiction (as Raad evidently does). At the same time, it demonstrates that the picture's appeal to objectivity and its alleged status as evidence can be used to conceal the disbalance of power between American and non-western citizens.

Something similar could be argued for the role of language in the video. The strong British accent of the news anchor and Bachar's own request to have his Arabic dubbed by a "neutral-toned female voice" form a clear reference to the western ideals of objectivity and de-

tachment. However, both are, albeit in different ways, fabrications by the artist. Whereas the recorded news item is staged and performed by an actor, the English translation of Bachar's Arabic is unreliable and at points a complete fabrication (Ra'ad, 2003, p. 38). This means that Raad's video abuses the alleged neutrality of the language to give credence to the fictional character of Bachar, thereby collapsing the whole edifice on which the objectivity of western media is built. In other words, Raad shows that trustworthy and reliable media (photos, news items, expert knowledge of Arabic) do not necessarily give rise to objective knowledge but can easily be appropriated for the construction of falsehoods. In this way, his work offers a perfect illustration of how parafiction works: It builds on the media most associated with truth and trust to construct an alternative reality (a parafiction) that, precisely because of its material support in objective media, begins to live a life of its own.

By its very nature, parafiction is inherently political. Blurring the lines between truth and falsehood, parafiction directly participates in the real. At the same time, it draws attention to the institutional and discursive frameworks in which media function, and by which their truth (or falsehood) is constructed. If photos, news items and expertise can be employed to create a fiction that is indistinguishable from the real, then their truth can obviously not be located in the media themselves but has to be the result of the discourses in which they function. This awareness immediately backfires to its earlier claims of objectivity, revealing that the supposed apolitical was political after all. All of this is to say that the construction of the figure of Bachar is political by its very nature. His mere existence immediately discredits the myth of objective media that gave rise to him, thereby implicitly drawing attention to the apparatuses of power that benefit from a widespread belief in objectivity.

This train of thought is actively pursued by Bachar himself. In a fictional interview that accompanies the video, Bachar zooms in on the role of expertise in the construction of knowledge. Responding to a number of official investigations that the American government conducted in response to the Lebanese Hostage Crisis and the Iran-Contra Affair, Bachar concludes that the so-called objective facts only serve the ones in power as they legitimize American foreign policy with no regard for the Lebanese perspective:

The investigations were politicized and partial, and they produced contested narratives that displaced interest away from the historical and policy dimensions of the affair and onto a concentrated celebration of the good health of the American political system. As such, the investigations failed to shed light on how a disastrous US policy in the region had contributed to the abduction of Western men in Lebanon. (p. 39)

Instead of questioning the presence of American churches, universities and journalists in Lebanon, Bachar shows concern that the impartiality and objectivity of the investigators only serves as a political cover-up that justifies American foreign policy.

The same could be argued for the role of testimony in Raad's video. Just as Bachar's mere existence eventually disproved the objectivity of photography, film, expertise and other media, it could likewise be argued that his eyewitness account by its very fictionality discredits the authenticity of testimony in general. Moreover, in the video, also Bachar himself raises questions whether testimony is to be trusted. In fact, his hostage tapes should be seen as a direct response to the memoirs that all five of his American "fellow prisoners" wrote about their captivity in Lebanon. At one point in the video, Bachar explicitly reflects on the rhetorical moves that all of their narratives share, e.g., the curious fact that they all open with a description of the weather on the day they were kidnapped: "Why did the Americans begin their stories talking about the weather? Is that because they wanted to present what had happened to them as something that was natural and unpredictable?"

This is not to say that he dismisses the accounts of the Americans. In fact, he even recognizes their truth when he remarks that the five books "stand as a fascinating testimony to our horrible ordeal in Lebanon." At the same time, he understands that truth is always local and perspectival: "Why is this story told 5 times, why were 5 different versions of it published. Because the story is not the same" (qtd. in Ra'ad, 2003, p. 43). Yet, Bachar fails to recognize his own experiences in the accounts of the Americans. In fact, he is concerned that testimony's appeal to authenticity only masks the political motives for writing the memoir. As Bachar (Ra'ad, 2003) explains:

In the captivity memoirs . . . the experience of captivity is represented primarily as a psychological and individual rather than a social or political phenomenon. . . . The emphasis in these beginnings on detailing the subjective perceptions of meteorological conditions in the city or the psychological state of mind of the hostage-to-be comes at the expense of some clarification of the socio-political context of Lebanon. . . . The presence of Westerners in Beirut during the mid-1980's is assumed to have no unusual significance, and Beirut is presented as any other city in the world. (pp. 44-45)

Bachar makes clear that the role of testimony is not very different from that of objective media in western representations of the Lebanese hostage crisis. Whereas photography, news reports and expertise use the cover of objectivity to naturalize American foreign policy, so testimony takes recourse to the subjective point of view in order to distract from alternative perspectives that may dispute America's role in Lebanon. The fictional character of Bachar thus reveals the double agenda that notions as truth, objectivity and authenticity play. Discrediting the idea that they have an autonomous existence in reality, he shows that they are merely functions of the apparatuses of power in which the human encounter with photography, media, expertise and testimony takes place.

VI

In Raad's video, the experience of captivity could be seen as a metaphor for the fragmentation of knowledge that is essential to the post-truth condition. "Each man experiences captivity in its own way," Bachar remarks in the video. "No doubt this is true. Not only of the experience of captivity, but of all experiences today." By suggesting that today all our experiences resemble those of captivity, Raad paints a bleak picture of our contemporary predicament. Essential to these experiences, is the deconstruction of dominant modes of knowledge together with their modes of representation, which is reflected by the formal qualities of the video itself. As an open-ended collage that breaks with the classical conception of the artwork as totality, the video's fragmented form mirrors not only the fundamental uncertainty of captivity, but also that of the viewer who can never be quite sure whether he is dealing with fact or fiction (Magagnoli, 2011, p. 319).

However, it is not merely the formal structure of the work, but also the parafictional strategies on which it draws that can be said to mirror the epistemological structure of the post-truth era. As we have seen, parafiction builds on trusted media for the construction of fictional characters that infiltrate the everyday world. Yet, by doing so, parafiction not merely blends the boundaries between fact and fiction, but also discredits the faith in those media that gave rise to the fictional in the first place. In fact, it reveals the political bias behind the claims to objectivity and authenticity, drawing attention to the apparatuses of power that govern the construction of truth and falsehood. However, one of the distinctive features of parafiction is that it not merely forms a postmodern exercise in deconstruction, but that it depends on the construction of the fictional to put the whole edifice to work. Parafiction is the lie that gives rise to truth. That is to say that the truths that parafiction engender can only be expressed through fiction.

It is precisely by blurring the line between fact and fiction that parafiction gives the artist the opportunity to participate in the dominant discourses of knowledge while simultaneously exposing their political bias. As Raad (qtd. in Gilbert, 2002) himself remarks:

The Atlas Group produces and collects objects and stories that should not be examined through the conventional and reductive binary of fiction and nonfiction. We proceed from the consideration that this distinction is a false one . . . and does not do justice to the rich and complex stories that circulate widely and that capture our attention and belief.

In this passage, Raad affirms one of the fundamental truths of the post-truth era. Referring to the multitude of stories that remain concealed when a sharp distinction between truth and falsehood is maintained, he acknowledges the reality of the current geopolitical situation in which there is no longer a universal subject-position from which Truth (with a capital T) can be spoken. We must contend with a reality in which one person's truth may be the other

person's lie, and in which all truths are, in one way or another, entangled with politics or ideologies.

This is exactly the epistemological structure that is mirrored by Raad's work. His parafictional constructions draw attention to the localized discursive practices through which truth is constructed and governed. Although this does not mean that their work is blind for the dangers and challenges that the post-truth condition imposes on us (one only has to remember Raad's parallel between the experience of captivity and our everyday experience), their work also draws attention to a more positive note that easily can get lost. Although there is a real danger that we will continue to understand post-truth as moral category that signals a political defect, leading to the further imposition of the positivistic ideals of impartial and objective knowledge, parafiction reminds us that the present moment also offers the opportunity to become more attentive to non-western discourses. One of the major challenges of the next decade will consist in confronting the dangers of post-truth at home while simultaneously remaining receptive for the wide variety of disparate voices abroad.

- 1 For Traboulsi's artworks, see Azem (2020).
- 2 Cotter (2014) referred in *The New York Times* to Traboulsi as a "cool minimalist-before-Minimalism." In the leading British art magazine *Frieze*, the critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie (2016) recounts that one of her colleagues was fascinated by Traboulsi after seeing her work in the New Museum. Also other prominent media as *Art in America* and *Artnet News* referred to Traboulsi as a person in her own right (resp. Markus, 2014; Muñoz-Alonso, 2016).
- 3 During the coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, a number of images went viral that claimed to document the chaos and violence in Ankara and Istanbul, but actually represented completely different events (Turkey Coup Attempt, 2016).
- 4 Hence the success of online news agencies as Bellingcat, and the prominence of Forensic Architecture within the artworld. For a programmatic statement on Forensic Architecture, see the programmatic statement by its founder Eyal Weizmann (2019).
- 5 This spirit is very well reflected by recent reports on the website of Bellingcat that pivots "Russia's . . . 'facts' against the evidence." (Higgins, 2022; Sheldon, 2022).
- 6 The Oxford Dictionaries define post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."
- 7 Only a quick look at the artist's website (Raad, n.d.-b) illustrates the enigmatic and ambiguous way in which Raad presents himself to the public.
- 8 Several contradictory genealogies of the Atlas Group are in circulation (Narusevicius, 2014, p. 45).
- 9 The video can be found on the website of the Atlas Group (Raad, n.d.-a).
- 10 "Low-level employee" is the description of Bachar given by the artwork itself.
- 11 The video contains besides the prologue, tape #17 and #31. These are the only two tapes of the 53 tapes in total that Bachar made available for screening outside of Lebanon. The video closes with an appendix that could be interpreted as a parody of the forensic method in which the two previous tapes are reduced to their quantitative qualities, particularly their duration.
- 12 "Supposedly" as the translation into English is often unreliable and incorrect (see below). Further note that the conflict between western and non-western perspectives is here illustrated through the incommensurability of language, the roots of which go back to the Biblical story of Babel. Interestingly, Jonathan Haidt (2022) refers to Babel as a metaphor for the fragmentation of the post-truth era. As he writes: "Babel is not a story about tribalism. It's a story about the fragmentation of everything." Just as Haidt, Raad illustrates the fragmentation of subject positions by highlighting the gap between languages.
- 13 Only the informed viewer will notice that the news report is inauthentic. The news anchor gives himself away by mentioning the name of Bachar. However, people in the audience unaware that Bachar is a fictional character will most likely perceive the news report as authentic.

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