

## Screening memory: violence and trauma in De Gaulle Eid's *Chou Sar?*

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### Abstract<sup>1</sup>

*Chou Sar?* (What happened?) is a documentary film by De Gaulle Eid, made in 2010 in Lebanon. The film consists of a number of interviews Eid undertook with his close and extended family about a massacre that took place one evening in December, 1980. Among the dead were Eid's parents. Thirty years later, as he visits his relatives and records their stories, the question what happened? comes to be directed more towards the personal, social, and political circumstances in which the survivors have coped. In the following discussion I focus on how Eid's film addresses this event by concentrating on its aftermath. I am interested in how *Chou Sar?* engages the capacity of public and political cultures in Lebanon to approach memory of violence and enduring trauma as pressing concerns in and for the present. In doing so, I suggest that the film works to screen and situate violence and trauma as both actual and potential modes of address and response.

Keywords: memory, screen, violence, trauma, personal, public

### Screening memory

In De Gaulle Eid's documentary film *Chou Sar?* (2010, What happened?) the filmmaker returns to Lebanon to track a massacre that occurred thirty years earlier – on December 9, 1980 – during what is conventionally referred to in the singular as the civil war. Himself a survivor of the massacre in

which both his parents were murdered, Eid embarks on interviewing members of his extended family, gathering and documenting their stories of both the event and how they have coped in the years since. The question »Chou Sar?« – which nominally serves as the film's title – comes to be directed more towards the aftermath of the massacre, so that the resonant tenor of the question carries an expansive sense of social, personal, and political circumstances in which coping has been endured – circumstances, indeed, in which the question itself can at all be posed. Eid's work on the film provokes his interlocutors into articulating their experiences and memories of the massacre – their stories filtered by personal and political circumstances, resonating as varying perspectives.

The fifteen years of recurring bouts of violence and atrocity, from 1975 until the formal ending of the civil war in 1990, involved extreme civil strife and foreign occupation. The long year of 1982 was especially violent. Israel had extended its occupation of southern Lebanon to a virtual siege of Beirut, mainly the western side of the city. The siege culminated in the Israeli army overseeing the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camp massacres from September 14 to September 18, carried out by members of the Kataeb and Lebanese Forces – Maronite political parties and militias working with the Israelis. It is estimated that up to 3,000 camp-dwellers were murdered in a three-day bloodbath (the term is no exaggeration). The Israeli army's indiscriminate bombardment of Beirut and southern Lebanon in the second half of the year resulted in around 25,000 civilian deaths, (ICTJ 2013: 36). Amidst this onslaught, local parties and militias were carrying out their own atrocities and practices of demographic cleansing, competing to control urban quarters and strategic

<sup>1</sup> This essay derives from the research project, *Transforming Memories: Cultural Production and Personal/Public Memory in Lebanon and Morocco*, which ran for the two years 2012–2013. Acknowledgment is due to the funder, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation). I want also to thank the reviewers for their comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

outposts, with the Khāt al-Tammās (or Green Line) dividing Beirut into eastern and western sectors.

The massacre informing the focal point of *Chou Sar?* took place in the village of Edbel, 15 kilometers north of Tripoli. One evening members of a village family took it upon themselves to round up members of another family – village neighbours – and killed them. Among those murdered were Eid's parents, a sibling, aunts and uncles. The massacre was apparently precipitated by an incident in Beirut in which a member of Eid's extended family, affiliated to the Kataeb or Phalange party, was involved in the killing of a political figure from the other family, the Diabs, some of whose members then sought immediate retribution and turned violently on their neighbours, the Eids. De Gaulle Eid himself was 10 years of age at the time, and with his sister Rose and brother Jean somehow managed to hide in their bathroom (in fact they lay still and played dead amidst the bodies and blood), until they later escaped.

In the following discussion I focus on how Eid's film addresses this event by concentrating on its aftermath. I am interested in how *Chou Sar?* engages the capacity of public and political cultures in Lebanon to approach memory of violence and enduring trauma as pressing concerns in and for the present. In doing so, I suggest that the film works to screen and situate violence and trauma as both actual and potential modes of address and response. By situating violence and trauma in tension to responsibility and culpability between victimhood and perpetration, the film stages a personal quest for justice, accountability, and moral recovery. Supplementing this personal quest, Eid claims the relevance and exigency of public acknowledgement and political redress.

Towards putting into relief more than one sense of *screening*, I want to emphasize that *Chou Sar?* is symptomatic of a post-civil war circumstance in Lebanon in which public acknowledgement of personal experience of violence and trauma is seriously restricted. The possibility of such acknowledgement involves certain constraints circulating through largely patriarchal, politically directed distributions of power, influence, formal and informal exchanges of accommodation. As I want here to keep within view, the question of capacities to screen particular incidents of violence, including how people cope with lingering aftermaths of enduring trauma, has necessarily to be situated within circulations and distributions of resources, of power and influence. Increasingly in Lebanon, since the formal ending of the civil war, predominating modes of parceling, managing, distributing and accessing material and imaginary resources flow towards confessional accretions of political advocacy and constituency. Such accretions have come about despite the Ta'if Accord of October-November 1989 – the document that was produced

to officially coordinate a cessation of violence and rehabilitate a political process – stipulating the setting up of a national committee to address the problem of political sectarianism; which therefore regarded confessionalism/sectarianism (طائفية) as a political obstacle.

In terms of *screening* memory I want to suggest that *Chou Sar?* reverberates as a filtering of unrelieved tensions in which the significance of *memory* and *event* cannot be restricted to a distinct, referentially temporal relationship between present and past. To my mind, a more adequate approach to the layered – or what could be referred to as *paratactic* – temporality of memory in *Chou Sar?* is suggested by Freud in his belatedly influential essay »Über Deckerinnerungen« (1899), or »Screen Memories« (1966). Here, in this short work published at the same time as his book on dreams, he claims a peculiar, unsettled sense of temporality to the screening of memory. Somewhat anticipating narratological and cinematic concepts of analepsis (flashbacks) and prolepsis (flash-forwards), Freud writes that whether »retrogressive« or »pushed forward,« a screen memory involves a »chronological relation ... between the screen and the thing screened-off« (320). The eventuating significance of memory, in other words, depends not on a descriptive account of an identifiable incident or event, but on a conflictual, productive tension between the terms of recollection and that which comes to be dis-closed (dis-covered, re-covered, *ent-deckt*). In the process, the emerging, temporalizing significance of a past event (not the event itself) is what transpires as memory in and for the present, subject to modes of filtering and screening.

In Freud's curious scheme, whatever is referenced as memory of a past incident or event co-incidentally takes place in the present as an event of memory. Just as his paratactic notion of what can be translated as »memory-occasion,« *erinnernder Anlass*, works towards a dis-closure of hermeneutic dispositions, the event of memory works towards an exposure of how present accommodations, resistances and displacements render the past admissible to a hermeneutic exercise of recollection. In other words, what comes to be screened and exposed is not so much a past incident or event, but the way in which people in the present muster and/or negotiate capacities to narrate, temporalize, screen a past incident, experience, or event. What comes to be foregrounded and critically addressed as symptomatic are the circumstances in which memory is *screened* – both shown and filtered.

Extrapolating from Freud's strictly psychoanalytic preoccupations, I want to observe how *Chou Sar?* engages various constraints in which certain political affiliations and personal circumstances *screen* how the past comes into view, how the past can be recalled as a mode of address and response. Arising from and embodying the tension between

memory of an event and an event of memory, the film not only references past incidents, but foregrounds how personal and political circumstances in the present influence and shape the very tenor of showing and telling. This includes the capacity of Eid's film to provoke and initiate public discussion of personal experience of violence and trauma.

In this phenomenological approach to the eventuating significance or social life of memory, what becomes compelling is how the film works to initiate proactive modes of address and response, according to a polyphonic murmur hovering on the edges of what can be rendered a modicum of telling, listening, and bearing witness. And this has a number of manifold tangents or vectors that provide a more relational and dynamic notion of *context* and subjectivity. One of these tangents concerns the filmmaker's experience of working on and participating in the film; whereby, for example, Eid develops a renewed sense of connection and disconnection to his immediate and extended families (his sister, as well as first and second cousins that he hadn't seen for many years). Another tangent has to do with my primary focus, in respect to the film habituating contexts of public discussion and social exchange.

The question of *context*, then, relates not merely to an underlying circumstance and distributions of political sensibility and exchanges of social viability, but also to the way in which the film creatively and proactively inhabits and *responds* to contexts. By so doing, the film works to provoke such contexts to become more responsive, drawing attention to the gaps and lacuna that otherwise work to stabilize predominating, accommodating equations of memory and forgetting – what in my earlier work I called »dismemory« (Nikro 2012). By design, *Chou Sar?* doesn't speak for or to a particular community, but rather responds to predominating alignments of memory and forgetting that deny any remainder – a denial that assumes a pre-discursive or pre-affectual, mythical basis of subjectivity and community; alignments informing the ways in which material and imaginative resources are distributed towards restricting political advocacy and constituency to conduits of confessional and/or sectarian allegiances and identifications.

### **What happened?**

In September 2013 our memory research group at the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin cooperated with Kino Arsenal at Potsdamer Platz to present a four-day film festival, titled *Sights of Memory: Films from Lebanon*. While introducing *Chou Sar?* for the audience on the third night of the festival, I realized that I had been wrongly reading the title as a statement, somehow forgetting the question mark that denotes a query, or mode of interrogation – a question mark that grammatically serves to fore-

ground the tension wedged between present and past. In moving towards an account of what happened, the film is mainly composed of interviews, with family and extended relatives, as well as Eid himself, giving personal accounts of how they experienced the massacre and how they have since coped. »What happened« thus becomes an unstable point of reference whose significance shifts between reference to an event of the past and the way in which its lingering force is endured, recalled and told in the present, the way in which it is screened as an event of memory. It is in this manifold sense that the film can be regarded as a *site* of memory – a proactive engagement of witnessing, investigative inquiry, production and narration of testimony, claiming the potential of public concern and acknowledgement.

This more enduring, emerging sense of an event is captured by the anthropologist Veena Das. In respect to her research on the belated, lingering force of violence arising from the partition of India in 1947, she offers an alternative to regarding the question »what happened?« in strictly historicist terms of reference. »In the context of the Partition,« she writes, »historians have often collected oral narratives formulated to answer the question: What happened?« And yet, for Das it is not enough to know and document what happened in the past, as this tends to explain present circumstances as effects of an identifiable, causal event, and thus is only part of the story. »Memory,« she goes on to say, with reference to her research with one of her subjects, »cannot be understood in Asha's life as a direct possession of the past.« Memory »is constantly interposed and mediated by the manner in which the world is *being presently inhabited*« (2007: 76, my emphasis). Rather than approach memory as a redemptive narrative practice attuned to an identification of past events and their causal trajectory, in her research Das is more concerned with how people socially cope and endure traumatic burdens in the present, and how the temporality of the present can be inhabited as a site of transformative practice, engaging a sense of hope and trust in the future.

Similarly, *Chou Sar?* can be approached as a site of memory and transformative practice, whereby the question what happened? does not assume a causal tenor. Indeed, in the making of his film, Eid eschews any of the standard conventions that work to reference a documentary mode of film, such as opening captions, historical references, or gritty news-reel footage. The film is on the whole acutely personal, tracking Eid's own experience and his efforts to translate this into public engagement. Eid lives with his wife and infant daughter in Corsica, where the opening scene of his discussion with his wife has a quiet, though emotionally charged air of impending departure and quest. I am not aware if this opening scene was indeed shot at the be-

ginning of his schedule, but it certainly captures Eid's emotional disposition and commitment, as well as his dogged determination to track various accounts of what happened.

Arriving in Beirut, Eid rides in a taxi from the airport, and along the way passes a large Lebanese flag draped on the side of a building, with a caption underneath referring to كَانَا لِلْوَطَن (we're all for the nation) – a »we« that the film will unpack through the event of memory. In Beirut Eid stays at the apartment of his sister Rose, from where he embarks on a number of visits to interview members of his extended family either affected by or connected to the massacre and its aftermath. Among the people he meets are his godfather Hanna Eid, cousins Bassem Eid, Ezzat Eid, and Bchara Eid in the north, and in Beirut at the Kataeb party offices, Emile Eid. Of the five, all of whom Eid meets more than once, Bassem, Ezzat, and Bchara are more frank and direct, while one feels that Hanna and Emile are not so forthcoming.

Eid meets Hanna on a rooftop, where the latter keeps a garden of flowers, vegetables and herbs. Hanna's unease is betrayed by his furtive glances at the camera, as well as his incapacity to engage Eid's gaze when answering questions. The first of these questions concerns a petition that the extended family had made to the municipality in Tripoli, in the north, requesting an official inquiry. Hanna's answers continue to be evasive (the jumpiness of the shoulder-held camera contributes, perhaps by design, to this sense of evasiveness), first denying that a petition had been made and then confirming that indeed his brother had done so (sent through the post, he says, although he can't remember the date or year), in the 1980s. It transpires that much depends on how the massacre was officially recorded and designated, so that if it were deemed a political act, legal action would be prevented by the compass of the Amnesty Law (legislated in 1991). The other revelation is that the Kataeb affiliated cousin, Emile Eid, had stopped them from following up on the petition, as »he risked being implicated,« according to Hanna, who abruptly breaks off the conversation to go and water his flowers (paralleled by the breaking off of the scene by the editing).

It is not my intention here to identify and declare responsibility and culpability to one person or another, or one party or another. I am more preoccupied with the way in which the design of Eid's film works to both tell his story – or gather aspects of a story that he can potentially own, an owning he wants to extend to political and public cultures in Lebanon – and put into relief how witnessing and telling are in the present constrained by certain affiliations and accommodations. In other words, as I indicated in my opening discussion above, both the production and showing of the film works to screen the political circumstances and accom-

modations in which Eid's quest is enmeshed. To my mind the extraordinary charm of *Chou Sar?* derives from its unpretentious style and frankness of characterization, as well as Eid's efforts to situate his quest within the messy circulations of family and political allegiances, accommodations, identifications and affiliations. Eid's film constitutes a site for a creative gathering of stories, while simultaneously canvassing the conditions in which stories can be told and heard.

I am in a sense performing my own screening and editing of the film, and want to make a jump-cut to Eid's interviews with his Kataeb party affiliated cousin Emile. In the first of these the hand-held camera roams around a large, noisy room of party members, gathered for what seems like a convention or meeting. When the film then cuts to Eid and Emile, sitting alone in what appears to be the living room of the latter's home, it is obvious that there has been a lapse in time, as Emile wears a different suit to that he wore in the immediately preceding scenes at the party's convention (which were obviously spliced in to note Emile's political affiliation). Unlike the scenes with Hanna, the camera here is firmly planted on the floor, which works to bring about a more decorous atmosphere. Emile, to be sure, affords more power and prestige than the somewhat disaffiliated Hanna.

In his account Emile addresses the circumstances in which the massacre took place, alluding to the involvement of Eid and Diab family members in political parties, though emphasizing the innocence of De Gaulle Eid's uncles and cousins in Edbel. Emile says that initially a member of the Diab family, secretary of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, was assassinated, and that he, Emile, was accused, though rejects any responsibility. He also says that he never would have thought that in the village the families would take up arms and turn on their neighbors, calling such retribution a »primitive reaction.«

Emile talks about how narrow-minded and inward-looking the people of the village were, saying that the »exodus« of family members »allowed our youth to broaden their horizons, to get out of the village.« »The world,« he says, »is bigger than the village and the family.« So that while he doesn't directly say, it seems that from his point of view there are other, more politically pressing issues to consider. The scene ends with a lingering silence whose polyphonic resonance registers Eid's perplexed thoughts. It is a complex and complicated story that doesn't leave Eid with any answers, only more questions. Eid, to be sure, is not after a story of what happened so as to reconcile himself to the massacre, but has the further intention of situating storytelling as a practice to canvass how he in Lebanon can indeed direct the question of accountability and justice. Emile, of course, much prefers

that Eid's quest remain within the predominating circulations of party alliances and grievances.

It is a quietly remarkable scene, and not only in respect to Eid's preoccupations and the structure of the film, but also in terms of a direct address to a particular instance of violence during the civil war. By evoking victims, perpetrators, participants, political parties and militias – indeed, the very term *massacre* (مزبحة) – the film works towards rendering the categories of »victims,« »perpetrators,« and »political parties« significant for historical reference and public debate concerning the civil war. While, in Lebanon, the civil war is often publically referenced – *harb al-ahliyya*, or else *al ahdass* – it is often done so with an air of generality and anonymity. Whenever people voice their distrust and disgust with their politicians – *hraamiyya*, or crooks, is a popular epithet – they tend to make general references to all their political representatives, or else make ad hominem remarks. Unfortunately, the predominating mode of political advocacy and electoral culture doesn't work to focus attention on debatable issues and concerns. Indeed, over the last decade successive governments haven't even deemed it necessary to draw a national budget for the collection and spending of public money – a budget that could become a focus of political debate and discussion.

In his film Eid puts into relief many instances of lingering silences, hanging in the air and contributing to a sense of the difficulty of posing straight forward questions, let alone drawing straight forward answers. These heavy silences work as polyphonic, or perhaps heterophonic reverberations resonating not only as mood and emotion, but also foregrounding how a predominating social ethos is informed by a sense of the futility of seeking both personal and political accountability for past violence. In the second interview with his cousin Emile, Eid seems to have realized this futility, and rather than ask questions, articulates a quiet, exasperated rebuke to his interlocutor. Not so much interested in knowing to what extent Emile was involved – knowing, in fact, that any straight-forward answer is impossible, because of Emile's political affiliations – Eid directs a rhetorical question about whether Emile has any idea about how the survivors, mainly the orphaned children, managed to cope in the aftermath of the massacre:

But do you know what happened to each of us that night? Do you really know what happened to your cousins Bassam and Ezzat, to me, to your other cousins, and the tragedy they went through? During and after the massacre, and during their escape to Beirut?

In this exchange Eid is focused not on getting at the absolute truth of what happened, but of directing attention to questions concerning responsi-

bility and response in the aftermath of what happened. Exhaling his cigarette smoke, Emile proffers a rejoinder, saying that he had tried to keep up with news of the survivors. Sensing the lameness of Emile's response, Eid cuts him off:

But I cannot picture why we should let children carry the responsibility. That responsibility should be borne by the country, its ministers, its parliament, its politicians, who lived through the war, which has brought about a certain circumstance. Because it's not only a fault of the war. It's the fault of the grownups, not the children who paid dearly, like me, like your cousins, like your uncles who were killed in the massacre.

Emile, looking down at the table, lights another cigarette, and exhales with a sigh.

This last passage lends itself to inter- or transgenerational considerations when tracking relationships between memory, violence, and trauma. Studies of memory in Lebanon have either noted or addressed the significance of a generational analytic, such as Hout (2012: 13-14), Larkin (2012, especially Chapter 2) and Chrabieh (2007). A recent empirical study by the International Center for Transitional Justice (2014) distinguishes, in the main, between focus group participants born after the formal end of the civil war in 1990 and those born during or before the war. One of the study's findings notes how older participants carried with them a sense of fear, related to recurrent images of violence and helplessness. Conversely, post-war generation participants tended to view memory of the war by referring to how their parents either spoke or did not speak about their experience of trauma and coping in circumstances of extreme and unpredictable violence, circumstances of unpredictable calm.

Eid, in his exchange with Emile, is suggesting that as long as the older generation does not develop capacities to address violence and trauma arising from the long years of civil violence, the younger generation is destined to carry over a heavy burden. In her *Haunting Legacies*, Gabriele Schwab – addressing in the main memory and forgetting in Germany in the aftermath of National Socialism – writes about what she calls »the broader dynamic of transgenerational trauma.« She focusses on how unspoken sensibilities of guilt and shame are passed on to a younger generation: »Silence or covering up violence, refusal to take responsibility, and failure to acknowledge guilt and shame are major factors in sustaining and passing psychic damage on to subsequent generations« (2010: 101).

As one of the younger generation directly affected by the violence, Eid situates his film as a site for a consideration of how response and responsibility can be proactively engaged. On a number

of occasions, when asked if his family has seen the film, Eid has said that the only way in which members of his family can view *Chou Sar?* is to attend a public screening. This interest in rendering the personal a public concern has some bearing on how he understands his film as a site of public exposure and debate, beyond any redemptive or retributive interest of families seeking personal revenge.

Later in the film Eid visits his cousin Ezzat Eid, whose father was killed in the massacre. Ezzat talks about how he still has visions of the horror - »pictures fixed in my mind« - as well as the temporal duration of the violence: »You can't forget them. The minutes, the hours that we experienced, you can't forget.« From inside the house, hearing Ezzat's conversation with Eid, his mother says: »What's the use in talking about it. It's been about thirty years.« As she comes out to the verandah, Eid says: »Can we truly forget the past?« She responds by agreeing, though declares: »Nobody forgets. We pretend to forget.« This scene immediately precedes Eid's second meeting with Hanna, again at the latter's rooftop garden. And yet the personal trauma referred to by Ezzat - its duration and temporality - is carried over into the voice, movements, and articulations of Hanna, who continues tending his plants and flowers while responding to Eid's queries. Where Ezzat - like Bassam and another cousin Eid meets, Bchara - is clearly a child-victim, a survivor, Hanna embodies a less distinct identification of perpetrator and/or victim.

In this second interview with Hanna, Eid takes a different tack from his first interview with him, and starts off by directly asking Hanna where he was when the massacre took place in Edbel. Hanna points out that he was in Beirut, having »fled« the village with his wife and children in 1976, because he felt threatened. Apparently, from the beginning of the civil war in 1975, political allegiances in the village, linked to developments in Beirut, had become »clannish,« as Hanna says. Eid pursues his questions and asks if there is anyone in the family thinking about revenge. While Hanna answers in the negative, the question leads him to betray not so much his anxiety in publically recalling the past, but the trauma embodied in his aging perspective. If anyone should be seeking revenge, he says, it would be he and his children, not the others affected by the massacre. With his voice and gestures reverberating with anger and frustration, he delivers an exasperated monologue, referring to the torture and murder of his brothers: »What can I say! They piled them up in a jeep as though they were logs. Who can forget? If you have blood in your veins, you can't forget. And whoever doesn't have blood will forget.« Hanna breaks off and again, nervously, circles around his garden, sighing that »Too many people have died.« He snaps a red rose off its stem, and offers it to

Eid, passing on a manifold sign of blood, revenge, love, commiseration and regret. But the significant point suggested by Eid's questions is that the equation of revenge, violence, and retribution is a symptom of a lack of political accountability and legal avenues for redress.

#### »The voices are present inside us«

*Chou Sar?* is in the main made up of interviews, as Eid tracks down members of his extended family affected by the massacre, gathering their stories and weaving them into a documentary film. This weaving circles back and forth between interlocutors, soliciting their accounts of what happened, and how they have since coped. As I outlined above, the making of the film has also to be regarded as a site for the very production of the value - both actual and potential - of addressing violence and trauma. The film, as I have been arguing, not only strives to *present* - render pressing for the present - accounts of what happened, but also how people in Lebanon reference the past and inhabit the present in circumstances that work to direct and constrain capacities to tell and hear.

Eid's cousin, Ezzat, does not only remember his experience of the massacre - »pictures fixed in my mind« - but also the temporal duration of this experience. In extreme, terrifying circumstances - as trauma theorists have noted - time is *inhabited*, embodied as an interval in which the ordering force of narrative, or else the instrumentalization of time, gives way to an acute experience of dwelling *in* time. What we can call the temporaneity of De Gaulle Eid's film somehow parallels this dwelling in duration, so that the film does not only present a departure back into time, into the past - towards an exposure of what happened, the massacre - but dwells in the temporalizing »structure of relationships« (Das). The film is not so much a medium of representation, but works as a site of mediality, whereby Eid's interlocutors, in the presence of a camera and audio-recording device, strive to somehow get a hold of the passing of time. They are solicited to give accounts of their relationships to this passing, this passage in time, or else this interval now fashioned by the intrusive, even provocative presence and address of camera and audio recorder.

A survivor himself, Eid the filmmaker brings about, initiates, a context for an encounter of bearing witness, provokes dormant capacities to tell into modes of articulation, into modes of proactively inhabiting memory and temporality. In other words, we can view the film as both a practice of collecting stories and initiating modes of listening to the articulation of stories. The role of listening in practices of bearing witness and testimony has been addressed by the psychologist Dori Laub, in his work with Holocaust survivors. In his chapters »Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening«

and »An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival« (1992), he notes the productive role of the »interviewer-listener«:

To a certain extent, the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing. This joint responsibility is the source of the emerging truth (1992, 85)

His more relational approach to bearing witness regards the listener as a »companion in a journey onto an uncharted land, a journey the survivor cannot traverse or return from alone« (59).

Laub writes from a manifold range of personal experience and professional activity – psychologist, survivor, archivist – developing a compelling sense of trauma as a circumstance in which coping is both endured and acted on. He relates the story of an orphaned boy, Menachem S., who embraces a photograph of his mother as an exercise of »creating his first witness,« so that »the creation of that witness was what enabled him to survive.« This »internal witness,« Laub observes, »substitutes for the lack of witnessing in real life.« It is this sense of habilitating the possibility of witnessing as a practice of address and response that I have been directing towards the film *Chou Sar?* For my purposes I want to borrow and situate Laub's relational approach to bearing witness and emphasize how, in screening memory, the making, screening, and discussion of the film initiates modalities of public listening, initiates the potential of public *response* – situates listening as a modicum of public *responsibility*.

In between his first interviews with Hanna and Emile, respectively, Eid travels to the north to meet his other cousin Bchara Eid, an affable doctor of medicine, whose father was one of the people murdered in the massacre. I write »murdered,« but with its associations of criminality the term is not altogether correct. As Bchara explains, the massacre was deemed a political act of violence, and consequently fell under the jurisdiction of the Amnesty Law. Hence the act of killing cannot be criminalized and brought before a court of law. He refers to the event as »the perfect massacre,« a premeditated »execution« of »thirteen fathers,« causing their families to flee the village. He goes on to mention that an old family feud existed between the Diab and Eid families, and that members of the former family took advantage of the surrounding violence and political affiliations, in Beirut and elsewhere, to carry out the massacre, which Bchara describes as occurring »one evening, in the duration of an hour.«

Where Hanna Eid and Emile Eid tell their stories self-consciously, reflecting on what and how they should tell (both of whom embody a sense that capacities to listen to and hear their stories are compromised by political affiliations), Bchara talks directly about the massacre, political and family motivations, and the difficulty of any legal redress. His story, we can say, is too direct and unaccommodating to be adequately assimilated by a political culture that is better designed to filter the respective accounts of Hanna and Emile, both of whom very well know that their stories implicate a range of allegiances and accommodations that inform capacities to tell and hear, to bear witness and offer testimony. It is for this reason that Bchara, unlike Hanna and Emile, can directly refer to political justice. He says that his father was the first to be summarily killed, »convicted« and murdered:

You say, »Where's the justice in that«? You say, »Where's the law«? Until today there has been no justice. Tell me, how can I go to the village and see this person who killed my father going around free, raising his children? I prefer not to see him. I won't go to the village.

Where Bchara and the filmmaker Eid are attuned to a pursuit of legal, political, and social justice, Hanna is attuned to redemption and revenge. Emile, meanwhile, adheres to the political and clientalist interests of his sect and party.

In his film Eid is otherwise interested in a more personal exchange of speaking and listening, and the intimate circumstances in which silence also becomes a modicum of exchange. His sister, Rose, has made a trip to the village, to visit the abandoned and semi-demolished ruins of the family home. Staying at her apartment in Beirut while working on his film, Eid would have had many conversations with her, as well as shared many silences – moments in which silence is inhabited as a modicum of managing how to tell and hear, negotiating an exchange of emotional comportment. In one significant scene, Rosie prods her brooding brother to speak what's on his mind, to which he responds »nothing.« This minimalist response nevertheless carries a resonance that signifies he has indeed a lot on his mind. When she further presses him to speak, he again answers in the negative. By provoking her brother to speak, Rose also prods him to listen, in this intimate scene where affective and intellectual capacities to speak have always to be exchanged as an accompanying commitment to listen. As she goes on to tell her brother about her visit to the village and their abandoned, semi-destroyed family house, she alludes to a sense of voice trapped in the ruined house, trapped by circumstances in which there is no one willing to listen and bear witness:

This voice is there in me, in you, in our brothers, in all four of us. The voices are present inside us. The voice I heard is in me, in you, in our two brothers. That's why I felt that the walls of the house were weeping. I live in this every day, every hour, every moment. I live it not because I forget, but with the passing of days I tend to forget. I wait and tell myself that a day must come when the truth can appear.

In prodding her brother into an exchange of his moody silence, Rose situates the resonance of this silence as a mode of address, and hence draws voice into a relational dynamic of speaking and listening.

### **Public exposures, exposing publics**

In transposing both the massacre and its aftermath into the significance of an event, *Chou Sar?* foregrounds the political and legislative circumstances in which it remains a non-event. The duration of the tension between non-event and event is two-fold – the temporality of the event of the massacre, and the temporality of what comes into focus as the event of inhabiting and surviving its aftermath. The film, then, does not only recall the pastness of a past event, but also engages the circumstances in which this pastness and this recall can be mediated and articulated. The temporality of this recall informs not only the political circumstances of post-civil war Lebanon, but also circumstances in which members of Eid's close and extended family cope with their traumas and manage to articulate and share their experiences, according to the design of Eid's film.

In coming to address *Chou Sar?*, situating our variable selves as addressees of, and potential listeners to, the various stories presented by the film, we should keep in mind that Eid is preoccupied with a quite specific quest to track what happened *and* the manifold personal, legal, political circumstances in which the query can be posed as a question and elicit a response. He is of course preoccupied with presenting this quest as a documentary film, as what could be regarded as a material and imaginary resource. In the process, one temporal register comes to be transposed into another – the temporality of his quest and work on the film, including the many stories and testimonies he elicits, is transposed into the temporality of the film he presents to a public audience. The anachronic gap between the story told and the style of its telling (his quest to track what happened over a thirty-year period on the one hand, and the stylistic compression and/or distension of this into the length of the film, on the other) is where memory comes to be inhabited and worked on as a productive terrain of reference and mediality, having some bearing on habilitating capacities for telling and listening.

For my purposes here, I want to critically direct this notion of a productive gap between story and narrative towards what Pierre Nora (1989: 8) somewhat nostalgically dismissed as the social life of memory, what he referred to as the loss of »real environments of memory,« – brought about, he argues, by the formal compartmentalization of memory in archives and monuments, commemorations and memorials. Moreover, in situating the film *Chou Sar?* as a proactive mode of inhabiting the wavering gap between what happened in the past and the duration of coping with the aftermath of what happened, memory becomes more than a framework for identification and attachment – as Halbwachs (1992) would have argued. By addressing the temporal implications of such frameworks themselves memory becomes an initiation of social exchange. I have been referring to frameworks as »screening« and »filtering,« placing emphasis on certain distributions of material and imaginary resources that work to constrain how a story can be told and heard, how a personal story can be articulated and gain a public hearing. This »public hearing« the film works to engage has in turn to be understood as an emerging social practice, in the process contributing to initiatives for the production of modalities of public hearing, of a public that is willing to enter a site of address and be situated as a responsive addressee. This transitive sense of memory as that which is proactively worked on to initiate modes of public address and response is somewhat lost to Nora's and Halbwach's more static approaches to memory.

Screening of the film, then, initiates modes of public exchange in which speaking and listening can be exchanged, and not completely constrained by predominant patterns of accommodation. In the almost final scene of the film, when Eid confronts and accuses his mother's murderer, the latter remains deliberately silent. This silence amounts to a withdrawal of voice so as to avoid being situated as an addressee, a refusal of allowing memory of an event to become an event of memory in the present, a refusal of exposing the present to the past. The *political comportment and social decorum* of this silence, Eid wants his audience to consider, informs the censor's interest in disallowing the film from public screening.

As far as Eid is concerned, his capacity to publicly screen his film in Lebanon has to be regarded as a condition of the film's emerging significance as a site for the production of memory. Although the film has been censored from public viewing (including state efforts to ban its screening at local film festivals, which I shall shortly chronicle), Eid and his film have received much media attention in Lebanon. In September 2010 he appeared on MTV's *Talk of the Town (Hadees al-Balad)*, a popular weekly talk show hosted by



Mona Abou Hamze. It is an interesting incident in the public life of the film, as the exchange between Abou Hamze and Eid is somewhat symptomatic of the way in which memory of violence and atrocity in Lebanon is screened by political compartment and social decorum.

In introducing Eid, Hamze first refers to the government's banning of his film from both the *Lebanese Film Festival* and *Ayam Beirut Al Cinema'iya* – annual festivals held in August and March respectively. She shortly recounts his biography and profession, and refers to the massacre (مزبحة) of ten members of his family. After Eid has a chance to recount the massacre, Hamze asks him to introduce a short clip from his documentary, one which captures a primary concern and motivation of Eid in making the film. In the scene he sits with his brother Jean on a bench at his home in Corsica, and says that while the family remains silent about the massacre, there is an urgent need to talk about it. As he goes on to tell his brother, the massacre has significance for the whole country's tragedy, and not only for their family and village.

After this, Hamze says that due to the censorship they cannot show further clips, and then engages Eid to talk about the almost final scene of the film, when in the village he and his small crew stumble across an elderly man of the Diab family, whom he recognizes as his mother's murderer. In this scene, Eid stands before him and with much emotion reverberating through his otherwise deadpan words reminds and accuses the man of his actions. In the ensuing studio discussion between Hamze and Eid, the man isn't named. Hamze goes on to suggest that in that instance, although he seems dumbfounded and offers no response, the man nevertheless carries an air of regret. She then asks why Eid included him and his name in the film, when he probably had a good idea that his film would end up being banned from public viewing in Lebanon. She suggests that he could have been more stylistically playful, less direct in his filmic confrontation and accusation. Eid responds by saying that after his film premiered at the *Dubai International Film Festival* in December 2009, many told him that the film would be banned in Lebanon. So while he had expected this, he nevertheless regards his film as a protest against the *Afou al-A'am*, or General Amnesty Law that I referred to above, passed by the newly formed parliament in the wake of the Ta'if Accord in 1990-91. In fact Eid articulates some very strong words about how politicians (themselves implicated in the violence of the civil war, he says) and the Amnesty Law institutionalized what he refers to as the »killing of memory,« »pushing memory aside,« along with any public inquiry or political process of accountability.

In his following comments Eid focuses on this point, which serves to situate the question of accountability both in tension to and beyond any quest for personal retribution. And yet the host takes a different tack, concentrating again on why he named and even exposed a person as a perpetrator when he knew that this, according to the censors, was taboo, and would prevent the film from public screenings. The theme of forgiveness is then canvassed, and Eid is asked if he can forgive. As he stumbles in his response, it is obvious that for him the question of forgiveness has to take place as a public and political process, and not be limited to a personal register. But the host again narrows down to the personal, and asks the other guest, journalist Nidal al-Ahmadiye, if she has forgiven the murder of her father (no further detail is provided), considering that she knows who the perpetrator was. Al-Ahmadiye replies that she and her family have indeed chosen to forgive.

In the later months of 2010 Eid and his documentary received much media coverage, the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation also doing an interview with him. The censoring of *Chou Sar?* by the General Security seemed to have contributed to the media's interest, with journalists questioning the banning of the film. In one incident, Ziad Baroud, the popular and unconventional Minister of Interior and Municipalities from 2008 until his resignation in May 2011, found himself on the street surrounded by a number of journalists vigorously questioning the banning of the film. His response was to declare his support for a lifting of the ban (a »banning of the ban«), although this never transpired. At the *Beirut International Film Festival* in 2010 the film was screened only for the select jury, which awarded Eid the festival's Special Prize. In 2011 *Chou Sar?* was scheduled to appear in what was defined as the *Forbidden Films Festival*, but at the last minute the General Security withdrew its permission for the film's screening (by, apparently, making a phone call to the festival organizers, on the day of the scheduled screening). This censorship and banning, De Gaulle Eid has said, »force us to erase our memories« (2011).

In November 2010 *Chou Sar?* was shown as part of UMAM's programme »Confronting Memories«, a programme consisting of a series of public screenings of films addressing memory of the civil war.<sup>2</sup> The screenings mostly took place at the Hangar, UMAM's space for cultural and artistic activities. These events involved a public audience and discussion after a viewing of the films. For *Chou Sar?* there were over 200 people in attendance, as the journalist Pierre Abi Saab, an editor of the local

<sup>2</sup> I thank UMAM Documentation & Research, especially the Directors Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim, for giving me access to the audio file of the public forum.

newspaper *Al Akhbar*, introduced the film and the presence of De Gaulle Eid.

Moderating the ensuing discussion, Abi Saab emphasized the value and significance of the film not only for memory of the civil war, but as a site of public response. He refers to Eid's work as a »challenge for the authorities to allow the film a public screening, and not just for academics, intellectuals, and artists.« Abi Saab, a significant public figure in Lebanon, speaks about the censoring of *Chou Sar?* as a stifling of public debate and exchange: »The film was disallowed because we are not allowed to remember ... the censors say they want to protect and support the public, but never gives the public a chance to debate and form its own judgments.« He gives some emphasis to the contradictions embedded in the censor's (الرقيب) claim that the film serves to »incite sectarian conflict,« when it is rather because of this delimiting of public debate that sectarian conflict simmers in political and public cultures.

In his responses to questions and comments from the audience, particularly questions from people who identify themselves as a younger, post-civil war generation, Eid claims that while people of this generation have no direct responsibility for the violence, they do have a responsibility to approach memory of the past as a site of being responsive. »We the children,« Eid says, »are not responsible for the violence, but we are responsible for its memory and for the truth.« The theme of »truth« comes up in many of the questions from the audience, in respect to the style of Eid's film, and concerning his transgression of the conventional taboo of naming and identifying people as perpetrators. Again, Eid emphasizes how the truth is never self-evident, but arises by situating events of the past as themes of public address in the present. Interestingly, this truth emerges in part not merely through a direct mode of address, but by demonstrating how silence, the withdrawal of voice and bearing public witness, works as a productive mode of maintaining the status quo, whereby predominating distributions of material and imaginative resources are channeled into political constituencies of confessional allegiance. As one person from the audience says, referring to the almost final scene when Eid confronts his mother's murderer: »It was great to see for once a perpetrator put in the position of not being able to speak about the past, and being very uncomfortable.«

When asked about how his family has reacted to the film, Eid says that he hasn't had a chance to ask his family, as he refuses to distribute private copies of the film. His family, he says, referring to his cousins and their families, would have to attend a public screening, as have family members on this particular occasion at UMAM:

I have never shown the film privately to my family, and told them that they would have to view it publically, as it was today. In fact today is the first time they've seen it, and I have yet to speak to them about it. Many members of my extended family requested a copy of the film, but I told them that they could only see the film at a public screening, as part of a viewing public in Lebanon.

Eid's commitment to situating his film as a proactive initiation of public discussion can be set against a practice of retribution informed by notions of honour or revenge, which in Lebanon have tended to circulate as modes of familial, gendered, and confessional identifications. Such modalities of retribution can be regarded as an outcome of the failure of the state to engage public provisions of social welfare; more pressingly, public forums for accountability and redress. So while the film may well be therapeutic for De Gaulle Eid and his family, suggested by one person in the audience, as Eid says in his response the film can also be therapeutic for public culture. »The Lebanese need conflict to rescue them from conflict,« Eid quips, understanding conflict as a measure of public debate and discussion.

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ISSN 2191-3897

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Design: Jörg Rückmann, Berlin

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