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Thinking Trauma, Essayistically: Configurations of Home, Loss and Memory in Liwaa Yazji's *Haunted* (*Maskoon*, 2014)

Abstract: Liwaa Yazji's film *Maskoon* (Germany/Syria/Lebanon, 2014), internationally known as *Haunted*, follows nine individuals in the midst of the ongoing civil war in Syria, including a couple trapped in their house surrounded by snipers, a Syrian man of Palestinian descent who has fled to Lebanon, a man holding out in his Damascus home, a Syrian refugee family temporarily living in an archeological ruin, and another living in what used to be a prison. All present themselves and their narratives in direct address to the camera, creating a sense of intimacy and distance. The thoughts of the protagonists—presented as voice-over or with corresponding footage of the interviews—are contrasted with footage of ruins, rubble, and destroyed physical structures. Refracted through the titular metaphor of 'haunting,' the film contemplates how violence and destruction affect one's relationship to memory, home, and loss, intricately interweaving personal and collective experiences. This contribution explores the (audio-)visual metaphors and narrative images used to make the unfolding crisis of experience 'thinkable.' Against the backdrop of findings from trauma theory, this article argues that *Haunted* produces meaning and generates knowledge about trauma *in the making*, especially through essayistic methods and aesthetics. Speaking from the perspective of the filmmaker returning to Syria from exile, the film follows a dialogical approach to explore and share in the social realities of its subjects. Following a media-theoretical reading of Max Bense's "On the Essay and Its Prose" (1948), this article draws on the notion of "essayistic configurations" and "proto-theory" to investigate how the essayistic treatment of trauma bears a potential for challenging cinematic visibility and tellability as well as for the conceptualization of trauma and traumatization.

Keywords: *Maskoon/Haunted*, essayism, essay film, dialog, Syria, civil war, trauma, memory, home, haunting.

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**“I’ll put everything into an album,
so next time I don’t have to open all the boxes.”**

Liwaa Yazjin’s film *Maskoon* (Germany/Syria/Lebanon 2014), internationally known as *Haunted*, follows nine protagonists in the midst of the ongoing civil war in Syria. For the most part, they remain nameless. Still, the protagonists present themselves and their narratives in front of the camera, often interlaced with, in part, highly stylized images of destroyed Syrian neighborhoods, rubble, and debris. They have either left their homes or are about to leave; they hold out or are trapped in their home surrounded by snipers. The film is a contemplation on how violence and destruction affect the relationships to one’s home and to loss, refracted through the titular metaphor of ‘haunting.’ Through varying individual accounts—concrete and specific—, Liwaa Yazji, a Syrian filmmaker, poet, author, and translator who returned to Syria for this film, outlines a wavering commonality. Oscillating between “intimacy and detachment, between narratives that are personal yet sometimes told with an ambiguous distance” (Jurich 43), *Haunted* traces the fragility of memory and familiarity, of materiality and loss. The omnipresent uncertainty and instability of the situation are reflected and extended into the film’s aesthetic and narrative movement, touching on intangible topics and questions of tellability.

Haunted has been described as a poetic documentary with multi-sited and sensory ethnographical qualities, and it forms part of the larger movement of diaspora cinema (Jurich 52). The film could also be described—to situate it within Bill Nichol’s well-known documentary categorization (1991)—as using “reflexive” and “participatory” features. The film does, not formulate a clear line of argument but rather employs, as I will argue, an essayistic logic. It centers less on providing facts about this complex political conflict than on the social reality of the Syrian war, on individual experiences, and a shared *emerging* experience of trauma and displacement. Meandering through the thoughts of its protagonists and images of ruins and rubble alike, *Haunted* articulates a polyphone and highly subjective movement that searches for the possibility of meaning—or possibly a truth—in what is happening. At the same time, it tends towards something abstract and conceptual. I propose that the aesthetic negotiation of such motifs, especially with a focus on progression and emergence, can be explored and better understood by turning to the essay and its method.

Looking at the literature on this subject, it seems there always was and still is a need or a desire to define what an essay film is—interestingly, this often takes the form of listing what the essay film is not. There seem to be two extremes in approaching the essay film: either perceiving the form as a genre or declaring that it is defined by its fluidity and resistance to definition.

However, the essay film eludes traditional or conventional classifications of genre. In the last decades, many authors described the form and methodology of the essay film as being

characterized by a constitutive openness, by indeterminacy and an unboundedness of its subjects (Kramer and Tode 12), by its complex relations of image and sound (Kramer and Tode 12, Blümlinger 15), and by media reflexive articulations. Locating the essay film in the philosophical-artistic field (Krämer and Tode 12), categories such as analogy, association, fragment and playfulness (Papazian and Eades 1), constellation (Adorno) and arrangement (Bense), proportion, topology, hybridity, and deconstruction are usually among its characteristics (Kramer and Tode; Alter and Corrigan; Papazian and Eades). Furthermore, in keeping with the literary-philosophical essay, it is often described as ‘in-between’ in form, method, and attitude (Rascaroli *How the Essay Film Thinks*, Richter “The Essay Film”, Lukács “On the Nature and Form of the Essay, Adorno “The Essay as Form”, Bense “On the Essay and Its Prose”.

One feature that has been foregrounded for the essay since Montaigne and is emphasized (at times) as a central feature of the essay film is its subjectivity. Whether it is presented in strong or subtle ways, this subjectivity of the essay film that is commonly tied back to an authorial subject should be understood as subjectivity aware of its own precariousness. Especially with films such as *Haunted* in mind, rashly relegating the potential for subjectivity to the voice or a voice-over of the author proves problematic. Essayistic forms, especially essayistic films, make us think about subjectivity from a perspective of polyphony and dialogue (Zima; Corrigan). This perspective foregrounds not only the conjuncture of question and answer, but the notion of arrangement, (con-)figuration, and constellation (Bense “On the Essay and Its Prose; Adorno “The Essay as Form”). Laura Rascaroli emphasizes that this idea of dialog encompasses a textually achieved direct address of a “real,” i.e., empirical spectator (Rascaroli “The Essay Film” 186). Subjectivity in *Haunted*, then, arises in the form of a shared, although fragmented subjectivity, emerging through what Adorno would term a “carpet” (Adorno, in Alter and Corrigan 70). It is important to recognize subjectivity as created. Similarly, in the case of *Haunted*, the self-representation of an authorial subject, of the filmmaker herself, may be thought of as *dialogic*. As will be discussed below, this takes place through the form of the interviews and the arrangement of the film, through which Liwaa Yazji explores the social realities of emerging trauma.

In the following, I will show how *Haunted* produces meaning, generates knowledge and how this can be achieved through essayistic methods and aesthetics. For this, I will draw on insights from general essay(ism) research that have not yet been explored in depth for film theory. I hope to show that there is research strongly influenced by literary studies that can be applied to film forms like *Haunted*. In this context, a prominent point of reference is Adorno’s “Essay as Form.” Yet, like Adorno (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination”), I will turn to Max Bense’s reflections on the essay. Bense is particularly well suited for this endeavor because he has recently been subjected to a media-theoretical reading (Ernst “Der Essay als Form,” “Essayistic Imagination”).

Thinking Essayistically: Max Bense's Essay on the Essay

Research on the essay film as well as research on essayism in general have pointed to the fact that essayistic forms of articulation are interwoven with a reflection on their medial conditions (see, e.g., Ernst *Essayistische Medienreflexionen*). For essay video and film, Ursula Biemann, for example, points out that the essayistic practice is “highly self-reflexive in that it constantly reconsiders the act of image-making and the desire to produce meaning” and is “consciously engaged in the activity of representation itself.” (10). Characteristics, she continues, that make the essay especially suited to “study complex relations.” (Biemann 10). The essay film, thus, generates a specific epistemological situation. It is a form that seems to demand a turn towards itself, not only in terms of content but also on the level of cinematic means of representation.

Against the backdrop of literary-philosophical considerations of essayism and media-theoretical implications, I will argue in favor of the media philosophical notion of film—i.e., essayistic film—as a form of “(proto-)theoretical thinking” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 206). This idea transcends the essay film as an aesthetic form. Referring to Max Bense’s “On the Essay and Its Prose” and, moreover, its media-theoretical reading proposed by Christoph Ernst (*Essayistische Medienreflexionen* 135, “Der Essay als Form,” “Essayistic Imagination”), Bense’s work can enlighten not only the relation of film and theory but also the underlying epistemology of the essayistic situation.

Essayistic thinking about media from the 1920s onwards ties in with the development of media aesthetics and media theory in the German-speaking world (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 205). It is a deliberation about media as well as a reflection on the essay in which “the essayistic was (re)discovered as a cipher for a specific form of thinking” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 205). These considerations coincide with observations about changing media technologies and human perception, a notion that seems equally timely today.¹ When it comes to theoretical works about the essay, Theodor W. Adorno’s “Essay as Form” (1958) tends to overshadow Max Bense’s work to whom he actually referred (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 206, Zima 164). Bense is more often recognized for his works on semiotics and pioneering computer theory than for being a cultural theorist (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 206, see also Fröschle).

For Bense, the essay is an “expression of an experimental method of thinking” (“Der Essay und Seine Prosa” 27). As Ernst points out, this describes an epistemic situation inspired by

1 Christoph Ernst elaborates on this line of argument in relation to present day technologies and notions of posthumanism and machine or non-human centered aesthetics and abilities. See: Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 205.

metaphors of “experiment” and “experience”:²

The essay is an expression of an experimental method of thinking and writing as a justified or animated action of the mind, but also an expression of literary activity to lend contours to certain objects, to give to reality existence. Neither the objects nor the thoughts about them appear in the state of eternity or existence, they appear as relative objects and the thoughts are slowly brought into an arrangement that they can become the subject of a theory. (Bense “Der Essay und Seine Prosa” 27, translated by Ernst in “Essayistic Imagination” 208)

Through arrangement—with Adorno: constellation and configuration—, essayistic thinking is able to create space for the emergence of its object (Ernst “Der Essay als Form” 3). Bense clearly delineates the essay from scientific modes and methods of thinking. Positioning the essay in between the “registers of art and literature” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 208), the essay, according to Bense, occupies a “*Confinium*” (Bense, in Alter and Corrigan 52), a “strange borderland” as “something third” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 208). This mode of thinking is an experimental process with the “methodic quality of a ‘proto-theoretical’ procedure” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 208). It is about developing a “theoretical perspective on an object” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 208), making the object accessible for systematic consideration:

‘Essay’ means ‘attempt’ or ‘experiment’ in German [*Versuch*]. This raises the question whether this expression means that a literary-leaning person ‘attempts’ to write about something, or whether the writing about an explicit or a partly explicit topic has the character of an attempt, an experiment with that topic. (Bense 1948, in Alter and Corrigan 52)

In a 1952 version of his seminal text, Bense highlights the “experimental preparation of an idea, a thought, a subsuming image from a certain amount of experiences, considerations and ideas.” (“Der Essay und Seine Prosa” 28, translated by Ernst in “Essayistic Imagination” 208) and emphasizes that the essay is, “at best, the genesis of a theory,” where “one senses a certain truth but does not yet have it” (“Der Essay und Seine Prosa” 28, translated by Ernst in “Essayistic Imagination” 208). This, however, does not mean that the essay is—or can be—free or void of concepts. As Adorno puts it, the essay receives its concepts “immediately” and makes them more “precise only though their relationship to one another” (in Alter and Corrigan 69):

Not less but more than a definitional procedure, the essay presses for the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience. In such

2 For broader theoretical context, see Müller Funk *Erfahrung und Experiment*.

experience, concepts do not form a continuum of operations. Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. (Adorno, in Alter and Corrigan 70)

Using terms like progression and linguistic images like “carpet” and “texture,” Adorno uses metaphors that hint at crucial aspects in Bense’s approach to the essay. It also shows that the essay—even in its literary form—has to be conceptualized as a visual phenomenon.

Bense describes the essay as a free and open media-reflexive form and connects this with a temporal, spatial, dialogical, and material notion. The conditions of the medium in which experimental, relational thoughts—i.e., essayistic activity—find expression interact intricately with its articulation. The *process* of writing *arranges*, that is to say: it gives *space*, *form*, and *relation* to thoughts with a dialogic approach of *question* and *answer*. This approach implies a “step into the unknown.” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 208). Bense reiterates the role played by the conditions defined by the medium. For him, “thinking *with* writing is, at least metaphorically, understood as a physical-haptical process of working with the medium (‘turns his object around,’ ‘feels’)” (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 207). In his writings, Bense foregrounds the materiality of the medium but also the perception of the process of articulation while it is taking place (Ernst “Essayistic Imagination” 209):

Thus, the essayistic experiment becomes a genuine act of ‘creation.’ The method of this kind of thinking is based on an interaction of cognitive activity and an autonomous medial ‘operating space’—recognized by Bense as a relevant epistemic dimension for the genesis of knowledge in its own right [...]. (Ernst referring to Krämer in “Essayistic Imagination” 210)

These conceptualizations are helpful in focusing on the concrete material situation, which is in various forms integral to *Haunted*. However, in taking Bense seriously, it is not sufficient to simply describe or depict the “proto-theoretical.” The notion itself crosses over into one’s own methodological and theoretical premises and determines the approach to one’s own subject, in our case, speaking about Yazji’s *Haunted*. It is symptomatic that writings on the essay and essayism tend towards being essayistic themselves. Following Adorno, among others, theory and object cannot be separated in essayistic contexts. Essayistic epistemology, thus, should be understood as transgressive. Following this premise, the present contribution explores (audio-)visual metaphors and narrative images used to make the unfolding crisis of experience ‘thinkable,’ hence, its aim at elaborating on the essayistic generation of knowledge in *Haunted*. Of particular importance here is the notion of “essayistic configurations,” as this term has recently been identified as the main element of a media-theoretical interpretation of an essayistic epistemology. With

regard to cultural theoretical interpretations and theorizations, this undertaking might be understood as being “proto-theoretical” in itself.

(Con-)Figurations of Haunting: Mediality, Spatiality, and Temporality

Historically, essayistic productivity increases in times of crisis; the essayistic can be understood as symptomatic, responding to a state of uncertainty and emergency (Alter 15). Similarly, Peter Sloterdijk identifies a time-diagnostic fundamental situationalism (*zeitdiagnostischer Fundamentalsituationalismus*) for essayism (48). This addresses not only the critical stance of essayism, that is—at least since Lukács letter on the essay in 1910—a prominent theme in literature on the essay, but also emphasizes an inherent political dimension of the essayistic. Current film scholars, like Nora M. Alter (2018), Ursula Biemann (2003), or Brenda Hollweg and Igor Krstić (2021), have also emphasized the political and especially post-colonial dimension of essay practices.

Unsurprisingly, the term “crisis” and “critic” have a shared etymology: both are derived from the Latin *crisis*, meaning “judgment or critical stage.” And, the Latin word *crisis* is itself borrowed from the Greek *krisis*, meaning an “act of separating, decision, judgment, event, outcome, turning point, sudden change.”³ In his concluding remarks in “On the Essay and Its Prose,” Bense also speaks to this duality and reiterates the “perpetual dynamism” (Alter 49) of essayistic thinking: “The essay serves the crisis and its conquest by provoking the mind to experiment, to configure things differently, but it is not simply an accent, a mere expression of the crisis.” (Bense, in Alter and Corrigan 59). Many of the best-known essay films are expressions of some form of crisis—Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, France, 1956), Harun Faroki’s *Between Two Wars* (*Zwischen zwei Kriegen*, West Germany 1978), Alexander Kluge’s *Yesterday Girl* (*Abschied von gestern*, West Germany, 1966), the work of Rhity Panh and Patricio Guzmán, to name just a few.

Such aesthetic treatments of crisis are often linked to an experience of (historical, collective) trauma. In many aspects, Liwaa Yazji’s *Haunted* epitomizes those aspects of cinematic thinking in terms of crisis, uncertainty, and time-diagnostic fundamental situationalism. With the camera being in the midst of an ongoing civil war that has killed and continues to displace countless people, it stands to reason to turn to trauma theory for analysis of the film. Trauma theory subsumes a multitude of perspectives and disciplines, originally centering around the experience of Holocaust survivors, clinical interests including post-traumatic stress disorders, and public discourse about memory (Elsaesser 194). Paradigmatically, the

3 Merriam-Webster Online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis#learn-more>.

works of Cathy Caruth (1996) and Susannah Radstone (2000) show how transferring trauma theory, probing, and developing analytical concepts to trauma (e.g., psychoanalytical and hermeneutic approaches) within the context of the humanities can prove beneficial—especially with respect to memory and history (Elsaesser 194). Regarding trauma, this article follows a bottom-up approach by reading Liwaa Yazji's film within an essayistic frame against the backdrop of specific aspects of trauma theory in order to ascertain how the film produces meaning about trauma.

Haunted builds on different meanings of its title. In various movements and (con-)figurations, the film develops different perspectives on haunting and keeps re-imagining them. Three of its central impulses are temporality, spatiality, and mediality—all three reverberate with Bense's thoughts on the essay as well as with trauma theory.

The first images of *Haunted* are images of a shaky, hand-held, and strongly zoomed-in pan across windows and balconies of an opposing apartment building at night. Through illuminated windows, we get glimpses into intimate everyday scenes from an eerie distance. These images are accompanied by a male voice, which—almost as if reciting a fictional tale—recounts a story of a woman preparing to flee her home. This woman, as he concludes, is his mother, Hala. The film cuts to a diffuse image of a person watching what seems to be an amateur video of a violent scene in a Syrian street. Then, the title—*Maskoon / Haunted*—appears on the screen and introduces the overarching metaphor of the film. In Arabic, 'Maskoon' has the double meaning of 'inhabited or inhabitable' and 'haunted,' derived from the root 'to dwell' (Jurich 47). Etymologically, the English word 'haunted' can be traced back to 'habit' (in the sense of 'to frequent,' implying repetition) and also to the Germanic root **haima*, meaning a 'dwelling.' The latter, up until today, echoes in the German *Heimat*, meaning home, homeland and habitat.⁴

Liwaa Yazji's *Haunted* foregrounds mediality and medial configurations. In this prolonged conflict, the status of (moving) images proves increasingly precarious, complex, and fraught. This is where *Haunted* becomes not only an inherently political project but also an essayistic one. In Syria, images and videos often appear in interconnected "political, evidentiary and documentary" contexts with unclear authorship and debatable authenticity (Jurich 42). The decrease in reliable reporting coincides with a proliferation of digital images

4 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/haunt#etymology>. Curiously, in the German translation, 'haunted' loses its passive voice. Usually, it translates to the active verb '*spuken*,' to haunt, as in 'it haunts in this house.' This is reflected in Sigmund Freud's famous essay on "The Uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*). Following primarily Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and various ideas from post-modernist philosophy a notion of an "uncanny essayism" (*unheimlicher Essayismus*) is developed in Ernst *Essayistische Medienreflexion* 394. In her text on *Haunted*, Joscelyn Jurich also refers to Freud's uncanny.

in social media, of which Donatella Della Ratta's *Shooting a Revolution* (2018), for example, provides an in-depth analysis. In *Haunted*, various protagonists state that they are looking for their homes and neighborhoods online, and one protagonist even states that he saw his home being destroyed on television. The film comes back to those images multiple times, shows someone looking at a tablet, mobile phone, or television, and reveals the haunting impetus of their potential availability. Due to the circumstances and the danger of the production, the whole film was shot with minimalistic equipment, even mobile phones (Jurich 46). Some of the resulting images and the additional footage Yazji uses have a more journalistic and documentary quality, making their imagery reminiscent of the circulating footage. Immediacy and sometimes the notion of danger and clandestinity are inherent to those images, but at the same time, they refer to their constructed nature, their mediality.

Prolonged Skype conversations between the filmmaker, and the couple Rufeida and Abed, whose names we only learn coincidentally, form an integral and probably the most haunting part of *Haunted*. The couple lives in an exclusion zone, too dangerous for in-person interviews. Resulting from the Skype setting are images and a situation that stress their medialized nature as well as convey a sense of immediacy by anchoring the viewer in an, at times, intimate but always direct conversation between the filmmaker and the couple. With the title still on the screen, there is the familiar Skype ringtone, and a woman asks, "Can you hear me?"⁵ multiple times. The camera turns to the computer display so that we see Rufeida, who remains trapped in her home with her husband Abed, surrounded by snipers. Although they are preparing to leave, their home is the safest place at the moment. Throughout the film, these Skype conversations emerge as a point of reference. They speak to the complexity of the situation: stress, worry, incomprehension, memory, nostalgia, finding a language for what is happening, the idea of home, work, relationships, everyday life, and moments of relief all come together here. Yazji finds a very specific arrangement for these scenes: she films the computer screen, which reproduces a technical visibility. In turn, this technique produces a pale and grainy, strangely framed and, at times, distorted image, whose location is ambiguous but somehow inhabited.

A few times, the camera catches her reflection on the screen, giving her a ghostly appearance amidst the layers of mediality. Emerging from this mediality, which extends to the spectator over several screens, is an unsettling effect of intimacy and distance. The sound of continuous gunfire and bombing accompanies us through the various screens. Rufeida's initial address implicates the viewer in the mediation of their dire situation. Later, she questions the evidentiary impetus of filming by asking: "Suppose anything happens to us—would that be our last document?"

5 Quotes from the film correspond to the English subtitles provided on the German DVD-Edition of *Haunted* (mec film, Berlin, 2014).



Figure 1. Still of Rufeida and Abed talking with the filmmaker via Skype.
Haunted, screenshot.

Jurich ascribes a palpable quality to these images. They are, as she puts it, “felt rather than visualized” (49). Beyond that, these images can be read as images of crisis. With these medial configurations, Yazji is able to find an aesthetic that functions as a visual hermeneutic and a visual metaphor able to address the crisis of representation and referentiality, including the crisis of indexicality of the photographic image emphasized in trauma theory (Elsaesser 194, Caruth). She does so, and this seems relevant to me *during the process of* traumatization. In this constellation, the before mentioned self-reflexivity of the essay film crystallizes in that it condenses what becomes tangible throughout the film. Thus, the film can be appropriately described with Biemann’s words: “Essayist work doesn’t aim at documenting realities but at organizing complexities.” (10).

Body of Dissolution: Ruins and Space

Haunted addresses the question of non-representability of trauma, of non-availability (*Unverfügbarkeit*) of traumatic experiences *in their making* through spatial metaphors. Long shots and photographs of empty, destroyed but once inhabited spaces, of buildings and neighborhoods, allow for an overview, absent in the protagonists’ homes. Yet, the overview is a testimonial to the war and the annulment of home, accompanied either by the disembodied voices of the protagonists or by ambient soundscapes.

The film explores the protagonists’ relationship of home by being with them in their perilous, temporary, or makeshift places that are linked to different stages of loss, displacement, as well as civil and emotional status. Like their names, most of their locations remain indeterminate. Only in the credits do we learn their first names and where they were at the time of filming—Damascus, Beirut, Idleb, and Kefernubel. Aside from the trapped

Rufeida and Abed, *Haunted* includes a man returning to Golan and leaving his dreams of a progressive lifestyle behind, a man holding out alone in his Damascus apartment, a man of Palestinian descent who fled with his family from Syria to Beirut, a refugee family living in an archeological ruin and another currently residing in the former Sawiri prison in Lebanon.

Ruins and historical buildings in *Haunted* can be described as “abject spaces” (Jurich 48) that function as “remainder and a reminder” (Jurich 47). Implying inhabitation as well as repetition, the haunting of the ruins in *Haunted* also ties back to the idea of political and historical iteration—of war, displacement, disruption of the established order—, to the concrete experience of the subject, the precariousness of its home and its memory.



Figure 2. Ruins of a bombed out Syrian street.
Haunted, screenshot.

By means of architectural ruins, Yazji introduces the metaphor of the body. *Haunted* refrains from depicting physical violence and avoids images with shock value. Instead, the film shows violence against physical structures, buildings, and streets, which thus stand in as bodies. A metaphor that, for example, Abed also invokes when he speaks of the ruins of the neighborhood as “skeletons.” The destruction becomes a corporeal inscription, an inscription in the memory of the city, which stands in for the people. Simultaneously, architecture is, at its core, a highly determined or fixed arrangement; it is ‘ordered’ space. By showing the aftermath of destruction, Yazji also shows the disintegration of arrangements. This dissolution of arrangement is reflected in smaller units where it gains a different quality. For example, while a young man talks about an explosive device found in the apartment, the camera slowly moves through the kitchen and the living room. There is a contemplating notion, a denial of overview. The camera moves over countertops that indicate an abrupt departure; the view is briefly obstructed by remaining curtains and moves over broken glass on the floor. The camera captures details and, as so often in *Haunted*, zooms in. Pre-filmic

arrangements become new aesthetic configurations, resembling topographies and patterns. Losing their indexicality, the images are ultimately dissolved by the camera, visually reiterating the moment of crisis in documenting and witnessing. *Haunted* searches for a visual language for “more abstract, intangible processes of social and cultural transitions” (Biemann 10). Returning to Syria, Liwaa Yazji contemplates the stories of her subjects and her surroundings while, at the same time, dealing with her own experience of displacement, exile, and trauma. What at first may seem as a negotiation of the (collective) trauma of the film’s protagonists, is rather an attempt to relate (to) subjects in the first place—and thus to find one/herself as a subject. Through the essayistic method, in which subjectivity as well as (self-)reflexivity find a central moment of thought and representation, the space of self-representation also opens up for the filmmaker. She utilizes a polyphony of voices to—in Bense’s sense—mull over and arrange subjectivities and metaphors. Nevertheless, apart from a few blurred images and the occasional questions from the off, her visible and auditive presence in the film remains precarious, speaking to a “presence-absence” of the enunciator (Rascaroli *The Personal Camera* 37). She speaks from a metaphorical and literal “position of placelessness” (Biemann 10). However, through cinematic articulation, the filmmaker—not only as a representative—articulates a position, a claim in taking inventory of the destruction, in the “rewriting” (Biemann 10) and re-mapping of the “historical dimensions of places” (Biemann 10) she is a part of, transcending the tangible towards the political. Thus, the point here cannot be an ontological determination of the trauma as that of the filmmaker or that of the protagonists. Rather, in *Haunted* subjectivity—and thus trauma—manifests itself *relationally* in dialogic events. Liwaa Yazji *shares dialogically* in the trauma of the onscreen protagonists she enables to emerge as political subjects, while claiming (political) space herself.

Haunted Memories: Objects and Loss

Liwa Yazji’s film draws on the notion of memory being intricately interwoven with an external network that is social, symbolic, medial, and material. The people in her film constantly speak to this while deciding what to pack, what to hide, how to condense memories tied to material objects like pictures, glass vases, or books, and how not to lose things through looting or destruction in their inevitable absence—all the while knowing about the futility of their task. *Haunted* focuses on the value attached to these objects by their owners. Other than the houses and buildings which have to be left, these memory-objects—like the books that formed us or souvenirs from friends who already fled—can or *could* be moved. Reverting to the motif of sorting objects, the film highlights a transient element of memory to which the attribute of home can be ascribed. Oversimplifying it:

we are at home in our memory-objects, in the sense that they trigger memories and store references and starting points for narrating ourselves through time. *Haunted* accentuates the precarity of such material anchors both visually and narratively. Detailed shots of memorabilia or unpacked books are contextualized by their owners and contrasted with images of broken interiors and those things left behind in a hurry. In one scene, the camera follows a young man who returns to the family flat to collect a dark coat for his mother, who attends a wedding. He talks about him leaving while the camera rests on a small photograph of a young girl. With a slight hint of amusement, the young man shows the camera glass vases, crystals, and, lastly, a royal jubilee plate from his grandparents' trip to Spain in 1978, all carefully hidden in the back of a closet by his mother: "This is what she wants [...]. These are the things that are valuable to her," he says, "I hope they don't get destroyed." The film undercuts any notion of a new home by not disclosing any current location for the family; instead, the camera shows that their belongings are still here. Yazji traces the ambivalent aspect of those (transient) memory-objects. Provided that these objects are intertwined with the notion of home, they bear the potential of haunting us, both in their absence after losing them as well as in the reminiscence of a home they once belonged to. Subtly, the film changes perspectives by following objects themselves. Looted household objects, decontextualized, are sold on illegal markets; returning to the building site in Beirut, electric appliances and household objects are thrown in a big container to be discarded.

If identity presupposes a sense of coherency of memory of experiencing and narrating oneself through time (Quante and Straub 2001) as well as taking into account that memory has to be—in parts—understood as externalized, one of the hauntings *Haunted* conceptualizes is that of a memory and therefore an identity of crisis, of temporal erosion and disintegration that aligns with trauma in the making.

In the filmic present of *Haunted*, different times, or more precisely, different temporal figures of memory coincide: in the present, not only the spatial escape is prepared, but the preparations refer to what is to be or can be remembered in the future by means of material objects or loss thereof. Memories from the past adhere to these material objects, and their durability is negotiated. For example, when one of the protagonists plans to prepare an album of mementos for his *next* forced migration, or even migrations, and remarks that leaving without anything would mean ripping out a part of his heart: "I don't know what that feels like. But everything would be gone. And me with it. [...] What could prove that I once lived?" The film repeatedly contrasts the recurring character of the experience with (radical) loss. In the archeological ruins that now shelter a family, *Haunted* introduces the story of an old man who lost the only picture of his late son:

I had a photo of a son who died long ago. And that was the only photo of him. It really affected me. It was like I lost something very precious. I mean he's entirely

gone now. Before I used to imagine him. I'd look at the photograph and it was like he was right there. But now I no longer imagine him. He's gone from my memory.

To him, the loss of the photographic image, the material carrier that prompted an immediate memory, results in an inability to produce a mental image. The metaphor of the missing image, which stands for a gap in personal and collective memory, is a common topos in the context of trauma and its aesthetic negotiation, explicitly, for instance, in Rithy Panh's *The Missing Picture* (*L'image manquante*, Cambodia/France, 2013). Usually, it is related to the (politically motivated) lack of (visual) evidence for atrocities as well as to the failing integration of such events into memory. In that respect, *Haunted* also takes on the role of a witness in that it gives visual and narrative space to traumatization. Liwaa Yazji creates space, a public (and even global) space for the narratives of the protagonists. Yazji keeps the protagonists (mostly) anonymous and their current place vague, thereby invoking a sense of universality in concrete experience and thought. However, by producing cinematic visibility and tellability, she not only performs a political gesture but also provides "the anonymous with a voice and enables them to become political subjects" (Hollweg and Krstić 11).⁶

Thinking Trauma Essayistically: A Conclusion

Essayistic treatments of trauma bear potential for challenging cinematic visibility and tellability as well as for questioning the generation of knowledge about trauma, memory, and loss at the same time. Liwaa Yazji's *Haunted* shows that this holds especially true when focusing on the unfolding of traumatizing events, on their progression. In trauma theory, as well as in aesthetic negotiations of trauma, the "latency hypothesis" (Elsaesser 195), based in post-Holocaust discourse, is commonly accepted. The hypothesis suggests that a temporal distance between the traumatizing event and their aesthetic treatment is considered necessary. However, *Haunted* suggests that essayistic aesthetics are able to generate proto-images and—in the sense of Bense's "proto-theory"—a specific knowledge about trauma *in the making*. By indicating a process of relational subjectivity, through cinematic articulation, Liwaa Yazji carves out an important transgressive moment of trauma, in which historical and social realities of traumatic experiences transcend the individual and personal, but are *not yet* established as collective trauma discursively, in the sense of being accessible via available and comprehensible reference practices. An epistemological approach in the footsteps of Bense

6 These and similar aspects of narrative subjectivity could be explored further with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity (1988, revised edition 2010).

is able to account for that process and, thus, is able to open up the analysis of essayistic films like *Haunted* for further considerations.

The last scenes in *Haunted* are a montage of voices and images. For the first time, we see (but do not hear) footage of a bombing in the distance. A cloud of smoke rises from the explosion, while we hear fragments of thoughts from the protagonists: Abed talks about the coffee pot—an heirloom from his parents featured earlier in the film—that he has forgotten in his former home and adds, “Even the decision that I did not want to leave I have forgotten.” Here, the film circulates around the notion of caesura—“another place, another time,” as Abed puts it. The lingering question of returning overshadows blurry images of the filmmaker packing, repeating the actions of her subjects, and sharing (again) in the experience. Yazji takes one more short and subtle turn on her dialogical approach: without the protagonists’ voices and interviews, the dialogic emphasis shifts, now lying between the filmmaker and us viewers. Throughout the film, Liwaa Yazji uses the ambivalence of images and their arrangement to articulate her place and her perspective on social realities. Here, these images expand the notion of relationality of trauma onto the viewer. Finally, a hand-held camera is walked through a snowy Syrian street. Only hearing her footsteps, the filmmaker’s presence haunts these last images. *Haunted*’s ending, while not rejecting the recurrent idea that trauma can be assimilated and integrated through narrative means and images (Caruth), clearly casts doubt on it.

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