Soul of the Documentary
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Moments of affection

One of the most ubiquitous documentary forms one encounters in art galleries and museums today is the talking head. This seemingly blunt audiovisual composition is striking for at least two reasons. Firstly, one is often perplexed by the presumed objectivity in the uses of the form: the visual frame is frequently used as a simple mediator of the experiences verbalized by the person in front of the camera. The relationship between testimonial speech and the talking head frame has become a pervasive “moment of truth” recognizable across media, ranging from confessional videos posted online and television talk shows to video art. It is a relationship that alerts the viewer to bear witness to a significant testimonial moment.

The proliferation of talking heads in media culture has, however, also generated artworks that weigh the conditions of the testimonial talking head in their expression. For example, the Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman displays a series of silent talking heads in an ascending spiral of second-hand televisions in a recent installation piece. Citizens from the remotest corners of Turkey stare mutely at the camera in the familiar testimonial frame. The power of Column (2009) is precisely that it shows the children, youngsters, adults, and the elderly as silent in a frame that comes with the association of speech in contemporary media culture. Muteness foregrounds the citizens’ inability to make their voices heard, to tell their stories.

Whereas Ataman’s piece challenges the simple objectivity of the audiovisual form with the series of television monitors and mute testifiers, Jayce Salloum’s everything and nothing (Canada 2001) experiments with the conditions of the testimonial moment in a more explicit take on the talking head frame. Salloum approaches the testimonial frame at the intersection of the recognizable testimonial moment and moments of affection. Accordingly, the video raises questions about the mediating aptitude of the testimonial frame as well as about its affective capacities.

Like many other testimonial videos, everything and nothing is actually an interview. It is an interview with the Lebanese resistance fighter Soha Bechara taped only a short while after her release from the notorious El-Khiam detention center in December 1999. Bechara was twenty-one at the time of her arrest and spent ten years at El-Khiam, six years of which in complete isolation. She was arrested after a failed attempt to assassinate the leader of the South Lebanese army, Antoine Lahad. The assassination attempt and the captivity made her a national hero, a spokesperson for her people. When Salloum was in Beirut working on another project in 1992,
he noted that posters of the woman were common; they graced the walls of public spaces and in private homes, they were placed next to martyrs of war, in places of honor.5

The interview takes place in Paris where Bechara relocated to study international law after her release. The resulting video coincides in part with the general interest directed at Bechara’s experiences in captivity but it simultaneously refuses to simply mediate the rather stratified view of the political figure repeated in other media. Salloum remarks that he was hesitant to ask for the interview in the first place as Bechara was being “interviewed to death by the European and Arab press about her captivity [...].”6 Put differently, the video is reluctant to position itself as another window on war experiences and torture.

This is obviously not to say that everything and nothing somehow bypasses the experiences that its subject embodies. Rather, the video aims at avoiding the “gratifications of immediacy”7 that come with the simple objectivity of the testimonial frame. The video is part of an ongoing installation project – untitled – in which Salloum deals with the interstitial spaces and subjectivities shaped by experiences of war and conflict. In the variant setup of the installation, interviews in and about the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) are projected in pairs with ambient footage shot by Salloum from train and bus windows while he was traversing the country at the time of the NATO bombings in 1999. Footage from Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon is paired with views of clouds. In the installation setup, everything and nothing stands out: It is a single-channel loop played on a TV monitor.8 Although the video stands out structurally, it is actually not that different from the other pieces. It is just that the interstices that the other pieces explore with the paired screenings – FRY and views from train

Figure 9: A testimonial moment. Frame enlargement courtesy of the filmmaker and the Video Data Bank.
and bus windows; refugee camps and views of clouds – are internal to the testimonial video.

As the video loops in the farthest corner of the room, it attracts one's attention with abrupt cuts and rather perplexing changes of view: at first glance, the camera frames a solemn woman who looks directly into the space reserved for the viewer, but a second look shows the same woman smiling wholeheartedly in the frame. Thus far, her words are inaudible as they are transmitted through headphones that are placed on a black sofa in front of the TV monitor. The video lasts about 40 minutes and, as one sits through the loop, the transitions between these views become more and more tangible.

At the beginning of the video, Bechara sits on a bed with a serious look on her face and in Arabic tells the camera who she is and why she has agreed to do the interview. Framed in a medium shot – the testimonial frame – she talks about the struggle for Lebanon and her arrest. She speaks solemnly yet softly, convincing the listener of her dedication with calm and reflective articulation. The beginning of the tape ties the woman to a discourse of political witnessing in which the boundary between personal experiences and the public domain becomes blurred.

The interview space adds to a sense of blurred boundaries. A white wall and a closed door in the background structure the interview space. Even though the interview takes place in Bechara’s room, there are no personal elements in sight. From the viewer's perspective, the enclosed and tightly framed space is easily associated with an anonymous setting in which Bechara speaks as the voice of the resistance. Overall, the beginning of everything and nothing reminds one of the simple objectivity associated with testimonial videos. A fixed camera records Bechara's speech and it is not difficult to imagine that Bechara has spoken of her capture and release and its historical context a thousand times before. She speaks in a reflective and convincing manner, directing her eyes to the floor submerged in thought or occasionally looking straight at the camera as if to summon the viewer to the cause.

A few minutes into the video, the testimonial frame changes. A sudden cut turns into black frames that are followed by a close-up of Bechara’s face. Then, the camera zooms out to a medium shot only to zoom back in, this time to a tighter medium frame. The testimonial frame is restored, only at a slightly different angle. After a few minutes more, the camera zooms back to a close-up of Bechara’s face. Over these first four minutes of the interview, Bechara explains that she agrees to participate in conferences and give interviews because it gives her a chance to talk about the choices
and possibilities available in the post-release period. It also gives her a chance to remind people of the long line of human rights violations inflicted on Lebanon and elsewhere that should be documented and remembered in order for a collective future to become possible. After Bechara has contemplated the need to act as a witness in order for us to know where we “who are a small drop in the world” are headed, a cut to black ensues. From the black frame, the visuals return to Bechara who now sits on the bed in the same position as before and looks at the interviewer beside of the camera. She rests her head in her hand with an expectant look on her face, smiles and asks in French “You don’t understand?”, to which Salloum answers from behind the camera, also in French, “I don’t understand but it’s ok.”

Salloum’s entrance into the testimonial frame follows the abrupt zooms and edits and yet it comes as a surprise. His sudden audible presence as well as the fact that he does not understand Arabic reorient the viewer’s relationship to the video. What began as a recognizable testimonial moment passes into a compound of questions and answers in which the “failed transmissions” are clearly foregrounded. From this point on, the questions that Salloum poses in broken French are audible on the soundtrack. Sometimes he resorts to English when he cannot express himself otherwise. Once Salloum asks her from behind the camera if Bechara has finished answering because he has no idea what she just said.

Bechara’s account becomes more personal as it becomes related to Salloum’s search for words. She talks about what she left behind when she moved to Paris [“everything and nothing”], how she experiences the distances between Paris, Beirut, and El-Khiam and why she never puts flowers in water. When Salloum has difficulties in finding words, Bechara comes to his assistance and compliments his “very sweet questions.” The speaking positions become more fluid as Bechara takes charge of the situation and Salloum openly reflects about the questions he poses. Addressing Bechara’s survival methods in El-Khiam, Salloum states that “I don’t want to ask you directly about that.” Instead, he wants Bechara to tell the “little stories” of her captivity.

According to Michael Allan, *everything and nothing* is a conceptual site for considering the problems of representation, mediation, and translation. What I have said about the tape thus far supports Allan’s argument. The piece criticizes the overexposed way in which experiences of war and torture are typically mediated and represented, and one of the ways in which *everything and nothing* performs this criticism is by foregrounding the linguistic threshold between the two parties of the interview. As the video confuses the speaking positions and thus also the viewer’s expectations
of the talking head testimonial, it takes a political stance regarding the recognizability of the testimonial moment. The testimonial frame in a sense breaks with itself in order to call into question the overexposed procedures of testifying. Judith Butler notes: “What happens when a frame breaks with itself is that a taken for granted reality is called into question, exposing the orchestrating designs of the authority who sought to control the frame.”

*Everything and nothing* weighs the conditions of the testimonial moment and evaluates the historically and culturally set positions of the testifier, the interviewer and the viewer in its audiovisual disposition. Thus, it offers a specter of new apprehensions about the testimonial moment itself. Politically speaking, it puts on display the norms that control the testimonial moment and its frame. This aligns with Butler’s assertion that there is always something that exceeds the frame that does not conform to the established understanding of things.

For the present purposes, Butler’s suggestion that the breaking out of frames could be their very function in contemporary media culture is particularly poignant. In her discussion of images of war and torture, she draws attention not so much to what is seen in the images, but to the discursive connections of the images. The point is that as the images break with themselves, their circulation may eventually cause a break in the silent, quotidian acceptance of war. As the frames open up to their outside, they gain a political function. It is, in fact, the outside of the frame – what is in excess of the frame – that holds political power in Butler’s thought.

Another example that uses and considers the testimonial frame is useful in this regard. Errol Morris’s documentary The Fog of War (2003) consists of 11 lessons in which the former American Secretary of State Robert McNamara presents his views on warfare. In *The Fog of War*, McNamara rationalizes the decisions made during the Vietnam War and aims at shedding light on the Vietnam experiences of the American nation. His apparent goal is to remove the fog surrounding the Vietnam War, but Morris’s stylistic choices actually place the fog in McNamara’s own gaze.

McNamara presumes to have subjective control of his words and the testimonial situation, and presents his rationalizations as convincing results based on years of experience and consequent expertise on warfare. According to Michael J. Shapiro, framing is one of the outstanding audiovisual devices with which the film enacts its politics against McNamara. In *The Fog of War*, the camera moves constantly and places McNamara to the corners of the frame and at times even partly outside the frame. As a result, he is not given the position of an official testifier. Morris’s criticism toward McNamara intensifies in the two moments where the former Secretary of
State is placed at the center of the frame: both times he implicitly admits to having made mistakes during the operation in Vietnam.

Morris’s aesthetics of the frame breaks with the subjective control and rationalizations of the speaker by first refusing the testimonial frame and then using it as a heightened aesthetic device. In *The Fog of War*, the frame breaking with itself is deployed as an initial condition in the film’s political setup, but the reinstitution of the testimonial frame is the documentary’s ultimate path to a “moment of truth.” In *everything and nothing*, the breaks of the frame take place in conjunction with a deep admiration of the political convictions of the testifier.

As *everything and nothing* vacillates between the official testimonial frame and its deframings it participates in discursive criticism of the testimonial moment. It offers a view of the possibilities of speaking, listening, and viewing involved in the testimonial moment. As a conceptual site or as a locus of discursive politics, the testimonial frame intertwines with the epistemological question of how a frame delimits the possible testimonies implicit in the testimonial moment. One could argue that the frame operates precisely in relation to the possibilities that remain outside, but that are constantly referred to in the frame’s operations. However, although the experiments in the relationship between testimonial speech and the talking head frame clearly have a critical function regarding the associated speaking positions, ways of speaking, and practices of mediation, I would argue that *everything and nothing* is capable of much more than discursive criticism regarding the testimonial moment.

Frames of emergence

The discursive politics of the piece – its deframing of the testimonial moment – could equally be named the re-orientation of the emerged.¹⁴ The political function of the frame is actualized in relation to ways of speaking, listening, and viewing that are already imbricated in the operational outer field of the frame. But there is also an outside of a different order, one that is more oblique in function and that does not translate into shifting testimonial positionalities:

In one case, the out-of-field designates that which exists elsewhere, to one side or around; in the other case, the out-of-field testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather ‘insists’ or ‘subsists,’ a more radical elsewhere, outside homogenous space and time.¹⁵
The distinction between these two outsides comes down to the difference between possibility and potential. Whereas possibility is an alternative occurrence implicit in the testimonial moment, potential is undetermined variation. In Brian Massumi’s terms, it is “the immanence of a thing to its still indeterminate variation.” Possibility refers to the variations that are contained in the outside of the testimonial moment and that can be evoked with the breaking out of the testimonial frame. Potential, however, has to do with indeterminate forces of affection that “insist” or “subsist” in the moment although they do not belong to the testimonial structure as such. Here, the frame lines up with processes of emergence rather than re-orientations of the emerged.

Frames of emergence, then, purport asking how the insistent forces of affection operate within a situation so clearly entwined in a discursive politics of mediation. There are two particular instances in *everything and nothing* that deserve attention in this regard. Both are interstitial in the sense that they mark the transition between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, the uniqueness of these instances is not only in the re-orientation of the roles involved in the testimonial moment but particularly in the emergence of a relationality that is no longer subject to these positionalities.

The first instance appears after Bechara’s lengthy description of her political work and commitment. After she has finished speaking, she looks at Salloum in anticipation. The brief moment feels longer than a couple of seconds – perhaps because it breaks the question–answer cycle so thoroughly. The feel of the moment could be described as something of a “leaning toward.” As testimonial speech comes to its end, the speaker begins to step out of her position, but as the position of listening is not yet available, she leans in-between.

The other instance is equally fascinating, only this time the leaning is reversed. As Salloum searches for the words with which to formulate his question, Bechara looks at him attentively. When Salloum is about to find the right words and Bechara is about to understand what he is trying to say, an affinity beyond the testimonial moment emerges. This moment is expressive of qualities that are not bound to the representation or mediation of the testimonial moment: it expresses a relationality between Salloum and Bechara that emerges in the interstices of the testimonial exchange.

The leanings toward begin as ruptures in the testimonial exchange and become expressive of the intensity that gathers between the two participants during the interview. These “moments of affection” are disorienting because they exceed the norms of the testimonial and set the direction of
the tape beyond the patterns inscribed in the testimonial moment. They draw attention to the incipient dynamics taking shape between the two parties over the course of the interview and thus also affect the remainder of the video.

These moments of affection are analogous in function to other points of rupture that change the course of a film. For example, Amy Herzog notes that scenes that invert the subservient role of music to image can restructure the spatiotemporal coordinates of the narrative and change the affective impetus of the film in question. For Herzog, these “musical moments” are particularly interesting because, although they are potentially affirmative and even liberating, they can also end up as generic aesthetic devices. For her, the musical moment is unique because it is at once one of the most conservative and the most irreverent of filmic phenomena.17

Elena del Río detects a similar momentum of affection in melodramatic scenes where the characters push through the characteristic contours of their bodies.18 She describes a scene from Douglas Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* (1956) in which Marylee Hadley (Dorothy Malone) places a framed photograph of Mitch Wayne (Rock Hudson) on a glass shelf and begins performing a frantic mambo in front of the photograph. Marylee’s unrequited passion for Mitch is expressed in her movements to the ascending pace of the music. The rhythm moving her body is so fast that her body seems to break through its bounds in the whirlwind. The dance is juxtaposed with Marylee’s father laboriously climbing the stairs of the family home. At the top, he loses his grip on the banister and spirals to his death. This melodramatic moment expresses the two characters ferociously moving out of their bodies: one in the throes of passion and the other facing death. The relationality of the bodies, rhythms, and objects constitutes a momentum that changes the affective tone of the film: in the final scene, the dead father looks over Marylee from a portrait on the wall, while she cries forlornly at his desk.

Although *everything and nothing* is neither a melodrama nor a musical, its emphasis on ruptures and consequent affective relationalities creates a comparable sensation of emergence within the video. As the testimonial moment unfolds into a moment of affection, the charge of the encounter between Bechara and Salloum takes a new turn and carries the two beyond their assigned roles. This frame of emergence does not challenge or undermine the political impetus of the testimonial moment, but rather works with material relations that cannot be coded into the testimonial structure as such.
Amodal affection

The distinction between a testimonial moment and an audiovisual moment of affection brings the discussion to how these distinct yet related areas of *everything and nothing* are experienced. Following the Italian filmmaker and theorist Pier Paolo Pasolini, there is a double reality at play in the experiential: a grammatical and a pregrammatical plane. The first is the level of cinematic signs (*im-signs*) that can be arranged in a number of ways. Pasolini insists that the grammatical outline of cinema is an indispensable pretext for pregrammatical expression. Pregrammatical expression, on the other hand, is an unrealized film that unfolds beneath the grammatical ordering of images. It is freed of grammatical function and expressive as such.19

In the realm of spectatorship, the double reality of cinema – its grammatical and pregrammatical dimensions – entices the viewer with different means and thus requires a conceptualization of the viewing experience that is equally double. Raymond Bellour suggests conceptualizing the double reality of the viewing experience with the notions of modal and amodal perception. Bellour borrows the outline from the developmental psychologist Daniel N. Stern, who discusses the distinction in the context of an emergent sense of self in an infant. Stern argues that an infant is simultaneously aware of the process of an emergent organization as well as its product. The sense of self is emergent because the objects and compositions the infant perceives are tied to an emergent process in which the modally perceived objects are tied to an amodal process of organization.20 Amodal experiences are elusive – hard to seize upon as such and they seldom fit existing lexicons of experience. He calls them “vitality affects” that are better described in dynamic and kinetic terms such as “fading away” and “bursting.”21 Bellour argues that the spectator in cinema is comparable to Stern’s infant, in the sense that the cinema as an experience is composed of the dual perception of an emergent process and a more categorical dimension of objects and their relations.22

Bellour’s insistence on the role of amodal perceptions in cinema coincides interestingly with William E. Connolly’s outline of “materialities of experience,” which coincide with the rich history of inter-sensory circuits that contribute to our perceptual habits.23 These sensory circuits form an amodal history of perception that grids the conditions of modal perception. It is this level of materialities – sensory relations of movement, affect, touch, sight, and smell – that Connolly sees as politically most timely. He speaks in favor of media experiments that challenge the simple objectivity of mediation
with audiovisual means and, in this way, expose and address the ways in which perception is inflected and grided in media-saturated society. He argues that this kind of audiovisual exposing may eventually lead to a more affirmative existential attachment with the world.24

Put differently, Connolly’s take on the materialities of experience, Bellour and Stern’s vitality affects, and Pasolini’s double reality of cinema posit that an experience of reality as well as that of moving image media goes deeper than what is modally perceivable. The plane of grammatical relations and corresponding modal perceptions is constantly tweaked by pregrammatical intensities that unfold immanently to actual forms and positions. This unfolding has political repercussions for both analyses of testimonial cultures as well as perception itself. In the latter case, focus is transposed from weighing the conditions of perception and experience in their discursive determination to looking at the conditions of perception and experience on the amodal level of inclinations and inter-sensory circuits. The moments of affection in everything and nothing, on the other hand, confuse habitual ways of experiencing a testimonial moment and thus transpose the work of testimony from mediating experiences to the immediacy of unfolding.

Politics of emergence

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the massacres of Shatila and Sabra in 1982 as well as the 2006 conflict against Israeli occupation – to mention some of the crises the country has seen – have left their mark on the art created in the country and about its people. The infrastructure, material objects, and lives in general are so thoroughly permeated by war that its presence in art should come as no surprise. As the political events have infiltrated people’s perceptions and ways of living, one of the goals associated with art about and in Lebanon is to learn how to see life in novel ways.25

For example, in the film I Want to See (France/Lebanon 2008), the Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige depict bombed South Lebanon after the 2006 war with Israel. In order to see things they have previously not been able to perceive in the familiar landscape, its details and convolutions, they place a non-Lebanese character at the heart of their film. In the film, Catherine Deneuve plays herself perceiving the South Lebanese situation. The film deploys her “fiction-body” to inflict perceptions that might have been impossible to generate by relying on the ways of perceiving that have become typical in the country. The directors emphasize that they
wanted to avoid a televisual practice of witnessing and put the stress on the “chemical reactions” that the encounter of a foreign star and the South Lebanese people can produce.²⁶

Deneuve’s “double-body” resonates interestingly with Soha Bechara’s double created by the Lebanese artist and filmmaker Walid Raad, who had previously worked as Salloum’s assistant. His experimental documentary Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (Lebanon 2000) is a take on the Western hostage crisis in Lebanon in the late 1980s and the associated discourses of terrorism. The tape features Soheil Bachar, a male character directly inspired by Soha Bechara, who was allegedly held in solitary confinement for ten years, except for 27 weeks in 1985 when he shared a cell with five American hostages: Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco, and David Jacobsen. In the video, Bachar talks directly at the camera in a testimonial frame against the backdrop of a blue-and-white cloth. He speaks in Arabic, but his words are simultaneously translated into English on the soundtrack by a female voice with an American accent.

The fictional setting of a shared cell enables the video to unfurl the common narratives of the Lebanese situation. For example, Bachar notes that the books written by the Americans after their release depoliticized their experiences by foregrounding their personal growth in detention. Bachar then talks about the cultural, textual, and sexual aspects of being in captivity and thus comments on the dominant narratives within the fictional setting. Mark Westmoreland notes that by focusing on the narrative aspects of the hostage situation and captivity, Raad intervenes in the ways meaning about Lebanon and the Middle East in general is constructed in Western discourse.²⁷

The figures of the double in I Want to See and Hostage: The Bachar Tapes suspend typical ways of seeing and making sense of the South Lebanese context. They point to and work with the need to find new modalities of perception and signification in order to talk about the Lebanese situation. Similarly, Salloum’s video wants to create a “body double” for the over-exposed image of the resistance fighter. The video achieves this by instituting “anotherness” to its core, by portraying both the testifier and the artist in transition, as emergent.²⁸

Thus, the work of the frame in the video instigates a politics of emergence. With its moments of affection, everything and nothing becomes expressive of intensities that were not prescribed in the testimonial moment. The momentum of these moments no longer depends on what remains outside the frame (as excess) but it centers on what emerges within the frame – how the frame captures and expresses that which insists or subsists as indeterminate
potential. In *everything and nothing*, this potential is expressed as a feeling of mutual infatuation, an affinity between the two participants.

Although the moments of affection in *everything and nothing* are ruptures in the testimonial order, they nevertheless do not abolish the testimonial function, but rather change its charge. The moments of affection are followed by yet other reflections on the importance of speaking out and telling others about the situation in Lebanon and El-Khiam. Bechara talks about democracy and a regime that asserts itself without attacking the other. The effect of the latter part of the video is, however, remarkably different from the official tenor at the very beginning. The suspending moments of affection have induced a captivating intensity in the rest of the testimonial. This intensity is like an extra dimension; it co-exists with the political discourse and imbues it with a feeling of emergence. As the video taps into the subsisting potentials of the moment, it creates an affective experience that sticks with the viewer in a manner that the testimonial moment of truth could hardly match.