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The Hush of Chaos: Pain and Play in Sara Fattahi's Films on The Syrian War
Dina Georgis

Chaos (2018)[1], a film by Sara Fattahi, a relatively new Syrian filmmaker based in Vienna, offered me an opportunity to pause and to think differently about trauma and memory, a topic that I've been writing about for over 20 years. My interest in Fattahi's work was accidental. Almost 2 years ago, I was invited to attend the screening of her film by a small festival in Toronto called *Rendezvous with Madness*. It was hard to sit through the film – the festival host who introduced it even warned us about this. The film shoots the daily routines of three women who had lived through the Syrian war and are now living under peaceful conditions in three different cities. The war which began in 2011 and continues into the present is not at all represented in graphic or disturbing images of war. Quite the contrary, the camera focuses on the women and their activities at home which are not particularly eventful. The film is slow to move, quiet, and repetitive. The story of the women's experiences of violence and loss is told in small morsels of the their truth. I would describe the impact of the film to be unnerving.

For those whose traumas are fresh, such as Syrians (and so many others in the region and beyond who have been affected by war, displacement, and colonial histories), the wound is on the surface of the skin, not yet a scab. When societies and individuals are still reeling from pain, what might it mean to have a relationship to that pain? In *Chaos*, the traumas represented are indeed of the recent past and Fattahi's camera is focused on the private and intimate spaces of three women. Her subjects have walked away from the site of trauma but they are viscerally haunted, living in psychic and embodied turmoil. In her first film *Coma* (2015),[2] however, which is set in Damascus inside the filmmaker's home, the context is not peace but a raging war. In both films, the subject matter is the affective states of her subjects as they engage, Sara, the filmmaker. As all subjects have a personal relationship to Fattahi, they are expressing and narrating their lives in casual engagement with her. The encounters we witness as viewers offer an opportunity to connect with a range of affects reflecting Sigmund Freud's originary observations of the psychic states of traumatic experience; namely, the traumatized are either numb to pain and are unable to narrativize their experience and when the wounds find expression, it can feel like they have no power against pain.

Creative expression, not pain, has been the starting point of much of my scholarly reflections on trauma. Preoccupied with how we remember or narrativize difficult or traumatic experiences, given my own family's experience of having fled Lebanon's civil

[1] *Chaos.* Dir. Sara Fattahi. Little Magnet Films. 2018.

[2] *Coma*. Dir. Sara Fattahi. Bidayyat. 2015.

war in 1970's, I have considered how life is lived in the aftermath of these events. Specifically, I've been interested in the emotional strategies of survival, giving special attention to reading cultures through aesthetic gestures that allow us to come into contact with how life is lived in unexpected places and ways. Trauma is a crisis of knowledge which confounds the fact of survival, and thus the efforts to re-construct life amid the unknown is in and of itself a creative act. But trauma can also attune us to the human capacity for dreaming, re-envisioning, and meaning-making. It has been important for me to theorize these efforts as inventive acts because without it we can't really account for how people, as a people, re-create themselves in new modes of life and cultures of expression. These 'otherwise possibilities' in the words of Black theorist Ashon Crawley is a 'celebration of flesh' in defiance to what suffocates.[3]

As we shall see, Fattahi's subjects demonstrate the drive to live and create in the face of trauma and struggle. However, since Fattahi's articulated objective is to convey the pain of war, I contextualize her films in a discussion on how they offer a radical shift from the typical mainstream framing of victims of war with a view that pain and creativity are entangled affects. Indeed, her subjects are not passive or abject victims but are complexly living with and moving through trauma. Significantly, in representing the traumas of Syrian people, a group among many not often represented in trauma studies, Fattahi's films help us theorize trauma through the experiences of non-European subjectivities. What my discussion will reveal is the continued relevance of Martinique-born Algerian psychiatrist and anti-colonial activist and theorist Franz Fanon's insights on the entanglements of trauma and race. His thinking helps me take a position on trauma that situates it in colonial history of violence and what it might mean to be in a different relation to the other's pain. Fattahi, I argue, documents pain by being a witness to her subjects' intimate lives. This method of film-making creates the affective environment for seeing what cannot be seen and for expressing what cannot be spoken. Through her camera we get to experience the women's imagination at work, engaging in what I read as subtle acts of play. Play, understood psychoanalytically and particularly through D.W. Winnicott's teachings,[4] is associated with creative capacity which, at the heart of it, is the capacity for meaning-making. Since representations of war often strip people of agency, being a witness to the other's play offers a radical method for documenting the experiences of war.

The Pain of Trauma

Coma (2015) and *Chaos* (2018) are part of a documentary trilogy. They are followed by *Calm*, the last film in the trilogy which has not yet been released. From a trauma theory angle, a trilogy is a suggestive choice. Freud's essay 'Repeating,

[3] Crawley, A. T., *Blackpentecostal Breath : The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016) 2,5.

[4] D. W., Winnicott, *Playing and reality* (London & New York: Routledge, 1971)

Remembering and Working Through' (1914) foregrounds the triune structure of trauma: there's the event, the repetition of the event (in absence of being able to remember it), and the working through of trauma.[5] Although these moments do not cleanly follow a linear trajectory and are better understood as interminable psychic states, which is to say they do not procced in a neat order towards healing, the placing and focus of each film loosely mirror these psychic states.

In an interview I did with the filmmaker in 2019, Fattahi tells me she has no clinical or theoretical knowledge of trauma but that she is traumatized by the Syrian war. One can only surmise that Fattahi's angle on trauma is intuitive or embodied knowledge conveyed in her interactions and cinematic choices. In watching the films, one gets the sense that Fattahi is taking her viewer on an emotional journey. Asked what she hopes her audience will take away from the life experiences presented in *Chaos*, particularly those who are not familiar with Syria, she says 'My only wish is to make people *feel* what I filmed.'[6] Fattahi is not appealing to her audience's capacity to understand the Syrian situation but to be affectively touched by their traumas. Indeed, the films offer very little in the way of providing the social and political context of that pain. We learn nothing about Assad's regime, the allies, or the opposition and rebel groups. All that can be learned through the media, which she says, 'sidelines women's stories in favor of politics.'[7] Put simply, *Chaos* and *Coma* chronicle the traumatic pain of the women featured in her films.

Despite, Fattahi's 'simple' wish for her viewers to feel what she filmed, her work offers hints into the complexity of affective formations of trauma. *Coma*—the first of the trilogy—is shot in Damascus, in Fattahi's family home where three generations of women, grandmother, mother and daughter live confined under one roof as the war rages outside. However, in the first half of the film, there are no sounds of war and virtually no references to the armed conflict. Sara follows her mother and grandmother from the moment they rise from sleep till the moment they return to bed. One gets the sense that Sara's camera is hardly noticeable to them. In the first half of the film, we see the women engaging in their daily routines. They congregate around a small breakfast table, sipping coffee. Often they look out of the window but seem to be staring into space. What can be seen through the windows is either blurry or behind drawn curtains. Their worlds have become small and insular. Fattahi's grandmother, who seems cold or dissociated, whittles the days away reading the Quran and watching movies. Only the melodrama of her Egyptian films stir her to tears, not the actual reality of their lives. Her daughter, Fattahi's

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[5] S. Freud, 'Remembering, repeating, and working through' (1914), vol 12 *The Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols., (London: Hogarth, 1953-1974), 145-156.
[6] NYU Arts and Science, 'Interview with Sara Fattahi,' par 11 https://as.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/as/research-centers/deutscheshaus/cultural-program/residency-interviews/interview-with-sara-fattahi.html [Accessed November 4, 2021]
[7] P. Cohn, 'Sara Fattahi on Bringing a Woman's Perspective: In Conversation with Pamela Cohn' in Lit Hub, par 3.https://lithub.com/filmmaker-sara-fattahi-on-bringing-a-womans-perspective-of-war/ [Accessed Nov 4, 2021]

mother, is the complete opposite. Passionate, chain-smoking and wary of men, she is riddled with anxiety—but not for their safety under a brutal war where thousands of civilians have perished in their homes, but more specifically for the loss of her house and her dwindling financial security. Sara—daughter, granddaughter, and filmmaker—engages her family in some conversation, but her body, with the exception of a few moments, stays behind the camera. The women are arguably in a coma*,* as the title of the film suggests, surviving but barely living.

Drawing on Freud's theory of trauma, Cathy Caruth famously argued that trauma is an unclaimed experience.[8] Those traumatized may know they've experienced a difficult event but because their psyches were not prepared for it in the first place, they are unable to fully grasp it. In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' Freud argued that anxiety is a defense against anticipated harm—it is the psyche's strategy to avoid danger.[9] With trauma (which can never be prepared for), those defences are absent and as such when harm does happen, the individual is unable to process the experience and speak. The wound is there but knowledge is deferred to a later time. Trauma's knowledge however is never literal but 'literary'—an act of the imagination—expressed in a 'a voice that cries out from the wound.'[10] Hence, though the experience cannot be claimed in words, it lingers affectively as a haunting intensity that demands attention and 'addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is otherwise not available.'[11]

When we eventually learn about the war in *Coma* it is through a radio report announcing the latest carnage. Moments later, a loud siren is heard, the first sound of war, suggesting that the conflict is close to home. Fear washes over Fattahi's grandmother's face as she turns to speak to the camera in a close-up shot, but the words are muffled. Next we see her making a call to check in on family or friends. This is followed by a wide-angle shot of the city. We hear the hum and bustle of the city which carries on even as a bomb is seen to explode in the middle of frame, but there's no sound. When the women do finally discuss the war, it is in comparison to their experience of the Arab-Israeli war in 1973.

Fattahi's mother shares with her daughter the terror she felt as a child when she heard the sirens blare back then. But aside from announcing that this war is 'worse,' they don't actually describe what they're living under or how they feel about it. Trauma's narratives are born in psychic time, a time when the wounds are ready to speak in some way. But in *Coma* that moment does not quite arrive over the film's temporality. However, there is evidence of a shift, at least at a symbolic level, when exposed windows offer a view to the outside world, letting sounds in. In one telling scene, Fattahi shoots a

[8] C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience : trauma, narrative, and history* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
[9] S. Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), vol 18 *The Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey, in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson. 24 vols., (London: Hogarth, 1953-1974), 1-64.
[10] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.
[11] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4.

close-up of the faces of her mother and grandmother pensively looking out through the sheer curtains followed by a shot taken from the inside of the window capturing the neighbours' curtains blowing in the air. It's as though the defensive walls have begun to come down making space for something else not yet known. Sure enough, the three women begin to talk about their fears, their survival, and their safety with much greater intensity as the film proceeds. The film ends with the women discussing Sara's plans to leave and her mother expressing her frustrations with feeling confined, insisting that the war on the inside is as bad as the war that is happening on the outside.

In the next film, *Chaos*, the outside context is not war (as the title might suggest), but peace. Fattahi films three women—including herself—in three different cities: Raja is an old friend of her mother's and still lives in Damascus where the war has calmed down, Heba is a friend from art school but now lives in Stockholm, and Sara (the filmmaker) lives in Vienna. They are all in exile—in of one form or another. Like *Coma, Chaos* is mostly shot inside homes. But unlike the home environment of *Coma*, where you hear the continuous commotion of movies, music or news in the background, in *Chaos*, silence fills the air. The chaos is internal. The women are haunted by painful repetitions of the past. For Raja, who tethers herself to her dead son's bedroom, the repetitions are more literal. We see her repeatedly smelling, sorting, folding and scenting his clothes, moving them from the dresser to his bed. The room has a window, and in a side angle view of her stiff body is seen looking at her city through broken glass over and over again. The viewer is not privy to how Raja experiences her life or her relation to the outside world. She is silent and apparently closed off—not once is her face seen in light or in full view—Fattahi explained it was important to respect her sadness.[12] Later we learn how angry she is about the loss of her son. As for Heba, the trauma of losing her brother returns repeatedly in her drawings and collage art. Even though her mental health was fragile before the war, she is more open and able to share her vulnerabilities, frequently looking out through her apartment window, exposing the bare snow-dusted spindly trees (almost forest-like) of her peaceful neighbourhood. She is filmed in front of the window at multiple angles but the most striking shot is of her standing facing the camera with her unblinking eyes looking straight at the viewer. Windows prevail in both films. In *Chaos,* her two primary subjects are introduced to the viewer as they are looking out through a window. If home stands in for their painful internal worlds, which in both films are shot in rooms seemingly only lit with the natural light, then the outside, or outsideness, could offer a glimmer of hope, an opening or an illumination through the darkness.

While the juxtaposition of light and dark prevail in both films, *Chaos* and *Coma* do not share the same temporality. In *Coma*, time is suspended in a perpetual present. The women live their days unable to be fully embodied in the present moment. In *Chaos*, the present is lived through past. The arms of the clock in Raja's son's room do not move with the passing of time. The women are stuck in a time loop, performing the same activities day in and day out. They are filmed alone, not under the communal care of

[12] From Vienna Humanities Festival, 'Chaos: Director's Talk (moderated by Dominik Kamalzadeh)' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hMxWuPz65g [Accessed November 4, 2021]

family. They may not live alone but they exist alone with themselves and with terrorizing pain. Here, not music, news or TV fills the air, but the sound of shuffling feet, a running shower, clanging cutlery, human breath, and the hum of banal domestic life. They do not seem to have distraction from what hurts. Even Heba's abstract montages replay the scenes from her past. But as I'll soon demonstrate, pain here is not devoid of possibility, even embodies glimmers of joy.

Calm, the last film of the trilogy, promises perhaps not an absence of pain but a different relationship to it. Fattahi tells me that the film revisits the past including, for example, the 70s in Lebanon; but is also about the present. Again, the temporality and spatiality seems to shift. This time the filmmaker is narrating the trauma of the Syrian war at a distance, literally through the lens of a different time and place, partially through fiction, and thus represents a break from being beholden one-dimensionally to the past.

Radical Re-framing of War, Camera as Ethical Witness

My lengthy descriptions of Fattahi's films are aimed at giving my reader an affective impression of the lives she portrays. Fattahi's insistence on representing the Syrian war through the pain of the Syrian people challenge two important perspectives: the mainstream documentation of victims of war, and the canon of trauma theory. I don't want to go to great lengths to critique the representation of pain, but it's valuable to view Fattahi's films against mainstream media images and documentaries that populate our screens and archives of war. These representations claim to make war 'real' for the viewer in frames of mangled and mutilated bodies, shattered homes and ruined cities. The camera is usually deployed to communicate to the outside world the urgency of a situation, hoping that the representation of violence will sufficiently outrage people and move nations to respond to the atrocities of violence. But as Sherene Razack argues, outrage or genuine concern does not follow from the consumption of such images. What does follow, as she writes, is a reliance 'on these images and stories to confirm our own humanitarian character… mostly served to dehumanize them further, and in the process, to reinstall us as morally superior in relation to them.'[13] In *The Pain of Others* Susan Sontag adds that shock-images can just as likely wage war as they are to condemn it.[14] Consider George Bush's declaration of war on Iraq after the collapse of the twin towers. Also prevalent, as Sontag points out, is that we become over-saturated with images of war and as a result become detached. As film reviewer Donatella Della Ratta rightly puts it, mainstream representations of pain 'have only contributed to aestheticize violence and anesthetize spectators from it.'[15] Of concern here is that such representations often allow us to *see* pain (often framed through an ideological lens) but not ethically *witness*

[13] S.H. Razack, 'Stealing the Pain of Others: Reflections on Canadian Humanitarian Responses,' *The Review of Education/pedagogy/cultural Studies*, *29* (2007), 375–394.
Sontag, S. *Regarding the pain of others* (New York: Picador, 2004), 376.
[14] Sontag, S. *Regarding the pain of others* (New York: Picador, 2004)
[15] D. Della Ratta, A New Wave of Syrian Films Exposes the Failures of Images in Hyperallergic, par 2 https://hyperallergic.com/323265/a-new-wave-of-syrian-films-exposes-the-failure-of-images/ [accessed November 4, 2021]

it. Indeed seeing or 'describing' violence for the purpose of diagnosing injustice often, as Katherine McKittrick warns, often end up reinscribing pain. In other words, it fixes people rendering them only abject victims, not complex beings with a complicated, even dynamic, relationship to pain and to the contexts they are living under.

In *Chaos,* the exploration of pain is a central feature of the film, arguably its purpose. We learn that the film is inspired by Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann, well known for her poetry and for giving voice to women's traumas and pain post-war Europe. The film includes an audio interview excerpt recorded in 1971 wherein Bachmann is heard saying that she had no interest in writing on war because that's too simple—'everyone can write about war; war is always terrible.' To write about 'what we call peace,' she claimed, is to write about war. She believed art had an important role to play. In her words: 'if art wants to describe the whole of society, the state of an era's consciousness…it has to be depicted in a different way. And it has to be depicted in a radically different way, because otherwise nobody will ever know what our time was like.' Bachmann insisted that the sickness of nations must be seen through its private sickness. Fattahi's films do just that. They radically reframe war through private suffering, wherein pain is given expression without inscribing it in stultifying victimhood. As cultural texts, what is represented is neither a dehumanizing faceless view of pain[16] nor an aestheticized depiction of trauma; instead, her portrayals expose the intimacies of pain and the psychic rawness of suffering. While one might assume that such representations could risk exploiting her subjects, the effect is something quite different. Fattahi's viewers are not left outraged or comforted by a fantasy of humanitarian care. The film resists such trappings. As an ethical witness to pain, Fattahi and her subjects offer insights into the experiences of trauma as lived by Syrians rather than observed or diagnosed by others.

Before I go any farther in discussing how Fattahi engages her subjects, I want to situate my discussion, which heavily draws on trauma studies, with a view that accounts for the failings of the field, which by and large has avoided exploring the traumas of peoples from the global south. This is important because Fattahi's documentaries offer a lens into trauma and a 'method' for witnessing the pain of the other. It is not within the scope of this paper to properly examine this failure, however, I draw on Frantz Fanon's writings to provide insights into the field's racism. Even though he was practicing medicine and psychiatry in the 50s and early 60s, his considerations on how to approach the traumas of Black people and Algerians remain to be a relevant intervention for trauma studies and, more to the point of this paper, relevant to how I think the pain of the other must be witnessed.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon admonishes psychiatry for its racist conclusions of the 'disorders' of Algerians arising out of the horrors of the war of independence from

[16] Here I'm thinking of images that present the suffering of people as a homogenous mass. But just as dehumanizing are shots of faces that suit the desires of global humanitarianism. These are the faces rendered intelligible, 'grievable,' in the words of Judith Butler (*Frames of war: when is life grievable?, 2009*), and are therefore deserving of our charity, our efforts for re-settlement and our general empathy.

colonial France. He explains that even though disorders emerged from air raids during the Second World War in England and in the Soviet Union, when they occurred in Algerians, the response and representation from the psychiatric community in France (and beyond) was atrociously dehumanizing. Fanon was not suggesting that all humans react similarly to trauma, what he called 'reactionary psychosis;'[17] rather he objected to the characterization of mental illness in Algerians 'as a congenital stigma of the native, an original part of his nervous system.'[18] We have not disentangled ourselves from essentialist pathologizing formulations of mental illness. But Fanon's perspective is not simply anti-essentialist. Instead, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon claims that human subjectivity must be understood as the work of both *ontogeny* (psychic structure) and *sociogeny* (the effects of social and cultural environment). That is to say, if an Algerian freedom fighter reacts differently than a white soldier to an air raid, it is not because they have congenital differences, rather a pre-existing history of racist subjugation, which in his words 'mutilate' him,[19] might have something to do with his overall psychic state. Certainly in the case of the Algerian war of independence, the Algerians were fighting a colonial war and so the traumas were compounded.

Though Fanon's impact on anti-colonial scholarship has been enormous, his insights into trauma and mental health are not significantly taken up by postcolonial studies,[20] and are virtually non-existent in trauma or the related field of memory studies. Stef Craps rightly argues that Fanon offers a theory of trauma and yet he has not been recognized by the field. Indeed, trauma studies, a field that has come to have a canon since its inception in the early 1990s, has had a Eurocentric bias. Inaugurated by Freud's writing on trauma but then subsequently shaped by the Holocaust, the scholarship has by and large ignored racial suffering and the traumas of modern colonialism and slavery. In theory, it offers a universal view on trauma and, as Craps argues, has "confidently announced itself as an essential apparatus for understanding the 'real world' and as a potential means for changing for the better,"[21] but has come short on living up to its own promises. Craps and Alford[22] warn that trauma itself is a culturally bound viewpoint and its ways of knowing and treating symptoms should not be applied to the global south. Alford argues that traumatic responses are culturally specific and to use the framework of PTSD on non-western nations is racist. I am not inclined to think that Freud's understanding of the psychic apparatus of trauma is culturally specific, and I don't read Fanon to take that position. Fanon engaged Freud's theory of psychoanalysis but pointed out that his indifference to race prevented him from understanding the psychic life of the

[17] F. Fanon, *Wretched of the earth.* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 290.
[18] Fanon, 291.
[19] Fanon, 294.
[20] In previous work (xxxxxx2013), I have argued that postcolonial studies has been reticent to take up the psychological dimensions of racism and as such have viewed racism only through the lens of epistemic violence. The worry that surrounds psychic violence is that non-white peoples will be produced as victims of violence rather than resistant agents.
[21] S. Craps, Houndmills (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.
[22] C. F. Alford, *Trauma, culture, and PTSD* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

colonized.[23] For me, Fanon offers an additive or reparative view of psychoanalysis and our understanding of the psyche rather than dismissing psychoanalysis altogether as the product of European biased thinking.[24] Similarly, my view on trauma is that the field has helped us think about trauma complexly: beyond pathology and as a method that has allowed us to understand our ontological relationship to loss, to read history and to theorize creative survival.

Fattahi's films are not interested in making socio-political correctives. Her focus, as mentioned, is solely on representing the stories of women (which of course potentially or inadvertently do make correctives to mainstream discourses). In creating the conditions for the women of her films to share their private realities of the Syrian war, a window into their experiences is opened up offering a dignifying and humanizing perspective on trauma and psychic injury. Fattahi's camera, which she describes in an interview as an extension of her body, is immersed into the real and emotional environment.[25] She appears briefly in *Chaos*, suggesting that this film is about her as much as it is about Heba and Raja, but for the most part actor Jaschka Lämmert plays her doppelgänger. Importantly, Fattahi remarks that her doppelgänger is not only a stand-in for her but for Bachmann's spirit, which resides in all her subjects.[26] The doppelgänger is the symbolic but ineffable thread that connects the three women to one another emotionally. We might say that this thread represents the ontogenic aspects of trauma, the way in which trauma's impact takes a hold on the subject in similar (forgetting, repetition etc) psychic responses. In the film, Jaschka is completely silent. Alone, she wanders the rooms of an empty gallery, pausing to examine Caravaggio's 'David with the Head of Goliath,' a painting of the good uneasily killing the powerful, prompting the question, what can art say about war? After walking through the streets of Vienna, Jaschka hops on a train. When seated, the camera shoots her looking down at her hands. Hands, emblematic of both strength and power, are a preoccupation for both Heba and Raja. When Jaschka finally arrives at an apartment door, presumably hers, her hands struggle with the key. When she unlocks the door, the apartment is empty and unhomelike. She sits on a hard floor and head down intently listens to the recordings of her video interviews with Heba and Raja. If the doppelgänger stands-in for their emotional state, then the invisible thread that connects the three women is aloneness, social and psychic exile and an unspoken desire for connection and meaning. The camera, as the object through which interpersonal intimacies are made possible in this instance captures not the graphic horror of suffering but the elaboration of embodied pain.

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[23] Fanon brilliantly argued that the oedipal paradigm is not experienced by all in the same way. Identification with the father figure in Freud's paradigm settles the problem of competition with the father and is the bedrock of civilization and social identity. For black people, the identification with the father figure has a complexity unanticipated by Freud because the black father is rendered inferior to the white father.

[24] Indeed, rather than dismiss psychoanalysis for its mistakes, Ranjanna Khanna in *Dark Continents* (2003) suggests that we both bring postcolonial critique to psychoanalysis while simultaneously deploy its tools for understanding colonialism's psychic grip.

[25] Cohn, par 8.

[26] NYU Arts and Science, par 7

Fattahi's bond to Raja and Heba, is evident in the film. We see her combing Heba's hair as close friends might do. Her camera, though probing, is not positioned as objective witness or observer to their pain. When she flips the camera around to film herself, we see her conducting herself much in the same way as Raja and Heba: pacing, hands making coffee etc. One of the opening shots of the film is Sara swimming under water in a lake, a site of traumatic pain for both Raja (whose murdered son was found there) and Heba (who immersed herself in the lake upon learning about the disappearance of her brother), making it very explicit that she does not set herself apart from her subjects' alienation but instead belongs to the same community of sufferers. In so doing, the distance between filmmaker and filmed is narrowed. Indeed in an interview she gave at a the Vienna Humanities Festival in 2019, she remarked that upon finishing production, she realized to her horror that she had shot a film in its entirety in close-ups. This is a remarkable admission because it gives us insight into what the camera enables for Fattahi.

I would like to suggest that Fattahi's camera functions as a transitional object for Fattahi, providing her the conditions for intimacy and 'play.' Child psychoanalyst Winnicott describes a transitional object as an infant's first possession, facilitating their relationship to the outside world. As the baby comes to understand that the breast (or bottle) does not just magically appear, which is to say that the parent is not an extension of the baby but a separate being unable to anticipate their every need, the object replaces the comfort of the parent with a soft substitute such as a teddy bear, blanket etc. The transitional object importantly projects both 'me' and 'not me'—the blurry boundary between the baby and parent (or external world). In play, the baby begins to create a self that is autonomous from the parent as it is working through loss and aloneness.

For Winnicott, the self's process of becoming is a creative act and requires a facilitating environment to enable free play. He insisted that objects had to be 'found', which is to say the baby freely *takes interest* in an object. Transitional phenomena does not end in childhood and is what allows us to affectively connect to external objects (objects, people, culture, artifacts). The nature of our encounters with transitional objects are of course never the same but what they do is help us sort out our self-to-self and self-to-other relationship. For Fattahi, the camera as extension of her body, is both a 'me' and 'not me' possession offering her comforting distance through which she can *find* Raja and Heba (also me/not me objects). Sharon Sliwinski (though not specifically referencing the camera here) puts it well when she says: 'Humans consciously and unconsciously borrow external objects to delimit the boundaries of their bodies and sense of space' (330). If the camera does delimit, it paradoxically also makes way for unconscious expression, which is Sliwinski's main point. Quoting Walter Benjamin who asserts: 'Clearly it is another nature that speaks to the camera as compared to the eye,'[27] Sliwinski argues that the camera allows us to find what we cannot see. In my mind, finding is not an end in and of itself but a journey of discovery.

[27] S. Sliwinski, 'Shooting in the Dark: A Note on the Photographic Imagination,' in *Photography and the optical unconscious,* ed. by Smith, S. M. & Sliwinski, S. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 324.

Fattahi shares the experience of the Syrian war with Raja and Heba, however they are not simply knowable or transparent to her. Instead, she invites us to find, or affectively connect to, what we cannot see. Fattahi's camera manages to make space for both intimacy and respectful separation. Her film of many close-up shots express her desire to reach them, maybe reach herself.[28] In other words, her camera expresses her connection, not her detached view. It probes the women seeking knowledge, but is uncertain about what can be found. Fattahi was not certain that Raja would ever speak. Trauma is not an experience that can be claimed or described. It is, a breakdown in knowledge and the unbearable incomprehensibility of survival. Because as Kelly Oliver explains, trauma 'is the experience of becoming inarticulate.'[29] (99), testimony is paradoxically the impossibility of testifying.

If the outside witness is not attuned to inarticulability, then giving testimony risks reinscribing victimhood. Raja's silence protects her from the risks of becoming an object of the camera. In respecting her silence, Fattahi's camera acknowledges that trauma is beyond the norms of articulability. The camera ultimately fails to penetrate. At the outset of the film, the very status of the camera as a tool is indeed put into question. A shot of Heba's face goes in and out of light, suggesting a kind of hesitancy by the filmmaker on how to shoot her face. In the last scene, shot in the woods with Heba, an environment we learn she finds terrifying (there are not a lot of forests in Syria, and none where Heba is from), Fattahi falls and drops her camera. Even though Fattahi wants to see all there is to see, Raja and Heba 'simultaneously [demand] and [defy] [her] witness.'[30]

If the camera fails to fully represent loss, what does a film, that is attempting to depict pain, actually offer? The film teaches us that trauma's chaos is quiet, even calm—not noticeable or foreclosed by the outside world. Fattahi's films turn our attention to the quieter, harder-to- discern psychic reality of war, utilizing the camera not so much to represent pain but to stand witness to it, as impossible as that might be. Witnessing, in conventional parlance, involves seeing someone/something (which gets registered in memory) and subsequently giving testimony to what was observed. But in the tradition of psychoanalytic trauma theory, there is no narration of facts.[31] It is testifying to 'both something you have seen in your eyes and something you cannot see'.[32] Witnessing, writes Oliver, is the impossibility of recognizing the other. When your inner witness has been compromised by trauma or dehumanization, having an external witness engaging you in dialogue, she explains, opens the possibility of dialogue with oneself. Being an ethical witness allows the other to represent and interpret their own experience as active

[28] In her interview with Pamela Cohn, she explains 'The films, for me, are experiences that enable me to let go of something, my fears, anxieties, even dreams. I didn't use this conceit in *Coma* because I didn't really see that until making *Chaos*'(par 9). To represent how the films serve her emotionally, she includes a scene of her going inside an MRI machine which she describes as 'a physical and metaphorical scanning because I want to see myself—my whole self' (par 9).
[29] K. Oliver, *Witnessing: beyond recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 99.
[30] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5
[31] See S. Felman, & D. Laub, *Testimony : crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience.*
[32] Oliver, 86.

agents and in so doing restores them from object to a subject. Witnessing resists the recognition of the other in foregone reductive or dehumanizing conclusions that had enraged Fanon and as such offers an important anti-colonial method. While Oliver sees witnessing as an obligation made from love, love is described only as an ethic not an affect. Fattahi, as I've suggested, is affectively tethered to the women she witnesses. Neither completely psychically enmeshed nor objectively distant, her connection sustains a me/not me positionality; and thus, her method positions her as an extraordinary witness. Fattahi's camera, as transitional object, is a tool that creates the space through which the women express, explore, and interpret their experiences in what I will posit as a 'playful' engagement. As viewers, the film in turn invites us to connect and experience the pain of the other in the 'potential space of play,' not in terms of identification or knowability.

Pain, Pleasure and the Potential Space of Play

While traumatic events can leave a legacy of pain, trauma is endemic to human experience, not a discrete reality separate from the capacity for creative living and pleasure. From the psychoanalytic lens I offer, I am drawn to this angle on trauma not for the sake of a philosophical discussion but because the capacity to play does not differentiate between ontology and epistemology, between being and becoming. Rather, the drive to make meaning and construct the world around is response to loss, a dimension of being. Indeed, Freud's theory of trauma in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' offers clues to how our earliest experiences demonstrate the entanglements of pain, pleasure and play.

In this landmark essay, Freud ironically revises his theory of the pleasure principle, which stipulates that the psyche strives to fulfill pleasure or minimize tension to avoid pain. Though he makes the case that the pleasure principle is 'out of action'[33] because the psyche is driven by the more powerful drive for death or the capacity to self-injure, the essay which features a story about a child playing a pleasurable game of repetitive disappearance and return, a game he names *fort-da*, provides him with clues that repetition of loss also holds the possibility of pleasure, even joy. Indeed, in 'Repeating Remembering and Working Through' which was written before 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' argued that repetition, a disguised iteration of the traumatic event, albeit painful is also an occasion to remember. Although he does not suggest that repeating and remembering has any relationship to pleasure, his ensuing insights offer an understanding on how the death drive, in repeating the painful event, is also serving the life drive to work through loss. As such, even under great pain, a quiet plea for pleasure and re-creation is whispered through every reenactment of pain.

This is the main argument of my essay. Caruth in her oft cited *Unclaimed Experience* suggests that 'waking up' from trauma presents a painful challenge to the incomprehensibility of survival; however, in her later writing she emphasizes repetitions' creative potential. Reflecting on Freud's observation of the *fort-da* game, Caruth explains that Freud's theory does not just stage the presence of the death drive, what is most

[33] Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' 29.

surprising in the child's game, Caruth explains, 'is that this reenactment of reality in the game places repetition at the very heart of childhood, and links the repetition to a creative act of invention.'[34] The insight into repetition is suggestive that pain and death are no strangers to joy and creative invention.

Although, creative capacity was not exactly the main point of 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle,' Freud's insight into the death drive and helplessness to traumatic pain is paradoxically a discovery into the human's primal capacity for creativity. Winnicott whose writings significantly contributed to our understanding of the centrality of play, not only in childhood but what makes life purposeful, offered a theory of *being* that understood it through his very unique view on *doing*, the utilizing of the imagination. Since Winnicott believed that creative life is a key ingredient to childhood well-being and to healing trauma, his theory not surprisingly focused on what it means to have an environment (home and cultural) that encourages imaginative/active play. Winnicott understood infants to need not only autonomy but a facilitating or holding environment. Indeed the conditions of the real environment contributed to the emotional environment of play, which Winnicott famously termed 'potential space.'[35] Potential space is the space between the internal and the external reality. One might think of this in-between space as the affective playground of risk, experimentation and meaning-making. To take such risks requires that people are held in spaces where they can express freely, imagine freely, and find their true self. Winnicott's definition of true self was a self that was capable of becoming and growing without the threat of persecution. A punitive environment that demands compliance in Winnicott's thinking threatens spontaneity and risks producing a defensive shell in a child. A self that cannot risk non-compliance is a self that cannot engage in creative becoming. For those who have suffered trauma, the capacity to take risks is already compromised from anxiety, traumatic repetition and a defensive relationship to the outside world, as such it is that much more vital to attend to the physical and emotional environment.

Fattahi films her subjects in the safety of their homes. Her camera which, as explained, performs as witness rather than objective observer, may have provided the psychic environment for her subjects to express themselves freely, sometimes in gestures of play (as I shall soon demonstrate), even though at first glance they seem to be stuck in repetitive loops. For Winnicott, what defines playing is not the technique or content, or even the interpretation (emphasized by Melanie Klein as standing in or symbolizing difficult experience) but the capacity to have a new experience. I cannot help but wonder if Fattahi encouraged this inadvertently by her own willingness to play. Never trained at a film school, she couldn't stick to the rules of a genre because, as she says, doesn't 'even

[34] Caruth, C. Parting Words: 'Trauma Silence, and Survival.' In Kauffman, J. *Loss of the assumptive world: a theory of traumatic loss* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 222.

[35] Winnicott, 135-139.

know the rules or what genre truly means.'[36] Fattahi's indifference to the rules allowed her to be, in her words, 'adrift in the process' (NYU, par 4), freeing her imagination to experiment and play. In both films, Fattahi interacts with the women in friendship and curiosity. Winnicott, who famously didn't just observe children play but engaged them in play also believed that the therapist's role is to play with the patient. He understood play as therapeutic and an end in itself. In play, not only is life given purpose, new meanings and experiences emerge. For this reason, Winnicott very much discouraged the idea that a therapist should provide interpretations to the patient.

With traumatic experience (re)finding one's capacity for play is undermined. It becomes hard to invest in outside objects and outside world. While this is evident in the interviews with Raja and Heba, the women in *Chaos* show signs of moving into play. Heba performs her everyday activities in silence—only the sound of her heavy breath can be heard. She has suicidal ideations but concedes that she has no courage to end her life, instead she oversleeps. Indeed, when she had a mental breakdown and passed out in a forest not that far from her home in Stockholm, she had no will to live. She explains it was the freezing cold that woke her back to life. Heba's story is painful and her mental health remains fragile. She feels alienated living in a new city and confines herself to her house. Only her son and her art keep her alive. Heba however is not closed off to herself. She shares stories about her time at the psychiatric ward, her bipolar diagnosis, her fear of forests (which she represents in her art) and her seeming unwitting desire to be creative.

When Heba lost her brother to the war, she had convinced herself he drowned in the lake so she jumped in with drawings of him. At that moment, she did not want to die (water does not scare her) but wanted all memories to be lost. Heba expresses herself poetically in her actions and in language. When asked 'what do you see in the life here,' Heba tells Sara 'I see birds, only birds.' Sara, who either doesn't hear her or is confused by her answer, repeats the question. She asserts she loves birds and sees them everywhere. One gets the sense that Heba's imagination is her sustenance. In conversation with Sara, she spontaneously exclaims that she sees something she had not seen before in her montage: she had drawn and cut out her father's hand for her montage. Seemingly a significant aha experience for Heba, her art, albeit an expression of her pain, offers her at that moment a playful and joyful discovery.

Heba's playfulness is more discernable than Raja's. For one, Raja doesn't speak. Fattahi explains that she was literally rendered mute from the trauma of her son's murder. Fattahi began shooting *Chaos* probably in all likelihood prepared never to hear Raja's voice. Raja however did eventually begin to speak but her story is heard in a voiceover. Her narrative exposes her seething rage over the brutality of her son's murder. Raja was convinced that the man who came to her door to bear the bad news was in fact her son's murderer. She knew this, she says, by his ugly hands. Raja also tells the story of how her son's body was found in the river. She believed that God had kept the river water calm

[36] NYU Arts and Science, par 4.

long enough so that his body could be returned to his family and not be washed away by a normally very strong tide. Raja's story of her son is shrouded with divine interventions and religious overtones. While the content of her stories is imbued with her cultural and religious references, all narratives of trauma reach for meaning and coherence to make survival more liveable. I have argued elsewhere,[37] these stories are always creative in that trauma forces us to make life from ruins. Raja's story is a wonderful achievement of her imagination. The truth of her story, whether one is a believer of God or not, expresses her affective truth. For Winnicott, playing is an achievement. Though creative expression is part of being, so much in life stifles it. So when Raja is finally able to speak, not only does she begin to narrate her pain, she expresses her truth imaginatively in a story of her creation. Raja's survival is the work of her imagination, and a gesture of her capacity for playing and healing.

Playing is what we are doing when we take risks, when we unbind our psyches enough to untangle our defences, when we imagine or re-imagine our experience, potentially making way for rebuilding our relation to ourselves and to a world that has failed us. In war, the living environment is virtually bereft of providing the conditions for survival let alone for reparation and well-being. Fattahi creates the conditions for a good enough environment such that Raja and Heba are able to narrate their stories and take risks (even agreeing to be filmed is a risk). It is hard to say how exactly Fattahi does this but Winnicott believed that, in the case of the baby, the parent must adapt to the baby's needs but also tolerate their frustration (which is inevitable) so that it can find itself (with the use of transitional objects). Fattahi's camera as I have suggested was a tool that may have given them the sense that Sara was using it to *find* them, and that they were worthy to be found. In not positioning herself as knower or expert documentarian (but witness), she allowed them to *find* her and *use* her to give voice to their wounds. It's important to note that Winnicott distinguished using an object from relating to an object. In his words, 'for the object to be used, if it is to be used, must necessarily be real in the sense of being part of a shared reality, not a bundle of projections.'[38] With object use, the object has to be a thing in itself, 'found because it is needed.'[39] Once found, it has to be destroyed. Only if object survives the subject's aggression can it be used. In *Chaos*, this dynamic is most evident with Reja. Only when Sara survives Reja's silence is Reja able to narrate her story.

Conclusion

Fattahi's films remind us that trauma's chaos is quiet, even calm—often not noticeable to the outside world. While it is right for the global community to help people recover from the traumas of war with asylum, hospitals, housing, even mental health interventions (albeit help is often rendered with embedded colonial fantasies of rescue), the film is suggestive that there is something else that should demand our attention. Indeed, Fattahi's

[37] Georgis, D. The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle east (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).
[38] Winnicott, 118.
[39] Bibby, T., *The creative self : psychoanalysis, teaching and learning in the classroom* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 129.

only wish is that her viewers be touched by the pain of others so that her viewers may have a perspective on war not normally available.

Inspired and challenged by Fattahi's preoccupations, this paper has made a case for why war needs to be understood through pain. Notwithstanding Fattahi's conscious objectives, I have argued that the films have social and political implications, especially around the ethics of how to represent pain. At a personal level, the films have offered me an opportunity to explore the actual suffering of people, something I have been reticent to do. Perhaps my psychic defences surrounding my own childhood experience of war and displacement explains this reticent, but intellectually I have also been well trained against the pitfalls of representing or describing pain. Fattahi's films, however, resist all the pitfalls of representation; and in choosing not to aestheticize pain, which would have ameliorated the impact on the viewer, she does not offer relief from the affects of suffering presented. Indeed, her aesthetic method, I have suggested, is anti-colonial because she documents pain by witnessing, not observing, the other. In witnessing the other, she engages their pain and creates the conditions for them to give voice to the hush of trauma. Fattahi positions her subjects as subjects able find themselves and speak their truth, and not rescue them from it. Not only does she create an environment for the women to find their capacity for play, pleasure and meaning-making, in so doing, she dignifies their lives and their experience of war.

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Dina Georgis is Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director at the Women & Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto. Her work is situated in the fields of postcolonial and sexuality studies She draws on psychoanalytical concepts to think through how expressive and political cultures are responses to difficult experience. Her book *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East* (SUNY, 2013) considers the emotional dynaics of colonial trauas and the stories and cultures they produce. She has published essays on war and memory, aesthetics and queer hope, and on Arab sexualities. Her work can be found in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, *Studies in Sexuality and Gender*, and in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*.