

Bidayyat \ Of Place and Cement

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There is unemployment: it is the refugees.
The economy is in crisis: it is the refugees.
Garbage and pollution are slowly killing the
environment: it is the refugees.
There are traffic accidents: it is the refugees.
There is no electricity: it is the refugees.
There is no water: it is the refugees.
The summer is too hot: it is the refugees.

—Walid El Houril

In Ziad Kalthoum's *Taste of Cement* (2017), Syrian construction workers in Lebanon move by day across the upper stories of their worksite, a tower in the making, and rest by night in the underbelly of the same structure, where they are confined underground. The contrast between these two spaces—worlds, even—is stark, emphasized by slow scenes that capture the workers as they ascend or descend. Aboveground, expansive shots of an emerging luxury skyscraper overlooking the Mediterranean Sea and the city of Beirut. Underground, claustrophobic shots of rough, makeshift living quarters submerged in darkness. The tower is a concrete prison that encloses the workers when they are not working, trapping them in dire living conditions, severing them from participating in the everyday life of the city.

The workers' marginalization is expressed not only visually but also in the voiceover. The narrator reveals that from 7 a.m. till 7 p.m., as they work, Syrians are above Beirut, and from 7 p.m. till 7 a.m., as they dwell in their living quarters, they are below Beirut. Yet the city is twenty-four hours out of reach, he says, even when they are standing at its highest point. Certain shots conjure Beirut through the workers' eyes, while others capture the workers as they gaze across the Beirut skyline. They see the city from a great distance and height, or from behind machinery, iron bars, and holes. They see Beirut, but the city doesn't see them.

It is difficult to see something and not be able to grasp it.
 The windows of the tower are our only connection to the city.
 From the roof I see the sea, the blue sky, the city, and its clouds, akin to an image, pasted along the frame of the tower.
 A wallpaper, wrapping the horizon around us.

These words, uttered by *Taste of Cement's* narrator, describe Beirut as an image that the workers are neither *in* nor *of*. They are excluded from Beirut, a city that is being erected on their shoulders. A city they know, make, and are made of. A place they belong to through their labor. This is the paradox of Syrian labor: the workers are integral to the city's exploitative economy, yet their labor is rendered invisible and their presence is relegated underground. Aboveground, a shot of a street banner reads: "Warning: Syrian workers are forbidden from the streets after 7 p.m. Violators are punishable by law." The 7p.m. curfew imposed on Syrian workers prohibits them from leaving the construction site after work. The writing on the banners forces them to disappear into the darkness through a hole in the ground. Starting in 2018, banners such as these appeared everywhere in Lebanon, producing Syrian refugee workers discursively and visually as demonized figures threatening public safety.² The banners have become emblematic of the hostile climate produced by a dominant anti-Syrian refugee discourse tied to a regional history of expulsions and the Lebanese state's sectarian practices, stretching back to the treatment of Palestinians following their forced displacement by the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948.³

The trajectory of the Syrian workers featured in *Taste of Cement* is familiar. It is one that for decades has brought thousands of Syrians to Lebanon in search

of work, under an exploitative labor arrangement that has benefited both the Syrian and Lebanese regimes since their independence from French Mandate rule.⁴ From the 1950s onward, Syrians have migrated to Lebanon to take jobs as sales and "unskilled" services employees, and as manual laborers in construction, agriculture, public works, quarries, manufacturing, and transport. Syrians were particularly vital to the country's three decades of growth following Lebanon's independence in 1943, as well as to its recent postwar reconstruction boom beginning in the mid-1990s. As *Taste of Cement's* narrator wryly observes, Beirut, ravaged by fifteen years of civil war (1975–90) and by a fierce Israeli bombing campaign in 2006, still woke up in 2017 to the sound of construction. Only Lebanon's 2019 economic collapse has brought construction in the capital to a halt.

The narrator speaks of his father's journey as a Syrian who migrated to Lebanon to work as a builder after the end of the Lebanese Civil War. The narrator also speaks of his own experience as a Syrian refugee who fled the war in Syria to seek refuge in Lebanon, where, following in his father's footsteps, he now works as a builder. He fled Syria after his house was destroyed and he was buried under the rubble:

The sound of drilling was piercing.
 I woke up.
 I could not move or shout.
 Our house was covering me.
 It was in my mouth.
 In my nose.
 In my eyes.
 People were shouting: "Is anybody there?"
 They drilled all day along until they found me.
 That's what they told me.
 The taste of cement was eating my mind.
 With the smell of death.
 I ran away.
 Into the void.

Suddenly I found myself buried in another hole,
under the ground.
When I first arrived, they told me: “No bombing, no
shelling here!”
But still cement surrounds me.
I can’t escape.

As the film unfolds, the life of Syrian refugee workers in Lebanon and the war they fled in Syria bleed into each other. The two worlds merge as their images are superimposed and juxtaposed. Images of construction cranes are spliced with images of tank turrets. Images of Beirut under (re)construction fade into images of Homs’s and Aleppo’s destruction. Images of the tower’s underground where the Syrian workers are effectively imprisoned are contrasted with images of buildings in Syria brought to the ground, their residents trapped. On the soundtrack, the pounding and drilling and roaring noises of the worksite’s machines echo the sharp staccato of war machines shattering Syrian cities into pieces.

The borders between these two worlds, and between war and capital, are erased by cement. The bitter, lingering smell and taste of cement fill the narrator’s mouth, ears, and eyes as he is buried underneath the rubble of his house in Syria. The same smell and taste find him in Lebanon, where they permeate his body as he labors as a construction worker. The smell and taste are familiar, and not only because they recall the war at home. They also remind him of his father: cement clung to his father’s body long after he returned home from Lebanon. The smell revealed his father’s return and presence, while the taste infiltrated every morsel his father fed him.

In Kalthoum’s film, cement becomes an affectively and sensorially charged elemental material that evokes physical memories of childhood longing, raging war, and the suffering of exile. The taste

and smell of cement are gendered; they summon the yearning for all fathers, brothers, and sons who left their families and their country to work in Lebanon. They also summon the physical devastation and trauma experienced by Syrians since the beginning of the war. The taste and smell of cement disappeared with the death of the narrator’s father, only to resurge in Lebanon years later.

For twelve hours a day, the narrator and his fellow Syrian workers labor with cement. They transport it. They sieve it. They mix it. They pour it. They spread it. They drill it. Cement’s dust hangs in the air, fills their bodies, sticks to their skin, and lingers in their minds. For the remaining twelve hours, cement confines them in their makeshift living quarters made from raw concrete. Its smell and taste, the narrator observes, are inescapable.

Cement’s materiality and meaning are recast in this film. Cement is no longer mere building material. It saturates the atmosphere to structure the embodied experiences of Syrian refugee workers. As they labor, particles of cement are encrusted on and in their bodies. Syrian refugee workers are transformed by cement—it eats their skin and souls, the narrator tells us—and in turn, they transform cement into a tower through their sweat and blood. Syrian refugees become of cement and cement becomes of them. In other words, cement blurs the boundary between body and infrastructure, permeating both. Media theorist Nicole Starosielski argues that “elements are not things . . . they are processual, dynamic, and interactive. . . . Elements compose. They are relational. Elements never fully stand alone. They attach, bond, and transform.”⁵ *Taste of Cement* is attuned to the relational dimension of cement—which, as an elemental medium, binds bodies to

infrastructure—and to its power to materially compose an atmosphere of exploitation and oppression for Syrian refugee workers.

The opening scene prefigures the film's consideration of cement as a material medium constitutive of destruction, extraction, and exploitation. Close-up shots focus on the wounds in Lebanon's mountains that quarries have ripped open, forever altering the country's geography and landscape. The shots attend to the surface of these wounds, foregrounding the coveted material elements that compose the mountains. A long shot captures mechanical diggers and bulldozers as they carve and hollow the inside of a mountain to extract the raw materials needed to produce concrete for Beirut's construction industry.

The assault on Lebanon's mountains for extractive purposes intensified in the wake of the civil war, a result of the Lebanese state's policy of postwar reconstruction that gave rise to a real estate boom concentrated in Beirut. As scholar Rami Zurayk puts it, "Driven by the city's gargantuan appetite for construction material, sand and limestone quarries spread like wildfire on Mount Lebanon."⁶ Cement, which is largely made of limestone, mediates the extraction and exploitation not only of labor power but of natural resources too. Cement not only eats the bodies and souls of Syrian workers; it also eats Lebanon's mountains, destroying wildlife, slashing pine forests, and wiping out ridges, valleys, and watercourses.

Kalthoum's *Taste of Cement* intervenes in the visual regime of the Syrian refugee "crisis" in Lebanon, unsettling the dominant discourse that structures public debate around refugeehood, and that shapes

how Syrian refugees are represented, perceived, and governed. Since Syrians started fleeing Syria to Lebanon post-2011, they have been framed as an invasive Other, their forced displacement mediated as crisis to shore up various anti-refugee practices through which state power in Lebanon has historically been consolidated. *Taste of Cement* disrupts the power relations and structures that are assembled by these bordering practices, using the visual as a material site for struggle in racist-capitalist relations. By claiming a political subjectivity and collectivity for refugee workers, and by making the material conditions of their struggles perceptible through the mediation of cement itself, Kalthoum's film reorganizes the relations of the sayable and visible; that is, it countervisualizes.⁷

This countervisual intervention renders visible other realities of forced migration that make up Syrian refugees' lived and embodied experiences: histories, memories, feelings, and perspectives that have otherwise been denied or concealed by the hegemonic "crisis" discourse. Focusing on Syrian male refugee workers laboring on a construction site in Beirut, Kalthoum documents their everyday life, environment, and gestures, bringing to light the marginalization and hyperexploitation they are subjected to in Lebanon. And yet, while Kalthoum makes visible Syrian refugee workers' oppressive conditions, portraying them as victims of an exploitative economic system, he also acknowledges their historical struggle and collective contribution as a labor force.

Taste of Cement's representation of Syrian refugee workers counters what urban studies scholars Mona Fawaz, Ahmad Gharbieh, Mona Harb, and Dounia Salamé refer to as "refugee talk." This dominant discourse has framed the

forced migration of Syrians as either a humanitarian or a security crisis:

Refugee talk is in vogue. When sponsored by international organizations, it adopts a tone of human destitution. . . . In this context, refugees are mostly represented as powerless and passive aid recipients. They are depicted as mere victims of external pressures that have forcefully displaced them and exposed them to the violence of host communities. . . . Conversely, within the dominant discourse deployed by political leaders and the mainstream media, refugee talk typically favors the vocabulary of security, fear, risk, and the existential threats posed by cross-border mobility. It depicts a “receiving state” suffering an “exogenous shock” as a “host community” is ‘invaded’ by a “wave of refugees” that threatens the [state’s] livelihood, coherence, work, health, way of life, and perhaps even its sovereignty.⁸

Produced and propagated by populist politicians and Lebanese mainstream media, solidified and institutionalized by legal frameworks and state policies, and embraced by a significant number of Lebanese citizens, refugee talk has been ramped up in Lebanon in the past decade.⁹

As hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians sought refuge in Lebanon post-2011, the figure of the Syrian refugee absorbed the attention of the government, the media, and the public. During a news conference held to address the influx of Syrian refugees in the country, a Lebanese government official warned that “the Syrian refugee crisis is the biggest crisis threatening the Lebanese entity.”¹⁰ By articulating Syrian refugeehood as threat and/or burden to the nation-state, refugee talk (re)ignites heated debates centered on the negative impacts of refugees in Lebanon—who have been blamed for everything from traffic jams to electricity cuts, the collapse of the economy to the degradation of the environment—to shore up and justify the Lebanese state’s anti-refugee policies and practices.

Marked by racism and xenophobia, this discourse systematically demonizes refugees and deprives them of their basic rights, while erasing their (exploited) labor and other contributions to space- and placemaking.¹¹

How does *Taste of Cement* counter the visualization of Syrians as a threat (to national security, economy, identity) and burden (to local resources and infrastructures)? Cement, as the film’s title suggests, is at the crux of Kalthoum’s aesthetic strategies. Kalthoum experiments with the documentary format by refracting the film’s images and narrative through the elemental medium of cement to portray a different reality. The material-poetic mediation of cement enables Kalthoum to create a multisensorial aesthetic that is attuned to refugee workers’ embodied experiences and struggles, and that makes the conditions of their displacement and exploitation not only visible but also matter, in both senses of the term.

In *Taste of Cement* Kalthoum creates an aesthetico-political language that captures Syrian refugee workers’ reality—the material and psychic effects of war, displacement, and exploitation—sensorially. *Taste of Cement* appeals to smell, taste, touch, and sound through an evocative narrative and sensuous imagery. This multisensorial evocation releases the experiences embedded in the senses and bodies of the Syrian refugee workers, and conveys these experiences in a way that engages viewers in sensing and feeling them: the horror of war, the sorrow of exile, the brutality of the capitalist exploitation of bodies and natural resources.

One important critique of Kalthoum’s film is that it overaestheticizes the Syrian

refugee workers' experiences, privileging the artistry of filmmaking and the beauty of the image over explicit depictions of the workers' struggles.¹² However, it is precisely the aesthetic qualities of the film that allow it to function as a counterimage to the pervasive "crisis" discourse and to situate the presence of Syrian workers in Lebanon within a regional history of resource extraction and capitalist exploitation. Kalthoum's sensory approach to documentary making—combined with an observational aesthetic, affective narration, and poetic imagery—creates a sense of proximate intimacy for viewers, drawing them into Syrian refugee workers' lived experiences.

While it is their reality that is represented, refugee workers themselves never speak to the camera. Their struggle is told through the sparse, poetic, and affectively charged narration. One voice for all the voices. One intimate story of displacement among many others. One embodied experience of exile, evoking a collective condition. This directorial decision, the fact that Kalthoum doesn't "give (individual) workers a voice," opens the film to critique, as does Kalthoum's own positionality as an artist and as the film's director. Lebanon's anti-Syrian refugee policies and practices have disproportionately impacted certain groups of Syrian refugees, largely along class lines. The lived experiences of a Syrian creative class—which includes Kalthoum, who migrated to Lebanon along with Syrian refugee laborers—are starkly different to those of construction workers. However, even as better-off Syrians, including artists, filmmakers, and intellectuals, experienced less blatant discrimination, they were nonetheless eventually pushed out of the country by Lebanon's hostile and discriminatory migration regime.¹³

Taste of Cement contributes to a growing body of migrant films created by Syrians on the move, who are attempting to (self-) represent their lived and embodied experiences of war, displacement, and exile. Key to the emergence of this new wave of Syrian cinema, which responds to the radical transformations that Syria was and is undergoing, has been Bidayyat. Since its launch in 2013, this nonprofit organization has provided crucial support and training to Syrian activists, artists, and citizen-journalists in their attempts to document and make sense of the revolution unfolding through and around them, to engage the world outside through the moving image, and to offer a collective response to the war of visual media waged by nation-states against Syrian refugees.

From the start, Bidayyat has invested in the creation and circulation of counterimages—that is, images that tell different stories from "the stereotyped images peddled by global media outlets and televised news broadcasts," and which resist "the obsession with images of death and destruction that so dominated and obscured the wider landscape of life, resistance, work and art."¹⁴ Bidayyat's work has been particularly pivotal in the development of a post-2011 Syrian migrant cinema, which not only reconfigures the way that the Syrian revolution is typically represented in media, but also unsettles the visual regime of the so-called Syrian refugee "crisis." Syrian filmmakers and artists, with the support of Bidayyat, have strived to generate counternarratives and counterimages that challenge the dominant perspectives peddled by the media, by politicians, by humanitarian organizations, and by other agents invested in representing Syrian refugees and their cross-border migratory movements as "crisis," whether in the region or globally.

Kalthoum's *Taste of Cement*, produced by Biddayat, is but one instance of this urgent aesthetic and political work. Kalthoum countervisualizes by reframing forced and labor migration through the perspective of Syrian refugee workers, in the process insisting that these workers are, in a material sense, *of* place.