

Words between Freedom and Control

The Story of a Syrian Poetry Club in the Uprising

I conquer the world with words,
conquer the mother tongue,
verbs, nouns, syntax.
I sweep away the beginning of things
and with a new language
that has the music of water the message of fire
I light the coming age
and stop time in your eyes
and wipe away the line
that separates
time from this single moment.

I Conquer The World With Words

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Bachelorthesis by

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University of Utrecht, 2011

Supervisor: Hans de Kruijf

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Preface

The inspiration for the anthropological practice depends entirely on real life and real people who, by sharing a side of their lives, their thoughts and their words have revealed moments of clarity and ideas. In this anthropological endeavour I have been supported by many people, both in my personal life and in the field.

First I would like to thank the people in Damascus who not only form the basis and the essence of this research, but most importantly turned my life in Damascus into a meaningful experience. Especially my main informants who I have stalked for much too long: Lukman and Shakespeare.

In Utrecht I would like to thank my supervisor Hans de Kruijf who endured my fragmented renderings and gave me hope when deadlines came closer and passed away.

My eternal gratitude goes to Ida and Simon who have inspired me conceptually and with their friendship, both in Damascus and Copenhagen.

To Dorieke and Mannus in Valencia for getting me back on my feet and Ivo and Johan in Antwerp for adopting me.

Finally, my parents who have opened countless roads.

Introduction

Winter 2011. Tunis. When a fruit seller sets himself on fire because he felt he had no way out, thousands of his fellow countrymen take the streets and express their anger. Weeks later, the leader of the country fled to Saudi Arabia. Because of the death of one man revolutions rocked the old regimes of the Arabic world.

Spring 2011. Damascus

It was in this tempestuous epoch that I started my research in Syria, a country which, like Tunisia, has been led by the same family for over four decades and has a notorious history when it comes to human rights and freedom of speech.

My research is placed in the nexus of the permitted and the transgressive: the struggle control and freedom of speech. I focused on a poetry club in central Damascus, *Bayt al-Qasid* (BaQ), the House of Poetry. This is not your regular poetry meeting of decent old men. The weekly Monday sessions are a grotesque and decadent reflection of Syrian society which has taken down poetry from its respected throne and turned it into a people's experience. Entering BaQ is one of the most bizarre experiences one can have in Syria. With its relatively conservative society and its control-obsessed government BaQ operates as a utopian bubble of revolutionary freedom within the totalitarian system.

I will start out by introducing BaQ as it is lived by the audience: as a space of freedom that breathes a spirit of freedom of speech and democracy, radically different from the society in which it is situated. I will expand on its hedonistic and anarchistic nature which make it a place of extraordinary freedom within Syria.

How can a place like this exist in the first place? In the second chapter I will show the context in which BaQ is embedded. I will track its roots in Syrian history and indicate where the space to organize BaQ comes from. The Syrian regime plays a constant game in order to control its citizens and weaken resistance. It is through the policies of the Ba'ath regime that a space of *ambiguity* comes into being

So while at first sight BaQ seems like a place of heroic freedom it is in fact instrumental in the government's politics of control. Since the space is controlled by the regime's security system it simply cannot be a place of resistance. But neither is it an arm of the regime. It is rather ambiguous.

BaQ is a place of paradox which is geared towards freedom and control at the same time. Ambiguity is BaQ's prime condition of existence. It occupies a position *in-between* different spheres of power and in-between different social and political groups, while not belonging to any of them.

Through Foucault's concept of heterotopia I explain the processes of alternative ordering which take place in BaQ. Bayt al-Qasid functions like an illusion. It brings individual freedom in a country which is ruled by a regime obsessed with control, it brings equality in a context of domination and it brings togetherness in a fragmented society. But only within the confined space of a basement.

For just a few hours a week, members of the resistance sit side by side the government agents drinking beer and listening to love poetry. It gives an almost utopic image of a united, free and peaceful society which goes merrily well together. The heterotopian space acts like bubble which gives people the chance to escape from the real world is much more fragmented.

While searching for freedom BaQ and its leader Lukman Derky came up with new forms of social control and playing the game of the regime. The poetry club is a social experiment which searches for alternative orderings. But being a bubble of hedonism it remains powerless, the alternative orderings will never leave the basement.

Bayt al-Qasid is not at all a static and independent entity. It relates to the city, to society and the power-structures that surround it. Instead it is a constant process, constantly changing identities and configurations. It captures the movements and relations that are significant in society at large.

Half-way my research the fragmented real world imposed itself upon the utopic bubble of BaQ. From mid-March onwards the uprising against the regime spread quickly across the country and affected all layers of the Syrian population. In the chapter which I call *The Period* I describe how this total event forced BaQ-regulars to choose sides, which meant that its prime condition, ambiguity, evaporated. And thus BaQ disappeared as well, as if had never existed, like a dream. My research locus disappeared but the people remained. I followed the roads that lead from BaQ and traced their paths as they moved through the uprising with new struggles and dramatically altered lives.

The story of Bayt al-Qasid, its existence and eventual disappearance, conveys the story of many Syrians who are affected in their own personal ways by The Period.

I. Space of Freedom

Going down the basement

It's Monday night, a quarter to ten. Going down the stairs of the up-scale Fardoss Hotel in the business-center of Damascus. I enter the dimly-lit basement, which has no physical connection to the outside world and feels like a cave. At the bar men and women sip their beer and arak while they take a puff of their cigarette and talk to their neighbors. Through the thick smoke I perceive the contours of the basement. On the left there are small tables which have a tag reserved on them and a red comfy couch with grey men and women sitting at them. In the far left corner stands a catheter with a microphone sticking out. On the walls hang black and white pictures of Mahatma Gandhi and Malcolm X which give the impression that important issues will be addressed and big changes are expected. The place fills up quickly, tables get taken, the couches get full, chairs and crutches go quickly. The central arena is filled with standing people and right in front of the catheter there's a group of mostly foreign students sitting on the floor. At ten the place is packed, filled with cigarette smoke, the smell of beer, loud laughter and busy talking. The atmosphere is hot.

Then, a man with worn-out jeans and a leather jacket enters the room. He greets everyone, the waiters, the people at the bar, the ones at the reserved seats, the ones on the floor. In his hand he carries a beer and a cigarette. After having greeted every single person in the room he walks towards the catheter and takes the microphone.

Welcome to Bayt al-Qasid!

(Fieldnotes, 14-03-2011)

Bayt al-Qasid, the House of Poetry, is one of the most unique happenings in Syria. Since it came on cultural stage in 2006 it has grown into one of the best known poetry reading sessions in the country and likely the best attended. It has grown from a closed poetry reading, invites-only, in a small gallery led by Lukman Derky, a well know Kurdish poet in Syria. Throughout the years BaQ has grown into an open happening which attracts a crowd of around one hundred visitors each Monday.

My main intention in this chapter is to introduce Bayt al-Qasid (BaQ) as a space of freedom that breaths ideas of personal liberty, democracy, freedom of speech and unity within a state-system which is obsessed with keeping control over its fragmented population. I will explain how

through principles of human agency and through poetry the existing processes of the ordering of society at large are challenged for several hours in the poetry club. BaQ is a temporary utopia where different visions of a better society are mingled, tested and somehow lived. But, as utopias go, it is too good to be true. Its power to alter the existing order is limited to the confinements of the basement and the real world starts when one climbs the stairs.

Throughout this chapter I will show the main characteristics and personalities of the poetry club. There can be no analysis of Bayt al-Qasid without considering Lukman Derky. He is the architect and dictator of BaQ and his unpredictable behaviour makes him a difficult character to understand and by extension makes BaQ difficult to understand.

I intend to show the diverse nature of the public and the interaction between poets/performers and the public. The public is what makes BaQ a unique space in Syria. First of all, the extent to which its composition is diverse. It is composed of different generations, different religions, genders, ideologies, ethnicities and nationalities, to such extent that it forms a reflection of the complex Syrian society. And thus BaQ entails some of Syria's main complexities: freedom and control, unity and diversity. Second, the relation between the public and the poets/performers is largely equal which gives BaQ the allure of a democratic space. Performers are taken from the public so that the poet is given little authority, the public criticizes the poetry and corrects the poet when he makes mistakes.

Alcohol, decadence and anarchy

Monday-evenings in Bayt al-Qasid are spectacles for the senses characterized by the consumption of large quantities of alcohol, shouting, laughter, music and dancing. It is a decadent and hedonistic affair which distinguishes BaQ from other poetry meetings in Damascus which tend to be serious, respectful and quiet.

Whether poetry suffers or flourishes in these circumstances depends on one's perspective, but performing poetry in BaQ and pleasing the public is no easy task. One evening (14-3) Waddah, a young talent from Suweida, attempted to perform a series of poems in collaboration with Gregory, an American poet, but he was interrupted by drunken elements from the public several times which forced him to start his reading all over. Besides the comments directed at him or at his poetry, Lukman himself interrupted Waddah as he was shouting that the public is supposed to be silent.

Waddah: *"Lukman! I want to add something, I'm not finished yet!"*

Lukman replied: *"Okay, remind me later, I'm too drunk right now."*

Of course much of this brutality is caused by the abundant consumption of *arak* and beer, but this is not a mere incident; it is the way BaQ is supposed to go.

The hedonistic behavior of the BaQ-crowd is continued in the chaotic nature of organization, or rather, the lack of organization. While there are a number of poets who perform almost every week, the evenings go by and large unplanned. The course of an evening depends on members of the audience who decide on the spot to read something they have written, to make music or sing, or Lukman who urges a special guest to come to the microphone and say anything. Its anarchistic organization makes every session a different experience. On some occasions there is little interesting poetry, which can leave spectators disappointed. Other evenings however can be powerful and entail moments of strong poetry, insight and togetherness. Everything depends on the mood of the crowd, of Lukman and the quality of the performances.

Performers volunteer from the public and while they are performing there is great interaction between poet and public, with the public often interrupting or even correcting when someone makes mistakes. Albrus is one of the poets who comes to read every week in classical arabic. and week after week he makes the same mistakes in the pronunciation of the lines. The poetry gets easily blurred between the murmur of the public. But when a performance is liked the public remains quiet and rewards the performer with thunderous applause.

The judging of poetry in BaQ is subject to serious contestation among the public. There are different factions which each prefer certain styles of poetry and performing. It is an unwritten competition centered around a number of literature-students from Damascus university. They bring their friends who act as supporters after a performance. They clap and cheer when their personal friend made his performance. According to Shakespeare, this competition is in fact about different visions of good poetry. One faction preferring modern poetry, the other faction wants classical poetry.

The lack of structure is contested by some BaQ regulars. One person said BaQ needs more structure, but immediately adding that it would change the very essence of what BaQ is.

There is a rough structure though to which all meetings adhere to. The evenings begin around 10PM (although it has started late several times because Lukman was late. In these instants everyone just waited, talked and continued drinking) and goes on until half past one or two. In the first two hours there are usually two sets of performances of each one hour and in between a short break. The performances are short, with maximum two minutes. This is the only rule

Lukman has installed in BaQ, according to him so that there the variation can keep the attention span strong.

Then, as if it were not disorganized enough the second part of the evening, as both audience and performers get more and more drunk, Lukman up front, the poetry falls into the background and the evening turns into a form of open podium. People come to the microphone to tell random stories or jokes, make music and sing. Depending on one's preferences one could call this either the disintegration of the night or exactly the time when BaQ's power is expressed to the fullest. The unplanned set-up of the evening allows for a free exploitation of time. At this point, the public partly changes. The ones who have an interest in poetry or those who aren't interested in messy singing and dancing leave the basement, while others enter exactly in these later stages of the night. Hassan for example, a man in his fifties, described by Lukman as a dandy. When I asked him whether he sometimes reads poetry in BaQ he replied cunningly: *no my friend, I come here to seduce women*. He is a man who knows how to time his entrance on the scene, arriving exactly at the moment of transition from relative order to chaos.

At that point BaQ is probably the most interesting point in the whole country. The basement enters a state of collective transcendence as poetry is mixed with music, laughter, emotion and beer. On the strongest evenings the basement feels like a spaceship which has lost all connections with the real world.

Uncontrolled the microphone passes from one person to next; someone takes a seat behind the piano and starts playing after which he is joined by a guitar player and a singer. The audience sings along. Soon the middle of the room is filled with drunken free-dancing adults. (Fieldnotes 14-03)

By about 1.30 AM the bartenders try to make clear that the party is over. When the crowd is still floating through space they are the ones who have to break the spell and send everyone out. When everyone has finally left the basement, the crowd takes place collectively right outside the Fardoss hotel, before landing softly back into the real world.

What does this hedonistic and chaotic spectacle express? In his work *The Badlands of Modernity* (1997) Keven Hetherington has written about hedonistic meetings in Parisian cafes in the mid- and late seventeen hundreds. He sees these spaces as sites in which "the utopics of modernity, the ambivalent interplay of freedom and control were expressed."

Bayt al-Qasid and poetry

The way poetry is treated in the House of Poetry may raise some eyebrows to those who are used to listening to poetry in concentrated sensitive way. The very idea of reading poetry is contested. Some poets don't feel the need to expose their words, thoughts and feelings with others. It can exist by itself without any obligation to be shared with a larger public. Jesper Berg, a Dane who's been living in Damascus for over 15 years and a poet himself finds the exposure of poetry to a crowd like BaQ's unnecessary. This is especially understandable in the case of BaQ as its relation with traditional poetry is quite disturbing. Waddah said he has had only one good experience in BaQ while reading poetry. All other times had been disturbed by intermingling of the crowd or indeed by Lukman himself.

This is not by accident, it is the way things are supposed to go in BaQ. According to Lukman the classical poet has a position of authority, as if he is elevated from the public. Gamardine, Lukman's Latvian girlfriend, once explained that poetry, theatre and spectacle originally were performed among the people, by normal people, without placing the performer above the audience. Lukman, in his view, put poetry back where it should be: among the audience, with normal performers and a great emphasis on interaction as an expression of equality.

In practice this means that the microphone is within easy reach for everyone, including the drunken amateur poets. In fact, the microphone itself was a questionable object. In the early years of BaQ when it was organized in Mustafa Ali's art gallery in the old town the poetry was read without microphone. When it moved to Jackson's Club in the basement of Fardoss Hotel Lukman feared the microphone *"would destroy the equal relation between audience and poet, giving authority to the poet. But it turned out the microphone became a device instead of an authority by itself. And it made even Shakespeare shut up."*

Poetry is treated without the respect it would get in traditional venues; it becomes blurred in hedonism and variété. This is exactly how it is supposed to be. The chaos is an inherent part of BaQ because it has a function, namely bringing poetry 'back to the people'. Lukman stresses the democratic aspects of BaQ

On the other hand this attitude creates a tension between BaQ and some of its visitors who would rather see some more organization and respect for the poetry and the poet.

The fact that BaQ evokes a wide range of different opinions and critiques makes it clear that BaQ sits along the boundaries of different spheres of society.

While supposedly poetry is BaQ's main occupation, the extent to which it is blurred by hedonism, anarchy and variété indicates that BaQ must be about something more than poetry. Its hedonistic approach is not a mere banality, it expresses something. The hedonist and decadent elements of BaQ show that it's not only the poet who expresses himself, the audience as a collective also speaks and shows no respect for the authority of the poet. It is one of the rare occasions when Syrians can speak freely in a public setting as an individual. Seen from this perspective it is truly a democratic space although democratic should not be understood in the strict political sense of free elections. It is democratic in a way that it stimulates the speaking of one's mind, the expression of the individual.

The hedonist and decadent elements of BaQ show a new appreciation for emotion and desire, for the expressive aspects of social life that have to do with personal freedom. From the clandestinely sexual to the overtly political. (Hetherington, 1997; 13). What is mostly hidden in modern Syria (sexuality, seduction, politics,...) can be revealed and played within the BaQ-sessions.

When I asked Lukman what he thinks is good poetry and bad poetry he responded.

"Bad poetry doesn't exist. There is either poetry or no poetry."

"So what is poetry then?"

"Poetry enchants and has to be believed. If you can believe it without it has charmed you it doesn't work. It is the expression of the truth, not in long boring books but in some powerful sentences."

Freedom of expression is one of the most important subtexts of BaQ. Of course this immediately raises the question of how to deal with the boundaries of free speech that the government has erected. The only way this space of freedom can exist in an authoritarian context is by limiting it.

We have to make a distinction between social boundaries and political boundaries. While BaQ is ideal for discovering the terrains of emotion, love, sexuality, religion, literature and even foreign politics, it is much less so when talking about Syrian politics. There is an unspoken red line that cannot be crossed which is critique on government policy or the president.

The red lines are guarded, not only by the secret security agents, *muhabarat*, which are present at every meeting, but most significantly by Lukman. This makes BaQ effectively a non-political space which cannot transgress the realm of ambiguity.

Thus poetry in BaQ is by and large non-political in character. Poetry, like every art and every form of expression, can be directed at a multitude of themes. As in songs and literature, poetry cannot exist without questions of love and thus also in BaQ it forms one of the major themes. Gaith, an Iraqi refugee and a self-educated communist more than once complained that BaQ could do more than it does now.

"There are more important things to talk about... like this government for example. I don't want to hear love poetry every week."

But another informant, Shakespeare, who is considered as the foreign minister of BaQ, believed love poetry could indeed play a role in expressing political resistance.

"The way in which poetry is performed encourages free speech. You can say it in way you want to. And it's unlike the way art and literature is taught in Syrian university which is only directed at the reproduction of a set existing images. It stimulates you to think critically about what you say and the way it is said. Also the audience participates. usually in syria the audience is passive, they only receive information and don't play any part. In Bayt al-Qasid there is debate, when someone makes mistakes he will be corrected."

Shakespeare saw BaQ as a space of openness, but still profoundly political.

Shakespeare, a young literary student is one of the most outspoken visitors of BaQ. He is atypical in the fact that he never hesitates to express his raw political opinions even in situations when it would be sensible not to do so. He expresses hard critique against the government, even in BaQ.

"We will fight them with poetry, like a young person losing its virginity."

(Fieldnotes: 11-03-2011)

The vision of the founder of BaQ, Lukman, appeared to have quite a different idea.

"Bayt al-Qasid is not a political place, our prime agreement is to keep it a poetic place (he didn't mention who this agreement was made with). People make fun of politics, so no political motives. There are great things being read and written about politics. Politics part of the poetic range so there can be political poetry, also in Bayt al-Qasid. People read about struggle, liberation, communist issues, poverty. Halas (enough!). There is range for freedom in Bayt al-Qasid, there's no censorship, no pre-reading, the

microphone is open to everyone. The only condition is to speak for maximum two minutes."

It has to be remarked that censorship is not necessarily executed by Lukman. Lisa Wedeen has observed that censorship is internalised in the heads of all Syrians. Lukman's claim that there is no censorship in BaQ is thus very relative. Not in the least because of the fact that the place is monitored by the secret service.

Utopian visions

Not only is poetry in BaQ taken down from its authoritarian position, it is meant for everybody to enjoy. On any given Monday-session the audience is composed of the greatest variety possibly imaginable. It's a colorful collection of genders, ages, nationalities, ethnicities, religions and ideologies who come from all strata of society. Some are well-established writers and artists, students of literature, amateur poets who live the bohemian life and people who come to drink away their sorrows at the bar. It's not an underground, hidden affair, it's open for everyone.

The diverse character of BaQ is Lukman's explicit intention; "we are open for the drunk and the bourgeois."

Lukman has managed to bring about a public which is a reflection of Syrian society, including all its ethnicities, religions, ideologies and generations and even includes the agents of control themselves, the *muhabarat*. Like any other group in BaQ the *muhabarat* are toyed with as this story by Shakespeare illustrates.

"I remember several ago there was this crazy moment. Lukman recognized one of the muhabarat quietly sipping his beer. Lukman at the microphone said to the guy he should come to the front and to read like everybody else. He said: you can read anything you want! Even the report you're going to give to your boss tomorrow. We never saw that guy again."

(Fieldnotes: 20-02-2011)

This is the sort of challenge BaQ poses to the conceptual system of the regime. It is a playful deformation of the social order, but which stays within the red lines laid out by the government.

Lukman's vision of BaQ is not necessarily anti-political. What he means is that the venue cannot be claimed by one particular vision of society. By trying to keep BaQ a poetic place and not a political one, Lukman creates space for ambiguity, for different visions of society to come together, from opposite sides of the social and political spectrum. Also, he positions himself

above potential conflicts and rifts, like a father-figure. For Lukman what BaQ should be is a place of unity and freedom. But *he* is the one who has the task of safeguarding this conceptual universe. It makes him indispensable and necessary.

Lukman's vision of BaQ a place of freedom and without censorship sounds rather cynical. It was to become clear very soon that freedom would remain a utopia, even within the bubble of BaQ. We can see that the existing order of the outside world is momentarily deformed. Members of the resistance sit side by side the *muhabarat*, authority has stepped down, a fragmented society appears to have united, and conservative morality has made way for liberal attitudes. For several hours in the basement of BaQ it seems as if the tensions of the real world have dissolved.

BaQ provides visions for a better society and makes the attendants believe that it is actually possible. Freedom, equality and togetherness are in effect manifested in the basement. It creates the illusion that this world is also possible in the real world. This makes essentially utopic, the good place that doesn't exist.

In order to pursue utopia the existing order needs to be altered and alternative ways of ordering must be invented, it means creating new relations between freedom and control. BaQ operates like a laboratory for utopias, a social experiment in which individuals, factions and the state can find out how they want to regulate society.

But the ideas that this laboratory produces will be in vain. They will remain an illusion and never leave the basement of the Fardoss Hotel.

Waddah stresses BaQ significance on the social plane rather than on the political.

"Bayt al-Qasid is a place where the limits of society are tested and pushed towards freedom"

(Fieldnotes: 15-03-2011)

Lukman

The most central figure in BaQ, Lukman, has quite an interesting history himself, coming from a Kurdish family in the north-eastern part of the country. While being a Muslim he was partly raised and educated by Christians and Jews. In his younger days he was part of a Kurdish communist group while attending Aleppo University. Throughout his younger years as a poet he was known as quite a rebel. He organized poetry meetings in the university while not having the permission to do so. Considering his personal history and his image as a person who does his

own thing while making his way through Syria's system of control and repression, organizing BaQ sounds logical. In his personality alone he unites the different factions of society.

Lukman is a difficult person to analyze. He has a history and reputation of doing his own thing while slipping through the systems of control. It's impossible to say whether he supports the regime or not, whether he's left or right. This ambiguity is what gives him the space to keep on doing as he pleases. He is subject to great respect and even admiration. Shakespeare even said *it's a miracle he's still alive. He got away with some crazy stuff*. The amount of admiration he receives by some gives him the allure of the leader of a movement. On the other hand he's known as a pragmatist who cares only about his self interests and as someone who doesn't belong to the resistance against the regime but as someone who strengthens it. As he has been my main character during my research I have come to know his ways very well. He is consistently inconsistent, critiquing the regime on some policies, wanting freedom on one instant and wondering what freedom worth anyway.

Concerning his influence on BaQ his influence is almost total. When he arrives in a bad mood, already drunk, the evening is likely to take on a dragging character without reaching its full strength. He is the one who is able to shape the meeting to his liking.

His importance goes that far that BaQ could not even exist without Lukman. Even though it already exists since 2006 and is thus one of the oldest still surviving cultural meetings to take place in Damascus, it is still unable to walk by itself and behave like an institution that can exist without its creator. This is both attributed to the personality of Lukman; one informant described Lukman as an egomaniac. He is a charismatic person and the only one who can lead BaQ. Not only because he embodies the meeting, but also because of his charismatic character and his ability to surround himself with a great diversity of people and to interest a large crowd. He shouts against his public, he makes insulting jokes, he seduces every girl and woman he meets, he drinks and smokes. He is both a source of entertainment and irritation and for a part of the public one of the reasons to come to BaQ.

This dominance of one person blurs the lines between BaQ and the person himself and makes an analysis of BaQ more difficult since group dynamics is very dependent on him. He is the uniting factor of the collection of people which reflect the fragmented syrian society. He acts like charismatic dictator (Weber) who succeeds in guiding its people towards a common project. But these are not the foundations of an independent institution.

The notion of charisma plays an important role in Max Weber's sociology of domination. According to Weber charisma in its pure form is deeply hostile to the existing order. Overtime though charismatic movements become *routinized* as the followers get dependent of the charismatic leader. These movements are dependent on succes, which make their universe unstable. (Swedberg 2005; 32)

Lukman created a place which is very much like his own image: entailing different religions and ethnics, with ambiguous political ideas, unpredictable, hedonistic and full of emotions and drama. His pragmatic non-confrontational characteristics make him well-suited to gather people from different walks of life. The audience is not expected to support one group or another which provides a broad common ground for potential audience.

II. State of control

In the previous chapter we have entered BaQ from the inside out. It is experienced as a place of freedom where one can escape the order of daily life. Despite the fact that BaQ *feels* like a bubble of freedom detached from reality it is in fact embedded within society and the existing structures of power.

In the previous chapter I have demonstrated how Bayt al-Qasid works as a bubble of illusionary freedom. The reason why it remains a bubble is because it is situated within a state which is geared towards domination which leaves little space for alternative voices to be heard. In the following paragraphs I will explain how the state of control operates but how it has created created space for an organization like Bayt al-Qasid to exist .

I will show how the regime of president Basshar al-Assad blurred the boundaries between dictatorship and democracy created a space of ambiguity and thus provided the framework for BaQ. Consequently I will explain how state-control is internalized and consequently exercised in a space like Bayt al-Qasid. It is key to understand the illusionary space in which freedom is turned into control and visa versa. They blur into eachother and form a zone of ambiguity.

Bayt al-Qasid seems to be an anomaly. It is known and experienced as a place of freedom but is situated within a state geared towards control. They seem to have opposed perspectives on the ordering of society. The first question which comes to mind then is *how* a place of freedom can exist in such a context in the first place. In order to answer this question I will give an overview of the historical framework in which BaQ came into existence.

The reason why an analysis of the Syrian state system is necessary for our understanding is simply because the state is everywhere. It sets the limits to daily speech; it gives opportunities and is able to take them away again at any given moment. When trying to understand a poetry club which is known for freedom we first have to understand the structure which gives and takes freedom, which is, in the case of Syria, without any doubt, the state.

According to anthropologists Stepputat and Hansen (2001) the definition of governance should be tri-divided into: *State* - the legal and military structures of considerable permanence; *Government* - the wider institutional structure and administrative precedures; and *Regime* - the political organization and will in power. (2001: 23)

In Syria however the Ba'ath-party exercises full control over all three spheres of governance and thus a clear distinction between them does not exist.

Unity and Freedom

Syria's prime characteristic is its multicultural society. Like most contemporary nation-states it encompasses a great variety of different ethnicities, religions and ideologies. Although the country is mainly inhabited by Arabs, a Syrian can also be Armenian, Russian, Bedouin or Kurdish. On the religious plane the majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, but the country is essentially multi-religious. There are large populations of Shia's, Alewi's and Christians of many denominations and, until relatively recently, Jews.

In the nationalistic, secular and non-ethnic discourse adopted by the ruling Ba'ath-party this mix is officially hailed as the national feature of the country (Wedeen, 1998). The Ba'ath-regime, alongside other dictatorial regimes, proclaims their rule as a necessity to keep peace and stability in an otherwise unpredictable and potentially dangerous context. This is essentially the main argument which the government has been using to legitimize its rule since the coming to power of president Hafez al-Assad in 1963. It praises itself for being able to keep peace, whereas its closest neighbor, Lebanon, has been through three long and bloody civil wars in the last forty years.

This emphasis on unity is expressed in the old credo of the Ba'ath party: Unity, Freedom and Socialism (Zisser, 2006, 73). Maintaining freedom and unity may arguably be legitimate principles for the basis of a regime, however the strategies the Ba'ath-party employed to reach this objective made it clear that freedom would be maintained by force.

Since the coming to power of the Ba'ath party Syria has built a reputation of repression, disappearances, imprisonment and torture. The regime of Hafez al-Assad was notorious for its cruel treatment of anyone contesting its legitimacy. Hundreds of journalists, artists, intellectuals, politicians and human rights activists were arrested, imprisoned and cruelly tortured. (Various HRW reports and Cooke 2007) Members of religious and ethnic groups, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kurds were seen as a threat to national security and have been negated group rights, undergone institutional discrimination or have simply been sent to prison (HRW 2009: 3).

The danger of ethnic strife has been used by the ruling party as a weapon of fear in order to keep control. Mind that I am not saying the danger of ethnic or religious strife does not exist, it does exist. In fact the relation between the country's factions and sects is, in my view, one of the

greatest challenges of the survival of Syria as a state. But the regime uses the existing tensions for its own survival. While claiming to solve ethnic/religious tensions, these tensions form one of the conditions of existence of the Ba'ath regime. It has little to gain from peace and unity.

Freedom, the other proclamation of the old Ba'ath slogan, seems to have an equally cynical content as unity. The emergency law which has been in place since 1963, allows officials to detain anyone without any reason or process, it forbids groups to demonstrate, all in the name of national security.

Syria possesses an impressive omnipresent security apparatus. Besides an exceptionally large army and police force it employs a well-developed secret service¹. The *muhabarat*, secret agents, are part of Syrians' daily lives. They are present in every café, on street corners, in shops and in BaQ. Not all of them work as full-time secret officials, quite often they are normal people who are in some way connected to the government system. It forces people to be constantly conscious of what one says and to whom. (HRW 1990, 38 Human rights in Syria). There is strict control on all forms of expression in order to prevent criticism on state-discourse. This control includes strict censorship laws which regulate writings, cultural societies, film productions and the media. Government censors all sensitive subjects including politics, ideology, religion, society and economics (HRW 2010) and if necessary intervenes by preventing publications, shutting down newspapers or arresting dissidents. Peculiarly, the rules and boundaries of censorship are not fixed, they are arbitrary. "Even if artists internalized the rules and what they wrote had been officially approved, still they might find themselves retroactively censored" (Sadiq 1990 in Cooke 2007: 26). This caused even censors themselves to fear for punishment as they had no idea if they did the right thing (2008, 26).

Censorship and control have been prevalent in Syria since 1963. It's therefore not surprising that the red lines of censorship have been internalized and are unconsciously abided (Wedeen, 1999). Wedeen says that most Syrians know very well how far they can go in criticizing the government however thin and vague these lines may be.

In 1982 military force and control of the media lead Syria into its darkest period. In February of that year an armed uprising took place in the central city of Hama, allegedly organized by the forbidden Muslim Brotherhood. (Seale, 1988) The army reacted with an outright bombing and occupation of the city. The city was destroyed and approximately 20000 people were killed. The

¹ For a detailed overview of the Syrian security system see HRW 1990

sheer brutality of this massacre is unimaginable, but because the media was controlled by the state, there were hardly any reports about this event that left the country. The government kept the massacre quiet and the few communication lines that existed in that era were cut. Consequently the Hama massacre remained a blind spot to the foreign public and even to many Syrians.

Art and resistance

In her work *The Arts of Domination* Miriam Cooke expanded on the art scene in Syria and its relation with the state system. She explained how the Hafez-regime claimed that art and culture were humanity's highest needs and thereby that they needed to be elaborated. In its policies however it appeared that humanity's highest need needed to be suppressed and controlled.

In order to control the public debate the ministry of culture may hire critical voices to create the phantasm of an open debate, a practice Cooke calls commissioned criticism. It is "situated at the nexus of the permitted and the transgressive, it is the mechanism that exploits what is ambiguous in Syrian arts of Domination." (2007: 73) This muting of the open debate is aimed at the creation of a state monopoly on the formation of discourse. It allows for the creation of a personality cult which takes on the form of a set of dogma's which all Syrians are expected to externally adhere as evidence of their loyalty to the nation. (Wedeen 1998: 508)

Art was instrumental in spreading the ideology of state and was in that sense elaborated. Art in Syria is not a neutral field solely inhabited by artists. It is strictly governed and controlled by the state.

One of my main informants, Shakespeare, described from his perspective how the principle of commissioned criticism, in Syrian terms *fan'nanneen al-sulta* or *commitment art* works in practice.

This regime tries to make people believe in illusions. They asked artists some of whom were part of the opposition to make art which depicts the regime as this amazing institution. They were of course paid to do this but it was impossible to refuse. Especially in the eighties you had no choice to cooperate. So many writers have had to leave the country or have been imprisoned.

(Fieldnotes 11-03-2011)

He expanded on the regime's methods to forge control upon discourse.

The regime here in Syria is based upon something which I call the Holy Trinity of Control: security, education and culture. Security speaks for itself. You can see it everywhere: the army, police and the secret police, which by the way are not all secret. Everyone knows they exist. A Syrian can instantly tell when someone belongs to the secret police. It's the look on his face, the way he walks, the clothes he wears. We can smell these guys. The system is huge. There are seven divisions of secret service who all have their specialization.

Then education. From the first years in elementary school we are indoctrinated with the dogma's of the party. We learn about the heroes of the revolution, we learn the slogans. Every child in the first year of secondary school has to sign a paper which makes it a member of the Ba'ath party. Imagine, at that age children don't have any political consciousness but they have to become member of a repressive party.

Culture is the most interesting one. Why is culture important? Because it expresses how we think as a nation, it is a mirror of how we see ourselves as Syrians. This is why this regime desperately wants to control culture.

(Fieldnotes 11-03-2011)

Michel Foucault expanded greatly upon questions of control and freedom. He argued that power is omnipresent in all facets of the social system. *There is no "outside" of power. Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.* (Foucault 1978: 95-96)

The fact that even art and criticism on the government was institutionalized demonstrates Foucault's point of view.

Creation of ambiguity

The claims of freedom and unity are annihilated by its actions. It has created a symbolic universe understood by all Syrians. In between the words freedom and the deeds of control the regime has left a space of ambiguity and relative openness. The intentions of the state seem unclear; it behaves in unpredictable and arbitrary ways, from time to time opening up the discursive space and closing it again when it suits them.

This marginal space invites for people and organizations to give a proper view of society, even some measure of contestation.

It is this space which the next president would elaborate and which formed the breeding ground of Bayt al-Qasid.

As Hafez passed away in 2000 his son Bashar took over in what was considered a remarkably smooth transition of power. He announced himself as a reformer that would bring real freedom to Syria, many Syrians hoped his presidency would bring change and renewal. Bashar widened the marginal spaces that already existed and to a certain extent loosened the sphere of control which had gripped Syria for many years.

The government let go of the sphere of ideology. Syrians were from then on allowed to watch satellite television and information from around the globe, including news-station like Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabia, BBC, CNN and Russia Today. The government loosened its grip on the hegemony of information. People flocked to the internet and got connected to YouTube and Facebook, although these websites were officially blocked until February 2011.

It was in this brief period of the opening of the public sphere in the early 2000's that Lukman Derky took his chance to use the space which became available to him. Together with several other poets he started a literary magazine, Aleph, rich in satire and political cartoons. It was one the first independent media publications at that time. In that same era he was asked by government officials to make theatre, critical theatre. He agreed on condition that they would give him the freedom to say whatever he wanted to.

"It became hugely popular, attaining audiences only exceeded by the singer Fairouz in her heydays in the seventies. The show was very provocative but it turned out the audience didn't know how to react, they were even afraid to laugh..." (Fieldnotes 27-4-2011)

After several months however playing time was over. Several hardliners within the Bashar regime saw the freedom as a threat. New political groups had been formed, the government was being mocked. Thus the new-found social freedom closed down. The Damascus Spring turned into winter again. (George, 2003: 47) and Lukman had to stop his political theatre.

But in the arts and the media things didn't just return to the gloomy way it was before. The art scene and media had been to some extent liberalized, although still monitored by censors. Lukman was able to turn the situation to his advantage and he became a well-known public figure in the newly opened-up media-landscape. In 2006 he was asked to start writing a daily column in Baladna, one of the new private newspapers. He starred in several soap-operas and even presented his own TV-show in which he interviewed normal people on the streets. It

gained him recognition and respect throughout Syria, especially amongst the Kurds he represented a well respected figure, being one of the few recognizable successful Kurdish people in the country who could serve as an example for what Kurds could become in Syria. Thanks to the policies of opening up and liberalization of the media by the Bashar-regime, Lukman grew to prominence.

In his daily column Lukman *puts things improperly* and uses a combination of both standard Arabic and the local dialect, Ammiyya. While standard arabic is the language of literature, media and politics, Ammiyya is the language of local people. By combining high and low language Lukman makes an important symbolic statement. He even incorporates Kurdish words into Arabic ones and creates new words. Like he has taken down the poet from a position of authority in BaQ, Lukman took down the high language to the normal people in his columns. When the ministry of culture issued an order that all language in the media had to be standard Arabic he changed his game and took language to the level of absurdity.

"When the editor of Baladna told me to write in proper language I did so. I started writing in quranic Arabic, using old words that nobody understood. After one week they told me: please go back to your old style because our readers complain that they don't understand what you're saying." (Fieldnotes 27-04-2011)

This kind of rebellious behaviour made it possible for Lukman to ridicule the system while still staying within the framework which has been designed by the system of power. It is impossible for both the regime and the readers to determine exactly what Lukman is doing. Is he resisting? and if so, against what? In any case he plays with the questions
In the same ambiguous way he created BaQ. It is rebellious in form but not in content.

As I said, although the media was partly liberalized it remained under stiff governmental control. The policy was geared towards creating an *image* of free press, while in reality control remained stiffly as ever. (Perthes 2007) By liberalizing the art and media scene the government incorporated it into its own ranks. (Rugh, 2004)

In similar ways political changes were promised by the Bashar-regime but never actually executed, or executed in such a way which actually strengthened the power of the state. One continuous promise was the eventual abolishment of the emergency law, which only occurred in April 2011, when the country was already in turmoil. Or take the state's attitude towards the Kurds which became noticeably softer throughout the years, allowing them to express their

culture to some degree and even support their cultural festivals. Again, it seems these measures were largely utilitarian as it forged loyalty from the Kurdish population for the regime. In reality though very little changed in the government's attitude towards the Kurds. (Tejel 2009)

All in all, the Bashar-regime made several concessions in order to give it a more humane, even democratic image in the international community and to forge legitimacy among its potential foes.

But the change remained limited to a superficial image, at the end of the first Bashar-decade, Human Rights Watch leaves us no illusions: “repression of political and human rights activism; restrictions on freedom of expression; torture; treatment of the Kurds; and Syria's legacy of enforced disappearances. The verdict is bleak.” (HRW 2010: 1).

Under the presidency of Bashar al-Assad the boundaries of dictatorship had been blurred. It has become unclear whether people are being free or are being controlled.

Anarchy and authoritarianism

Considering the fact that cultural space was liberalized in order to subdue to deeper control we see how the existence of BaQ fits within the policy of the government. Allowing a bubble of illusory freedom to exist while keeping under surveillance of the muhabarat serves the government well for several reasons. First: it brings together several controversial figures into one controllable space. Two: the creation of a bubble of freedom weakens the resistance against the regime as it provides an escape. Three: it adds to the government's image of a free and almost democratic state.

The anarchy of BaQ is effectively incorporated into the ordering process of the authoritarian regime. It brings back Foucault's view that there is no outside of power.

It would be a mistake however to see the existence of BaQ as merely a way of the regime to strengthen itself. Wedeen (1999) remarks that spaces like BaQ could not have existed without tremendous effort and authentic agency. But with all its claims for freedom, democracy and unity one would have the impression that in a place like BaQ visitors have control over the course of their own lives and are able to transform the processes that are at play in society. But, what happens in reality is that the audience of BaQ has the *experience* of transforming the processes that shape society with its own actions.

III. Heterotopian ordering

The previous chapters were based upon two perspectives, one coming from freedom, the other from control. I have shown how these concepts have moved towards each other and intertwined with each other. Throughout the second chapter these two concepts became indistinguishable. both at the national level and in BaQ control has been turned into freedom and freedom into control.

It is time to question whether freedom and control are in fact the most useful categories to understand the field in which BaQ sits and to appreciate the contribution it made in the Damascene art scene. The elements of control and freedom have slipped together and there is no telling whether it a space of freedom or control. How can the paradox that defines BaQ, the paradox that freedom can be turned into control and control into freedom, be addressed?

An important aspect which came about during my interviews with the visitors of Bayt al-Qasid is the fact that all are conscious of their freedom brought onto them by the system. However the recognition of these circumstances does not imply unconditional submission. Anthropologist Motoji Matsuda remarked people "are sometimes willing to accept ... powerful devices yet they reinterpret and remake the situation." (Matsuda 1993: 15) All my informants had a distinct perception of themselves as reflective and actively acting agents. Although they live in a world of control and surveillance they did not see themselves as submitting to absurdity, nor as publicly opposing it. Rather they try to uphold a feeling of mastery over their own destiny, however arbitrary it may be.

What is really at stake is the fight between two perspectives: "what is (objectively) possible" versus "what can I (subjectively) make possible" and between subjectively taking control versus objectively being controlled.

Whether there is a discrepancy between perception and practice is of lesser importance. What matters is that the individual has an understanding of himself as opposing the normative and actively engaging in the construction of the own life opportunities.

So how do people go about to create space for manoeuvring? By space I don't only mean physical spaces but also spaces for identity and the creation of a decent life. My concern here is the construction of my informants' own metaphorical space, which I call the heterotopian space. within the state of control.

Heterotopia is a term which I borrowed from Foucault and which was later expanded by Kevin Hetherington.

Heterotopia allows us to include the complexities and contradictions which are present in BaQ. It combines simultaneously a safety valve for resistance and a radical undermining of state's conceptual system. It can be simultaneously linked to the bohemian life of alcoholics and the family life. There is not one single reason why people come to the heterotopian space and thus it also has different meanings to each visitor and it is criticized by everyone, though for different reasons. This makes Kevin Hetherington conclude that the attendants of the heterotopian space are pilgrims who each have their mission to complete.

They do not exist by themselves instead they are the revelation of ordering processes. What matters is not the space itself but the processes of ordering that it reveals.

In contrast to utopia, which is the good place, but unreal, heterotopias do exist as the ordering processes in-between spaces. They are spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve: social order, control and freedom. (Hetherington 1997, ix)

The term heterotopia was first introduced by Michel Foucault in the article "Of Other Spaces" (1986). For Foucault "heterotopias are places of Otherness whose existence sets up unsettling juxtapositions of incommensurate objects which challenge the way we think, especially the way our thinking is ordered." (Foucault 1986; 24) In these *counter-sites* a kind of enacted utopia can be found in which the real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. (Foucault 1986; 24).

Foucault argues that heterotopias are spaces of illusion. They give the impression of freedom while they are just as much spaces of surveillance. This means that heterotopian spaces do not exist solely by themselves, they are related to the hierarchy that created its conditions of existence, to which it can perform alternativity.

Kevin Hetherington has expanded on Foucault's heterotopia. He argues that these sites of otherness are in fact processes of social ordering.

In "The Badlands of Modernity" Hetherington places the rise of modernity in heterotopian sites. As an example he gives the Parisian cafes in the 1780's where the bourgeoisie found a place of alternative social ordering compared to that of society defined by the Ancien Regime. In the period leading up the French revolution this was a stamping ground for the newly enlightened

bourgeoisie, a place of openness and tolerance, but also a place of pleasure and consumption, contrasting practices in the society surrounding it.

Hetherington: "Out of the enlightened, hedonistic and revolutionary conditions of the Palais Royal emerged ideas about order and about processes of how society should be ordered, just as much about ideas about freedom" (10)

It is not a place of total freedom, but a combination of market, forum, cafe, brothel, arena, spectacle and place of theatrical entertainment.

Hetherington gives the following definition of heterotopia:

[F]irst, no space can be defined as fixed as a heterotopia; second, heterotopia always have multiple and shifting meanings for agents depending on where they are located within its power effects; third: heterotopia are always defined relationally to other sites or within a spatialization process and never exist in and of themselves; fourth: heterotopia, if they are taken as relational, must have something distinct about them, something that makes them an obligatory point of passage, as otherwise it is clear that any site could be described as in some way Other to another site (Genocchio 1995); and fifth, heterotopia are not about resistance or order but can be about both because both involve the establishment of alternative modes of ordering" (Hetherington 1997: 51, reference in original)

Bayt al-Qasid as a space of alternative ordering

BaQ may be a place of freedom, it is a special kind of freedom. It sits in between ideas of a utopian expression for personal freedom and control. The mediator between these two seemingly opposite views is Lukman. He is the one who keeps control of BaQ's character of-in between place. In order to keep BaQ in its position he has to abide the rules that come from above. He acts as a voluntary arm of the regime employing its policies in the microcosm of BaQ.

It is stunning to see how a place which is about freedom actually seems to have employed a different kind of order. If we look at the state and BaQ as parallel institutions we can see the same top-down structure in BaQ as on the state level. There is a clear omnipotent leader who decides the order of the evenings, who knows all of his disciples and shouts when he wants his people to be quiet. One informant jokingly said that Lukman was the dictator in his basement, albeit one that stimulates communication. It is paradoxical that Lukman on one side claims that BaQ is a democratic space where everyone can act in the way he or she feels like, but on the

other hand he has created a new dictatorship. There seems to be a tension between the utopic vision and reality, between a will to change society and acceptance of the existing order.

As revolutionary as BaQ appears at first sight, the more compliant it becomes when we look closer. The problem here is that BaQ suggests changing the existing order. But it cannot create any change because it takes the existing power-structures as given and accepts them completely. More than trying to change the power-structures, on the contrary, it strengthens them. The visitors of BaQ experience a sense of freedom and fulfillment, while the *muhabarat* are sitting next to them and are toyed with. It shows the visitors of BaQ that there is little danger in supporting the regime.

While those who *are* critical of the system are served with a safety valve for their frustrations and enter a space of experienced freedom. This effect is of course temporarily, but it is enough to start doubting one's resistance and continue life without taking action against the regime for another week. Thus, the resistance against the Assad-regime loses some of its power because it is effectively incorporated in the regime's safety valve. When we look critically at the effect BaQ fulfills has on the system there can only be one conclusion: it strengthens it.

The discussion whether or not BaQ strengthens the system or resists the existing structures obscures somewhat the true issues. This is not a story of resistance or collaboration so to speak.

BaQ doesn't ask to be judged. This approach does not allow to see the experienced reality of the attendees: it obscures the democratic aspects which *are* present. Fact is that BaQ simultaneously entails freedom and control.

At this point we can see the complex and contradictory relations between BaQ, the state and society. First we saw that BaQ is a place where freedom is celebrated and experienced and now we see that this freedom is instrumental in strengthening the regime.

When we look again at the freedom of BaQ we can see two different levels. One level of experienced freedom the other in relation to the system, a level of control.

This said it would be incorrect to state that BaQ is simply a toy of the regime. It has grown organically throughout the years from a meeting of poets and artists. It is not invention of the state, but it does serve it well.

It shows the extent to which BaQ acts as a bubble, not being part of society nor of the regime, although strongly linked and even mirroring both of them. It does not influence nor society nor the regime. It is its own thing with its own rules.

As BaQ seems to be the product of the schizophrenic marriage between state policy and authentic agency it occupies a position in between different spheres. It expresses ideas for organizing society in a way as if it were preparing for a life in a better future. It is the space where the ethnicities, religions and ideologies have come together in juxtapositions which are clearly different from the rest of society.

BaQ is the ultimate heterotopian space: being a space of in-between, a space of illusion, of utopia and dystopia, of hedonistic consumption, a reflection of society and at the same time a reversal of the existing order, but only temporarily. It is a temporal deformation of the syrian time and space. But what does this mean exactly? What exactly does BaQ as heterotopian space do and show?

What does it mean for heterotopian space when group dynamics depends largely on the mood of one single person as is the case in BaQ? does it make a space like that artificial? Lukman's mood is so dominant that it the place seems to be directed like a film scene or a collective theatre play. the feeling is strengthened by the fact that the red lines of internalized censorship are ever present and surveilled by the apparently ever-present *muhabarat*. As I have demonstrated Lukman has a fixed idea of what BaQ should be, namely a place of poetry and not a place of politics.

How does this strong personality relate to the heterotopian space? Hetherington (2000: 23) says that in the heterotopian space there is always a central figure. "The blank figure is like joker in a pack of cards [...] The joker can represent any number and any suit. It is like a chameleon; it is an underdetermined figure that has special powers to alter the order of the game." (2000: 23) He goes on to say that the *joker* can change as it moves within the social order and it has the power to change the *conditions of possibility* for that order. This joker is central in the functioning of a heterotopian space as it can change the direction and decide the continuation of the ordering processes.

Lukman fits this description perfectly. He is the contested dictator, who regularly changes roles depending on his mood. His unpredictable behaviour is of prime importance when it comes to group dynamics. Sometimes it challenges the existing order of the outside world while on other

occasions he is compliant or indifferent. He's not a hero who reveals the weaknesses and injustices of the social order.

Intermezzo: The End of Bayt al-Qasid

March 21st 2011

On March 15th the Arab Revolution reached Syria. On that date anti-government protests began in the town of Dara'a in the southern Hauran region. The government cracked down with military force. Several people had died.

Lukman was in good mood when I entered the Jackson club with Shakespeare and Gamardine. The basement was filled as usual. The lonely men and women at the bar, the Iraqi checkpoint between the foreigners and the villagers... Though some of the regular faces were absent, most of the characters were present. Samir the soft-natured bodybuilder who must be one of the few people who comes to listen to poetry, the grey-haired Abu-Ahmed, Farouk and Shakespeare. The evening began with a reading of Dante in Italian, by one of the foreign students. Then Albrus who as usual tried to read in classical Arabic but making too many mistakes and thus was corrected and booed by the audience. Then Farouk came with a reading of Nizar Qabani, one of the greatest Syrian poets, which was received warmly by the public. What happened then was a performance of two girls, one on the cello and one the guitar who played an intimate duet. The crowd was willing and generous, it was a good night for poetry. Shakespeare read an old, well-known poem from the Ummayyad times in which the audience participated. As usual the night disintegrated, people left and new ones entered, most notably Hassan the dandy. Because of Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, that day Lukman started singing Kurdish songs and the evening started to disintegrate in its usual anarchistic manner, completely forgetting the outside world.

The centre of the club was now taken by dancing man and women, dancing in groups, in pairs or individually. The evening transcended into ecstasy. In the wildness and confusion that came about Malcolm X fell of the wall sat on the couch.

A young man walked to the microphone as if he were to participate in the jolliness of the evening. Instead he shouted: "Support the martyrs of Dara'a, remember the martyrs of the Hauran!" Lukman took the microphone away from him and immediately told everyone to go home. Lukman left the building.

With a shout, Bayt al-Qasid was silenced. It was the end of a dream, the end of Bayt al-Qasid.

IV. The Period.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

While in the international media the uprisings in the Arabic world have been labeled with rather optimistic terms such as *The Arab Awakening* or *The Arab Revolution* I found these terms to be misleading. They do not entail the confusion, complexity and despair which was present on the ground. Therefore I have opted to use the more neutral term: The Period

Bayt al-Qasid had abruptly ended on March 21st, after it had been silenced by a shout in support of the deaths in dara'a.

On Thursday 24th of March, three days after BaQ's last session passed by Lukman's place. His house had for a moment turned into a center of power. In a state of drunkenness and mood swings Lukman made a phone call to an army-general who "supports BaQ" and who was at that moment in Dara'a. Lukman to the general: *don't shoot anyone!*

First a grey-haired man unexpectedly arrived at Lukman's house. Khaled Khalifa is a writer whose and a prominent criticist of the regime whose books have been banned in Syria for the last twenty years. Moments later a friend of Shakespeare entered the house. He was distressed and announced that his cousin had just been killed by the army in Dara'a. He screamed that he would talk about it in BaQ. This was the moment which I believe made Lukman decide to cancel the next BaQ session. This suggestion made Lukman very nervous and he started walking around the room, getting visibly more moody.

But as the food and the whiskey kept on coming the mood turned and became abundantly optimistic. We were cheering for freedom and democracy and on that moment everyone seemed to believe it was actually going to happen, in the real world. Half an hour later Lukman who was drunk because of an overdose of whiskey kicked everyone out.

This spontaneous gathering of contested figures at Lukman's place demonstrated how central he is as a public figure.

After the euphoria of that night when all of us were toasting to freedom the atmosphere quickly changed at Lukman's house and made way for uncertainty. When I visited Lukman's place on March 27th, three days later he told me there would be no BaQ on Monday. For the first time in almost five years BaQ was cancelled. I was surprised. Were we not cheering for freedom three days earlier? Of course Lukman had his reasons to cancel the poetry sessions.

He was very moody and slightly drunk, watching Al-Jazeera. First he told me that people were not in the mood to come listen to love poetry because people are shocked about what happened in Dara'a. After an uncomfortable silence and two whiskeys he continued that it would be too dangerous to organize BaQ. With last week in mind he said how people could take the microphone and shout anything they wanted to thereby endangering both the audience and Lukman himself. The personal motive definitely played was an important factor. He said he was afraid something would happen to his daughters.

Like so often with Lukman it remained unclear to me what was the real reason he closed BaQ. The following weeks he was called by many BaQ-habitues who asked him if there would be BaQ the next Monday. Even I was asked by many people if there would be BaQ. So obviously the public wanted BaQ to take place. In reality Lukman himself wasn't in the mood for BaQ while public was asking for it. It was clear that there was an urge for people to come together and read and listen to poetry. In this age of confusion an institution like BaQ could help people make sense of what was going on.

The beginning of the uprising and subsequent disappearance of BaQ made it clear that it BaQ depends completely on the power structures that created its conditions. Instead of using its central position of in-between to mediate between different spheres it simply collapses.

Lukman's reasons for cancelling remain partly veiled. Therefore it is possible that he was pressured, or ordered, not to organize BaQ from then on, although this remains speculation. But in the end it appeared to be the only way to go. The week after BaQ was cancelled I heard about other cultural gatherings being cancelled as well like the live music sessions in Pages Café. As I said, in the light of the deaths in Dara'a living the mundane, decadent life as before felt improper. But besides these considerations there were also reasons to go on organizing cultural life if only for the sake of maintaining a feeling of togetherness or an attempt at making sense of all the confusion. The fact that all cultural life stopped shows how Syrian society was

embedded in fear. A place like BaQ would have made an excellent site for discussing the subject everyone is preoccupied with as apparently the need was there. But exactly the discussion of this one subject would have been impossible in the context of surveillance and punishment. Since the impact of the issue is of such large scale and touches every Syrian in very emotional and personal way it would have been hard to talk about the Period in soft metaphorical ways. Emotions were much too strong for that. Considering the strong surveillance there would have been a real risk when people would have started making direct statements. So BaQ got stuck in a mud-field. In order to talk about the one meaningful subject strong and direct statements had to be made, like the one made on March 21st. Not being able to do so would have turned BaQ into a hollow space, void of meaning.

Another consideration is that the public of BaQ roughly represents all corners of society, including convinced supporters of the regime. When emotional statements would be spoken expressed in favor of whichever group it would have probably ended in a very emotional discussion which could have easily gone out of control. In such a scenario there was a risk that BaQ, thriving on ambiguity would fall apart because of polarization.

BaQ's prime condition of existence, the ambiguity which created in-between space, disappeared. Everyone was pulled into the total event and was forced to choose position, or remain silent.

To give an impression of what polarization means I will recount the meeting in one of the bars of the old city with Shakespeare and Hassan, two characters from BaQ from different backgrounds. Hassan, the dandy and Shakespeare, the "foreign minister of BaQ".

At some point of their conversation in Arabic I picked up some disagreement between the two friends. Given the intensity of the pronunciation the subject could only be about politics. At some point Hassan directed his words to me.

"It's good we meet today, before the civil war starts and all of us will either have to flee or will be killed. Because of this man (pointing at Shakespeare) we will get the bombs of America who will bring us democracy (mocking), like they did in Iraq. Do they have democracy? No, they have only bombs every single day, their women are being raped every single day. Lebanon they have democracy. They have lived in the shit for the last forty years. Is that what you want? Civil war, blood? No one wants blood. If you want democracy move to America, you will see how shit democracy is."

Shakespeare replied. *"Building a democracy takes time. Look how long it took France to move from the revolution to a republic. It took them more than fifty years of fighting, changes of regime and contra-revolutions. It was no easy road. But look at France now: one of the most amazing democracies in the world."*

The conversation continued for a while like that, Hassan saying democracy means very little and that stability is what people want, until Hassan had enough and left the bar angrily.
(Fieldnotes, 6-4-2011)

This conversation took place in loud voices where everyone could listen along. For decades talking about politics in Syria was a very sensitive undertaking, but now it had come too close. More and more people started venting their opinions in the bars even though surveillance is everywhere. It demonstrates how the boundaries of speech have moved in a matter of weeks. It has to be said that Shakespeare is a person who always speaks his mind, even when it would be more suitable not to. Still, as more people were touched personally by the uprising and the consequent crackdown, people became more determined to keep firm positions.

The movement towards strong statements and fixed positions can be seen as a paradoxical movement. Because in reality there was no telling what exactly was going on. Life in Damascus at that time was like living in a bubble. After the first protest at the Ommayad Mosque the authorities closed the city on Fridays with tanks. In a large area stretching from Abbassiyeen square to the Mezzeh Highway the access roads were blocked by military checkpoints in order to avoid chaos to erupt in the political centre of the country, as had happened in Cairo several weeks before. The city became a void. The streets were empty, except for the military, traffic police and *Muhabarat*. On those Fridays there was no doubt that there were more security personnel in the city than normal civilians. While the central areas of the city were vacuum, it was in the suburbs the uprising took place, surrounding the centre.

Silence, Confusion and Fear

Fear took hold of Syria. Two of my informants from BaQ, the brothers Gaith and Faidh, both in their late twenties talked about their experience in that time. Being refugees from Iraq they live on the fringes of Syrian society. On an evening walk through the old Jewish quarter Gaith said he was preparing to escape again.

"We had never experienced any hatred or violence for being Iraqi but sometimes there was some tension as if we're not welcome here. But what is happening now is really scaring me. If it goes wrong here the Iraqis will be the first to suffer. Yesterday when I was walking in my neighborhood I was threatened. I have never been threatened in my life. Some guys said: "we'll come and get you and your brothers"... I'm preparing to escape. We will try to go to Turkey soon."

(Fieldnotes, 9-4-2011)

Gaith and Faidh were not the only ones who saw a gloomy picture in those days. Shakespeare, who was convinced that the reign of this regime was about to end and be replaced by a democracy, was preparing for tragedy.

"The government wants to create civil war. They will do anything to remain in power; they are willing to take on any dress. We have seen that in our history. First they were fake Arab nationalists, then fake communists, and now fake liberals. I am telling you, they will do anything to remain in power. Now they have ended the emergency law. Can you imagine, after forty years. They have given nationality to the Kurds to please them. Yesterday they have lifted a ban on the niqab in the university as a concession to the conservatives. But it's just candy, our people are hungry Frederic. We will go out and we want the whole feast!

But there will be blood. There will be tragedy. I am preparing to leave the country... before civil war breaks out. Either to Europe or the United States."

(Fieldnotes, 8-4-2011)

What Shakespeare had been pointing to in his comment about the threat of civil war was a sign that the myth of unity this regime employs, that by its hard hand it is able to provide peace in an otherwise divided and potentially lethal country. Looking at neighboring countries but especially looking at the constellation of power in Syria which has been stagnant for forty years it seems like a fear which is at least partly legitimate. When all key positions are in control of minority Alewi's and policy has for years been geared at remaining in power, without a clear vision, it seems there is a legitimate concern for civil war. But this fear is exploited by the government to remain in power.

Now that their power is threatened it seems like Shakespeare fears the government is turning the myth into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"The government is setting up different groups against each other. When ethnic or religious violence would actually take place they can claim they are above the violence and are ready to save the country from destruction."

Shakespeare compared this period to the eighties when repression was extreme. The influence of the eighties could also be part of the explanation why Lukman and others of his generation are careful to cross the lines. He has seen many of his friends arrested or disappeared in that time. He knows where the red lines are in these times of hard repression.

Meanwhile Lukman seemed uncertain what to do, as was unwilling to choose sides. When I entered his apartment he poured me some whiskey. I distracted him from the news on Al-Jazeera and attempted to start a meaningful conversation.

"What should the government do?"

"Drink! Have Whiskey and cocaine!"

"What can the people do?"

"They shouldn't believe these things anymore."

"What can you do?"

"I make Bayt al-Qasid. And I write. But not now. Now I am silent. I have written about these things for 25 years. Now the people can take the microphone. I know my time. I have always known my time."

(Fieldnotes 24-04-2011)

For weeks Lukman remained vague whether BaQ would be organized the next Mondays or not, as if it was completely arbitrary and as if it didn't matter.

As usual, Lukman's words are intriguing and confusing. Was he portraying himself as a freedom-fighter and BaQ as a place of resistance? Then why does he keep quiet at the moment when he could steer BaQ into a direction of resistance?

Several minutes later after Al-jazeera had finished broadcasting about Syria and his whiskey-glass had been filled once more he continued:

"Within two months this regime will be out! People don't take it anymore. Or there will be war. But for sure they will be finished."

He praised the editor of Syrian newspaper *Al-Watan* who called for national dialogue as a solution to the country's problems. I asked him whether he could contribute to dialogue since he's well known and respected among a wide spectrum. He responded:

"I have done what I should do."

(Fieldnotes: 24-04-2011)

This was Lukman the pragmatist, the joker speaking. Calling for dialogue but not wanting to take part.

The double moral continued when I asked him:

"Will there be freedom?"

"Yes!"

Lukman used silence as a strategy to express disagreement about the existing order in Syria. He had stopped writing his daily columns in Baladna.

"I wrote something about Libya but that stupid editor refused to publish it because it didn't suit the censor. So since one month I have been sending them my old boring poems from the eighties. They express nothing, only stupid love poetry. And they publish these things, look! (he points to the poem with his picture above it.)"

Again, Lukman played with language in order to express his idea by form, by ordering things improperly he challenges the conceptual basis of the regime and its dogma's. This time by silence.

But, again, his actions can be understood in multiple ways. He does not take any position in favor of any of the parties.

Lukman's silence appeared typical for those days in Damascus. First of all, the public sphere had been closed. all cultural activities, not only BaQ, had been cancelled. Most public debating moved from the streets and the cafes to private homes among trusted friends and family. It seemed like people wanted to stay safe on the one hand by taking a careful non-confrontational stance, not towards the government nor the protestors in the suburbs of Damascus.

What does the disintegration of BaQ say about the concept of heterotopia? Heterotopia is just a crystallization of the processes of ordering that are taking place. It only *shows* the processes but its power to change them is very limited. Foucault stressed the temporal character of

heterotopian spaces. They are processes, never remaining the way they are at one moment, they change constantly and thus they disappear, it is part of their lifecycle.

In his work about the Parisian cafes he said how these places of alternative ordering disappeared at the advent of the French Revolution as the space of ambiguity disappeared.

BaQ has been a place of unity, but a place of unity of difference. BaQ acted as a place existing in contrast, where people could imagine themselves together in spite of all differences. At the time of the revolution those differences emerged from behind its walls and became triumphant. (Hetherington 1997: 143)

BaQ was The Period before it happened. It dealt with the same tensions as those that would tear apart the heterogeneous country. It expressed the difficulties of living together in a diverse heterodox nation. It was an attempt to order society in a new and better way, but it remained powerless because it could not leave the walls of the basement. BaQ gave its visitors a glimpse of how the country could look like after the revolution before it actually happened.

By Way of Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to clarify Bayt al-Qasid's position of between freedom and control.

In the first chapter I have described BaQ's character of decadence and hedonism. The moral and social ordering of society is turned around.

Then I investigated how such a free place could exist within a state of control. I described the Ba'ath-regime claims to strive for unity and freedom, but that its policies have an effect almost opposed to it. Under the regime of Bashar al-Assad there were processes of the opening of the public sphere, though mostly to create an image of a free democratic state and retaining control. I argued that Bayt al-Qasid is a place in-between different spheres. It sits in a central position between the state and society and between different factions. This position, which is elaborated by the regime, is characterized by ambiguity, BaQ prime condition of existence.

Through Foucault's concept of heterotopia I explained the processes of alternative ordering which take place in BaQ. Bayt al-Qasid functions like an illusion. It brings individual freedom in a country which is ruled by a regime obsessed with control, it brings equality in a context of domination and it brings togetherness in a fragmented society. But only within the confined space of a basement.

As the uprising began BaQ showed its true face. BaQ depended completely on the existing order. On the moment when it could have used its central position it failed to do so. I followed my informants on their rollercoaster of emotions while their lives were being changed.

Epilogue

The last days of

Throughout the writing of this thesis I maintained contact with my informants and I was able to see how many of them have left Syria or are preparing their way out.

Shakespeare has managed to arrange a master-study in English literature at the university of Utrecht, of all places. It remains to be seen whether he will succeed in leaving the country.

Hassan the dandy, managed to take out his mother from Syria and take her to Paris.

Gaith and Faidh, the Iraqi communist brothers are preparing to flee Syria and become refugees once more. They are attempting to go to Turkey.

For over a month I have tried to reach Waddah, the great talent from Suweida. Unfortunately I haven't been able to hear anything from him.

As for Lukman Derky, the founder of Bayt al-Qasid, something strange, rather *ambiguous* happened. He was forced to leave his apartment in downtown Damascus due to a conflict with the landlord. He decided to leave the city and move to his mother in the northern part of the country. His girlfriend, Gamardine, returned to her old mother in Latvia. She said she would marry Lukman so that he could become a European citizen and they would move to London. The last time I spoke Lukman he told me: "You come to London! We will make Bayt al-Qasid there!"

This last remark typifies the strangeness of the kind of place that Bayt al-Qasid was and the vagueness of Lukman's ideas. He wants to recreate Bayt al-Qasid in London, which has a completely different context as Damascus. It doesn't have any of the political tensions of Damascus. There is no *need* to speak in subtle metaphors except for the sake of metaphors themselves. In the same way hedonism doesn't have anywhere near the same value in a democratic context like the one in London. Hedonism is something of everyday, it doesn't challenge any order and has its place like any other lifestyle. The fact that Lukman believes that he can simply transport BaQ to a completely different setting raises again the question of what BaQ actually was. These words confirm that BaQ was to a large extent a personal project,

which depended completely on Lukman. His ideas on how BaQ *should be* decided the form and essence of the space.

Whether he will succeed in recreating Bayt al-Qasid in London and in which form will have to be seen just like the result of The Period will only be revealed when the next phase has begun.

Utrecht, July 8th 2011

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Appendix

Reflection

When preparing for this research I knew Bayt al-Qasid from a single visit in the summer of 2009, which left me thinking: what was that? It was a bewildering and confusing experience but I had no idea what it was about. With this image I started preparing for this research.

I had the impression it was a place of freedom, and of resistance. This impression was confirmed by articles that had been written by the New York Times and the BBC. I hoped to see a haven of free speech, which was in some way resisting authority.

After having witnessed several BaQ meetings, its visitors, structure and habits became quite clear; while in the beginning it seemed like a very confusing and disorganised, even dysfunctional place.

I was quickly accepted in the BaQ crowd which makes it possible for me to talk freely to almost everyone. I laid firm foundations of a wide social network, which allowed me to meet my key informants on a regular basis and pass by whenever I wanted to. But one of the greatest challenges has been finding out how to meet people privately for interviews. Even when I tried making appointments with someone there were always friends or family. At first this was discouraging but gradually I learned to make interviews when there are other people. In the case of Lukman for example the presence of his wife was actually a great advantage: as he gradually became more drunk and sleepy, his girlfriend Gamardine took over the conversation. Making proper interviews with a list of questions and a voice recorder was almost impossible. Almost all the information I gathered comes from informal conversations which I attempted to steer. But even this often proved difficult.

What was actually the most difficult part of the research was to adapt my preconception of BaQ from a semi-resistance group to something else. At times I was disappointed in the banality of the meetings and I wondered whether there was actually anything interesting about it. The disappointment I felt was a sign to remain critical of my topic and not to glorify it. Luckily it didn't take me a long time to see that BaQ was indeed a very special place, in its own way.

The moment when I have just come to understand BaQ from the inside out as a phenomenon my field transformed completely. The uprising started and BaQ disappeared altogether. As my field changed it was inevitable this would also change the research itself. My main concern was

to remain focused. I had reached the point where my research was yielding results beyond anticipation while writing the proposal. I continued my analysis as usual, keeping my questions and theoretical framework in mind and looking for deeper information. But I also let go of these questions in order to stay close to what was actually happening in the field. The adaptation of my research was a necessity but happened in natural way. My informants changed, the field changed and I merely changed along with them, researching the only thing that can be researched in an epoch like that. I was able to adapt swiftly as I was in close contact with all people involved in BaQ and many regular visitors and performers. My extensive network allowed me to continue researching the transformations that were taking place. As a researcher I felt very lucky and excited to stand so close to social transformation while it is happening, exactly in the heart of my research.

The anthropologist in action. Bayt al-Qasid, March 14th 2011

