Això era casa meva: This Was My Home. Interview with Gabriel Garroum and Xavier Segura

Teresa Gil Ricol. Department of Euro-Mediterranean Policies, IEMed

Gabriel Garroum and Xavier Segura are the young creators of *Això era casa meva* [This Was My Home], a documentary that takes a subtle, human and empathetic approach to the war in Syria and what it means to be "Syrian". Segura, audiovisual director and producer, accompanies his friend Garroum, political scientist and son to a Syrian father and Catalan mother, on a journey to his home in Aleppo seven years after the war began. The documentary avoids a cold analysis of the conflict to give an inkling of how the war penetrates the day-to-day lives of people, how it breaks down the border that separates public and private spaces, and how it reshapes the identity of the people going through it.

Teresa Gil Ricol: Your journey begins in Barcelona and ends in Aleppo, passing through the capitals of Lebanon and Syria, Beirut and Damascus, collecting testimonies from inhabitants of the region and Gabriel's own family. Along the way there's a reflection on the reconstruction model of the city of Aleppo, both in terms of town development and intangible aspects: identities, wounds and peace. How did the idea of making the documentary *Això era casa meva* come about?

Xavier Segura: Gabriel and I have been friends since we were teenagers. The idea of the documentary occurred the day I read his article in *El Confidencial*, "El librero de Alepo que no cerró en toda la Guerra" [The bookseller of Aleppo who never closed throughout the war]. The article was about his journey to Aleppo in October 2017 and his conversation with Jabra, the bookseller who also appears in the documentary. I told Gabriel how much I'd liked it, how I was surprised by the fact that he'd been somewhere that seemed to me inaccessible and had told that story. I work in the audiovisual world and I suggested going with him on his next trip to Syria to record more interviews. Within a month, he said: "If you want, let's try it." And so it began.

Gabriel Garroum: At first we didn't have the idea of making a documentary. I'm doing my PhD at King's College London, in the Department of War Studies. I had to go to Syria

View of Aleppo (Xavier Segura).

to conduct some interviews and Xavier came with me. We went to Aleppo in the first two weeks of August 2018, with my father, with the idea of making the documentary, but we were aware of the possible limitations as it is a complicated area, with difficult access to people, limited material, and without knowing what would happen.

T.G.R.: Did you have funding from King's College or another organisation? Did you have a deadline to complete it?

X.S.: Zero budget. As we were making it ourselves, we didn't have a deadline, but we set mid-May 2019 as a target date. And so it was as the documentary premiered on 3 May. I had never recorded a documentary. We took the minimum equipment: a tripod, a lavalier microphone and a Canon 5D Marc III camera, quite manageable and of sufficient quality, but small enough not to be intimidating. Jordi Artola, the editor, did wonders with the material I gave him.

G.G.: He had a very cooperative attitude. We were also helped free of charge by Sergi Comabella with graphic design, Francisco Gosalves with audio postproduction and Nieves Tirado and Wael Mejri with translation. It was gratifying to see their interest in our project, and the freedom of not reporting to anyone else, although the precarious situation of making the documentary was also hard.

T.G.R.: Despite being a project created on the hop, you must have had some initial objectives.

G.G.: Yes. I wanted to present the war in Syria, which is distant, enveloped in a lot of violence and generates a negative response, and provide a balanced insight rather than the typical war analysis. We get so much information about the conflict: news, pictures, videos, and it all seems so far away. I wanted to bring the situation of Syria closer to the people who see the documentary, so they understand what it means to experience an armed conflict every day, or have family living through the conflict.

X.S.: I had three objectives: personal, professional and friendship. Personal, because it was a decision I had to make: to go to a country in

a delicate situation, where I had never been; professional, because I had never made a documentary and I wanted to see how far I could go with what we had; and friendship, because it allowed me to get to know Gabriel better.

T.G.R.: Do you think these objectives have been achieved?

G.G.: Yes, I do. I think that in addition to generating empathy, *Això era casa meva* is an honest documentary. It does not seek to sell you anything or create easy empathy. From my point of view, it is the most honest thing we've been able to do. With regard to the political issues portrayed, I try to moderate a lot, as frankly as I can. And the witnesses are very relatable. My aunt appears, my cousin, a man who sells books, a baker. I think that anyone who sees it can feel reflected in them.

X.S.: I also think we achieved them. In the end we've created a well-rounded documentary that the audience liked. And because Gabriel and I spent two weeks in Syria working together, and we didn't fall out!

T.G.R: Identity is one of the most important issues in the documentary, and you talk about your Syrian identity. In *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, the writer Amin Maalouf reflects on the danger of compartmentalising identities, of reducing and simplifying the aspects that define a person. What elements do you consider define your identity at this moment in your life?

G.G.: It's a subject I've reflected on a lot. When I was little, I hadn't decoded the Syrian identity. I've grown up in Barcelona, in a half-Syrian half-Catalan family. As a child, I felt more identified with my mother and my grandmother, who are Catalan, than with my father, who is Syrian. And it bothered me a bit that some classmates asked me: "Do you feel more Catalan or more Syrian?" Or "Are you 50-50? 90-10?" This angered me a lot because I didn't understand how I was supposed to feel. And all this was related to the fact that I didn't decode my Syrian side. Maalouf is interesting because he sets out the concept of reticular identity, which is very useful in this case. What he explains is that, instead of being in watertight compartments, identity is on a grid and, therefore, goes through varying degrees of intensity.

T.G.R.: It makes us understand identity not as a mosaic but as a tightly stretched parchment. In the words of Maalouf: "Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound."

G.G.: Exactly. An identity vibrates more or less intensely according to the specific moment. The war has not only decoded my Syrian identity, it has also made me aware of it. The process of decoding and understanding an identity is one step, and the process of assuming it and making it your own is another. I had already done the first, aged fourteen or fifteen, when I had gone to Syria before the war. I was already beginning to understand how the country and its people worked.

T.G.R.: The war in Syria was a turning point in how you relate to your Syrian sense of belonging.

G.G.: Wars in general and violence in particular always awaken and transform things in the field of identity. The war awoke in me experiences of the city of Aleppo. In Barcelona, you take it for granted that you live in the presence of Gaudí's Sagrada Familia. If someone destroyed it with a barrel bomb, you'd give it another meaning. You would realise how important the building was to how you un-

derstand the world, your city, your memories, your family. So this becomes a core of your identity. When violence rubs up against identities, they emerge, awaken and new meanings vibrate in them. It's a psychological process that takes something from the subconscious to the conscious.

T.G.R.: Do you think that after *Això era casa meva* your identity is more defined, or more chaotic?

G.G.: My identity is much more chaotic than before, it is much more mixed and I like it that way. Also, I'm much more aware of its different parts. However, all this comes from a personal endeavour: I could have chosen not to do it, the war might not have meant so much to me. The Syrian side could be there and not be there.

T.G.R.: Identities don't always form through a conscious process.

G.G.: Liberalism has the idea that we own our identity and history, but this is not always the case. We don't always consciously decide which political subject we are. We can be subject to structures, violence, oppression, and so on. We are not always the owners of our identity.

T.G.R: What shapes your identity now?

G.G.: European identity, Catalan identity, Syrian. I do not feel Spanish to be my identity. Compartmentalising is also very complicated and I don't feel comfortable marking very clear lines either. I don't reject it, I just don't identify. In the same way, splitting hairs, I feel more Aleppian than Syrian.

T.G.R.: Let's talk about the future of Syria, the reconstruction of the country. What activities promoted by civil society for the reconstruction of Syria do you know about?

G.G.: Within the country, the margin for action is very small. The reconstruction of Aleppo has been achieved through purely private funding. Charitable associations, both Muslim and Christian, have played an important role in this. One of the fears regarding reconstruction is that local actors don't have sufficient lobbying mechanisms to negotiate. In its time, Lebanon didn't have the necessary capacity to apply pressure from the local level, and what was established in its reconstruction was a totally neoliberal model, from top to bottom. In Syria, there are local initiatives for removing debris, trying to generate a bit of dialogue: we want the square like this or we want it like that. They are also initiatives with very little critical capacity and independence. More than a pressure mechanism, it's a demand mechanism: we group together so that our demand reaches the powers that be. It's never known if it's really a local initiative or the result of coercion.

T.G.R.: Can you give an example of this kind of initiative?

G.G.: Al-Hatab square, next to my house, which appears in the documentary, was blown to pieces. A contest was held among architecture students to decide what the new square should look like. But everything was so controlled, the foundation was so uncritical, it was clear that the initiative had no real depth.

T.G.R.: We've talked about civil society at the local level. What can you tell me about the role of the diaspora in the reconstruction of Syria?

G.G.: Syria is a country that has produced many engineers and architects, and there are lots in the diaspora. There are projects and models that offer alternatives to redevelop, for example, the centre of the city of Aleppo. A current of critical architecture and town plan-

Això era casa meva premiere in Barcelona.

ning is being developed by Syrians abroad, who take into account the models that are being applied in Damascus and Aleppo and the dangers they pose. From the diaspora there are many more pressure mechanisms, as well as much more awareness from the legal point of view: this is, in essence, a debate about property.

T.G.R.: How far do all these initiatives have a real capacity for transformation?

X.S.: I can't provide as detailed a vision as Gabriel, but when we went to Aleppo, the square project didn't seem a genuine initiative of the people of the neighbourhood but was directed from above. Interviewing the people who live there, we realised that they were repeating a learned discourse that they imposed on themselves. I don't know if they said it because they believed it or because they had a camera in front of them. What I did see as a local initiative was a group of young people from the students' union at the University of Aleppo who were organising to collect the rubble, since no other person or authority had come to do so.

T.G.R.: Given what you've said, there seems to be a cognitive dissonance between the discourse they provide and the reality on which they build the discourse.

G.G.: Exactly. The concept of cognitive dissonance that you mention makes me think, in fact, about ontological security. It's not about physical security, in the sense of not suffering any type of attack, or human security, in the sense of having enough money and housing to lead a decent life. Ontological security is about having an ego, a stable identity of your own. The day that your identity, your ontology, is completely truncated and the parameters in which you live change,

Gabriel Garroum at his home in Aleppo (Xavier Segura).

you experience great anxiety and difficulty managing your life. In Syria, for forty years, the time that the al-Assad family has been governing, you can see how people repeat a discourse automatically, even if we feel that they don't believe it. If people were aware that what they say doesn't make sense, the system would collapse. There's a fantastic book about Syria by political scientist Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, which describes Syrians' policy of "acting as if." Everything they do and say is "as if" it made sense. They base their whole life on this discourse. When making the documentary we realised, depending on the interviewee, who believed it with more or less conviction.

T.G.R.: You have to rebuild Syria physically, but you also have to rebuild an identity. And this is an enterprise that can take generations, even once the physical and human security can be guaranteed.

G.G.: Syrian identity doesn't exist. It is a tremendously complex identity, since Syria is a country of very strong regions. The local identity in Syria has a huge significance: being a Damascene, being Aleppian. Saying "I'm Syrian" means referring to an extremely vague identity, very simple to manipulate to attribute it with the meanings that you want to give at a certain time.

T.G.R.: There are other countries than just Syria that define what it means to be Syrian. Is it an uncomfortable concept?

G.G.: Look at what happens in Palestine. No, I wouldn't feel comfortable with it at all. But I also don't feel comfortable when defining what it means to be Syrian from within the country. Fixing identity is not a good idea. We are in a very fragile moment. Syrian talent has either died or is in the diaspora. The people who remain there try to produce from what the situation allows each one, so as not to risk it, so that their security is not compromised. Maybe tomorrow a new critical current will emerge that considers identity and nationalism in a different way.

T.G.R.: Foreign powers have played a crucial role in the war in Syria, among other things, through the sale of arms. Russia, Iran, Iraq

and Hezbollah have supported the al-Assad government, while the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey and the Arab League have supported the opposition, the Syrian National Coalition. What role have all these powers played in reconstruction, facilitating dialogue and humanitarian aid?

G.G.: When talking about the reconstruction of Syria, the fact that the country is still at war is often forgotten. We should not wait for peace to rebuild, because it must be done soon. In Damascus a couple of impressive urban projects have already been approved, with exceptional locations and great views. Contracts have been given to Japanese and Chinese companies to collect the debris in Aleppo. Business is business, and Russia, China and Iran, together with some Gulf countries, are and will be involved. At the moment, Europe doesn't seem such an involved actor, but it could be in the future. It depends on the final outcome of the war and normalisation. The reconstruction is an extremely political issue since it includes legal provisions, economic management, urban projects and local initiatives, as well as the guarantee of the right of return of the refugees who left.

T.G.R.: UNHCR, the United Nations Agency for Refugees, recently declared that returning to Syria was safe, although in many areas of the country that is not so clear. It could be a manoeuvre to prevent more flows of refugees to Turkey and, finally, to the European Union, in the midst of the current reform of the Dublin Treaty of 2013 and the Common European Asylum System.

G.G.: It's a very convenient way to get rid of the refugee problem, as well as a very effective way of normalising the al-Assad government.

T.G.R.: The city of Aleppo traditionally had a Sunni Muslim majority. Could the return of the refugees change the religious or ethnic make-up of the city?

G.G.: No, for one simple reason. Aleppo was one of the cities with the most Christian inhabitants, although they were a minority, and the vast majority of them have died. It's terrible. My family is Christian, lives in the neighbourhood of al-Jdeideh. All my friends are abroad, especially in Canada, where there has been a big diaspora of Christian Aleppians since the 1960s. Therefore, it is difficult to change the make-up of Aleppo, the Sunni population will remain dominant. Damascus is another story. There is fear that an influx of Shia Muslims will arrive and build homes on the Damascus border near Lebanon.

T.G.R.: We've talked about the differences between religions and ethnic groups in the make-up of the urban centre. What role does social class play?

G.G.: In eastern and southern Aleppo and the periphery of Damascus there were informal neighbourhoods, which were being built without urban planning. People simply built houses. If instead of houses of this type, they start to build apartments for people with more economic resources, with a communal pool, who will buy it? Clearly not the refugees. It will be bought by the middle-class Damascene, who is not a threat. There are many more urban projects in Damascus than in Aleppo, as it's a less problematic area.

T.G.R.: Who funds these projects? Is the European Union involved? In 2016, the European fund was established in response to the Syrian crisis, the so-called Madad Fund, which has 1.5 billion euros for humanitarian projects.

Gabriel Garroum's father at Aleppo's Great Bazaar (Xavier Segura).

G.G.: There is both public and private funding. The United Nations participates through small rehabilitations in areas such as the distribution of drinking water, sanitary infrastructures or the repair of doors and windows. The European Union was positioned against the al-Assad regime at first, and is now more concerned about the problem of refugees in Turkey and how to manage them. From the Madad Fund, a small amount of money destined for Turkey to manage the huge flow of Syrian refugees has reached the Syrian communities in their place of origin. The European Union is helping Syria but it does so by diverting funds earmarked for the management of refugees in Turkey. It's very different.

T.G.R.: Returning to you, how often did you go to Aleppo as a child?

G.G.: The first time I went I was six or seven years old. It fascinated me and I remember it quite vividly. From then, I started going every year, in summer, for Christmas or during Easter. Every time we had holidays we went there. The last time I went before the war was in December 2010, four months before the conflict broke out. The first time I returned after the war was in October 2017.

T.G.R.: Before the war did you notice the escalating tensions?

G.G.: The last time I went before the war I was about eighteen. We were in al-Jdeideh, a neighbourhood that, despite being mixed, has a large percentage of Christians. What surprised me, especially since 2006, was the large increase in women wearing headscarves and burkas. It used to be strange to see women with burkas in Syria. I also saw more poverty, more people asking for charity on the street. One thing I remember about Christmas 2010 was, on the way to the midnight mass, seeing large cars driving around the neighbourhood churches. In the back of the cars were young guys staring and shouting insults. I had never seen that before. There was an increase in

social tension, parallel to the Islamisation of the city.

T.G.R.: Finally, do you see yourself living in Aleppo?

G.G.: *Insha'Allah*. I had plans to live in Aleppo in 2011 to do an intensive five-month Arabic course at the University of Aleppo, but I had to cancel everything at the outbreak of the war. Yes, I would like to go there. I wish I could go there. I would like to return to the Aleppo from before.

T.G.R.: And do you see yourself living in an Aleppo that ends up like Beirut, which you describe in your documentary as a schizophrenic city?

G.G.: If the future of Syria is Lebanon, right now, of course. I would like to go back to what was my home.