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## The Limits of Representation. The Transformation of Aesthetics in Syrian Artistic and Social Discourse

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*The conflict that followed the uprising movement in Syria is the second deadliest since the Second World War. As Susan Sontag has written: «In an era of information overload battles and massacres filmed as they unfold have been a routine ingredient of the ceaseless flow of domestic, small-screen entertainment. The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image – of an agony, of ruin – is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war». Much has been said about the role of the new generation media in the Arab Spring in general; but in the Syrian scenario, their usage assumed a specific function, becoming soon a mere echo of the witnesses of the rough, unfiltered horror while reproducing and generating a huge amount of footage, pictures and documents that will circulate forever in all forms of media and reach an extremely wide audience. «Pictures of hellish events – indeed – seem more authentic when they don't have the look that comes from being 'properly' lighted and composed, because the photographer either is an amateur or – just as serviceable – has adopted one of several familiar anti-art styles». Meanwhile, it is also true that the creativity of Syrian literature and art in general has increased exponentially in recent years. A common feature in this production is the continuous representation of an impasse concerning the expressive ability of individuals in the face of the unspeakable collective tragedy of enormous proportions. This reflection proposal intends to investigate how the role of artists, writers, intellectuals changes when violence and its exposure exceed the limit of imagination while the ability to represent is reduced and reality is shown without filters.*

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In *The Drowned and the Saved*, recounting his internment in the camp at Monowitz-Auschwitz, Primo Levi declares that, as a survivor, “saved”, he cannot be one of the true witnesses of the reality of the *Lager*, because he did not touch its depths. The only real witness, whom Levi calls the integral witness, is he who has gone to the heart of the horror. But “those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute.” Those who have seen the Gorgon, are, for Levi, the “drowned,” those prisoners “irreversibly exhausted, worn out, ... close to death” who in the camps were called *Musulmänner*, Muslims. [...] The reality of the Lager, Levi insists, “was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death.”<sup>1</sup>.

This long excerpt from Adriana Cavarero’s work entitled *Orrorismo* was chosen because the focus of the reflection proposed here is the horror and the possibility to talk about horror.

The conflict that followed the uprising in Syria is the second deadliest since World War II, after the civil war in Sudan. The official figures, which we can very easily imagine to be much lower than the actual ones, count about 310 000 victims<sup>2</sup>.

Much has been said about the role of new generation media in the Arab Spring in general, but in the Syrian scenario in particular, their use has acquired a specific function, which is possibly the most neglected aspect of the analyses conducted so far. This is completely understandable since what I intend to talk about here is death, concrete physical violence and death, and their representation.

While writing this paper, I was constantly overwhelmed because of my shame towards the innocent victims of this war, doubting whether I have any right to write about them or not, but also towards those who may pay attention to this reflection and their right not to be disturbed by such a topic and its shaking details.

Nevertheless, the material that is under our eyes everyday regarding anything related to Syria today loudly declares that this is exactly what we need to observe in order to understand some of the most important trends in all of the forms of expressions of this traumatized country.

As mentioned above, online media have undoubtedly played a pivotal role by helping Syrians’ voices to be instantly heard throughout the world, with an unprecedented extent of freedom in a country that lived under an almost complete obscuration of expression and communication for decades.

The information system in Syria was ranked as one of the worst in the world. No form of private media had been present in the country for the past four decades. The only attempt by a satirical magazine<sup>3</sup> led to its forced closing in the

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<sup>1</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism. Naming Contemporary Violence*, Translated by W. McCuaig, Columbia University Press, New York 2009, p. 18. Original edition: *Orrorismo ovvero della violenza sull'inerme*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Data of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (<http://www.syriahr.com/>), April 2015.

<sup>3</sup> “al-Dūmarī”, 2001-2003, by ‘Alī Farzāt. «*al Domari* (the Lamplighter) was among the early independent publications in Syria since the beginning of the Baath Party rule in 1963. *al Domari* was published by a well known political cartoonist, Ali Farzat. The newspaper issued political satire and its style was inherited from the French weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* (The Chained Duck). The paper started its circulation in February 2001 and sold its entire run of 50,000 copies in less than 4 hours. However, *al Domari* closed down in 2003 due to lack of funds and steady

early 2000s while media licences were issued only to businessmen who supported the regime and Assad's (al-Asad) relatives. Syria was also classified as one of the worst states in terms of Internet freedom and information. «Within this framework, the revolution opened a hole in the wall of media restrictions behind which Syrian society lived [...]. The real story of the Syrian revolution began the moment the country's citizens became citizen-journalists»<sup>4</sup>. Omar Alassad sums this up in his essay *Popular Collision. New forms of alternative media in Syria during the revolution*:

Their reports and short documentary films effectively became sources for the majority of foreign journalists. [...] As the military and political response to the uprising became more violent, the regime closed its borders to the foreign independent press, permitting only news organisations from its allies Russia and Iran to report on the conflict<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, the main subject of these documents is death, that is to say, the proof of the regime's violence against civilians.

The reaction of the medium used to spread this flow of information proves that the regime's crimes developed quite rapidly. The transformation of YouTube, the most capillary means of spreading information as a well-known and widely used platform, occurred before our eyes.

Prior to 2011, YouTube was known to be very controlling in dealing with the violent material that can be uploaded by its users. However, in 2011 this strict policy started to change. I was surprised the first time I clicked on a video of a demonstration that I knew had ended in a massacre, and YouTube actually allowed me to watch it completely, after inserting a still frame with a very clear warning about the "graphic" content of the video, and an explanation of their decision to keep it up, as it was piece of journalism documenting facts that actually took place. The transformation of this term, "graphic", deserves some attention as well.

As Olivia Ma, News Manager at YouTube, declared, YouTube's administrators deliberately made an exception to their policy under the pressure of the bulk of videos uploaded by Middle Eastern activists who were involved in the violent situations of their respective countries. These videos «would normally violate their community guidelines and be removed»<sup>6</sup>.

In time, the level of violence increased exponentially, reaching unimaginable levels of horror, and YouTube's policy continued to evolve with the events. Today it is possible to watch these documents without any previous warnings by the website. This is the latest version of YouTube's policy on violent and graphic details:

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government censorship». Cf. *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, Editor S. Attardo, Sage Publications Inc., London 2014, p. 473.

<sup>4</sup> Omar Alassad, *Popular Collision. New forms of alternative media in Syria during the revolution*, in *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, Edited by Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud, Saqi Books, London 2014, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-is-managing-graphic-violent-videos-from-the-middle-east-with-community-help-2011-5?IR=T>, date of retrieval 08/05/2015.

Violent or graphic content.

Real depictions of graphic or violent content:

Increasingly, YouTube is becoming an outlet for citizen journalists, documentarians and other users to publish accounts of what is happening in their daily lives. It is inevitable that some of these videos will contain content that is violent or graphic in nature.

If the violence shown in your video is particularly graphic, please make sure to post as much information as possible in the title and metadata to help viewers understand what they are seeing. Providing documentary or educational context can help the viewer, and our reviewers, understand why they may be seeing the disturbing content.

It's not okay to post violent or gory content that's primarily intended to be shocking, sensational or disrespectful. If a video is particularly graphic or disturbing, it should be balanced with additional context and information. For instance, a citizen journalist who captures footage of protesters being beaten and uploads it with relevant information (date, location, context, etc) would likely be allowed. However, posting the same footage without contextual or educational information may be considered gratuitous and may be removed from the site.

Dramatized depictions of graphic or violent content:

Some people post videos that contain dramatized depictions of violence. Much like movies and TV, graphic or disturbing content that contains a certain level of violence or gore is not suitable for minors and will be age-restricted<sup>7</sup>.

An extremely permissive policy. As a result, the exceptions they never allowed before have been allowed for the past four years.

As Giorgio Agamben writes, «the state of exception has today reached its maximum worldwide deployment»<sup>8</sup>. He explains further on that: «The modern state of exception is an attempt to include the exception itself within the juridical order by creating a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide»<sup>9</sup>. A threshold of undecidability is produced when fact and law fade into each other. The state of exception is void of law; it is «an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law»<sup>10</sup>.

The Cameroon born philosopher Achille Mbembe has provided an extremely useful epistemological tool in recent years, i.e. his concept of Necropolitics. In his homonymous essay, he explains how:

the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/2802008?hl=en>, date of retrieval 1/10/2015.

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Translated by K. Attell, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2005, p. 87 (original edition: *Stato di eccezione*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2003).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, Translated by L. Mintjes, in "Public Culture", 15(1), 2003, pp. 11-12.

What we are witnessing here is a necropolitical use of images: the state of suspension of ordinary law decides whose dying or dead pictures can be shown and whose not.

Meanwhile, the Syrian uprising turned into a blood bath, which was promptly and desperately reported by citizen/journalists in their videos filled with the slaughtering of civilians, massacres of children, signs of every kind of torture, effects of every kind of conventional and unconventional weapon, including chemical ones and mass graves. Everything is visible, everything is on the net and nothing prevents us from watching it.

In his essay *Il corpo del nemico ucciso*, Giovanni De Luna writes:

The twentieth century was the century of mass violence, but it was also the century of mass production, mass consumerism, the means of mass communication, mass political participation. It is the sharing of the specification “mass” that makes the inextricable tangle of violence, production, consumption, media, forms of political participation and ideologies, attributing these interweaving features to contemporary markedly identifiable lines that are irreducible to the contiguous modern age<sup>12</sup>.

But what happens to the collective imagery when this huge flow of footage circulates freely on disparate media? What is the impact of this unfiltered violence on the “consumers” who are average Syrian citizens both in Syria and in the *mahğar* (abroad), other activists, artists, writers, not to mention international viewers?

The risk that De Luna sees is that «of being swept away and sinking into real cognitive impotence»<sup>13</sup>.

Moreover, if the accusations of the documents against the regime’s crimes are already powerful to the point of being able to show us the very moment of the death of a demonstrator who was shot by a regime’s bullet, what more can the artist use to stimulate, solicit, or even shock his or her audience?

If we look at the Syrian artistic production of the last four years, both in literature and visual arts, we can witness a general inability of the usual means to express the reality at hand, a prevailing impossibility to speak, an extreme difficulty to elaborate, a sort of inadequacy of language itself and of any other means of expression.

In literature, it may be seen in the incapacity of narrative devices to build narratives. In figurative art, it represents a failing struggle to overcome the images coming from reality. Very few are the successful attempts to use symbols<sup>14</sup>.

There is a general tendency that I would call tautological, that shows the limits of artistic expression itself, entrapped within its violent present and unable to escape from its deadly ontological borders.

<sup>12</sup> Giovanni De Luna, *Il corpo del nemico ucciso. Violenza e morte nella guerra contemporanea*, Einaudi, Torino 2006, p. 19. The translation is mine.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> For an accurate overview on the Syrian literary and artistic production from 2011 onward see Aḥmad al-Ḥalīl, *Sūriyā, al-ḥarb fī marāyā al-adab wa 'l-fann*”, in “al-Safir”, <http://assafir.com/Article/1/411243>, 03/04/2015, date of retrieval 1/10/2015; Haytam Ḥusayn, *Dawr al-adab wa 'l-ṭaqāfah fī wāqi' al-ḥarb wa 'l-damār*, in “al-Ġazīrah.net”, 30/10/2013, <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2013/12/29/دور-الأدب-والثقافة-في-واقع-الحرب-والدمار>, date of retrieval 1/10/2015.

Among the literary works published in recent years that deal with the revolution there is, for instance, Samar Yazbek's *Taqāṭu' nīrān* (A Woman in the Crossfire, 2012)<sup>15</sup> which is simply a journal, which is possibly the most genuine, honest and direct way to report what was happening, as well as a way of putting oneself at the service of the Syrian revolution, but which in fact asserted the impotence of the writer's habitual craft skills. It is a lyrical diary of her experiences in Syria between March and July 2011, when she finally decided to leave because the threats on her and her family's security became stronger. The writing mostly consists in a report of activists' discourses, activities, points of view, mixed with her considerations and some personal direct experiences. «Yazbek herself admits this collision of fiction and non-fiction, journalist and novelist, the personality crisis that is really at the heart of this novel – and its author. 'I want to go back to my solitude that is crowded with novel characters' she writes»<sup>16</sup>.

It is therefore not a realization of the common idea that reality can sometimes surpass imagination.

Another novel published after the beginning of the uprising is *Ṭubūl al-ḥubb* (The Drums of Love, 2013)<sup>17</sup> by Mahà Ḥasan. In an interview, Ḥasan declared that she considers her novel as part of the prose fiction genre, despite the fact that it is based on real events, for «names of real activists, prisoners, and massacres are used in the novel»<sup>18</sup>.

The work opens immediately on a metaliterary reflection as Mahà Ḥasan decided to develop the character of a translator named Rīmā who, touched by the power of the revolutionary movements, intends to write a book on the Syrian revolution, along with her work as a researcher specialized in studying the transformation of the Syrian novel after the beginning of the uprising. It is easy to trace the autobiographical motivation of the plot, as it tells the story of a Syrian female intellectual who had been living in Europe for years and who, in the wake of the spark of the revolution, starts to become interested in – or, rather, obsessed with – the news coming from her country, mesmerized by all the pictures of horror and blood. Mahà Ḥasan herself is a Kurd from Aleppo who has been living in France for years.

Rīmā therefore decides to go back to Syria after years to feel as part of the extraordinary historical moment her country is going through and to mitigate her

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<sup>15</sup> Samar Yazbek, *Taqāṭu' nīrān*, Dār al-Ādāb, Bayrūt 2012. Cf. the English edition: Samar Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire. Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, Foreword by Rafik Schami, Translated by M. Weiss, Haus Publishing Ltd, London 2012. See in this double issue: Arturo Monaco, al-Ša'b al-Sūrī Wāḥid (*The Syrian People Are One*): *Syrian artists and intellectuals against sectarianism*, pp. 87-105.

<sup>16</sup> Grace Perriman, *Book Review: A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution. Samar Yazbek, Syrian novelist, turns her attention to the Syrian uprising*, in "Asharq Al Awsat/al-Šarq al-awsat" (English), Jan. 12, 2013, <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/01/article55239167>, date of retrieval 2/5/2015.

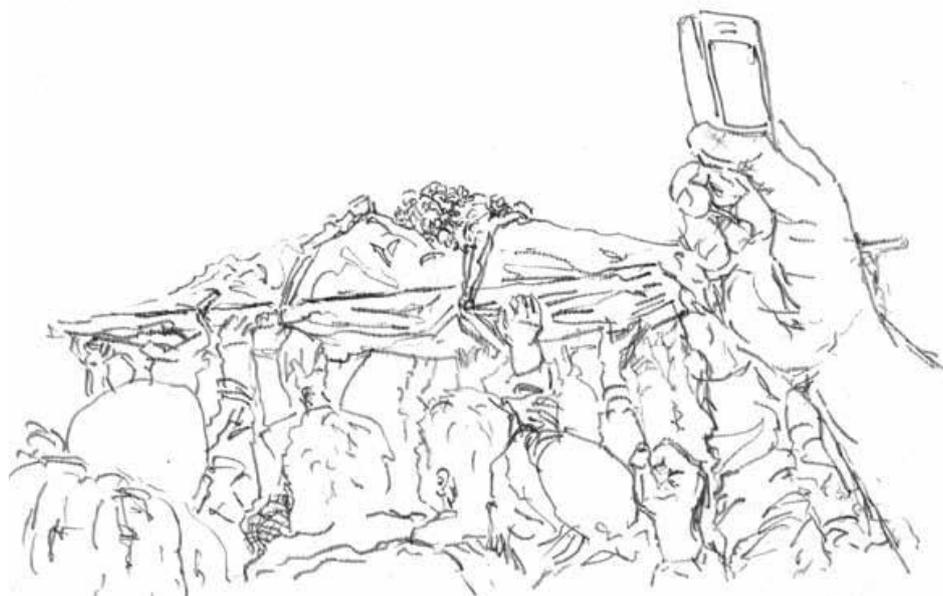
<sup>17</sup> Mahà Ḥasan, *Ṭubūl al-ḥubb*, Dār al-Kawkab Riyād al-Rayyis, Bayrūt 2013.

<sup>18</sup> <http://maha-hassan.blogspot.it/2013/12/first-book-on-syrian-uprising.html>, date of retrieval 15/5/2015.

sense of guilt for being an intellectual living safely and far away from what she is asked to describe for the Europeans. She is motivated sentimentally as well, as she falls in love with an activist she meets online. The Internet is in fact the other protagonist of the novel, both as a topic and as a writing form. The fictional part of the novel seems to finish here, as the narration starts to become a report of facts, conversations, opinions of characters, many of whom real, moving throughout a country in turmoil, and therefore very similar to the diary genre. However, Rīmā cannot be satisfied by just hearing what the people she meets tell her. She needs to see with her eyes. As Primo Levi wrote, it is possible to know completely the experience of horror only after experiencing its extreme consequences in person. The character that Mahà Ḥasan depicts has to die, shot by a bullet in the midst of a protest, in order to symbolize the will to know what the horror taking place in Syria truly is.

In addition, the description of this final scene is as graphic as one of the videos on YouTube: indeed, it really seems to reproduce one of them in words. Only by dying, can this young woman represent the inescapable gaze of the Gorgon, the need of all these writers to complete their cognitive path with their impotent worlds, which are impotent against concrete death, as they all are survivors.

The perfect symbol of this metaphorical inability, this impasse in the elaboration of trauma simply because it is still happening, the suspension of the possibility of the metaphorical ability, this ultimately tautological trend – as I propose to call it – is perfectly summed up by this drawing by the artist Khaled Barakeh (Ḥālīd Barakah).



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<sup>19</sup> Khaled Barakeh, *Regarding the Pain of Others and Damascus 15 Feb 2012 19:47:31*, in *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline*, cit., p. 159.

It is obviously none other than the pencilled replica of the real photograph below:



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Barakeh's work sums up everything: death, the centre of war is what must be represented. The core is composed by bodies, the dead body of the martyr and the living, mourning bodies that are threatened during the funeral, plus a mobile phone, the other protagonist that involuntarily entered the picture and was probably framed by another mobile phone. Barakeh actually did nothing more but reproduce exactly what the picture shows.

If transforming is what art does, then art, like literature, abdicates its role. It is a never ending *mise-en-abyme* of the mediated image of a mediated image of a mediated image that speaks for itself.

I would like to conclude by reporting, rephrasing, and reopening the question that Susan Sontag asks in her work entitled *Regarding the Pain of the Others*: what to do with such knowledge that photographs bring of faraway suffering? Are these pictures of the horrors of war able to change anything, able to stop this horror? Does our sympathy really testify to our innocence as well as our impotence, or are we drawn by a voyeuristic lure and the possible satisfaction of knowing? This is not happening to *me*, I'm not dying, I'm not trapped in a war. «It is because a war, any war, doesn't seem as if it can be stopped that people become less responsive to the horrors. Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers»<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.globalarabnetwork.com/politics/51-syria-politics/3510-2011-04-24-00-53-58>, date of retrieval 2/5/2015.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, New York 2004, p. 127.