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Visual Media in Syria

In keeping with the amount of conflict it has produced, the first part of the twenty-first century has been a particularly prodigious period for critical thought about visual media and war. After indelibly critiquing the medium in 1977's *On Photography*, for example, Susan Sontag oscillated just as thoughtfully in a more constructive direction with 2003's *Regarding the Pain of Others.* "As objects of contemplation, images of the atrocious can answer to several different needs," she writes. "To steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself more numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible."[1] And indeed we can find contemporary war photographers struggling to respond to these and other needs, albeit with varying degrees of success, in such works as Michael Kamber's essential interview collection/photo anthology *Photojournalists on War: The Untold Stories from Iraq* (2013).

Conversely, many others have followed Nicholas Mirzoeff's cue, thinking, as he does in *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (2005), about "the ways in which images have become weapons in the military-visual complex."[2] David Shields's brilliantly cheeky 2015 coffee-table book *War Is Beautiful: The* New York Times *Pictorial Guide to the Glamour of*

Armed Conflict, for instance, strongly suggests that the newspaper of record's highly aestheticized images of the Iraq War have been just as harmful in their way as, say, Judith Miller's reporting. Similarly, in his masterful 2008 documentary film *Standard Operating Procedure* and its companion book *The Ballad of Abu Ghraib* (2008) (co-authored with Philip Gourevitch), Errol Morris scrutinizes the images that emerged from the infamous Iraqi prison and finds serious reason to doubt the tidy narrative that they simply show the actions of "a few bad apples."

But despite all of this important work, we are still very much at the beginning of thinking critically about how networked communications, such as social media, compound and complicate these and other issues. Enter Donatella Della Ratta, whose recent *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria* begins with a bold but undeniably compelling assertion. "I argue that Syria is the first full-fledged networked conflict," she says. "Iraq's 2003 conflict, for example, lacked this dimension because the major social networks and sharing platforms such as YouTube or Facebook were not present yet."[3] (Facebook was founded in 2004 and YouTube in 2005.) Using the example of Abu Ghraib, she points out that "the tortures, the

pictures [came to us] one after another, like in a linear scheme, in accumulation." By contrast, as "networked images," those coming out of the Syrian Civil War "move beyond the [bilateral] relationship between image-makers and publics to construct a multilateral dialogue with the networked environment inhabited by human and non-human subjectivities (data, algorithms, automats and bots, AIs)" (p. 196). Put another way: "The networks have granted the utmost visibility and shareability to the most extreme violence, finally merging the physical annihilation of places with their endless online regeneration, producing a sort of *onlife* which gets renewed every time content is manipulated, re-uploaded, re-posted and shared, as meanings are combined and recombined in different, clashing versions" (pp. 4-5).

An assistant professor of communications and media studies at Rome's John Cabot University, Della Ratta approaches this topic, first and foremost, as "a long-time analyst of Arabic-speaking media": as she explains in the introduction, her PhD work took her to Damascus to conduct "several years of fieldwork exploring the connection between the local TV drama industry, the authoritarian power, and the wealthy Gulf market" (p. 12). That said, *Shooting a Revolution* is informed not only by this scholarship but also by the author's acknowledged "bond" with the people of Syria: among other things, Della Ratta was a close friend of the noted democracy activist Bassel Khartabil Safadi, who was imprisoned and executed by Bashar al-Asad's government. Invoking Antonio Gramsci's notion that "intellectual work should be grounded in a project that requires active political commitment," she explains that "it is precisely because of this bond that I have developed the theoretical reflections offered in this book into a broader discussion on the transformation of contemporary conflicts in the age of networked visual culture, while also, hopefully, helping to frame a more informed debate on the current situation in Syria" (pp. 13, 12).

Described as "an ethnography," *Shooting a Revolution* presents a series of "snapshots" from "two key moments in Syria's contemporary history: the pre-networked environment profoundly marked by the TV drama industry, the *tanwir* ideology, the elective affinities between political and cultural elites; and the ongoing post-2011 phase, where this carefully engineered idea of nationhood and identity has crumbled following the collapse of meaning facilitated by the mutual interaction between a disruptive political event (the uprising turned armed conflict) and a disruptive medium (networked communications technologies), both in perpetual acceleration mode" (pp. back matter, 10, 10-11). Chapter 1, "Making Media, Making the Nation: Syria's *Tanwir* in Neoliberal Times," provides a deep dive into the first period. In it, Della Ratta looks at the ways *tanwir*, the "ideology of development that has traditionally informed the relation between political and cultural elites," was remade in Syrian TV drama series, or *musalsalat*. "Moving away from its modernist version, shaped around social commitment, and fully entering the neoliberal atmosphere, *tanwir*, which once served that goal of building the common good, was ultimately used to disrupt it and to strengthen the belief that reforms were to be implemented only if the president's political persona was preserved" (p. 14).

Chapter 2, "The Whisper Strategy," continues to look at how *tanwir* has been twisted to the al-Asad government's purposes in the 2011 TV drama *Fawq al-Saqf*. Here, the term "whisper strategy" refers to "a sophisticated communication mechanism through which the president and the drama makers manage to fine-tune messages to indoctrinate the Syrian public about what makes good citizens, and how to think about religion, gender, human rights, freedom, and, eventually, the protest movement unfolding in the streets" (p. 34). This analogy is very purposeful, in that what is happening here is neither "top-down" nor "mandatory and coercive." As Della Ratta demonstrates, "the metaphor of the whisper captures the soft, gentle,

non-coercive form of communications between cultural producers and political powers: a bilateral, circulatory dynamic through which both sides express their needs and address the necessity of tackling certain issues using *tanwir*-inspired media" (p. 42). She further shows how the interests of the "Pan Arab [TV] market and its Gulf-backed top players"—buyers of Syrian TV dramas—are wrapped up in the whisper strategy as well, despite their public position as "staunch opponents" of al-Asad (pp. 47, 34).

Chapter 3, aptly titled "The Death of *Tanwir* in Real-Time Drama," explains how post-2011 "Syrian *musalsalat* dealing with issues such as sectarian chaos, jihadism, forced exile and the refugee crisis ... highlight the failure of *tanwir* to serve as a catalyst in rebuilding a post-uprising national, collective, unifying project through progressive media, and to act as a Habermasian platform that would establish a dialogue between the factions involved in the conflict and help overcome sectarian divisions" (p. 57). Della Ratta rules the cause of death to be the dramas' "profound resonance with Bashar al-Asad's political project"—which "views society as a disoriented, heedless mob that needs to be educated on how to think"—compounded by the drama makers' "reluctance to hold the president accountable" (pp. 57, 77, 57). Not unsurprisingly, then, "novel forms and formats of expressing creativity and dissent" begin appearing around the same time. In chapter 4, "The People's 'Raised Hands'," for example, the author looks at one example in the eponymous internet meme, which "originated from user-generated remixes of a 2011 regime-backed campaign aimed at preventing people from protesting." Contrasting the meme with the *musalsalat*, she notes, "far from generating a Habermasian public sphere that would open up a democratic path, this collective formation thrives exclusively on the people's participation in making the remixes, and in the activity of sharing within the networks' economy of circulation" (p. 78).

Chapter 5, "Fear and Loathing on the Internet: The Paradoxes of Arab Networked Activism," begins with Della Ratta's recalling her friendship with Safadi, as well as her "first-hand experiences in the field of Arab digital activism." She goes on to appraise the "political economy of digital activism," questioning the idea of the "liberating, democratizing" power of the internet. Digital activism's "precarious political economy brings into stark relief the volatility and uncertainty of local storytelling, suspended between the imperative to gain attention in the overcrowded domain of digital media and the need to counteract Bashar al-Asad's propaganda," she writes. "Its fragility includes the questions of distribution, and of the storing and access to content, since the bulk of the diffused archive of the Syrian uprising lies in the hands of internet platform capitalists" (p. 98).

Likewise, in chapter 6, "Screen Fighters: Filming and Killing in Contemporary Syria," Della Ratta looks at the "pervasive" use of cell phone video post-uprising and questions the popular notion that the distribution of these videos on social media subverts the tendency of these platforms to "commodify" everything uploaded to them. "Syrian image-makers are no longer the keepers of their own images, which have been appropriated by Silicon Valley's platform capitalists, and by those activists who abandoned the idea of the revolutionary 'commons' and claimed back ownership, once they realized that Syrian visual production was in high demand," she writes. "This split between image-makers and image-keepers, which takes on a global dimension in moving between local activists and the Californian internet giants, opens up an emerging political economy of the image post-2011, one whose material, legal and ethical implications are yet to be fully explored" (p. 124).

Chapter 7, "Syria's Image-Makers: Daesh Militants and Non-Violent Activists," offers contrasting examples of how two distinct groups have and have not understood these and other implications.

As Della Ratta argues, "despite radically different objectives and strategies," both Daesh and non-violent Syrian activists "articulate a framework in which values of solidarity, camaraderie and brotherhood contribute to forging their identity, together with ideas of revolt, risk-taking and the capacity to imagine and aspire to a revolutionary future." In her view, though, only the Daesh militants have fully grasped the "dynamics of circulation and reflexivity upon which the networks thrive," transforming "internet pioneers' libertarian dream of openness and accessibility into a nightmare of anonymous recirculation and the sharing of terror" (p. 148).

Lastly, in chapter 8, "Notes on a Theory of Violence and the Visual in the Networked Age," Della Ratta shares thoughts inspired by Khaled Abdulwahed's *Jellyfish* (2012, undistributed), a documentary film about "Syrian image-mediated activism ... that will likely not be screened in public" (pp. 179, 178). Here, the author muses on the aforementioned "social and performative" dimensions of networked images—"It is as if [Jacques Lacan's] sardine can could finally talk back," she says—and presents concluding thoughts (p. 197). "Networked images no longer aim at advancing evidentiary or truth claims, nor at representing, mirroring or interpreting the real, but rather at *making* it," she says. "These multiple subjectivities, whether global or local, professional or amateur, profit or nonprofit, armed or peaceful, human or algorithmic, all shape Syria's media ecosystem, creating a complex visual (and political) formation incestuously imbricated with the warfare on the ground, and defined by a combination of the utmost violence and visibility, both thriving in a permanent state of hyper-stimulation, speed and acceleration, and heading towards disjunction, disaggregation and ultimate disruption" (p. 178).

To call Della Ratta's knowledge of Syrian media "extensive" would be an understatement: between her language ability, experience living and working in the country, and proximity to impor-

tant figures and projects discussed, the author has delivered perhaps *the* essential assessment of twenty-first-century Syrian visual culture with *Shooting a Revolution*. The book is rich with thoughtfully considered examples from a broad range of media, and Della Ratta is a deft navigator of the occasionally complicated relationships and politics at play. Moreover, her expert application of critical theory throughout this work sets it apart from other titles on Syria and visual activism, making it of special interest to subscribers of H-Socialisms.

It is worth mentioning too that the book is uniquely strengthened by Della Ratta's positionality and the ways she uses it throughout. Disclosing her "bond" to the Syrian people is a necessary act of transparency, yes, but it serves to underscore the rigorousness of her work as well: while clear-eyed about the situation in Syria, this is not a polemic, and Della Ratta takes great care never to doff her scholarly hat. As one might surmise from the chapter summaries above, the author's closeness to the Syrian people never seems to compromise *Shooting a Revolution*; instead, by the end of the book, it is difficult to see her wish to help "frame a more informed debate on the current situation in Syria" as anything but completely sincere (p. 12). In addition, the photo illustrations are an excellent touch: they not only offer glimpses of visual media less familiar to English-speaking audiences but also greatly complement the author's first-person approach. (One droll photo even shows Della Ratta herself on location with the cast of *Bab al-Hara*, a *musalsalat* discussed throughout the book.)

Impeccable as both ethnographic research and radical media criticism, *Shooting a Revolution* is a landmark work, moving our knowledge about the relationship between visual media and warfare multiple steps forward—every bit as much as any of the works mentioned at the top of this review. Della Ratta has ably demonstrated that it is "no longer possible to approach the question of im-

age-making (*shooting*) or the question of violence (*being shot at*) in Syria—*and more generally in contemporary warfare*—without taking into consideration the technological and human infrastructure of the networked environment, where the 'visuality' of the conflict gets produced and reproduced as labour" (p. 4, emphasis added). If there's anything like a shortcoming here, it is that there might be room for the author to say even more about contemporary warfare and image-making generally. But that could easily be another book—or several. For now, though, we should be grateful that so enormously important a contribution has been made to a subject of such enormity and import.

Notes

[1]. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador), 98.

[2]. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.

[3]. Elisa Aceri, "Shooting a Revolution: Professor Della Ratta's Book on Media and Warfare in Syria," John Cabot University News, December 18, 2018, https://news.johncabot.edu/2018/12/della-ratta-shooting-revolution.

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