

Shooting a Revolution

Digital Barricades:
Interventions in Digital Culture and Politics

Series editors:

Professor Jodi Dean, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Dr Joss Hands, Newcastle University

Professor Tim Jordan, University of Sussex

Also available:

Cyber-Proletariat:

Global Labour in the Digital Vortex

Nick Dyer-Witford

Gadget Consciousness:

Collective Thought, Will and Action in the Age of Social Media

Joss Hands

Information Politics:

Liberation and Exploitation in the Digital Society

Tim Jordan

Unreal Objects:

Digital Materialities, Technoscientific Projects and Political Realities

Kate O'Riordan

Shooting a Revolution

Visual Media and Warfare in Syria

Donatella Della Ratta

PLUTO  PRESS

First published 2018 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

Copyright © Donatella Della Ratta 2018

The right of Donatella Della Ratta to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3715 9 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3714 2 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7868 0186 9 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0211 8 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7868 0210 1 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material in this book. The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions in this respect and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England
Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vi
<i>Series Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>A Note on Transliteration</i>	xii
<i>Glossary</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1 Making Media, Making the Nation: Syria's <i>Tanwir</i> in Neoliberal Times	15
2 The Whisper Strategy	35
3 The Death of <i>Tanwir</i> in Real-Time Drama	58
4 The People's 'Raised Hands'	79
5 Fear and Loathing on the Internet: The Paradoxes of Arab Networked Activism	99
6 Screen Fighters: Filming and Killing in Contemporary Syria	125
7 Syria's Image-Makers: Daesh Militants and Non-Violent Activists	149
8 Notes on a Theory of Violence and the Visual in the Networked Age	179
<i>Notes</i>	199
<i>Bibliography</i>	226
<i>Index</i>	249

Introduction

In Syria, every day, YouTubers film then die. Others kill then film.
(Osama Mohammed, co-director of *Ma'a al-fidda* ['Silvered Water: Syria's Self-Portrait'], 2014)

Never before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense ... Never before has a period known so little about itself.
(Kracauer 2005: 58)

The shot opens with heavy shootings. We see buildings burning in the distance, smoke rising. More shootings, an ambulance siren, a live-chat message notification are all heard in the background. The camera moves slowly towards a group of armed men dressed in black, probably police or security forces. The male voice behind the camera screams 'peaceful, peaceful', while the sound of the shootings gets closer. 'No, no, I am peaceful, peaceful', the voice insists. More shootings. The camera shakes, yet the man does not leave or stop filming. 'The world must see!', he shouts. We hear another male voice in the background, worried, probably trying to get the man behind the camera out of there: 'Iyad, Iyad!' The man filming screams even louder, addressing the armed men: '*Shoot at me, shoot at me!* The world must see what is happening.'

This video was allegedly shot in Daraa, a city in southwestern Syria where a popular anti-regime uprising sparked in March 2011.¹ The anonymous filmer – Iyad? – embraces the camera to document the violence that unknown armed men are likely to inflict on his body, and no doubt on other disarmed bodies too. Yet the invisible man behind the camera would not move – like thousands of other anonymous citizens who have silently, fiercely, defiantly filmed the Syrian uprising. They would stand still, hiding behind the camera, shooting while being shot at, like in Iyad's video.

In March 2011 Syrian protesters found themselves in this unprecedented situation of being simultaneously victims and heroes. Victims, as they faced repression with bare hands, at the mercy of the armed killers'

absolute will; heroes, as they bravely turned into first-person narrators of their own history, regaining agency through the self-documentation of the events they participated in, even when they took a violent, dangerous form. A defiant, extreme act of filming regardless, that pushed us as spectators to wonder why these anonymous filmmakers didn't throw their cameras on the floor and run away when facing death in the shape of a sniper, a militia man, or a police officer. Such a gesture should not be dismissed as the psychotic, narcissistic behaviour of few isolated individuals, but rather understood as a collective endeavour with a large-scale dimension.

The act of filming has become so inherently connected to Syria's post-2011 everyday life that it was appropriated by a wide spectrum of the country's citizenry, including its violent components. Security agents, armed groups, torturers, jihadis, all indifferently turned into image-makers, employing the camera to live-document their brutal acts, while also producing the most extreme and obscene forms of violence for the sake of the camera. Every day, everyone films and is filmed in Syria, a country where the visual form has been turned into a device to perform violence, and the quintessential tool to resist it.

The parallel, dramatically intertwined movements of *shooting* and *being shot at*, of filming and killing, of filming to kill and killing to film, lie at the core of this book. *Shooting* while *being shot at* is the gesture of capturing life events on camera while dying live in front of it and for the sake of it, so as to grant an extension to existence in the immortal form of witnessing and crystalizing the self in the historical document. Meanwhile, it is also the fascination for violence, the pursuit of an ideal visual form for its enactment on the ground. For *shooting* as in killing shares with *shooting* as in filming a concern for the aesthetic performance, a preoccupation with the (re)presentation of the act, a compulsive attraction to any visual format offering visibility to the violence, whether in the spontaneous form of shaky pixels generated in moments of anxiety and fear – like in Iyad's video – or in the orchestrated, cruel beauty of a static, surveillance-like shot properly fixed before the enactment of torture. Yet when filming disappears into everything and into the everydayness, becoming just another life activity among others, framing the question of the image around the aesthetic dichotomy between revolutionary, low-resolution, seemingly naive pixels and the self-declared objective form of 'caught-on-camera' torture videos risks diverting

attention from the material conditions that allow these visual media to emerge, and from the power struggles they conceal.

Let us not be distracted, entrapped, mesmerized by the ‘pixelated revolution’² or by the ‘cinema of the murderer’.³ For as Ernst Jünger noticed already in the aftermath of the First World War, the production of the visual in the context of warfare relates much more to labour than to a mere narration or aesthetic representation.⁴ This is apparent, more than ever, in post-2011 Syria, where the parallel dynamics of *shooting* and *being shot at*, of filming and killing, of making images to preserve life and destroying life for the sake of the image, have invaded the domain of the ordinary and been converted into mundane forms of digital labour on networked communications technologies. The latter have added an unprecedented layer of complexity to the production of the visual and the violent in Syria, as the variety of immaterial labour – paid, unpaid, underpaid, volunteer – involved in generating, assembling and distributing content has fused with the plethora of material subjects – armed and peaceful, pro- and anti-regime, local, regional and international – engaged in the fight on the ground.

Never before in history have these dynamics of violence and visibility been so dramatically entangled, jointly captured and domesticated in the form of routine labour on the networks. Never before have forms of military conduct and forms of visual (re)presentation been equally rendered visible, shareable and ‘likeable’ for the sake of global circulation and consumption. Never before has the seemingly endless multiplication of media and its makers in the networked environment matched so astonishingly with the explosion and consequent disruption of subjects and meanings on the ground: a hyper-fragmentation of digital ‘*me*’ versions of national belonging and identity that mixes up and confounds with the raw materiality of the armed conflict.

To be sure, reflecting on the material conditions in which visual media are generated as commodities in a time of conflict, and on the continuity between technologies of (re)presentation and mass mediation and the military apparatus of violence, is not new to the scholarship. Susan Sontag speculated on the inner violence concealed in the act of visual reproduction – conceived as an interference, an invasion – in the context of the Vietnam war.⁵ Discussing the conflict in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, Thomas Keenan has hinted at the dimension of danger brought to surface by the sheer amount of visual production that emerged, generating confusion and a loss of authority, principles and

meaning, causing inaction, indifference and indetermination as a result of ‘the war of “live death”’.⁶ In 1991, the Gulf War was so quintessentially mediated that it is hard for anyone to remember anything other than a pixelated screen with green missiles falling from the sky and hitting invisible targets, as in a video-game simulation – which led Baudrillard to state provocatively that the war never took place.⁷ Conversely, the 2003 invasion of Iraq carried the highest degree of visibility, materializing the alleged triumph of the neo-colonial power in the iconic image of a US marine covering Saddam Hussein’s statue with the American flag, or in the (in)famous imperial spectacles offered by the Abu Ghraib pictures, where orientalised bodies were co-opted into the rawest and most organic forms of violence, including sodomy and sexual abuse.⁸

Yet those conflicts – and the scholarly reflections they inspired – all lacked a networked dimension, since the participatory aspect⁹ became a wide-scale popular feature of communications technologies only post-2003, after social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube had been launched. In contrast, the non-violent Syrian uprising that turned into an armed conflict was born digital and networked from the very moment an unarmed activist used a smartphone camera to *shoot* while an armed man raised his gun to *shoot at him*. Suddenly, the performance of violence had become visible, shareable, reproducible, remixable, likeable.

This book maintains that it is no longer possible to approach the question of image-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 ‘visibility’¹⁰ of the conflict gets produced and reproduced as labour. Syria is the first fully developed networked battleground in which the technological infrastructure supporting practices of uploading, sharing and remixing, together with the human network of individuals engaged in those practices, have become dramatically implicated in the production and reproduction of violence. The entanglement of visual regimes of representation and modes of media production with warfare and modes of destruction has exploited and prospered from the participatory dimension of networked communications technologies. 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.

I call this process ‘expansion.’¹¹ Expansion brings to the surface the dark side of peer-production, sharing economies, remixing and participation, suggesting that these networked practices, as well as enabling creativity and self-empowerment, can also multiply terror and fear. Expansion hints at the participatory dimension of violence that thrives on networked subjects who are both the anonymous, grassroots users celebrated by cultural convergence and remix cultures,¹² and the political and armed subjectivities active in the conflict – each probably overlapping with the other. The plethora of actors, local and international, military and civilian, peaceful and armed, involved in producing the conflict on the ground, is also the social workforce engaged (and exploited) in its reproduction on the networks, with military factions ultimately rendered into multiple forms of digital labour, and vice versa.

The explosion of personalized ‘me’ media, enabled by platforms deemed quintessentially progressive by techno-utopias and digital democracy frameworks, has been matched by an explosion of violence and the expansion of warfare. Everybody seems to claim a right to create and re-manipulate on the networks, as much as the freedom to conquer, occupy and destroy on the ground. Everybody is an active maker, an empowered subject, at the level of both creation and destruction, contributing to reproducing that very destruction for the sake of networked circulation. *If it’s dead, it spreads* – so Syria’s networked environment seems to tragically suggest, in a bitter remix of Henry Jenkins’ famous motto.¹³

The counter-movement to this process of expansion, yet directly following from it, is the fragmentation of media – and, in parallel, of civil society. The latter has been even more disruptive in Syria as it emerged from a context where, for decades, the authoritarian power had carefully crafted messages aimed at providing citizens with a shared idea of national identity and belonging. At the core of this mediated process of nation-building was the popular form of *musalsalat* (TV series), used since Bashar al-Asad’s seizure of power – by elite cultural producers employing what I call ‘the whisper strategy’¹⁴ – to engineer seemingly reformist content directed at educating the public on issues of gender, religion, political rights and citizenship. Networked communications technologies have contributed to disrupting and undoing these concepts constructed through TV drama, dispersing the elite-sanctioned idea of

nationhood into a plethora of ‘*me*’ versions of the country’s identity and future which parallels, at a media level, the clashing (armed) subjectivities active in the making of conflict. However phony the once-shared idea of the nation was, it no longer exists in Syria, neither in the media nor on the ground.

As media production accelerates – with more remixes, more sharing platforms, and the accumulation of layers in a permanent mode of circulation – so does war also accelerate and degenerate, involving more actors and interests at local, regional and global levels, expanding in time and space with no end apparently in sight. The mediated mimics the military, and vice versa. In the networked environment, media messages circulate rather than communicate, embracing a status of ‘constant emulsion’:¹⁵ a permanent, entropic, circular movement that dramatically mirrors the ceaseless bombings, sieges, chemical attacks and humanitarian crises that have unfolded in Syria since 2011. We are far from the abstract media spectacles offered to international publics during the 1991 Gulf conflict: the ‘perfect’ war, marked by a precise beginning and end, carefully orchestrated and performed for the sake of media (re) production and (re)presentation.

The Syrian conflict hints at a new mode of warfare and visibility marked by a sort of ‘neverendingness’, which is also a quintessential feature of the networked environment. The war is stretched in a multi-layered time continuum that appears endless, its space dimension exploding and expanding in a way that perfectly mimics networked processes lacking a centralized organization, a hierarchy or a sense of order. Syria no longer exists as a coherent geographical entity; at the time of writing the regime controls certain areas, while rebel factions, as well as the Kurdish YPG, oversee fragmented pockets of territory across the country. Meanwhile, Syria’s space continuum has stretched and over-expanded in the virtual, global-embracing entity of Daesh’s caliphate, which occasionally finds a material existence on the ground – as previously happened in Raqqa.

Regardless of its alleged physical elimination by the international anti-terrorism coalition force, the self-proclaimed ‘Islamic State’ remains alive and well in the networked environment. Daesh seems to have fully understood the nature of networked communications technologies, as it has succeeded in creating aesthetically compelling networked forms and formats of violence and, at the same time, novel ways of enacting violence on the ground for the sake of media reproducibility, peer-to-peer sharing and viral redistribution on the networks. Despite proprietary web 2.0

platforms and governments jointly engaging in policing Daesh-made media, the terrorist group has managed to resurrect itself in the domain of the open web, turning the internet pioneers' libertarian fantasies of openness and accessibility into nightmares about the viral redistribution of terror spectacles.

That's the tragedy of the digital commons. Paradoxically, and sadly, contemporary forms of networked terrorism have come to materialize the dreams of the 'commons' in their indifference to copyright and rejection of individual recognition, embodying the quintessential idea of collective ownership. 'The artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated ... Only the terrorist stands outside,' Don DeLillo once wrote.¹⁶ Today Daesh embodies the anonymous, grassroots, amateur, web 2.0 terrorist as '*auteur*'.¹⁷

Conversely, user-generated digital commons have dramatically evolved into commodities, as Syrian activists, who once filmed as a collective 'we',¹⁸ now have to face the loss of control and ownership over their own creations. The keepers of the Syrian image are today's Silicon Valley corporate platforms who have set the legal framework for sharing and distributing over the networks, and who get the ultimate say on the circulation of Syrian visual production and on its definitive disappearance – as several cases of content removal on social networking sites have sadly demonstrated in recent years. Yet the image-keepers are also those activists who became image-makers during the outbreak of the uprising; with the unfolding of the armed conflict and the fading away of the revolutionary possibility, they have claimed back their authorship and ownership, recognizing that Syria's visual production has turned into a market good highly sought-after by international NGOs, journalists, TV networks, film festivals and the global art market.

In the routine labour of *shooting* and *being shot at*, this process of commodification, and the logics of exploitation it entails, have moved far beyond images to invest social beings who have become fully image-defined and image-determined. Contemporary Syria seems to have materialized Debord's prophecy of the 'spectacle' becoming 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images'.¹⁹ In the networked environment of hashtags and emojis, retweets, selfies, 'stories' and streaks, participants are hyper-mediated, eager to be circulated, re-posted, tagged and liked, even when death and violence are the content to be rendered into a form of spectacle now collaborative and peer-produced.²⁰

The Syrian image is a quintessentially ‘networked image’.²¹ In the non-stop sharing and manipulation over the networks, the production of the visual has moved away from the activists’ original attempts to generate ‘evidence-images’²² that would hold the regime accountable for the violence and the violations of human rights. Rather than meaning, circulation is in fact what creates value on the networks. Images either circulate or die. They have to be copied, downloaded, re-uploaded, manipulated, redistributed, no matter what information they carry. Those that are not distributed in the networked circuits of drive and affection are condemned to permanent extinction. The a-social, the anti-social, has to disappear from the networks.

This new form of ‘sociality’ of the image bluntly surfaces from Syria’s rubble. It will likely remain a permanent, vital feature of conflicts to come, a curse of future networked forms of warfare – where ‘networked’ implies the mere circulation of data, regardless of meaning and *in spite of* it. Syria’s networked images are not interested in bearing witness or conveying a truth value or a moral position. They no longer aim at representing, mirroring or interpreting the real. They *make* the real, a *new real*. They are affirmative and world-making, the offspring of remix and participatory cultures where everyone and anyone can create and manipulate meaning, spreading it quickly with a clever use of hashtags and other ‘social’ tools. Networked images distance themselves from fake news, as truthfulness or falseness no longer hold as values, parameters, or ways of assessing the visual.

This emerging mode of the visual is taking over the language of representation. Images become a process rather than a content: dynamic entities, moving around, ever changing, filled with a sort of ready-to-explode detonation energy. Disconnected from the thing represented, liberated from the slavery of representation, they are free to express all possibilities and to allow new connections to be made and unmade. In this endless combinatorial possibility, where their fascinating yet annihilating beauty lies, images have abandoned any preference, organization or order, and, ultimately, have given up on signification. Deleuze called this visual mode ‘langue III’,²³ seeing it rising in connection with television. Yet it is with networked communications technologies that it takes the most complete and perfect form.

In the process of making the image as something disconnected from the object, filtered of individual features in order to become common and reproducible, the individual is dried up, turned into ‘the exhausted’.²⁴

Exhaustion is about combining all sets of variables and possibilities, playing with them, trying them out infinitely. It's the network logic of endless circulation, the fantasy of abundance offered by Instagram and Snapchat filters, the McLuhanian fascination for the media whatever it mediates. Make the image, then die. Shoot, then be shot. Syria, in its terrifying yet compelling enmeshment between violence and visibility across the networks, is Deleuze's 'exhausted'.

Syrian human beings are not spared the cruelty of this process that turns the visual and the violent into two inevitable components of contemporary networks. Willing or unwilling, victims or perpetrators, displaced or evacuated, Syrians are irremediably cogs in the labour chain granting 'vitality' to the image through its circulation.²⁵ The sociality of networked images not only invests their human makers, but actually expands them, multiplies them, dispersing them into a wider spectrum of entities all equally responsible in giving *onlife*. Algorithms, interfaces, bots, AIs and other non-human subjectivities have the same agency as their human counterparts – if not more – in making and keeping the networked image alive.

The parallel movements of *shooting*, whether as filming or as killing, dissolve meaning into a plethora of individual and fragmented forms and formats, mere occurrences of divided and hyper-mediated selves that do not have enough strength to embrace any consistent, political, social, collective shape, nor to propose any solution to the conflict. The latter seems caught in the same mechanism of unceasing circulation that defines its quintessential 'mediator', the networks. The conflict should never end, but only circulate, reaching peaks, stopping abruptly and then re-starting again, in the endless sequence of attacks, bombings, sieges, evacuations, displacements, starvations and deportations that we have all sadly become accustomed to. We are all condemned not only to watch this endless sequence, as we did with previous wars, but also to share it, remix it, hashtag and archive it, upload and download it, 'like' or attach an emoji to it.

The perpetual state of acceleration in which networked media find themselves, matching the escalation of the conflict and the proliferation of armed forces and political interests on the ground, is revelatory of dynamics that are not exclusive to Syria. More broadly, they mark the ways in which the enactment of violence has been structurally transformed in the presence of participatory media that make everything and everyone visible, archivable, likeable. Yet I do not wish Syria to be

taken merely as an empirical case study employed to support a theory of violence and visibility in the age of the networks. It was, in fact, through living in Damascus for some years (2008–11), witnessing the March uprising unfolding, watching friends of different socio-economic and religious backgrounds becoming improvised image-makers, and seeing some of them sacrifice their comfortable lives for the revolutionary cause, that I started developing these theoretical questions. It is also thanks to my professional experience in the field of digital activism, both as Arab world community manager for Creative Commons and as co-founder of the web repository SyriaUntold, that I was able to place these reflections within the broader debate on networked communications technologies and political mobilization.

Fundamental to this discussion is Syria's pre-networked media environment, heavily characterized by the attunement between the makers of edgy, taboo-breaking television and Bashar al-Asad's idea of reformism. The president's rise to power in the early 2000s was marked by a parallel rise in popularity of Syrian TV drama, which was highly sought-after on the Pan Arab, Gulf-backed media market. Quite surprisingly at a first glance, these TV series openly discussed taboo issues such as religion, gender relations, government officials' abuse of power, and even corruption, in a country that had been under authoritarian rule for decades. This was, however, absolutely coherent with Bashar al-Asad's seemingly reformist project, launched when succeeding his father Hafiz with the promise of implementing reforms, on the condition that they followed a gradual process managed by enlightened minorities. Throughout the 2000s, al-Asad's regime and Syrian TV drama enjoyed their golden age, the country's political and cultural elites firmly aligned on an idea of *tanwir* (enlightenment) adapted to neoliberal times. *Tanwir* was conceived as a project to make the country progress and indoctrinate Syrian citizens on how to think about personal and civic freedoms, so as to shelve political reforms in favour of social and market-oriented ones.

The book photographs these 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. To make this shift visible, the book offers a series of anecdotes collected first-hand during my fieldwork up to 2011, and then through ethnography conducted online or in neighbouring countries after Syria had become inaccessible to me.

A better word to describe these incipits, used to frame the main theoretical questions in each chapter, would be 'snapshots'. They portray: the filming of a TV fiction on rebellion at the very moment when people are demanding freedom on the ground (Chapter 1); watching the uprising unfolding in a Ramadan TV series (Chapter 2); attempting to make a documentary about the war and the refugee crisis (Chapter 3); witnessing a meme spreading in the streets of Damascus and on the virtual alleys of the web (Chapter 4); kick-starting digital activism in Syria (Chapter 5); rediscovering an archive of civil disobedience practices from 2011 (Chapter 6); comparing user-generated videos made by armed militants and peaceful protesters (Chapter 7); reflecting on a documentary film that will never see the light of day (Chapter 8).

Snapshots have two key features that capture the condition in which I find myself while trying to make sense of these fragments of lived experiences in book form. Firstly, they are casual photographs made typically by an amateur with a small handheld camera. An 'amateur' is someone who loves engaging in an activity for pleasure, rather than for professional reasons or financial benefits. The Syrians who committed to shooting as a life activity back to 2011 were amateurs, as are the anonymous users who gave a new push to creativity, and new meanings to meaning, through the practice of remix.²⁶ Amateurs are key characters in my account of the transformation of violence and warfare at the time of the networks.

Secondly, snapshots are impressions or views of something brief or transitory: a snapshot of life *back then*; in this case, back at the time when the revolutionary moment was still unfolding and full of promise, before being shot at and silenced. I do not wish to make predictions about Syria's future, or conduct geopolitical analyses of the latest developments in the Arab region. Rather, I offer these views from Syria's recent past as an entry into the present moment. How and why did we get to this point in Syria? How did we move from the over-celebrated 'Arab Spring', globally praised for the courage, dignity and resilience of its protesters, to the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time? How did the US and Europe shift from declaring Bashar al-Asad's regime illegitimate and unable to bring Syrians together, into forming a *de facto* alliance with

him in order to fight Daesh as the most urgent international priority, finally endorsing the Syrian president's narrative of a country targeted by a foreign conspiracy and terrorist plots?

This is not a sanitized book on Syria. I have approached the country as a long-time analyst of Arabic-speaking media, and as an ethnographer who conducted several years of fieldwork exploring the connections between the local TV drama industry, the authoritarian power, and the wealthy Gulf market. At the same time, I undertake the difficult task of writing about a country which I deeply love and which is experiencing a moment of utmost distress, as an activist and a committed human being who has lived there and empathized with people whom I witnessed first-hand giving their lives to shape a courageous and peaceful protest movement. I do not wish to conceal the deep emotional bond that I feel regarding Syria and its people; indeed, 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.

In 2011 there was a peaceful uprising in Syria which was later dragged into a brutal proxy war. In 2017, at least a part of this conflict – the one named ‘war against terrorism’ – was officially declared ended. Daesh was removed from Palmyra and Raqqa, Aleppo was ‘cleansed’ of the rebels, and Bashar al-Asad, together with his Russian and Iranian allies, called it a day. Should we call this a victory and let it pass into history? At the time of writing, several areas of the country still lie in the hands of armed rebels of different factions; others, like al-Ghouta, are being subject to the most brutal starvation and extermination of their civilian population with the excuse of cleansing them of terrorism. Meanwhile, although Daesh has physically evacuated Raqqa, the capital of the so-called caliphate, its small-scale terror attacks are ongoing in Europe and the US, and videos are continuously released to feed the organization's propaganda machine, many of them featuring children and reminding us of the terror that will likely haunt future generations in unexpected and unpredictable forms. Syrians are displaced everywhere, both within the borders of the country, and scattered across the planet, mostly in Europe and the Middle East but also in Canada, South America and Asia. Syria's once vibrant, incredibly smart and talented youth – if not dead like my friend Bassel Safadi, who has been an inspirational source of this book, or imprisoned like thousands of disappeared people – now sit in

refugee centres, waiting to sort out papers in order to be sent somewhere, someday, by somebody who probably knows very little of their story, language or culture. Many of these young people are depressed – a reaction to the exaltation generated by the glorious moment of change they seized on in 2011 and that seems now irremediably lost. Some have committed suicide. Others are resiliently building a new life, learning a language, making art and films, or starting a new business.

In offering these snapshots of Syria's recent past both as guides to the crucial turning points post-2011 and in order to illuminate and inspire future reflections, I wish to bring with me Antonio Gramsci's lesson: intellectual work should be grounded in a project that requires active political commitment, recognizing 'the ethical imperative to bear witness to collective suffering and to provide a referent for translating such a recognition into social engagement'.²⁷ The revolution has been *shot*, yet the *shooting* is not over, as history will write the final scene. Snapshots are antidotes to oblivion and violence because, ultimately, 'forgetting extermination is part of extermination'.²⁸