
Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria

By Donatella Della Ratta

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Reviewed by Osman Burak Tosun, Ege University

A researcher who wrote her thesis about television series (*musalsalat* in Arabic) aired in Syria, and unluckily faced the grim reality of the Syrian Civil War, Donatella Della Ratta gives us a solid and undeniably unique work about transforming aesthetics of propaganda videos, TV shows, and images circulating in new media and the cross-referencing, reviving and everchanging modern myths of a postmodern revolution. Even if her intentions were not related to writing a book about the transformation of new media in a civil



war, she states that her deep emotional bond with the Syrian people living in agony, her long-running ethnographic research about visual culture in Syria and her first-hand testimonies from the very first days of peaceful protests in 2011 would have made her write a book about it. *Shooting a Revolution* offers read-

ers a broad theoretical discussion about the transformation of contemporary conflicts in the age of networked visual culture and helps to frame a more informed debate on the current situation in Syria.

Shooting a Revolution consists of an introduction, eight chapters and eight fragments called “snapshots” that could be considered prologues for every chapter. Every snapshot gives a general view of the following chapter and an abstract view of the historical context of the main topic. With the guidance of these well-thought-out snapshots, readers become initiated in the discussion and may grasp the theoretical and historical background easily. Each chapter addresses a prominent issue that changed Syrian visual culture. The first chapter provides a brief yet encompassing history of Syrian Neoliberalization from the days of Hafez al-Assad to the first days of the Syrian Revolution and interestingly expounds the changing face of the reproduction of the official ideology of the Syrian State (*Tanwir*) by means of ideological apparatuses. From the use of *musalsalat* as an ideological apparatus that employs *Tanwir*-influenced rhetoric, to the emergence of a new, rich class in Syria and the changing ownership structure of the media, Della Ratta offers a well-documented summary of contemporary Syrian visual culture.

The next three chapters identify the crisis of *Tanwir* ideology and the changing efforts of representing it in the public sphere by using conventional and new media. The second and third sections of the book present a cross-section of the increasing pressure from the 2010s to the beginning of the 2000s, where the relaxed control of the presentation of *Tanwir* ideology in the *musalsalat* and the directors close to the reformist ideology could present their views without being censored. In the fourth chapter, Della Ratta explains how the government’s propaganda posters—specifically, the raised hand poster with the pro-government slogan “I am with the law”—are reproduced in a counter-hegemonic discourse by reformists on social media as memes. The

book indicates how the lines of the Habermasian public sphere grew blurry, and notes the formation of a new agora in social media. While the humorous nature of social media memes and the flexibility of user-generated content has yielded a new and rich perception for the Syrian opposition, it also represents a new, personalized space and an opportunity for every person as an individuals in social media.

The fifth chapter of the book explores the roots of cyberactivism in Syria and the pressures and executions faced by Syrian opposition cyber activists during the civil war. Della Ratta notes that individuals from middle-class families, consisting of ‘tech-savvy’ young people, shape the culture in cyberspace. Also, she does not miss the point regarding how the Arab Spring, as a myth, sprouted and transformed in the hands of social media users.

In the sixth chapter, a review of the aesthetics of the content produced by video activists is discussed. In the first pages of the chapter, the author gives a brief history of how smartphones turned into “weapons” in the hands of activists in Syria from the early days of the protests to the present day. By making a comparison between the videos shot by victims and killers, the author describes the unprofessional nature of the image produced by the victim as the “aesthetics of the victim.” Della Ratta attributes aesthetic, well-produced images to the killers.

The seventh chapter addresses the violent images produced by ISIS and non-violent protesters in Syria. The chapter begins with a quotation from a propaganda video that describes ISIS’ perspective on video producing and notes its interesting resemblance to the notion of the camera as a weapon held by non-violent protesters in Syria: “Cameraman,

you are a fighter too!” She criticizes the transformation of the images produced in the present day by Syrian activists from the ‘evidence image’ to the ‘networked image.’” (para. 24)

In the final chapter, Della Ratta opens a discussion about how myths that are taken from religious elements, history and TV series are being used in images. She provides examples, such as clashes between pro-Assad forces and the FSA in Damascene Village re-enacted with scenes involving clashes between Syrian militias and French colonial troops derived from a TV series called *Bab al-hara* used by *both* sides in propaganda videos, and a video of FSA troopers killing a lion in a zoo and eating its flesh (Assad means lion in Arabic). With all these examples, the book gives readers a view of well-documented, multi-layered, postmodern patterns from the Syrian Civil War.

Overall, Della Ratta’s deep insight and research from the country in which she lived offer a bitter fruit with a unique and impeccable view of a postmodern revolution. The book is an excellent contribution to visual culture studies as well as a useful guide to understanding the transformation of video activism and the culture of violence in Syria for academics and researchers. Consists a good panorama of Syrian visual culture from the earlier days of protests to present day. It can be useful resource for cultural and historical researches in the future with accurate analyzes on evolution of new and conventional media of Syria. A must-read to understand the digital and cultural background of a civil war ongoing. *Shooting a Revolution* can be considered a resource for anyone who aims to understand conflict in the postmodern world.