

## Regards

32 | 2024

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility:

An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

---

## Moments of Silence in Syria Place and Self in the State of Exception

**Ammar AL-MAMOUN**

---

### Edition électronique

URL : <https://journals.usj.edu.lb/Regards/article/view/1213>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1213>

ISSN : 2791-285X

### Editeur

Editions de l'USJ, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth

### Référence électronique

AL-MAMOUN, A. (2020). Moments of Silence in Syria Place and Self in the State of Exception. *Regards*, (32), 279-338.

<https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1213>

## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

# MOMENTS OF SILENCE IN SYRIA PLACE AND SELF IN THE STATE OF EXCEPTION

**Ammar Almamoun**

**Résumé** | Cette recherche traite du «silence» dans le cadre du concept de la «nécropolitique» dans le contexte syrien, en observant le « lieu » créer par le « silence » et ses significations politiques et performatives, en particulier quand il est imposé violemment aux individus. Nous examinerons le terme «agents du silence» dans les œuvres artistiques et littéraires, ainsi que dans les formes publiques de performances d’obéissance et de protestation, le but est de comprendre l’autorité des «agents du silence» et leur impact politique.

Notre étude adopte une approche intersectionnelle qui combine la théorie politique avec des formes de performance quotidienne, la théorie performative et des éléments de l’art de la performance. Nous utilisons également les œuvres artistiques et littéraires d’un point de vue "factographique" pour développer une compréhension des méthodes de documentation de la réalité dans les œuvres littéraires. Cette approche vise à aborder la crise de l’absence d’archives en Syrie, souvent appelée le "Royaume du Silence" au Moyen-Orient, où le silence est imposé de manière métaphorique, politique et littérale aux individus, avec des institutions contribuant à son enracinement et à son amplification.

**Mots-clés** | Syrie, Nécro-politique, Silence, interpolation, agents du silence, état d’exception.

**Abstract** | This research discusses “silence” within the concept of “Necro politics” in the Syrian context, aiming to observe the conceptual “space” that silence refers to and create, along with its political and performative meanings, especially when violently imposed on individuals. We will examine the term “officers of silence” in artistic and literary works, as well as in forms of obedience

and protest-oriented public performances, in an attempt to understand the “officers of silence” authority and their political impact.

Our study adopts an intersectional approach that combines political theory with forms of daily performance, performative theory, and elements of performance art. We also use artistic and literary works from a “factographic” perspective to develop an understanding of methods for documenting reality within literary work. This approach seeks to address the crisis of archival absence in Syria, referred to as the “Kingdom of Silence” in the Middle East, where silence is imposed metaphorically, politically, and literally on individuals, with institutions contributing to its entrenchment and amplification.

**Keywords** | Syria, Necro-politics, Silence, interpolation, agents of silence, state of exception.

“I (Anton Chekhov) shall write a new play and it will begin as follows:  
“How wonderful, how quiet! One can hear no birds, no dogs, no cuckoos,  
no owls, no nightingales, no clocks or bells, not so much as a cricket.”

Andrei Turkov - Chekhov and His Times. (1995 -p. 126)

## Introduction

### The Impossible Architecture of Silence

In 2015, American journalist John Biguenet published a book titled “Silence”, in which he discussed the various spaces of silence: theater, music, politics, etc. In his book, Biguenet mentioned a conversation between George Prochnik and Dirksen Bauman, a professor of Deaf cultural studies. According to Prochnik<sup>1</sup> (in the conversation quoted by Biguenet ), Bauman studied a group of people who suddenly found themselves in the world of silence after an accident or injury. He asked them to recall the moment when they realized they were deaf and couldn’t speak because they were unable to hear their own voices: “At that moment (i.e., the moment they realized their deafness/silence), they asked, “Where am I?””<sup>2</sup>.

We mentioned the previous incident to indicate the place within the experience of silence in its clinical context that can be summarized by the question: (Where am I?). This question refers to a silent, voiceless space where the silent person hears his inner voice without being able to hear himself out loud. Those who were drowned in silence did not ask, “What’s going on?” or “What happened to me?” but rather, “Where am I?” as if silence isolates the self from its environment, banishing it from the present moment to an unknown, voiceless place where it loses self-consciousness and denies the outside world as unnatural.

The terrifying thing about the above incident is that any place can become silent from the experimenter’s point of view. The street, the sidewalk, the house, and the car are all places where an accident can cause a loss of hearing. The experience of drowning in silence involves the self, the means of hearing that everyone has (the ear and the mind), and the characteristics of the place where individuals “lose the ability to position themselves”<sup>3</sup>. It is as if silence is an exceptional event in which they lose the ability to speak, that is, they don’t hear themselves.

In tracing the literature of silence, we discovered the constant quest of individuals to find silent places. In Alain Corbin’s “A History of Silence” and his pursuit of silent places in literature, silence is defined as “that inner space from which

---

1- BIGUENET John, *Silence*, 1<sup>st</sup>, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015,

2- *Ibid.*, p. 20.

3- PROCHNIK George, *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise*, New York, Anchor, 2011, p. 166.

speech came”<sup>4</sup>. It’s the same case in life: we constantly strive to create silent spaces, silent in the sense that they don’t include electric wires, where planes don’t fly over us, where even the noise of electrons in wires and the waves that pass through air atoms don’t exist<sup>5</sup>.

Silence is a concept with multiple definitions, which can neither be defined nor recognized. It belongs to highly conceptual subjects such as death, lies and the human being. In researching the history (or histories) of silence, we discovered various ways in which people tried to control it. In “A History of Silence”, Corbin studied the impact of silence in literary and poetic works, and explored “Silence and the Intimacy of Places,” “The Silences of Nature,” and “The Tactics of Silence,” by drawing on the history of literature to explore the characteristics of this changing concept.

In music, for example: John Cage is the first name that comes to mind when talking about silence, with his book “Silence: Lectures and Writings”, first published in 1939, and with his most famous experiment, the piece “4:33”, in which Cage experimented with silence as a generated musical mark. In this case, silence does not mean the absence of music, but rather the generation of new, invisible marks. We can find something similar in a contemporary experience with British music producer Mark Ronson, in a 2021 Apple+ documentary entitled “Watch the Sound with Mark Ronson”. Ronson went to the world’s quietest place, the Orfield Laboratories recording studio in the USA, where you can hear the sound of your own heart if you remain silent, not to mention the fear that grips those who remain alone in this place for a few minutes.

In theater, silence also appears as a sign that moves between text and performance. The plays of the Russian Anton Chekhov, the American Lee Strasberg, and the Irishman Samuel Beckett are the clearest examples of the use of silence and its role in revealing characters. Silence also appears during the performance itself. In Piaget’s book, one of the most important questions of acting, whether on stage or in front of the camera, is asked: “How can an actor be silent in the presence of a fellow actor who is speaking?”

Silence is also present in political theory as part of the study of the systems of political representation, because the absence of voice means withdrawal from the democratic process, whether this silence is imposed or voluntary. The need for participation implies that the voice be heard, and even if silence is used as a protest technique or transformed into (voice), the clear, audible and significant

---

4- CORBIN Alain, *Histoire du silence : De la Renaissance à nos jours*, 2ed. Paris, Flammarion, 2018, p. 7.

5- This is what is known here as “microwave syndrome”, recognized by the World Health Organization as “electromagnetic hypersensitivity”, a set of symptoms that appear in people sensitive to electrical appliances, the movement of electrons and their displacement in wires. There are several places in the world known as “quiet places” free of electromagnetic waves, the most famous of which is a village in the USA called Green Bank.

voice remains the most important element, especially since voice reveals the homogeneity and qualities of the group. While a silent group may be constituted of highly differentiated groups that do not have a voice or do not exercise their right to be heard, silence “Silence is that which is imposed upon marginalized groups, for example, so it is easily assumed that silence must be overcome”<sup>6</sup>.

It’s impossible to list all the areas in which silence appears or disappears. There are always definitions that try to control and define it, from the poetic to the highly scientific, too numerous to mention here. However, this multiplicity of definitions and contexts does not mean that it is impossible to determine the place of silence or control it, nor that it is impossible to approach it, especially since we will not adopt a specific definition of silence. Rather, we will approach it as a sign at certain moments, as a measuring instrument at others, and as a performative position adopted in specific places. What is common between our approach and the models we will examine is the question asked by people who have suddenly become deaf: “Where am I?”. This question refers back to “place”, which is the criterion that will determine our definition of silence: in what space does it appear? What are its political and cultural components? What is the role of the individual in finding himself in “silence” or in the signs of silence? How does silence affect the political definition of the individual, i.e. how does it modify his definition as a subject in relation to himself, to political authority and to his peers?

Identifying the moment and the place/space where silence appears will help us to determine the specificity of the phenomenon of silence and the way silence is used politically as an instrument of arrest, discipline and domination in different spaces. Thus, the meaning of the expression “impossible architecture” mentioned in the title becomes clear, since any place can become a silent place, whether due to the absence of voice, the absence of capacity for political representation, or the disappearance of individuals in the space of public representation, or even theater, which is why we use the following question: “Where am I?” in each of the models of silence, to study place in its two definitions: physical and political.

### **Assad’s Syria: The Fortress of Eternal Silence**

In al- Jurjani ‘s definitions, eternity is defined as “a period whose end is never imagined by thought and contemplation.”<sup>7</sup> This definition is applied to the Syrian eternity, a term created by Yassin al-Haj Saleh to describe the techniques of governance in Syria. It indicates the characteristics of this eternity and its applications. Al-Haj Saleh states that eternity does not end with dialogue or

---

6- FERGUSON Kennan, “Silence: A politics”, *Contemporary Political Theory*, April 2003, 2, p. 55.

7- AL-JURJANI Sharif, *The Book of Definitions (Kitab Al Tarifat)*, original publication 1837, 5th ed. Lebanon, 2020, p. 9.

“contemplation” and is also “an obstacle to political change.”<sup>8</sup> Eternity denies political life in all its forms, and devours both right and left.

Furthermore, it should be noted that “eternity” is an exceptional event in the political sense of the word. In Syria, although a new constitution was adopted in 1972, it was “published five years after the declaration of the state of emergency. The state of emergency is implicitly, even if not declared, abolished. It is de facto and constitutionally ineffective as the situation for which the state of emergency was declared has ended with time and the (approval) of the constitution.”<sup>9</sup> However, keeping the state of emergency in place means suspending the constitution. To put an end to this eternity, or to bring Syria into the history books and put an end to the state of emergency, we need a similar exceptional event, namely the Syrian revolution. We won’t dwell on the specificity of the state of emergency in Syria, but rather focus on the transformation of Syria at the moment of the beginning of eternity into a “silent” space where political voice/representation and speech/expression are controlled.

What we mentioned above is not enough to control silence, especially in a country like Syria, where the emergency law and the security branches have effectively formed a dual state<sup>10</sup>. The Syrian political system consists of two different entities: a constitutional state and a security state. Each of these entities has its own agencies, exerts control over the other, and limits the authority of the other. This situation partially changed after the revolution and the promulgation

8- AL- HAJ SALEH Yassin, A state of extermination, not a dictatorship, *Jumhuriya* [Online], April 2018, [Accessed 17 October 2024]. Available at: <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2018/04/30/%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a5%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%af%d8%a9%d8%8c-%d9%88%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%b3-%d9%86%d8%b8%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%af%d9%83%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a/>

9- AL MALEH Nabil, Syria: Legitimizing the Crime! (*Souria Sharanet AL JArimah*). Saudi Arabia, Madarik Publishing, 2012, p. 19.

10- The term “dual state” goes back to the German thinker Ernst Fraenkel, who believes that the combination of emergency law and military tribunals with the constitution creates a dual state, “a legal state and a privileged state. The relationship between them is disciplined, they limit each other and prevent each from dominating the other, and each has its own internal organs and laws, and although governance in the case of the privileged state means a “permanent state of siege” (FRAENKEL Ernst, *The Dual State: A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*, 1st ed. Oxford, Oxford university press, (1941-original publication), 2017, p. 24), this duality also means ambiguity about the concept of crime that threatens the exercise of citizens’ lives, allowing arbitrary violence by representatives of both states, as there is no clear text or clear crime about what is political or non-political. (FRAENKEL Ernst, op. cit., p. 43) The situation in Syria is similar to the difference in procedures when a person is arrested by the police or security services. There is ambiguity as to the nature of the crime and who will be punished, the criminal law or the arbitrariness of the branch security officer; whether torture is directly administered or practiced by the jailer; whether it is part of the punishment or not; not to mention that the security branches in Syria are not under the authority of the traditional judicial system.

of the Anti-terrorism law. At that time, the civil war policy<sup>11</sup> became more evident and the killing of “enemies”<sup>12</sup> and mutilation of their bodies became more open. This was evidenced by the direct shooting at demonstrations and the leaking of videos showing the torture and humiliation of civilians.

The question “Where am I?” indicates that sudden silence was an exceptional (perhaps eternal) state that threatened the place, its definition, and the relationships of individuals within it. Similarly, the concept of “silence” in the Syrian context can be understood as a strategy of governance, a public demonstration, and a mechanism for maintaining discipline. It shows the way individuals express themselves in their everyday lives and their relationship to cultural and political activity. It is also used as a means of repression and domination. This is particularly evident in the context of the Syrian regime’s “necropolitics”<sup>13</sup> with the enforcement of the Emergency Law during the adoption of the constitution up to the revolution, which did not negate silence and its associated techniques despite the loudness of the demonstrators or protesters. The models selected for analysis will shed light on the forms of necropolitics in Syria and the role of silence, whether in public, private, or prison spaces.

Given the evolving context of silence and political theory in Syria, the question “Where am I?” will recur throughout our research, with reference to place, whether internal or external, public or private, imagined or real. We will refer to its relationship to self and self-consciousness, and we will assume that this

---

11- Salwa Ismail refers to the civil war policy employed by the Syrian regime, where “violence in its cyclical form and theatrical manifestations governs relations and interactions between citizens, and between them and the regime in Syria. It shapes the horizon of their expectations and shared understanding of governance in Syria” (ISMAIL Salwa, *The rule of violence: Subjectivity, memory and government in Syria*, 1st ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 179). She also notes that the attempt to explain this extreme violence cannot be located within the existing system of law/governance, which explains the withdrawal of citizens from public space and political action.

12- There is no clear definition of the enemy from the point of view of the Syrian regime after the revolution; sometimes it’s germs, sometimes infiltrators or demonstrators, which is a very fluctuating characterization in the media. But to understand this hostility, we quote Achille Mbembe when he discusses anti-terrorism laws as a way of reflecting “the need for an enemy, or the desire for an enemy, which is not only a social need but also an ontological need, in the context of the simulated parity implied by the war on terror” (MBEMBE Achille, *Politiques de l’inimitié*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016, p. 69), i.e, the enemy that the Syrian regime needs must find its counterpart in the discourse of hostility in terms of power and threat. This is reminiscent of the counter-revolutionary law and the law criminalizing affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood that were passed under Hafez al-Assad, and then the terrorism law passed in 2012, which leaves the definition of terrorist and terrorist act broad enough to apply to anyone, meaning that the enemy is also dominant and omnipresent, but in a hidden way.

13- Necropolitics, a term developed by the thinker Achille Mbembe in his article of the same name, is “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (MBEMBE, Achille. *Necropolitics. Raisons politiques*, 2006, vol. 21, no 1, p. 14.). He also suggests that the state, as part of this policy, endangers the lives of individuals, i.e. it is not the guarantor of the lives of its citizens in legal and material terms, but rather contributes to leaving them on the margins of life. There are many examples of necropolitical practices, but they are centered on a legal structure that deprives individuals of their rights and exposes them to death. In Syria, we observe these practices in the security branches, such as: confiscation of land and property, arbitrary arrests, deprivation of freedom of expression, repeated massacres, and denial of mourning.



question is asked by anyone who is “silent” or who finds themselves in a “silent” context, especially since we cannot hear silence, but rather assume its presence by comparing it to speech/noise/sound and their respective physical and symbolic locations; that is, we will treat silence as the inability of an individual or group to speak, to suffer, or to emit sounds.

## Terms and Concepts

In the previous two preliminaries, we tried to explore, without elaborating, the question of histories of silence as a sign that moves across artistic, cultural and scientific sectors, and has no fixed definition in all sectors. This lack of specificity poses a challenge in developing a definition that allows us to deal with the different spaces in which silence appears, or in other words, the hidden effect behind “sound”. However, by adopting a simple definition of silence as the inability of an individual or group to speak, pronounce or emit sounds, we can better understand this phenomenon.

In the present research, we consider silence as a sign that appears visually or audibly, whether in works of art or in forms of obedient and protesting public performance. In our study, we will draw on political theory to try to understand the nature of the political system in Syria and its relationship to everyday forms of performance and production. We will also explore silence in different spaces, drawing on the approach of necropolitics<sup>14</sup>, as well as performative theory and elements of performance art.

We will use artistic and literary works based on the factographic approach developed by French researcher Marie-Jeanne Zenetti in 2011. In her doctoral thesis, published in book form in 2014, Zenetti used a number of Soviet and French novels to develop an understanding of how reality is described in literary works. We will adopt this approach in the novels we read and use throughout the present research, namely Fawaz Haddad’s “*Al Suriyun Al’ Aeda’*”<sup>15</sup>, Rosa Yassin al-Hassan’s “*Alladhina Masahom Al Seher*”<sup>16</sup>, and Manhal Al-Sarraj’s *Assy Al Dam*<sup>17</sup>.

We can’t say that the previous novels are factographic, because they don’t suggest it, but they do show signs of reality similar to what Zenetti mentioned. References to the weather on certain days, places and scenes can be compared to news and social media messages. Here factography appears as an attempt to establish a relationship with reality through two techniques: “notation, which concerns the formulation and writing down of observable facts and

---

14- AGAMBEN Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Le Pouvoir Souverain Et La Vie Nue*, trans. Raiola Marilène, 1st ed., Paris, Seuil, 1997, 273 p. ; MBEMBE Achille, «Nécropolitique», *op. cit.*

15- HADDAD Fawaz, *Al Suriyun Al’ Aeda’* (The Syrian Enemies), I1. Beirut, Riad Al Rais, 2014.

16- YASSIN AL-HASSAN Rosa, *Those Touched by Magic (Alladhina Masahom Al Seher)*. Beirut, Manshurat al-Jamal, 2016.

17- AL-SARRAJ Manhal, *Assy Al Dam (Blood Defiant)*, 1st ed. Beirut, Lebanon, Dar Al-Adab, 2012.

transcription, based on the collection of statements previously heard or read before being copied. “<sup>18</sup> For example, in *Alladhina Masahom Al Seher*, we read: “I wanted to ask him to remove the Ajami carpet from the entrance, it always gets wet with rain, and this month of December 2011 is very generous with rain, but he distracted me with his car, the rear window of his car...”<sup>19</sup> A simple internet search reveals that the literary description corresponds to the weather during the revolution, and that the technique of “notation” appears here in relation to the characteristics of the place and its references.

It is important to consider the role of archives in factography, as they are the primary material for it. In the Syrian case, however, such archives do not exist or are inaccessible. As a result, novels have what is known as the effect of reality. By working on the testimonies of the detainees and comparing them with the novel *Al Suriyun Al' Aeda'*<sup>20</sup>, we were able to explore some of the moments of silence, as they have the effect of reality according to Roland Barthes' terminology.

The use of novels and their effect on reality relate to the relationship between art and reality, especially in the context of factography, which relies on the position and active engagement of the reader to produce its effect. Zenetti draws on the concepts of the “Apparatus,” as developed by Foucault and Agamben, and the “Model Reader”, as suggested by Umberto Eco, to emphasize that factographic reading involves “an interaction between a reading process and knowledge of the non-literary world.”<sup>21</sup>

By performance we don't just mean artistic performance, but also political performance and performance in everyday life (Michel de Certeau, Erving Goffman, etc.). At the same time, we use performance here as a tool of self-representation, as we draw on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, where the self is publicly “embodied” through a set of movements, actions, and sounds that are controlled by a public scenario. In the Syrian case, this scenario is characterized by a particular emphasis on obedience, which will be explored in more detail in the research.

We used the concept of “mana,” derived from anthropological studies of European Atlantic colonies, to refer to the spread of fear and terror and its relationship to political power. The ambiguity of this concept and the multiplicity of its uses make it a means of linking aesthetics, political theory, power, everyday performance, and religious phenomena. The first religious meaning of the term, written in 1877, indicates that it “refers to the invisible...and as far as practice

18- ZENETTI Marie-Jeanne, *Factographies. L'enregistrement littéraire à l'époque contemporaine*, 1st ed. Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2014, p. 35.

19- YASSIN AL-HASSAN Rosa, *Those Touched by Magic (Alladhina Masahom Al Seher)*, Beirut, Manshurat al-Jamal, 2016, P60

20- HADDAD Fawaz, *op. cit.*

21- ZENETTI Marie-Jeanne, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

goes, in the use of means of getting this power turned to their own benefit.”<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, it refers to “infinity: a name for a force that transcends all names and exceeds all forces.”<sup>23</sup> and refers to “that which is beyond the ordinary power of men, outside the common processes of nature.”<sup>24</sup>. Émile Durkheim later mentioned this term in the context of totemism as “it is the anonymous force at the basis of the cult, but incarnated in an individual whose personality it espouses; it is *mana* individualized”<sup>25</sup>. Lévi-Strauss cleared up some of the controversy surrounding *mana* by asserting that it is “the conscious expression of a semantic function, whose role is to enable symbolic thinking to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it”<sup>26</sup>. It expresses the individual and the universal, power and weakness, and maintains partially coherent structures by transcending them. According to Lévi-Strauss, it is a sign without meaning, which can be present in everything, contains relations to everything, and can be harvested or produced.

We will see how *mana* is used daily in Honolulu, on the island of Hawaii, as a means of reclaiming a national identity, a brand, a political slogan, an inner feeling and an energy shared by all. It appears as such in contemporary usage; freed from its religious past, it acquires an authority and meanings associated with national identity and sovereignty. Interestingly, this frame does not belong to its original use or history. One of its fictional meanings is “a universal life force and can be used to heal. It can also be used for more mundane tasks like sharpening razor blades”<sup>27</sup>. In the research paper “The State of Mana, the Mana of the State,” the relationship between *mana* and sovereignty is examined from a contemporary perspective, with a commentary on its history. There is no strong evidence that *mana* was regularly expressed in this speech community, nor does it appear to have been particularly ambiguous in its application to certain kinds of objects (things, persons, actions)”<sup>28</sup>. The researcher goes on to point out its “everydayness” and its use in various fields, especially in relation to the self and its expression. *Mana* became something that affects everyone without its exact meaning being clear. Agamben offers a contemporary interpretation that liberates *mana* from its ambiguity in relation to the taboo and the absence of meaning that it carries; he described it as “the suspension of law freed a force or a mystical element, a sort of legal *mana* that both the ruling power and its adversaries, the constituted power as well as the constituent power, seek to

---

22- TOMLINSON Matt, P KĀWIKĀ TENGAN, Ty, *New Mana: Transformations of a classic concept in Pacific languages and cultures*, 1st ed. Canberra, Australia, Anu Press, 2016, p. 2.

23- *Ibid.*, p. 3.

24- *Ibid.*, p. 2

25- DURKHEIM Émile, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. by Karen E. Fields, New York, The Free Press, 1995, p. 267.

26- LÉVI-STRAUSS Claude, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, In *Structural Anthropology*, originally published 1950, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 63.

27- TOMLINSON Matt, P KĀWIKĀ TENGAN, Ty, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

28- MAWYER Alexander, *The state of mana, the mana of the state. New Mana: Transformations of a Classic Concept in Pacific Languages and Cultures*, 2016, p. 208.

appropriate”<sup>29</sup>.

This reading imbues mana with meanings that liberate it from the religious and metaphysical, and gives it the form of a “command system [...] that compels others to follow an everyday command from a singular individual.”<sup>30</sup> Previous conceptions of mana, with their religious and political baggage, make it more like an energy that spreads through the air, regulating the behavior of individuals in the absence of law. You can lose it and lose your life, or gain it and keep it. In the Syrian context, mana refers to eternity and the ability of the “master” and his men to dismantle bodies and kill them supernaturally. The resulting effects of the mana of fear (through obedience and silence in our case) save the individual and maintains his continuity. However, losing or wasting it can threaten lives, especially since it is invisible and unspoken, pumped through images, names and individuals. Silence is a sign of mana’s existence, as it forces the individual not to laugh in order not to lose his mana.

It is also important to note that we used margins to explain the theories and their adaptation to the Syrian context. In order for the margins to serve as theories, we didn’t place them in the body of the text. This was done to avoid the inclusion of details that might disrupt the flow of the reading. Given the scarcity of archives and theoretical approaches in Syria, we provided tools and explanations in the margins, in order to define the theoretical space and its relationship to the humanities and social sciences.

The first section, entitled “Silence in Public Space” deals with forms of silence in public space and their political and exceptional characteristics in Syria under the emergency law and the politics of exception. We will start with the phrase “Shut up!” where silence is considered a sign of discipline in the public space. We will use Louis Althusser’s famous concept of “interpellation”, in which the citizen becomes a suspect. We will apply it to the Syrian case in the phrase “Shut up!” as an order with performative value that uses silence as a method of preventing speech, and a sign of anticipated and provoked violence. This phrase, when said by a person with power, such as a security officer, a soldier, etc., hides behind it the signs of policies of exclusion (arbitrary detention, prevention of self-defense, creation of false accusations, conviction...). The subject/individual remains silent throughout this process, and when he speaks, his voice is not heard.

We will then move on to “Transformations of the Officer of Silence: Survivors Facing the Invisible Power of Fear”. We’ll explore the concept of the “officer of silence” in literary and artistic works. The latter prevents the recovery of the past

---

29- AGAMBEN Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Le Pouvoir Souverain Et La Vie Nue*, trans. Raiola Marilène, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Paris, Seuil, 1997, p. 210.

30- MAWYER Alexander, The state of mana, the mana of the state. *New Mana: Transformations of a Classic Concept in Pacific Languages and Cultures*, op. cit., p. 230.

and leaves victims in a state of silence. This is what we notice in the testimonies we read, whether about the Hama massacre (Manhal Al-Sarraj's novels deal with this silence and the prevention of repetition) or the history of political detention (X-ADRA, Y-SAIDNAY plays in A: Ramzi Choukair's clude the silence of the detainees after their release). They all deal with stories that were "forbidden" from public circulation and remained in the space of silence. We will continue with "Jokes and the Crime of Listening" to explore the relationship between silence, laughter and jokes. This delicate historical relationship appears in novels and stories as a life-threatening method in the Syrian case. Political jokes in Syria have a history that contains many paradoxes; for example, laughing at them can lead to death, while silence can lead to accusations of complicity. Therefore, it is crucial for individuals to understand their role and status and to know when to laugh and when to be silent.

In the second section, we will try to examine the concept of silence in the context of a vital exception, specifically in the context of prisons or security branches. This will be done according to the theoretical framework of Giorgio Agamben. In these spaces, the individual is stripped of his status as a citizen and becomes an insignificant life, that is, a life that can be taken without committing a crime. Silence is a pervasive phenomenon in these spaces, and we will explore its various manifestations through a series of testimonies and published texts. First, we'll look at the terrible silence and how silence is linked to the violence inflicted on people's bodies. We will try to define the term "sonic detective" used by the artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan in his sound works to refer to the relationship between guards and prisoners in Sednaya prison, and the role of this "guard" in torturing prisoners. We will then discuss "Silence and Confession," the role and form of silence in the interrogation rooms of the security services, its relationship to confession in language and text, and how it is used by prisoners on the one hand and "interrogators" on the other. In "Silence and Play", we will discuss the role of silence in a play performed in the Syrian Criminal Security Branch, and see how silence played a dual role, both as an element of the play and as a means of avoiding the attention of the guards.

In the third section: "Silence in Obedience and Protests in the Capital", we will discuss the timing of the revolution and the different forms of protest. We'll also explain how silence is used in the "dangerous" space or field where the "space of exception" can be performatively activated through the bodies of protesters moving as a mass deserving to be killed and shot directly. We will do so by drawing on photos, recordings and studies that deal with public demonstrations in the capital Damascus. We will also discuss "silence as a sign of political difference". We will address the silence of the spectators, or the silence of those surrounding the protest space, which is shown in some of the footage. Silence in this case is a sign of difference from the protest space that the demonstrators form with their bodies. It also represents a political sign that says: "Those who

have voices are enemies, we who are silent are friends”. We will use the word “enemy” to refer to the official propaganda and the fact that these people deserve to be killed by the army and the police.

We will conclude with a question asked many times since 2011: “When will Farouk al-Sharaa defect?”. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s quotation on Heidegger’s “How to Avoid Speaking”<sup>31</sup>, we will try to understand the reasons for the silence in the public space of the revolution, the hopes set on certain personalities, and we will try to explain this silence.

## Section One: Silence in Public Space

### *“Shut up!”: Silence as a Sign of Discipline in the Public Space*

We don’t know whether the classic definition of public space applies in the case of “Assad’s Syria”, particularly given the predominance of emergency law in the country. In Syria, traditional activities in public space, such as the gathering of individuals, free political discussion, and the exchange of opinions, are practiced in private spaces and closed forums, namely houses<sup>32</sup>. However, public spaces such as cafes and squares are highly dangerous due to the legal restrictions on holding sit-ins during the state of emergency and the prevalence of a “carceral society<sup>33</sup>”.

Moreover, public space is subject to surveillance, whether by the authority or by the citizens themselves, since “everyone” is suspicious of “everyone”, and discipline in public space is subject to laws and norms generated by the collective. Discipline in public space is also subject to the system of obedience, which develops along two axes: the first, according to Slavoj Žižek, is as follows: “The only real obedience, then, is an ‘external’ one: obedience out of conviction

---

31- DERRIDA Jacques, *De l’esprit Heidegger et la question*, 1st ed. Paris, Galilée, 1987, p. 12

32- The meetings of the Riad Seif Forum, or Forum for Democratic Dialogue, were held in Riad Seif’s living room, in his house; the Jamal al-Atassi Forum was held in the garden of his house, in Dummar, Damascus. Without going into details, the houses were private spaces, not open to the public.

33- The term, coined by Michel Foucault, refers to each individual’s ability to regulate his behavior out of fear of punishment: the judge, the employee, the worker, adopt norms of obedience, and “each must at some point subordinate his body, his movement, his behavior, his skill and his performance to public norms” (FOUCAULT Michel, “Il faut défendre la société”, *Cours au Collège de France. (1975-1976)*, 2001, Le Facault Electronique, p. 311). However, the Foucauldian terminology (after the French philosopher Michel Foucault) is not sufficient to analyze the nature of relations in Syria, so we borrow from Achille Mbembe the term “the state of enmity”, which is based on the existence of an unidentifiable internal enemy, a moving enemy without a clear form, which threatens life and its way of life in a kind of “silent civil war” (MBEMBE Achille, *Politiques de l’inimitié*, op. cit., p. 80), the existence of enemies requires their extermination, for a reason that Mbembe describes with the word “contagion” (MBEMBE Achille, *Politiques de l’inimitié*, op. cit., p. 72), as if the enemy is everywhere and can infect us within the national body, so that everyone is responsible for keeping an eye on him and practicing politics in its simplest sense (distinguishing enemies and friends) according to Carl Schmitt.



is not real obedience because it is already ‘mediated’ through our subjectivity”<sup>34</sup>; in other words, obedience, whether a mask or a disguise, cannot be the result of conviction, it is a way of producing the self and defining its relationship to authority.

The second axis is linked to social performance, and here we refer to the concept of the cynical actor introduced by the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman. “When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical”<sup>35</sup>. Obedience thus appears here as a mask worn by the individual, or a non-self-representative performance that the individual embodies in the case of Syria to protect himself from suspicion. One of the characteristics of this mask is silence: not voting for someone, or saying anything, that might arouse suspicion.

We face a conceptual challenge here, since we cannot detect the silence of the obedient. In other words, we can detect the external characteristics of a silent performance without being able to determine how seriously it represents the individual, especially since silence does not lead to group homogenization, but rather hides groups whose affiliation we don’t know. Given the collapse of the system and its associated signs in Syria, the concept of the obedient citizen can be either a satirical performance to protect life or, more precisely, a mask worn by an intelligence agent to eavesdrop and monitor. Performance in public space becomes a mask of obedience. However, the “inner obedience” of the individual cannot be detected or recognized in public space.

In this context, we can explain one of the techniques of “silencing”. We can describe the moments when the authority of the ideological apparatus of the state (police and security in a space governed by emergency laws) over citizens and their voices is revealed, the moment when the power and authority of the security apparatus over citizens is revealed, and the role of this power in the silencing process. In this case, we refer to the famous example of Louis Althusser’s arrest. Althusser describes an imaginary situation in which the individual becomes an object of sovereignty in a public space. This is represented by a policeman saying to someone in the street: “Hey”<sup>36</sup>, you there!”<sup>37</sup>, to which the passer-by responds by voluntarily turning towards the policeman.

Althusser’s model reveals many things: first of all, it reveals the transformation of the individual from a citizen to a direct subject of sovereignty and its representatives, because the individual obeys the call as he thinks he is the

---

34- ŽIŽEK Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of ideology*, 1st ed. London, Verso Books, 1989, p. 35.

35- GOFFMAN Erving, *The presentation of self in everyday life*, 1st ed. New York, Anchor Books, 1959, p. 229.

36- Althusser uses the phrase “hé, vous, là-bas! Here we’ve chosen the word “hey”, and beyond the lexical meaning, we assume that “hey” is the noun of an imperative verb that indicates and designates “stop”.

37- ALTHUSSER Louis, « Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’État », *La Pensée*, Juin 1970, no 151, p. 22.

intended recipient. The call does not specify the recipient, but is made publicly, and the response to the call, according to Althusser himself, does not imply an “inner sense of guilt”<sup>38</sup>. He later refers to this “scene” and tries to explain it as “actors performing on a stage”<sup>39</sup>. Being arrested on it leads individuals to “embody their roles within the dominant ideology”<sup>40</sup>

Judith Butler commented on this scene, and emphasized the performative aspect of the call and the way in which the caller responds to it. She noted that the response, namely the caller’s stopping in the street and turning back to the policeman, does not mean that he immediately becomes a “subject”. The caller’s absence of response in Althusser’s model/scene does not confirm the presence of the individual and postulates an imaginary “Here I am!”<sup>41</sup>. Butler noted that this position/response does not reflect an internal sense of guilt or blame, nor does it fully account for the impact of ideology. Rather, it represents a moment when the individual is confronted with a call to which he responds, and his response “Here I am!” is an attempt to identify himself in some way, to acknowledge his individuality rather than to admit guilt.

The previously imagined scenario<sup>42</sup> does not reflect arrest under necropolitics, especially since security men in Syria are immune from the law, i.e.: their offenses are not considered crimes and they are not held accountable for them. Furthermore, because of the emergency law, all citizens are vulnerable to being stripped of their rights the moment they are arrested anywhere. Therefore, we propose the following scenario<sup>43</sup> in a public space where people play their “roles” governed by obedience and control.

F is driving his car down the street, in front of him is a car driven by a stranger, let’s call him M. F wants to overtake M. Like any driver, F accelerates in his car and overtakes M, but M accelerates again, cuts F off, gets out of his car and approaches F’s window. F asks: “What’s going on? Who are you?”, M replies, “Shut up!”, pulls out his gun and shoots F, killing him. M gets back in his car and drives on.

In the previous scene, F does not know what is going on, there is no call to respond, he is not suspected or accused (he has not broken his obedience) of being arrested, he is driving his car. In other scenarios he is walking down the

---

38- *Ibid.*

39- *Ibid.*

40- *Ibid.*

41- BUTLER Judith, “Conscience doth make subjects of us all.” *Yale French Studies*, 1995, no 88, p. 2.

42- There is a similar story to this incident that does not end in murder, but rather a security officer and a young man from Hama swearing after the Hama massacre following an argument in the street, which we read about in the novel *Blood Defiant* by Manhal Al-Sarraj (AL-SARRAJ Manhal, *op. cit.*).

43- There are many versions of this story, some where the innocent driver is beaten, some where he is arrested, and some where he is killed. There is no real documentation of this story, but it is part of what circulates among Syrians about the power of the ruling family and any security man.



street. M has exceptional powers such as carrying weapons, arresting people, detaining, torturing, and killing: In this case, M chose to arrest F by force rather than by sound, and when F tried to present himself, he was prevented from making any “sound” and told, “Shut up! “Don’t make any noise, don’t talk! Then he was killed. F doesn’t know what he did wrong, who stopped him, how he broke his obedience, and above all, M was not held responsible afterwards.

The performative value attributed by Althusser to the sentence “Hey, you there!” is associated with the policeman and his powers. It is a phrase that has a specific meaning in the context of the world and leaves an impact. It turns an individual into a subject of suspicion. In Butler’s digression, the response “Here I am!” represents a rejection of the policeman’s process and a response that asserts the individual’s identity as a citizen. This response indicates that the individual answered the call not because he felt inwardly accused, but because he heard it.

All these characteristics disappear in the Syrian case. The process of transformation into a subject took place in M’s mind, while F is completely unconscious. More importantly, F’s attempt to present himself, or at least to find out what’s going on, and then to know who arrested him, was met with the words “Shut up!”, which means: keep quiet, no matter what you’ve done, the exceptional authority accuses you and holds you responsible.

The scene above shows the exceptional situation in Syria. The security system<sup>44</sup> has unlimited powers and is able to turn individuals outside the security branch into subjects of direct violence, and this is where the value of “Shut up” comes in. It silences not only the voice of the accused, but also that of his entourage and witnesses- if any. No one can provide an official confirmation of the incident, which is passed on by word of mouth. The performative value of the phrase “Shut up!” reveals that whoever gave the order is protected by the same silence and the obedience associated with it.

---

44- In this context, we refer to the system of the “privileged state,” as illustrated by Frankel’s controversial assertion that the “security system” in Syria is highly complex, with powers that remain difficult to define precisely. There have been many attempts to construct its hierarchy, as Anwar Raslan’s testimony to the Koblenz court shows, according to which within one “branch” there are several active forces from several other branches, we don’t know exactly how tasks are distributed within them, nor the exact hierarchy of orders; you can read the text of the testimony to trace this hierarchy.

The scenario imagined above and the moment of the shooting create what engineer and academic Eyal Weizman calls a “temporal state of exception”<sup>45</sup>. For just a few seconds, the space of exception is activated, in which the individual passes from the status of citizen to that of “bare life,”<sup>46</sup> exposed to direct violence and the threat of death without his killer being prosecuted or criminalized. It’s also noteworthy that these seconds, and F’s supposed questions: “What happened? Who are you?” remained unanswered. F lost all his rights as a citizen; he didn’t know who arrested him, he was prevented from presenting himself, he didn’t know what he was accused of, he was arbitrarily arrested and then killed without knowing what he had done.

The preceding characteristics of F apply to the bare life situation created by the phrase “Shut up!”. He was silenced, didn’t speak and didn’t even exercise his right to present himself: he didn’t reply “Here I am!” and didn’t have time to ask: “What’s going on?”

The above shows that silence is a component of the performance of obedience, which is associated with public performance, and with arbitrariness and the ability to transform public space, or its areas, into a “camp”, in Agamben’s terminology, in which bare life is produced. This was evident in the demonstrations that erupted after 2011. A series of public actions (rallies, chants, etc.) transformed the space occupied by individuals into a space in which all those present could be killed and transformed into bare life. That is, a camp produced performatively, as opposed to the traditional approach proposed by Agamben, who sees the camp as a specialized geographical space hidden from the public, in which the individual becomes an “insignificant life”, and as opposed to Yassin Al -Haj Saleh’s approach associated with “Assad’s torture camps”. The concentration

45- Weizman refers to this temporary state when he discusses the case of the American policeman who shot hairdresser Harith Augustus in 2018 following a routine arrest, the decision to shoot having been made in milliseconds that were not enough to determine his “crime” or supposed “danger”. In his book *The Sultanic State*, published in 2020, Yassin al-Haj Saleh points out that Syria is experiencing two states of exception: The first is represented by “the state of emergency and martial law imposed on the country.... It has been accompanied by a restriction on the political freedoms of all Syrians and has prevented them from participating in the public affairs of their country through specific channels decided and controlled by the authorities.” (AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *The Modern Sultan*, 2020, p. 303). The second is exemplified by the existence of several personal status laws based on the perception of the population as groups defined by their religious affiliation. These laws do not recognize the population as citizens of the country, but rather as followers of particular religions. In addition, they do not recognize the Syrian identity of individuals, but rather categorize them as Muslims, Christians, or Jews. Furthermore, sectarian divisions within these religious groups may lead to the enactment of laws specific to their respective sects. (AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *The Modern Sultan*, op. cit., p. 304; FULLER, Matthew, WEIZMAN Eyal, op. cit., p. 101).

46- The term “bare life” was coined by the Italian Giorgio Agamben: it is a political categorization of individuals imposed by the sovereignty that controls life and death: “a life not worth living.” (AGAMBEN Giorgio, op. cit., p. 133). This classification is generally applied to inmates of Nazi concentration camps, local prisoners in colonies, and slaves on ships crossing the Atlantic. In Syria, this classification appears in the security branch, where the detainees are “enemies” who deserve to die in a demonstration, as we’ll see later.

of prisoners in them can lead to their immediate or subsequent death”<sup>47</sup>. It’s true that these were spaces intended for the production of power and the annihilation of “enemies” in the political sense, but they remained non-public and closed, even during the revolution. However, the performative space for the production of bare life is public, and there are those who witnessed its existence. Roles within it are produced according to the performance and the individual’s location (inside or outside the demonstration).

The sentence “Shut up!” has a political value because it presents silence and can transform the individual into a bare life without him knowing why. The fact that he doesn’t know what he’s accused of is linked to the generalization of (everyone’s) guilt. This inner sense of guilt among individuals is based on the fact that they are all involved and interact with the authority that criminalizes them and disrupts their lives if they don’t play by the rules of the game within the legal-political structure, whether it’s bribery, violations, or working as informers and snitches. This means that silence is also a way to avoid arbitrary criminalization, to protect one’s life, and to conduct affairs that are supervised by the authority.

The question “Where am I?” that F may have asked refers to a place. In this case, the performative value of the phrase “Shut up!” activates the “space of exception. It’s a place similar to a concentration camp, arbitrarily determined, where a person, without knowing why, is subjected to the most severe violence. The place to which this question refers is therefore the space of the camp, which is activated for a temporary period. The silent person finds himself there, because he didn’t have time to speak, was killed as a “bare life” or an “enemy”. However, one of the characteristics of this silence is that it is sympathetic, the witnesses to the previous crime themselves remain silent and no crime was recorded against anyone. It’s as if the murder took place in the torture camp, where no one is a criminal and the witnesses are potentially dead.

#### Transformations of the Officer of Silence: Survivors Facing the Invisible Power of Fear

In literary works devoted to the massacre committed by the Syrian regime in Hama, in 1982, we read the following: “Every newly created park is a mass grave, every piece of land surveyed and leveled for a new project is a mass grave, and the aim is to bury facts and rights.”<sup>48</sup>. This passage shows the practices of annihilation of bodies and memory used by the Syrian regime to hide traces and testimonies of what happened in Hama.

---

47- AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *Horror and its Representation - Deliberations on the Ruined Form of Syria and its Difficult Formation*. 2021, p. 28.

48- AL-SARRAJ Manhal, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

The annihilation of memory here is aimed at physical bodies, the ground and the collective consciousness, and is intended to control the relationship of witnesses and survivors to this “event”. The experience of the massacre is formative, through which the regime controls people’s stories and its own, rendering “the experiences of life in Hama voiceless and suppressed”<sup>49</sup>. This means that the form in which events are recovered, whether through personal testimony or various narrative methods, is determined by the power of the regime and the individual’s relationship to the event and to that regime, which threatens the formation of the self and its relationship to authority and others.

This also applies to other “massacres” committed by the Syrian regime: the Tadmur prison massacre (1980), the Sednaya prison massacre (2008), as techniques to annihilate bodies, and discipline those “on the outside”. Those who survive become an example, all the more so because they provide an image of the nature of the Syrian regime’s relations with its enemies and opponents. Here, killing is not punitive or even vengeful; it is destructive and exterminatory, with a view to enslaving those who are not killed and to the immortality of the killers.<sup>50</sup>

The processes of annihilation and erasure are aimed at preventing recovery. Talking about what happened before, mourning, testimony, and the right to reparations, are all denied to survivors, both materially and symbolically. This translates into the erasure of the event/massacre and the political efficacy of immortalizing the killers and preventing the survivors from making their voices heard. This refers to Al -Haj Saleh’s term “through time”, i.e. the pursuit of destruction, prevention and silence through time, as if what happened had never happened.

Prevention over time, as part of the policy of annihilating memory, uses “silence” as a force that transforms massacre<sup>51</sup> into an ongoing effort in history and a

---

49- ISMAIL Salwa, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

50- AL- HAJ SALEH Yassin, A state of extermination, not a dictatorship, *Jumhuriya* [Online], April 2018, [Accessed 17 October 2024]. Available at: <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2018/04/30/%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9-%d8%a5%d8%a8%d8%a7%d8%af%d8%a9%d8%8c-%d9%88%d9%84%d9%8a%d8%b3-%d9%86%d8%b8%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%af%d9%83%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a/>

51- Yassin Al -Haj Saleh proposes an approach to the Syrian regime as a genocidal state and relates it to the concept of eternity. He says: “The etymological proximity between eternity and annihilation justifies the idea that eternity cannot be achieved without annihilation, that is, without the murder, torture and humiliation of the population on a massive scale, which is effectively proven by the actions of the Assad regime during the years of the father and the son. In the case of the father, tens of thousands of people were killed, tens of thousands were arrested and tortured, and thousands were imprisoned for two decades in Tadmur prison, in order to keep those who were not imprisoned subservient for a long time”. He adds further: “As Syria’s destruction continued in the post-revolutionary years, the space of exception became generalized to the country. When the camp is an entire country, the entire world becomes the country surrounding the camp.” (AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *A State of Annihilation, Not a Dictatorship*, *op. cit.*, 2018).

technique of governance. “to approach Massacres in Syria as expressions of the civil war regim ...(enacts) a division of the population into “us” and “them”<sup>52</sup>; that is, we are “friends” and they are “enemies,” and the silence of the enemies is maintained at the expense of the official history of the friends, which is sanctioned and framed.

Before addressing the subject of silence, it is important to mention that all research on the Hama massacre, including its aftermath and the efforts of researchers to collect primary material, is based either on personal testimony, such as interviews conducted by researchers or later by witnesses and survivors at different times, or on narrative. Narrative is the largest and most pervasive corpus that creates a memorial space for the massacre, whether at the collective level (descriptions of the devastation, slaughter, massacres, etc.) or at the individual level (descriptions of the subjective suffering of survivors or victims and their inquiries about the event). Remarkably, naturalization (in novels)<sup>53</sup> opens the door to imagination, requiring a double effort to read the novel’s aesthetic and its “factographic<sup>54</sup>” elements. This makes the massacre an inspiration for stories, not just an under-documented event.

Other massacres and extreme forms of violence suffered by political prisoners are also mentioned in novels. For example, the 2008 novel *Al Qawqa* (The Shell)<sup>55</sup> carries a sub-naturalization that is (Diary of a Voyeur), and Ratib Shaabu’s book *Ma Wara’ Hadhih Al Judran* (Beyond These Walls), published by Dar al-Adab in 2015, has two naturalizations: “novel” on the outside cover and “biography” on the inside cover, and the same goes for other titles such as Heba al-Dabbagh’s *Khams Daqayiq Wahasba! Tisi’ Sanawat fi Al Sujun Al Suria* (Just Five Minutes! Nine Years in Syrian Prisons), *Unshudat Al Bard Walhuriya* (A Song of Cold and Freedom) by Samir Kanou, and *Ajniha Fi Al Zinzana* (Wings in the Cell) by Mufid Najm.

In the preceding context, the reference to the massacre in the literary text, and the analysis of the way in which the regime uses silence to annihilate memory, shows that silence appears on two levels: the first is a material effort to undermine and conceal the traces of the massacre (hiding prisoners,

---

52- ISMAIL Salwa, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

53- What’s remarkable about the testimonies of the Hama massacre is that they are novels, like Manhal Al-Sarraj’s books. Even Abdullah Al-Dahamsha’s ideologically charged book “The Virgin of Hama”, written in 1982, contains the following statement: “Note: 95% of this novel is based on reality, and 5% comes from the author’s imagination to make it a literary novel”.

54- In 2011, French researcher Marie-Jean Zenetti developed the “factography” approach in her doctoral thesis, published in book form in 2014, and drew on a number of Soviet and French novels to develop an understanding of the methods of recording reality in a literary work, as we mentioned in the introduction. We do not assume that Al-Sarraj’s novels or the novels that deal with Hama are factographic, but they have the characteristics of the documentary effect, of the impression of reality and its recording.

55- KHALIFA Mustafa, *Al Qawqa* (The Shell), 1st ed. Damascus, Dar Al Adab, 2008.

preventing mourning for the dead, changing the geography of the city, etc.), the second level is shown through an effort practiced on a daily level to prevent “remembering”. We won’t go into detail about the first level because we don’t have enough information and evidence about it. The second level is constantly present in the narratives that deal with the Hama massacre and in the stories of the political detainees. In these narratives, we encounter a recurring model that can be called the “officer of silence,” who is physically responsible for preventing sound from leaving the throat of the survivor or witness by using direct violence against those who speak.

The officer of silence has no specific appearance, he acquires his effectiveness and authority either through the fear felt by witnesses, or through complicity with the authority and membership of its official narrative. These simplified definitions are not enough to describe the police officer, but an analysis of his impact shows that he exercises two rhetorical functions on the voice: the first is to deny witnesses/victims the right to tell their story or even to say what they have witnessed, and the second is to force individuals to adopt narratives of which they are not necessarily convinced.

The testimony of Khaled al-Khani, a survivor of the Hama massacre, clearly shows the role of the officer of silence. He recounts in Sam Dagher’s book *Al Asad aw Nahriq Al-Balad*<sup>56</sup> how party officials came to school one day when he was a high school student and asked him his name and his father’s name, and then his father’s profession. He answered: “My father was killed during the conflict; he was killed by the army”<sup>57</sup>. Sam Dagher goes on to quote al-Khani in his book, “The five party officials took off their “jackets” and threw him to the ground, beating and slapping him”<sup>58</sup>.

Al-Khani identifies this (these) person(s) as party official(s). We know nothing else about them, but what is interesting is that they exercise an arbitrary power of direct reprimand, and more importantly, it reveals who is in charge of enforcing silence.

The officer of silence reappears in the form of a “they”, a group that cannot be precisely defined, through which the second function of the agent of silence is expressed: he does not impose silence, but elicits a ready-made discourse that must be said. In Manhal Al-Sarraj’s novel *Assy Al Dam*<sup>59</sup>, in the chapter immediately following the one describing “the events in Hama,” we read how “the other residents of the city were forced (to participate in the mass march)

56- DAGHER Sam, *Assad or we burn the country: how one family's lust for power destroyed Syria*, 1st ed. London, Hachette, 2019.

57- *Ibid.*, p. 242.

58- *Ibid.*

59- AL-SARRAJ Manhal, *op. cit.*



to greet the president, show their loyalty to him, and pray for his long life...". Mokhlas (one of the novel's protagonists) accepted his share like everyone else and participated in the march, carrying his banner..."<sup>60</sup>.

Behind this passive form is a person or group who imposes a policy of silence on individuals. He imposes the mobilization of crowds, forcing them to repeat slogans or say something that doesn't correspond to what they've witnessed. This reflects the role of silence in the production of obedience as a public performance. What is normal and happens every day takes place on a "stage" where obedience and silence are practiced, and anyone who breaks this performance is subject to punishment and reprimand; in other words, this silence is concerted / enforced by everyone. This contradiction between the living and the official representation on the screen is described by Manhal al-Sarraj through the heroine Ghada, who "watches TV programs in the evening and feels hatred for all Syrian celebrities, for all those who realized their dreams and desires under this regime, and even for all those who enjoy a normal life.... For her, they are all responsible for the daily torment they live.... Broadcasters and anchors, advertisers, managers, officials and their children, actors and singers..."<sup>61</sup>.

Television narratives that represent the official and legalized version of events serve to exemplify the second role of the officer of silence. He is the censor of stories and of what can be said. The fear of arbitrary authority allows for controlling what is said and what is not said, as the consolidation of official story<sup>62</sup> occurs not only at the popular level but also at the official level within cultural products<sup>63</sup>.

We won't discuss the psychological effects of keeping silent about the terrible memory, but we will talk about the techniques used to prevent the recovery of memory. We'll be talking about the officer of silence, who, as we've said, fulfils two rhetorical functions. It's worth noting that the effect of this embodied silence, whether a member of the authority or of a close circle of the survivor/witness, goes beyond the moment of the massacre and includes other forms of violence, which becomes more evident when we talk about political prisoners. After the experience of imprisonment, deprivation of rights, and release, the

---

60- *Ibid.*, p. 178.

61- *Ibid.*, p. 211.

62- In her book *Shooting a Revolution*, Donatella Della Ratta discusses the so-called "whisper strategy" that controls what is broadcast on state television. It is "a mechanism of communication through which parties discuss and agree on issues that deserve to prevail in media platforms, it is a mode of communication between cultural producers and political power... Through it, both parties express their needs and the issues that should appear in the media.... Whispers are not vertical orders that move from the top to the bottom of the pyramid. Producers of culture also whisper to power with the same force". (DELLA RATTA Donatella, *op. cit.*, p. 42)

63- We use the term cultural products in a broad sense, a term borrowed from critical theory that generally refers to products in a capitalist context, and to the making of their very aesthetics that contribute to a culture of labor, not blind obedience as in the case of Syria.

next step for ex-prisoners is to recover or talk about what happened. This is what we learn from the testimonies of those who were released and remained in Syria. Their silence, fear and psychological trauma prevented them from speaking about what they experienced. In the play “Y-SAIDNAYA”<sup>64</sup>, Syrian director Ramzi Choukair mentions the testimony of Hind, a former inmate of Sednaya prison who witnessed the killings in 2008.

“Hind: 2008 is almost 20 years since I was released from prison. / Like all Syrian political prisoners, we could not say what happened to us, and most of us were deprived of our civil rights. / Few people would come and greet you, because visiting someone coming out of prison could expose you to prosecution and imprisonment for sympathizing with the prisoner. / Even if you want to tell what happened to you, no one has the courage to listen. / Many people like me spent dozens of years in prison, and their lives changed after they were released. / Some never left their homes, some went mad, and I know one who committed suicide shortly after his release”<sup>65</sup>.

What is remarkable about this model is the transformation of the survivors/ former prisoners into officers of silence. Those around them refrain from questioning and ignore the situation in which they find them. They represent the fate that awaits those who speak and remember. In this context, silence can be seen as a contagion whose symptoms appear as soon as the silent subject is approached. This is especially true since listening can lead to arbitrary guilt and ultimately to the same fate as that of the prisoner.

In the previous models, silence appears as a continuation of constituent sovereign violence<sup>66</sup> that aims to reform the status quo and destroy enemies in order to implement the constitution. However, the power of the silence officer subsequently results in formal, performative rhetoric. This practice results in what can be read in the following description of Fawaz Haddad’s novel *Syrian Enemies*: “He knew, and they knew, that everything that was said and the slogans that were exchanged were nothing but a kind of hypocrisy, duplicity and outright lies. The language of state officials and their supporters was always taken seriously, and only dared to be questioned when it became truly serious.”<sup>67</sup>. This is exactly what Lisa Wedeen talks about in her book “*Ambiguous Domination*,” referring to the nature of the language used not only in official

64- Manuscript of the unpublished play Y-SAIDNAYA, used after consulting with the author and director Ramzi Choukair.

65- An unpublished version of the play that was performed in France and Italy between 2020 and 2022. I received a copy of the text after contacting the director, and publish this quote with his permission.

66- Here we distinguish two types of sovereign violence: The first is constituent violence, which operates outside the legal system and whose purpose is to destroy enemies and prepare the ground for the implementation of the constitution. This violence is unaccountable and is exercised in the name of sovereignty itself, as above the legal system. The second is constituted violence, which is practiced within the legal framework and is regulated by penal codes and criminal laws.

67- HADDAD Fawaz, *Al Suriyun Al’ Aeda’ (The Syrian Enemies)*, I. Beirut, Riad Al Rais, 2014, p. 114.



discourse but also in everyday life. The strength of the Assad regime lies in its ability to “compel people to say the ridiculous and avow the absurd”<sup>68</sup>. Silence, as opposed to “speech,” is seen here as having a serious, communicative value, and its effect lies in the performative space<sup>69</sup>; by which we mean survival and belonging to the obedient group.

“Where am I?” appears in testimonies scattered throughout literature and serious texts (testimonies, trials, press interviews, etc.). However, what is striking about this question is the inability to define the post-prison and post-massacre space. A place that cannot be recovered; it physically disappears, as in the city of Hama. We do not have the opportunity to visit it, as in the prison, or to describe in official cultural products. What place does silence refer to after the prison? Yassin Al-Haj Saleh tries to underline this by saying: “Once out [of prison], we feel how much more powerful the system is, and how lost we are in a vast world that it occupies and controls. This is when the former prisoner loses his cohesion and his world is turned upside down. In this fragile state, he finds himself under the skeptical gaze of his relatives and acquaintances, with disappointment and astonishment in their eyes. They wonder whether this confused and disoriented person is worthy or deserves such a long imprisonment”<sup>70</sup>.

This “place” is a space permeated with suspicion and doubt, as evidenced by the phrase “worthy or deserving of such a long imprisonment”. This suggests that the prisoner’s entourage is skeptical of the veracity of his experiences, a sentiment that extends to the place after the massacre. The fate of the people of Hama is blamed on them, as the daughter of an official tells Ghada, the protagonist in *Blood Defiant*: “The state killed the terrorists”<sup>71</sup>.

The above reveals the characteristics of a terrifying place where the officer of silence can assume the role of the policeman, the partygoer, the brother, the passer-by on the street. It is a model that can be adopted out of conviction, cynicism, or fear, perhaps present everywhere. The silent person in this context is the witness, the survivor, the potential listener, and the officer of silence himself. Everyone is forced to talk only about what is official, which brings us back to the main question: “Where am I?” What are the characteristics of this place where the survivor is forced to say what he doesn’t believe, what doesn’t match his testimony? Even in the absence of the Silence Officer, his influence persists, as he

---

68- WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of domination: Politics, rhetoric, and symbols in contemporary Syria*, 1st ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 12.

69- We assume here that the repetition of official history in the face of disbelief - “ironic performance”, “unserious words” - has a performative political value, whereby those who repeat the meaningless words become obedient citizens, acquire a certain immunity from arbitrary violence, and affirm their belonging to the obedient group.

70- AL- HAJ SALEH Yassin, *Billkhalas, ya shabab! 16 a'man fi Al Sujun Al Suria (Salvation, Guys! 16 Years in Syrian Prisons)*, T1. Beirut, Dar Al Saqi, 2012, p. 130.

71- AL-SARRAJ Manhal, *op. cit.*

was always present even before 2011. This silence not only prevents the recovery of memory but also hinders political activism. Survivors and witnesses are exiled because they belong to the place of the massacre or the place of detention. In addition, there's the terror of the silence officer model, who could be anyone.

This place has political characteristics that surround those who remain silent. Giorgio Agamben's concept of the banned can be quoted to understand it more precisely. "He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable"<sup>72</sup>. They have no right to political representation (to vote) or to share their experiences with their peers. The difference is that those who are usually expelled or "banned from the city"<sup>73</sup> and forbidden to enter it. In the Syrian case, they are floating in the city, forbidden to leave it. They are at the mercy of the master at all times, as evidenced by the constant summons and disruption of daily life. This category of no-place is constantly threatened, voiceless. Even those who have heard of it have no voice.

However, being at the edge between the inside and the outside, the disruption of civil rights and silence and its officers reveal a strategy for reintegration into the legal system, the reclaiming of rights, and, most importantly, survival in the midst of violence. This is exemplified by the cynical voice that survivors-witnesses are forced to produce. Its performative value does not depend on belief or disbelief, but rather on its impact on reality<sup>74</sup>. It is a method of attempting to survive danger and reintegrate into the obedient collective. This involves consuming and repeating the official discourse as a politically valid sign that transforms the individual from a former enemy into a potential obedient citizen.

### *The "Joke" and the Crime of "Listening"*

There is a recurring incident in Syria, often mentioned in daily conversations as well as in various literary sources. In this incident, a person makes a political joke or a joke about the president, the sect, or the military in the presence of a group of people. In the end, we discover that it led to his death, because he was later arrested, along with those who were with him, more precisely, those who laughed or interacted with the joke.

Traditional accusations against the teller of a joke and those who laugh at it include damage to the prestige of the state and damage to the presidency.

---

72- AGAMBEN Giorgio, *op. cit.*

73- *Ibid.*, p. 89.

74- The most striking example of this form of return to the obedient social system can be seen at the beginning of the revolution in Syria, where some activists and demonstrators were forced to appear on state television and make confessions about their activities in the revolution, as in the case of journalist Sheyar Khalil and actor Jalal al-Tawil.

However, what is remarkable about the above case (joke, teller, listener(s)) is the ambiguity surrounding the transmission of the joke. There are several potential parties who were not arrested, including those who did not laugh, the informer, or the “officer of silence” himself, who could use the joke as a means of entrapping those around him. In this regard, Lisa Wedeen presented a semi-comic context<sup>75</sup> in which an officer asks Mr. M. a question. His question was misunderstood and he was beaten and dismissed from the Syrian army. Interestingly, the story was transmitted to Wedeen through an intermediary, as she states, “The person who told me this story did not witness the actual event, although he believes that it happened as reported”<sup>76</sup>. She went on to comment on the misunderstanding that occurred with M: “The Syrian regime requires citizens to provide outward proof of their loyalty to the group through an incredible public ritual of adulation”<sup>77</sup>.

What interests us in Wedeen’s comment is undoubtedly the outward evidence: it’s the mask of obedience and the public performance before others to demonstrate one’s belonging to the obedient group, a role that must be declared at every opportunity. The mask of obedience requires that the laughter or insult in a joke that undermines the prestige of the state should not be responded to with laughter, but with the most appropriate response, which is either silence, denunciation or silencing.

It should be noted that these are not “authorized” jokes, some of which are shown on TV screens and in cinemas, and are aimed at the Syrian government and some of its men. Nor are they metaphorical jokes or full of puns and imaginary stories, but rather clear, direct jokes. We don’t know where they’re circulating, or who’s telling them, and they’re surrounded by fear, terror and suspicion on the part of both the teller and the listener.

Silence in the previous context, belongs to the outward evidence: that is, a public sign that materializes in front of others, out of fear or under the effect of chilling<sup>78</sup>. This moment of silence, after the decision not to laugh<sup>79</sup>, reveals the effect of the joke itself on a political level: it is a performative utter, a set of words that leaves an impact on both the speaker and the listener. This effect requires a response, either laughter or silence, because it has a political impact that threatens the categorization of its owner, whether obedient or enemy.

---

75- WEDEEN Lisa, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

76- *Ibid.*, p. 68.

77- *Ibid.*

78- The “chilling effect” has no clear definition or legal value. It is present in surveillance studies, international relations and horror studies, and refers to the inner anxiety and hesitation before doing or saying something, for fear of its effects on the individual.

79- Here, we are not discussing the ludic value of humor and its impact on disrupting the symbolic order of the world or highlighting its paradoxes. Rather, we argue that humor, whether funny or not, must be treated with caution if it touches on the political system.

We can say that those who remain silent survive, and those who laugh are threatened and may be arrested. Those who remain silent in this context are not responding to the joke (funny or not), but using silence to maintain their role as obedient citizens. There is, however, an ambiguity regarding the telling of the joke itself. Factors involved in determining the appropriate response and the ambiguity of that response can be seen in the following example from a post by Abdul Jawad Sakran:

An informal meeting brought me together with a few engineering and management colleagues. We were of different religious and sectarian affiliations: Sunnis, of which I'm one, Shiites, Alawites, Christians and Communists. The conversations were diverse and varied, then naturally turned to "jokes" for laughs and fun. Everything was going smoothly until one of the leaders of the Alawite community made a political joke: "Bashar died suddenly and his son Haidara was eight months old, so the People's Assembly met and decided to change the constitution to allow eight-month-olds to run for president. The Syrian people demonstrated in support of the People's Assembly decision and the constitutional amendment, chanting: Ingggggh...Ingggggh...Ambooooo, and everyone laughed to varying degrees, and I laughed with them, then there was a cautious silence.

One of my colleagues, a Christian with whom I had a good friendship, followed me out of the room and pulled me by the hand away from the door with a worried look on his face. I was surprised by his behavior and even more surprised when he looked at me and said: "What have you done? I replied: "What kind of question is that, and what have I done to be asked in such a strange state? He sternly replied, "Why did you laugh at that joke? I replied very surprised: "Yes, I laughed, the joke was very funny and I heard it for the first time, then I wasn't the only one laughing, everyone laughed out loud. He said to me, 'You're a Sunni Muslim, you're not allowed to laugh at a political joke in front of them, it will be used against you, my friend, and I'm afraid you'll be questioned about it.'"<sup>80</sup>

The joke teller divides the audience into different categories based on their affiliations and, in particular, their administrative roles and the degree of authority they each hold. However, it is the ambiguity that is particularly noteworthy, which could be described as a poor performance. The joke teller didn't know that he was not allowed to laugh. This revealed the ambiguity of obedience, the ambiguity of the moment of silence, and the need for caution on the part of the listener. The problem with the aforementioned example of silence is that this narrative, along with other iterations, resembles a traditional folk tale. It's

80- SAKRAN Abdul Jawad, "The Joke" ... What if we investigate it as a criminal?!, *Al Jazeera*, [Online], July 2018. Available at: <https://aljazeera.net/blogs/2018/12/7/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%83%D8%A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%88-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7>

not clear whether the incident took place in a public or private space. However, this incident is similar to the “Shut up!” scene. It’s an example of an absence of origin, repeated and altered, with no fixed subject, no fixed narrative structure, and above all no knowledge of the precise characteristics of a joke that could cause harm to an individual. However, as Sukran himself noted, “silence” is the way to survive in this case.

After the joke is told, moments of silence reign, they could be described as a kind of “deafness” or “silence”. This leads to the question: “Where am I?” The silence that follows the joke can be attributed to its effect on the system of political and sectarian classifications that, as discussed earlier, determine who is allowed to laugh and who is not. This is similar to the way in which theatrical mistakes are handled to ensure compliance with the script or the director’s instructions.

What are the defining characteristics of the space in which a joke effectively transforms an individual from a “citizen” to an “enemy”? Obedience can be used to address this question, as the initial response to a joke is the activation of the Mana of fear<sup>81</sup>, a magical substance that spreads fear and controls the behavior of individuals in the context of sovereignty, its representatives, and those who hold its power. The act of laughing unexpectedly results in the loss of mana, which is perceived as a threat to one’s life and a source of danger. In contrast, remaining silent allows the retention of mana, or “vital energy,” which is believed to regulate one’s relationship with the “Eternal Person,” his “representatives,” and his “group”<sup>82</sup>. Each individual controls his reaction to the joke in order to conserve his mana. In this way, the joke seems to have a performative and ritual value. Everyone must be disciplined and know (their role) for fear of this master, who is absent but has a dominant presence. He is the source of mana/life, and is capable of confiscating it. This Mana is shared by everyone, people and objects, and its level varies according to the degree of fear and obedience. It is the magical energy that governs people’s relationships and behavior, and sets the limits of their lives in the state of exception.

The question “Where am I?” in a moment of performative silence carries many

---

81- We could have used habitus or Pierre Bourdieu’s system of preparation, but it is clear from the example that there is no clear system for preparing for laughter, silence, or when to materialize them, not to mention that the reaction associated with laughter is sometimes physically uncontrollable.

82- Lisa Wedeen uses the term cult, not in the religious sense of a sect, but in a broader sense. The Cult of Assad is “a strategy of dominance based on compliance rather than legitimacy...a disciplinary device generating a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act as if they revere their leader. (WEDEEN Lisa, *op. cit.*, p. 6). In the Arabic translation of the book completed by Naguib Ghadban in 2010 and published by Dar Riyadh Al-Rais, Ghadban chose to translate the phrase as “worship of the lion, or lion glorification” to refer to the behavior of individuals, and we chose the word his group because it contains a reference to the relationship with the “regime” and its representatives; that is, lion glorification is not only a phenomenon applicable to ordinary individuals, but also to a group of “informers, snitches...” They have the power to control the behavior of individuals because of their relationship with the security establishment, for example.

connotations, but unlike what Butler and Althusser assume before this question, the joke activates a temporary stage for an anxiety-laden performance. The response to the joke, (laughter) or (silence), becomes a form of self-identification, (I'm keeping quiet because I don't agree with this joke), (I'm keeping quiet because I'm afraid for my mana/my life!). Laughter implies complicity with the irony of the joke itself and its ability to linguistically redistribute the symbolic composition of the world, with its insults and derogations. Here, we can say that the performance of obedience is clearly evident and we can observe signs of theatrical improvisation<sup>83</sup>. It's about avoiding the threat of death by establishing the element of silence and interacting with what's happening and with the audience, in a way that distributes responsibility and makes it difficult to determine who has or hasn't laughed.

---

83- Improvisation is one of the techniques of theatrical performance, which means defining the starting and ending points and controlling the elements surrounding the performer in order to complete the event and reach the end. In our case, the starting point is the joke, and silence is a fixed element for those who realize the end, which is either arrest or survival, and this is evident in the scenario that Sakran adopted, and reveals his poor performance and his lack of mastery of obedience, since he did not recognize the roles of those around him, which are defined by their names and sects, and the status of each of them.

## Section Two

### Silence in the Space of Dynamic Exception (Silence Inside)

This section of the research focuses on silence and its role in the space of exception, or the camp in the traditional sense. Here, we consider silence to be a place “in which there is a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger”<sup>84</sup>. It’s an isolated space where direct violence is applied to bodies, and where no laws condemn the perpetrators. This involves all hidden and inaccessible places, such as the cells in Tadmur prison, Sednaya, or the basement of a security branch. This section will focus on the security branch as an exceptional space where anyone can turn into insignificant life, similar to the camp proposed by Giorgio Agamben. In this hidden space, the individual loses his constitutional rights and becomes a life that can be killed and dispensed with.

Some of these places in Syria are well known, while others remain hidden. These are very cruel places compared to ordinary prisons. Prisoners transferred from the security branch to a normal prison consider the latter a paradise. Yassin al-Haj Saleh’s analysis in his book *Horror and Its Representation*<sup>85</sup> provides insight into how this space became an instrument of governance and even the engine of sovereignty in Syria, as its violent and horrific effects extend beyond the closed spaces.

In this context, silence will be studied through testimonies, artistic and literary works coming from “inside”, which is a forbidden space, where one cannot enter or record. In this way, artistic works will play a “factographic” role, describing the characteristics of what goes on “inside” and the relationship between bodies and interrogators or executioners. We’ll try to answer the question: Where does silence refer when it’s “inside”? We won’t talk about the horrors of the detention center or the nature of the torture practiced there, but we will focus on the use of “silence” in this center, whether as a tool of torture or as a method used by the detainee to save his life.

---

84- AGAMBEN Giorgio, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

85- AL- HAJ SALEH Yassin, *The Terrible and Its Representation - Deliberations on Syria’s Ruined Form and its Difficult Shaping*, 1ed. Beirut, Dar al-Jadeed, 2021.



## Silence and Forms of Horror

We'll use the term "horror"<sup>86</sup> here, echoing the word "horreur" used by Adriana Cavarero to refer to the person's fear of becoming like those they've heard about or seen dead or in pieces. The inability to react, to defend oneself or even to present oneself in captivity causes the horror effect and makes the individual lose his mind, as we shall see later.

In order to understand the role of silence, we quote the description of Tadmur Prison during the period of detention in the 1980s, as presented in the novel *Syrian Enemies*. "It is forbidden to open your eyes at night, to speak, to pray, or to go to the toilet. It is also forbidden to read, stay up late, or move around at bedtime. In short, nothing is allowed."<sup>87</sup> A similar description is found in the testimony of a detainee in the State Security Branch in Damascus after the revolution: "It was very difficult to sit (in the cell) because of the narrow space, and most of the detainees had severe knee problems. Talking was not allowed, so we talked to each other by whispering, and any loud noise was severely punished"<sup>88</sup>.

Silence appears in the exceptional space of the cell as a technique for controlling bodies and as a part of the process of torture and interrogation<sup>89</sup>. To explain this silence, we draw on Lawrence Abu Hamdan's term "Masters of Sound"<sup>90</sup>. Abu Hamdan's term refers to the guards in Sednaya prison who were responsible for distributing sounds and silencing the detainees. Thus, silence appears as a means of "terrorizing", not to let the detainees confess, but to break their resolve. It plays a different role in this space than it does outside, because the detainees in the security branches or in Sednaya (the human slaughterhouse) are insignificant, nameless lives, they're just numbers and accusations, living out their last breath, undergoing the process of transformation at the moment

86- The term "horror" is used here because it is derived from the word "terrible," i.e., mind: A terrible affair, i.e. mind-blowing, and a wonderful woman, i.e. mind-blowing. Adriana Cavarero, on the other hand, associates it with immobility and paralysis, recalling Medusa and her severed head, who, when someone stares at her, is petrified and unable to move. So we adopted the word horror to add its meanings to what Cavarero suggests, especially since the word horror in the dictionary refers to a form of immobility. We quote: "The warning of death, the place of terror in the heart, it terrified him, it terrified the mare; that is, she refused to move, splendor: A tinge of beauty, wonder of the mind". We can say: A dreadful thing is one that occurs in the heart or mind, startling it and paralyzing its ability to understand, "like a mare when frightened".

87- HADDAD Fawaz, *op. cit.*

88- Anonymous witness, Activist's testimony about Branch 285 State Security, *Violations Documentation Center in Syria*, [Online], August 2013, [Accessed August 30], Available at: <https://vdc-sy.info/index.php/ar/reports/branch285>

89- In the testimony of a witness in the trial of Iyad Gharib and Anwar Raslan in Koblenz, Germany, we read the following: "Witness P1 heard the sounds of torture during his interrogation, as if he was being tortured again without being beaten. P1 said: They wanted to tell him that this was what would happen to him if he did not cooperate, as the interrogator would allow him to hear the sounds of torture and screaming by remaining silent for a moment... P1 said: "The sounds came from all directions. (SJAC, 2020)

90- WEIZMAN Eyal, *op. cit.*, p. 88.



of arrest. Their crowdedness in the cell is something that cannot be changed by words, and their relationship with the jailers is based on silence, as a way to avoid torture and to protect their lives. This is a place they cannot define the “self”, which becomes “we”, a mass of decomposing flesh, open to the other, connected by blood and breath. Silence here is not an individual choice, but a collective situation, since everyone in the cell is expected to “remain silent”. Complicity in silence means a kind of survival for all, since the “voice” of any individual can lead to collective punishment, especially as violent punishment in this context is designed to terrorize and create helpless, defenseless beings, stripped even of their political agent in case of release.

Silence, in a context where bodies overlap and open up to each other, does not appear as a tool of resistance, but rather as a survival strategy, as we will see later. The homogeneous silent mass is not allowed to complain, object or even suffer, it has the same effect as “Shut up! The difference is that the group doesn’t have to introduce itself, they are “criminals” and sound was used and spread to terrorize and control them. Prisoners are not even allowed to cry out in pain during torture<sup>91</sup>. We see here the terrible effects of the use of “silence” as a means of increasing the pain of others. Here we see the terrible effects of using “silence” as a means of increasing the pain of others. Silence doesn’t always reign in this place; there are always people listening in silence, using their imagination and what they see before them to understand their fate. This leads to the “absence of reason<sup>92</sup>”, that is, the loss of the ability to judge logically in order to survive. Detainees may imagine their fate after hearing the voices that break their silence, as we read in the testimony of a Sednaya survivor:

“Between 10 p.m. and 12 a.m., or between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m., we’d hear loud noises, shouts and curses coming from downstairs. This is a very important point: if you’re quiet, you’re beaten less in Sednaya. But these people were screaming like they’d lost their minds, and these weren’t normal sounds, they sounded like people being skinned alive. “ (Amnesty International, 2017). “There is absolute silence in the prison, a total absence of any sound. [...] It’s a silence that you can’t understand”<sup>93</sup>.

It is clear from the testimonies that silence as a technique negates the performative value of “sound,” regardless of its meaning, be it words, screams, or curses. What matters is its profound effect and its transmission to the listener. The ability of the “master of silence” to control this “silence-sound” dichotomy deprives sound of its communicative value. In other words, the

---

91- FULLER Matthew, WEIZMAN Eyal, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

92- One of the main characters in “Enemy Syrians” developed schizophrenia while incarcerated in Tadmur prison. One of his personalities tended to withdraw into silence, while the other, represented by the figure, chatted with the guards and other inmates. This behavior suggests that the rational, conscious self was inaccessible, surrounded by a protective wall, while the tortured body struggled to hold itself together.

93- AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *The Human Slaughterhouse* [Report], London, Amnesty International, 2017.

intensity of pain does not end the practice of torture, nor does silence about torture. The manipulation of the effect of sonic “pain” on the individual who does not experience it is intended to diminish the ability to produce “sound” and threaten the performative and representational value of the individual. One of the testimonies states: “There was no health care, no medical treatment. When doctors came, they tortured the prisoners instead of helping them. If the patient complained of pain, they would beat him even more brutally. After we realized this, we stopped telling the doctors where the pain was because we knew they would beat us right where it hurts.”<sup>94</sup>. Therefore, even the indication of pain, a phenomenon that must be “vocalized” in order to recognize its existence, sinks into silence, escaping the increase of this pain or its intensity, so that the body or the mass of bodies becomes “a thing objectified by the reality of pain”<sup>95</sup>.

The words “assimilation” and “realization” recur in the testimonies, there is something incredible, a terrible thing that destroys the logical capacity, all the more so since discussion is forbidden in order to “understand” or “assimilate” what is happening. Even personal pain sinks into “silence”, as if the body were a voiceless swollen mass, sometimes incapable of identifying itself and what is happening around it. The horror destroys the mind, the ability to understand and be aware, as if it destroys the self and its ability to identify itself and the space around it.

How can we answer the question “Where am I” in this context? Sednaya prison report described it as a “human slaughterhouse” due to the brutal method used to kill prisoners. However, in moments of silence that are “incomprehensible,” what can be the answer? The individual in question is a bare life in pain, silent, outside the legal framework, subject to a policy of exception, subject to constituent violence<sup>96</sup>. He is neither a prisoner of war nor a criminal. He has no constitutional rights and is considered an insignificant enemy who deserves to die, no matter how many words he has to say. How can we describe this place? There are numerous answers that could turn the question into a rhetorical formula that calls for poetry. However, it is important to note that these conditions, which are created by political powers, do not correspond to the conditions mentioned in historical examples such as Nazi concentration camps, colonial prisons or exceptional facilities such as Abu Ghraib.

In trying to answer the question “Where am I?” it is important to note that some prisoners don’t know what is going on outside the prison, their fate is

94- *Ibid.*

95- CAVARERO Adriana, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

96- The violence used against the enemy is not within the bounds of the legal context. It is reasonable to assume that it is of this type because the Sednaya report describes the post-2011 detainees as revolutionary prisoners. Moreover, Sednaya prison is a place where revolutionaries are specifically killed: “The detainees in the red building are those arrested on charges related to the revolution, which marks the end of their lives.” (AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *op. cit.*)

unknown to outsiders, and their bodies are threatened with disintegration and decay through torture. They are in the “hole” as Agamben described it, or perhaps they are in no-place. Lawrence Abu Hamdan tried to take us into this space with his sound installation<sup>97</sup> (*Saydnaya (The Missing 19db)*)<sup>98</sup>. He tried to make us experience the role of the silent man, but in what place is the silent man? Adriana Cavarero pointed out that these tortures are aimed at creating defenseless beings, comparing them to “babies”<sup>99</sup>. the “place” to which the question “Where am I?” is referring to is an embryonic space where fluids circulate and mix. There is no sound. Silence and the echo of pain in the distance reign in the place. The detainees can do nothing but wait (for the outside world) and go towards it. It’s a dark place with no political definition, a place where the individual can’t even acknowledge that he’s alive<sup>100</sup>. Killing him or answering him makes no sense.

### *Silence and Confession*

Silence in the security branch is not limited to the space of detention, it extends to the space of interrogation. In this place, the number given to the individual in the cell turns into a name with an identity and a political identification. This space includes investigation, confession, and the resulting legal consequences that will be applied (outside the prison); such as the trial and its consequences.

The interrogation space may seem to be a place where people make a sound, a speech, to present themselves and try to confirm or refute accusations. However, speech in this space has no legal or performative value and embodies silence as a method to protect life. In Fawaz Haddad’s *Al Suryun Al ‘Aeda’* “Syrian Enemies,” one of the characters imprisoned in an intelligence branch says: “If you don’t confess, you will always have the hope of being released one day, even if it’s a tiny hope”<sup>101</sup>. In this context, silence -even within the space of speech- is both heard and desired, contributing to the survival and salvation of life. This is evidenced by the persistence of silence in the relationship between jailer and prisoner, where the dynamics of fear and terror do not change. In addition,

---

97- A version of this sound recording was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona in 2017, as part of the exhibition “Forensic Architecture: Towards an Investigative Aesthetics.” It consists of a small corner with a black screen in front of it, where the viewer sits and wears headphones to listen to the sounds and their variations between years, without seeing anything.

98-ABU HAMDAN Lawrence, *Saydnaya (The Missing 19db)*, [online], [Accessed on 28 October 2024]. Available at: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=wUeKrzNb4kQ>.

99- CAVARERO Adriana, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

100- Defending abortion and women’s right to abortion: The debate is over the right to “life,” that is, at what week of pregnancy does the embryo become “life.” Opponents of abortion see this as the moment of fertilization, while pro-lifers disagree legally and intellectually about this moment. In countries that allow the right to abortion, there is disagreement about the number of first weeks; that is, those in which there is no definition of “life”; this disagreement also defines the days before which the fetus is not alive; that is, the period in which abortion is not considered the killing of “life.

101- HADDAD Fawaz, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

confessions<sup>102</sup> are often prepared in advance, which further diminishes the significance of the prisoner's silence, since the accusation and punishment have already been determined and the prisoner's statements have no legal value.

Silence here—that is, not saying what represents the self, or in Butler's approach, the “representation of the self”—is not limited to unsuccessful attempts to deny accusations or to leaving the prisoner in a state where their accusations are neither proven nor denied. Rather, silence is replaced by official documents, fabricated confessions, and an alternative narrative. Many texts filled with fabricated narratives and confessions extracted under torture replace silence, and are then transferred to the court. Here, silence loses its original value of representing the self. To be accused or an enemy is a position that cannot be denied by words.

Silence about torture and abuse “on the inside”, accompanied by false accusations and confessions, helps to spread fear (on the outside) and creates an official narrative about what happened. In the case of Hama, the official narrative blamed Islamic terrorism and, at the start of the revolution, many detainees were forced to appear on state television<sup>103</sup> and publicly confess to what they had done during the revolution, such as sabotage, terrorism and other charges. In fact, silence extends beyond the space of detention into the public space. False confessions imposed on detainees or released prisoners fill the space of silence.

Silence in the context of confession, compared to “speech,” appears on two levels: it is part of a survival strategy, and it is a worthless act, like speech itself. Confessions are prepared in advance and are part of a bureaucratic process in which the “detainee” does not intervene. In other words, it's not a “confession” to come forward or reveal what's hidden. Even if the prisoner admits the truth or lies, he doesn't express or represent himself, and above all, he doesn't change the reality of the result.

Written or televised confessions contain contradictions. They are a linguistic formula with an internal contradiction, since they have an official form. They are legally and politically dependent, and at the same time they are a false declaration that does not represent the confessor. The listener becomes skeptical about the veracity of these statements and cynically believes what he hears. In this

102- In the testimony of one of the detainees, we learn that she was falsely accused of “dealing with armed terrorists and killing a member of the Republican Guard” (AL-DIMASHQI Youmna, *A Woman's Harrowing Account of Torture and Abuse Inside Assad's Prisons*, 2015).

103- After his release, journalist Sheyar Khalil was forced to make false confessions about his role in the early days of the revolution, which he later denied after leaving Syria, as was the case with actor Jalal al-Tawil.

context, Lisa Wedeen's strategy "I Know Very Well, yet Nevertheless . . ." <sup>104</sup> can be cited. Wedeen explains in her analysis of speech and discourse in Syria that these confessions are considered false, but are believed to avoid danger.

We won't dwell on the impact of believing accusations on the outside, but rather focus on the question: "Where am I?" during interrogation, where speech has no value and silence is a means of avoiding a return to the cell. The detainee accepts the fabricated accusations, is forced to confess, and remains silent for the sake of his physical survival. It is a cruel moment in which cynical performance occurs, "When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience," <sup>105</sup>. This place where self-presentation is threatened, even forbidden, is like the boundary between "bare life" and "defendant awaiting trial"; between number and name, it is the moment when the detainee has no choice. Place in the physical sense is well known here, and we read about it in numerous testimonies (interrogator's office, officer's desk, confession room, etc.), but on the conceptual level we are in a transitional space whose occupants meet the definition of the banned, which is "simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable" <sup>106</sup> (Agamben, 2017, p. 27).

### *Silence and Play (Stage in Prison)*

Some testimonies describe the forms of play and entertainment in which prisoners participate inside prisons in Syria. It's interesting to note that in the most famous testimonies dealing with theater, we read about performance techniques, composition and the creation of decorations and music. However, the available testimonies <sup>107</sup> do not go into detail about the relationship with the "jailer", nor do they mention the noise that the performance may cause, or the criteria followed to avoid attracting the attention of the guards during the performance itself.

In the course of our research, we came across a short interview with the brothers Mohammad and Ahmad Malas, the founders of the Chamber Theater in Damascus. After their release from prison, they stated: "We had to limit and control the reactions of the audience.... Laughter, hands over mouths, and silent

---

104- WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 85.

105- GOFFMAN Erving, *The presentation of self in everyday life*, 1st ed. New York, Anchor Books, 1959, p. 299.

106- AGAMBEN Giorgio, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

107- Malek Daghestani published a testimony titled "Before a quarter century ago, the secret theater of Sednaya" on the website of Al-Jumhuriya in 2017, and Badr Zakaria published a testimony titled "Testimony about theater in prison - the birth and death of a theater" in the seventeenth issue of Qalamoun magazine in 2021.

applause”<sup>108</sup>, This sentence prompted us to contact the Malas brothers and obtain a testimony from them, the full text of which we mention here:

The testimony of the two brothers Mohammad and Ahmad Malas about the play *Al Thawra Ghadan Tuajal ‘ila Al Bariha* (Tomorrow’s Revolution Postponed to Yesterday) performed in a cell of the Criminal Security Branch in Damascus in 2011.

We, Mohammad Malas and Ahmad Malas, were arrested after participating in the intellectuals’ demonstration in Al-Midan neighborhood of Damascus on July 13, 2011. We were taken to the Criminal Security Branch in Damascus. In the basement, women were separated from men and we were put with the other men in a cell reserved for the perpetrators of crimes (theft, rape, etc.). At the same time, we performed the play *Al Thawra Ghadan Tuajal ‘ila Al Bariha* (Tomorrow’s Revolution Postponed to Yesterday) as part of the Chamber Theatre demonstration in our house.

We decided to show/perform the play, which is about 20 minutes long. There were two guards at the door (two prison guards), and two of the “shabiha” who attacked the US embassy. They were detained like us, but outside the cell, smoking with the guards, walking in the corridors, and wearing T-shirts with Bashar al-Assad’s picture on them.

We stood among the prisoners and started the show. The place spontaneously divided into a performance space and a space for the audience, who stood very close to the walls. Mohammed used to play the protester and Ahmed the officer, but as Ahmed was hit on the head and bleeding, we swapped roles.

We started the show without saying anything or informing those outside, but as the laughing and talking got louder, the two guards came to the door, interrupted the show and said: “What are you doing? Stop playing around!” We replied: “We are performing a play.” He said: “So be it, but in a low voice.” Apparently, it was the voices that attracted him, and he allowed us to continue on the condition that we be quiet. We continued the show in whispers, stifling all our laughter. At one point, the audience got excited and started applauding, and the four of them, the two guards and the “shabiha”, immediately went in and cursed everyone. We agreed with them, after some discussion, that the applause would be gestural; we weren’t beaten, just cursed and pushed, and when we continued in a low voice, the four didn’t leave, but continued to watch. Here we can say that the expression “the magic of theater” became meaningful.

108- ANONYMOUS WRITER, « Two Syrian actors perform a play in prison after being arrested at a demonstration (Mumassilan suriyan yaarudan masrahiya fil sejen baada e’tiqalihima fi muzahara) », *Zad Jordan News*, [online], September 2011. Available at: <http://jordanzad.com/index.php?page=article&id=49907>.



The prisoners became an audience, even the women in the other cell wanted to watch, which created a problem with the jailers, who refused to let them. Then, over the protests of the women, especially our friend May Skaf, the jailer suggested that we perform the show again in the women's cell.

During the performance, the name "Bashar al-Assad" was uttered by one of the characters we were playing. As soon as the jailer and his entourage heard it, they intervened and stopped the performance. We tried to defend ourselves, explaining that the president's name was part of the show, and after some discussion, they allowed the show to go on without mentioning his name, or encrypting it or use it directly.

The show ended and the audience applauded silently, then we went to the other room and performed again for the women in the presence of the guards.

Interestingly, the permission to continue the play was not an order from the head of criminal security, but rather an impromptu decision by the guard himself, who apparently wanted to continue the play and made the individual decision to allow us to continue and repeat the performance. At one point, the guard participated in the "play" with us: he was an accomplice who could be punished just as we would have been, if he was discovered.

*Mohammad and Ahmad Malas*  
29/01/2022

First of all, it should be noted that the "play" did not take place in an official security agency or prison, but in a detention center within the Criminal Security branch, which belongs to the "constitutional state" and not to the "prerogative state"<sup>109</sup>; i.e., the detainees are identified by name, their place of detention is known to the public, and there is (theoretically) no torture or ambient sounds of torture around them, thus we are not faced with a classification of "bare life". However, the play was performed, and it didn't attract the jailer's attention until the "voices got louder"; that is, there was supposed to be silence, but it was the laughter that triggered the jailer's intervention.

The order to remain silent was clearly given by the jailer, especially when "Mr." Bashar al-Assad was mentioned. This name was later avoided, as if it wasn't the right place to mention it. What is also remarkable, and poetically read in the testimony, is the phrase "the magic of theater". The theatrical event had

---

109- The term prerogative state was introduced by Ernst Fraenkel, as mentioned above, which intervenes through the police and its men (security in the Syrian case) in determining political and non-political activity. Moreover, the men of this prerogative state "replace the courts and bypass the judicial process" (FRAENKEL Ernst, *op. cit.*, p. 42) and are responsible for deciding whether a crime is political or non-political.

a performative formula that led the jailer to allow the prisoners to watch the performance. A decision improvised by the jailer himself, who became both the audience and the guard of the performance. His authority lies in his ability to control the concept of “silence”, which includes both what is said and what is not said. This form of authority is linked to the characteristics of the jailer and his improvised powers (which can lead him to be involved in the event). It is generally linked to simple services rendered to prisoners, to ignoring certain excesses, or to torture itself. However, since we are outside the space of exception, it is obvious that there are laws that regulate the relationship between prisoner and jailer.

In this case, not only is the improvisation in the theatrical space remarkable, but also the adoption of new theatrical codes, such as silent applause. The rule of silence is always present in the space of detention and can be modified or manipulated. However, what is noteworthy is that this manipulation/modification took place within a specific condition, namely theater, which was announced in the following way: “What are you doing here?” the jailer asked. The answer was: “We are putting on a play.” Here the rule of silence is broken by announcing what is happening, as if the “game” began, and the jailer took on the role of “officer of silence”. He intervened in it, determined what can and cannot be said, as if he were part of the show. According to the Malas brothers, this involvement and role is due to the jailer’s own decision to allow the show to go on, since he could be punished if the matter were revealed to his superiors.

The particularity of the previous “event” lies in the adoption of elements from theatrical improvisation techniques, which rely on manipulating the flow of the show (fixing/modifying/cancelling/adding) in order to bring it to a successful conclusion. In this case, the improvisation was first carried out for aesthetic reasons (“swapping” the blindfold between the actors). Then, to continue the performance itself and maintain silence, the actors and audience had to clap silently and lower their voices. In addition, the jailer became the leader of the theatrical game, setting the tempo with his orders and his own silence, and directly censoring what is said.

How can we answer the question “Where am I?” especially as silence was not totally imposed, but the jailer asked for it twice (when the prisoners applauded and when the performers mentioned Bashar el-Assad’s name). We could say that this question is “metaphorical”, and that it is asked in the space of detention and in the space of performance. However, during the performance, the officer of silence intervened to stop the game and control the silence, as if (we are only talking about the Syrian case here) we were in a public rehearsal in a traditional theater, attended by a censor/security man who exercises his power over the “performance” by manipulating its components, deleting and adding what he wants from it. We can say that the question: “Where am I?” was prompted when



the guard asked the brothers to be silent after they mentioned the president's name. This case shows how theatrical censorship in Syria takes place not only before and after the performance, but also during rehearsals, which depend on the "arbitrary" and often subjective judgment of the censor.<sup>110</sup>

The question "Where am I?" provides an insight into the process of artistic production in Syria and the relationship between artists and authority, as well as the challenges presented by censorship. Despite a certain freedom of criticism, what is allowed is controlled, and criticism is limited by the censor and his control over what can or cannot be said.

### **Section Three: Silence in Obedience and Protests in the Capital**

Earlier, we discussed silence in two spaces in Syria: The outside (presented by public spaces) and the inside (presented by prisons and security services). We used examples from different stages of Syria's history in an attempt to answer the question "Where am I?" in the moment of silence.

This section addresses the forms of public protest in the capital, Damascus, during the first year of the revolution, particularly the peaceful phase that ended around 2012. We will focus on the protest in public space, which became a space for public obedience (pro-Assad marches, the proliferation of photos of Bashar al-Assad, the strengthening of the surveillance system and the spread of the mana of fear, etc.). The production of these practices is mentioned in Rosa Yaseen Hasan's description of Mehvan Hajo 's behavior: " It was clear to me that most of the customers in Mr. Omran Abul Azm's cafeteria were from the opposition; the big TV screen hanging in the middle of the cafeteria was tuned to Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, France 24 or the BBC, the same satellite channels whose images I step over every evening as I enter the parking lot. They're big, colorful images that stick to the floor like mops. There were those who deliberately stepped on it every time, those who stepped on it carelessly, and those who tried very hard not to touch the ground with their feet. I used to watch the different feet as they passed by. If I worked for the government, I could tell a loyalist from a dissident simply by his footsteps on the ground, but I had to enter the garage every evening to take the bus to Al Hajar Al Aswad where I live, without daring to change my footsteps. Under the logos and names of the TV channels were the words: "Channels of Sedition".<sup>111</sup>

---

110- Numerous oral testimonies refer to this form of censorship, i.e. when the security guard observes the preview and determines, on the basis of arbitrary rather than aesthetic authority, what is allowed and what is not.

111- YASSIN AL-HASSAN Rosa, *Those Touched by Magic (Alladhina Masahom Al Seher)*. Beirut, Manshurat al-Jamal, 2016, p. 12.

Before delving into the forms of silence in the protests, it is important to note the changes in the state of emergency. The Emergency Law was replaced by the Anti-Terrorism Law, which is more powerful than the Emergency Law and gives the human masses, responsible for policing public order, greater powers to confront protesters. This was accompanied by exceptional orders<sup>112</sup> to some army and security forces to openly shoot protesters in front of everyone in the Syrian governorates and in some areas of the capital.

These new rules of public space, linked to the anti-terrorism law, divided individuals in public space into two clear categories, as we already noted: the “obedient citizens”: those who openly practice obedience and participate in the process of resisting the “enemies”, and those who are labeled “germs”<sup>113</sup>, by the head of power and deserve direct violence, such as being shot in the street.

This division and the resulting overt violence gave demonstrations in the public space political and performative dimensions that go beyond mere gathering and chanting, as the space became a dangerous place where it is not possible to “stand still.” This explains the impossibility of occupying public spaces in the capital and the spread of demonstrations by dozens for a few minutes “in order for the protesters to show their movement/issue to the largest number of Damascenes with the least amount of risk”<sup>114</sup>. Adwan’s final note on “risk” indicates that the space of protest is where protesters are threatened with arrest or death. It’s a space activated by the movements and voices of protesters who become “enemies” or “germs” who removed their masks of obedience.

We can say that the space of protest can be a performative space of exception, created by the movements and voices of the protesters at a given moment and bounded by their bodies and their places of movement. It is a space activated before the eyes of the “obedient” and the law enforcement officers. Through antiterrorism laws and the direct shooting of protesters in the cities, the space of protest becomes an exceptional space in which protesters deserve to die. They are killed as if their lives were insignificant, and their murder is not considered a crime. The difference, however, is that this insignificant life is produced openly, not in a hidden and closed place, such as the case of the security branches.

The previous approach, i.e. the activation of the space of exception in the space of protest governed by its environment, includes improvisation and acting techniques, such as studying the elements of the place and the event

112- There is no legal proof that direct orders were given to shoot at the demonstrators, but various stories and testimonies point in that direction, without specifying the hierarchy of the decision: were the shootings at the demonstrators ordered by higher commanders or were they improvised on the spot?

113- AL ARABIYA, « Syrians comment on Assad’s third speech: “Germs want to overthrow the regime” », [online], January 20, 2011, [Accessed on December 15, 2021]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/STmrxCr>

114- ADWAN Ziad, « Flying above Bloodshed: Performative Protest in the Scared City of Damascus », *Contention*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017, p. 14-33.

in order to survive, since the demonstration is akin to suicide. In this context, we will use the term “super-objective” from the terminology of acting. “All the imaginative thoughts, feelings and actions of an actor (in our case, the demonstrator), should converge to carry out the super-objective of the plot (in our case, the demonstration). The common bond must be so strong that even the most insignificant detail, if it is not related to the super-objective (in our case, survival), will stand out as superfluous or wrong”<sup>115</sup>. Removing the previous definition from its theatrical context and putting it in a political protest does not invalidate its effectiveness, especially when we read the methods of organizing demonstrations and controlling movements within and beyond them. However, in the case of the protest space, the ultimate goal is first visibility (voice and body), then survival and overcoming mistakes. Our adoption of the previous definition is evident in the anonymity, the disguise, and the insistence on choosing a place without indicating who occupies it, all of which are evident in the sporadic recordings of demonstrations that aim to protect the protesters at the time of the demonstration and later at the time of the broadcast of the recording.

We’re dealing with traces of events, blurred traces<sup>116</sup> that don’t convey much information, especially as the recordings attempt to hide the identity of the demonstrators. Those around the protesters appear in the frame without being the center of it, as if they were part of the composition of the place. It is therefore difficult to determine precisely the role of each, as Adwan notes in his research: the aim is visibility and to answer the question “Do we exist?”<sup>117</sup>, in the face of regime propaganda that attempts to hide them and deny their physical presence.

The previous points referring to changes in public space reveal the political impact of the act of protest and its performative role in transforming the individual from an “obedient citizen” into an “enemy worthy of death” through a series of signs: the place he goes to, his relationship with the space of protest, his voice and his way of moving. Under these conditions, and given the relationship between physical performance in public space and the political divisions imposed by authority, silence appears as a visual and physical sign with political value, drawing the line between friend and foe and avoiding arrest.

---

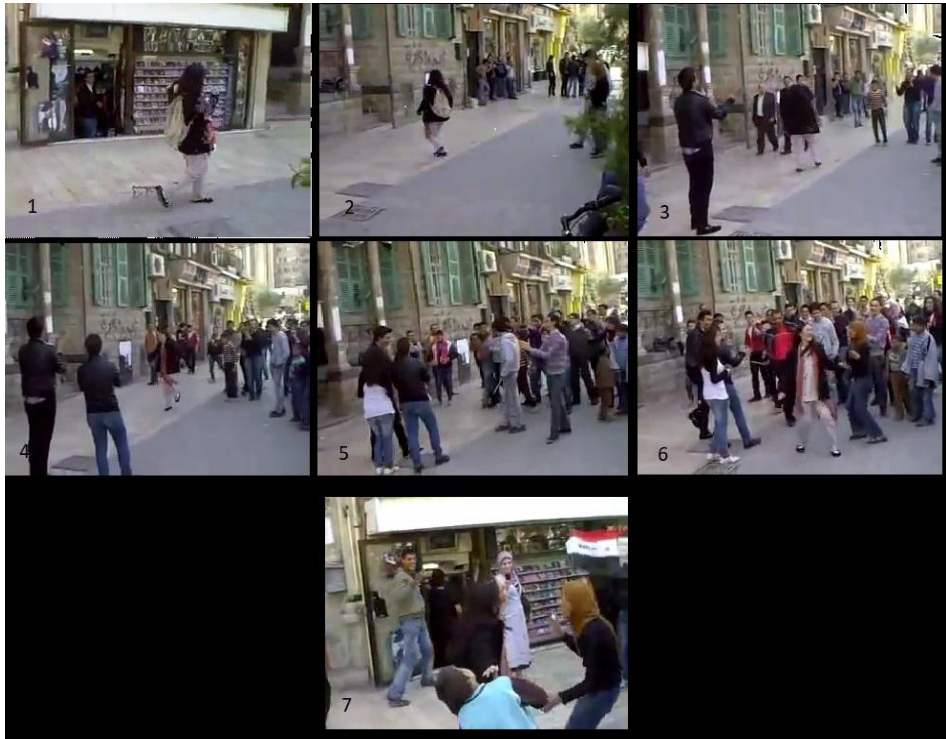
115- STANISLAVSKI Constantin, *An Actor Prepares*, 1st ed. (original 1963), New York and London, Routledge, 2003, p. 293.

116- French researcher Cécile Boëx points to a number of variables in the documentation of the first demonstrations: “These recordings were taken in the depth of the event, without strategy, the cadres are shaking, the image is blurred, and there are few clues to understand the spatial distribution and temporal flow of the event...They give an impression of realism...They reflect a tension and contradiction between the intensity and credibility of the experience and the abstract form of its audiovisual translation” (BOËX Cécile, DEVICTOR Agnès, *Syrie, une nouvelle ère des images-De la révolte au conflit transnational*, 1st ed. Paris, CNRS Edition, 2021, p. 70).

117- ADWAN Ziad, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

### *Silence: A Sign of Survival and Difference in Political Opinion*

The act of assembly after 2011 in the Syrian capital Damascus has highly political meanings, especially before the eyes of the Syrian regime and the human mass responsible for maintaining public order. In addition, any sign or opportunity to show loyalty is exploited by law enforcement officers and obedient citizens to deflect suspicion from themselves, whether sincere or cynical. This is evidenced by the video in which a young girl is shown dancing to a patriotic song in the capital Damascus<sup>118</sup>, an event that quickly turned into a kind of impromptu celebration or Happening. As soon as the young girl started dancing, passers-by gathered around her and more and more people joined in, waving flags, clapping and dancing.



2 Basil Homs al-Assad, (Oct 21, 2011)

The previous (spontaneous) formula is a sign of how obedience is produced and embodied, and of its empathic capacity, since it is contagious. It is also an invitation to participate, addressed to those present at the event, an invitation initiated by the song, then by the dancing girl. This improvised performance has

118- The publication of the video documentation indicates that it is in Homs, while it is in Damascus, in Arnous Square.

a political value because it is visible and recorded by the camera. The place is transformed into a stage of obedience, where boundaries appear between (the obedient), who adopt and consume the symbols of authority, and (the silent), who refuse to participate in the event.

This (spontaneous) call for obedience is accompanied by calls for protests, demonstrations, and assemblies against the regime. In these public calls, the participants, with their bodies assembled and in motion, declare that “those who do not participate have no morals”. In other words, the call must be heard and heeded, otherwise the silent or non-participant is considered immoral. However, as we see in many of the recordings showing forms of protest in Damascus, joining the crowd of demonstrators is a risky act. Watching and being surrounded by the space of protest, whose boundaries are defined by the bodies of individuals, has a political and categorizing value. Answering or refusing the call redefines one’s political category (obedient/enemy). These categorizations are based on a series of signs that must be visible to the camera, whose place we do not know, and to the eyes of informants and law enforcement officers.

In a recording of a demonstration in Bab Srijeh on November 5, 2011, demonstrators call out, “He who does not participate has no morals”<sup>119</sup> and walk through the crowd in the market. We can spot those who do not participate, that is, those who do not respond to the call, maintaining their categorization as obedient citizens. They watch without intervening, as if responding to the call could turn them into potential enemies who could be killed during the protest or later. Thus, the space of demonstration produces a state of exception, that is not temporary<sup>120</sup>. The camp itself is immediately activated by the bodies of the demonstrators<sup>121</sup> and those around them. The “spectators” invited to participate are not passive, and silence here does not mean that they are neutral or uninvolved, but rather that they have not responded to the call and have maintained their political categorization.

Silence here is a visual sign of their sincere or cynical obedience, and their refusal to be enemies in front of cameras and snitches. This sign of survival, the embodiment of silence, was back then transformed into an accusation. The slogan “Your silence kills us”, which was later taken up by the demonstrators, was addressed to everyone: obedient people, countries, presidents, and so on.

---

119- AL-MAYDANI Ahmad Fawaz, *Bab Sreija Market Demonstration 5/11/2011 in the Center of the Capital Damascus*, Damascus: [s.n.], 2011.

120- WEIZMAN Eya, *op. cit.*

121- Judith Butler points out in “Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly” that we must not fall into the trap of categorizations and say that those who demonstrate in the streets and exercise their right to assemble “become insignificant in life” (BUTLER Judith, *Rassemblement: pluralité, performativité et politique*, 1st ed. Paris, Fayard, 2015, p. 2). Her analysis does not address demonstrations under emergency laws and states of exception, where those who assemble are subjected to violence that threatens their lives, not just violence aimed at dispersing the assembly.

Silence is no longer a sign of obedience, but an unjust accusation of complicity in the crime committed by the Syrian regime.

The space of demonstration contains elements of the Theater of the Oppressed, or Invisible Theater<sup>122</sup>, a subcategory referred to by Augusto Boal. When the demonstration is a show of rebellion, a rejection of the existing regime, and the people surrounding it are invited to join because they find themselves as spectators, their refusal is characterized by remaining silent, maintaining the mask of obedience, for fear of what we don't see in the recording. They could possibly be arrested, killed, or end up as a bare life in a security branch, or in the space of the demonstration itself, which is a dangerous, moving space that involves even the unwary and passers-by because of their movements.

We use the concepts of Invisible Theatre here to say that the participants in the demonstration are considered performers, while those around them are not an audience in the traditional sense. They experience what they have never seen before, "All the people who are near become involved in the eruption and the effects of it last long after the skit is ended."<sup>123</sup> This involvement, in the performative sense, does not mean that they become co-performers in the performance, since "whatever happens to the character, happens vicariously to the spectator"<sup>124</sup>. On the contrary, the silent audience does not want to be subjected to what the performers are subjected to, in a rejection of the invisible theatrical formula that involves the audience in the "play"; the embodiment of silence here is a negation of the play and the confirmation of the official role: the obedient citizen who doesn't commit to the new role.

Silence offers a kind of protection to those who embody it, who are obedient, do not respond to the call, and stand on the edge of the space of protest, marking its limits. They are under suspicion, but the charges against them are not clear. Silence is a mask of obedience, a performative sign of self-identification (I don't agree with what is happening in front of me, out of fear or conviction). A clear and visible sign in front of hidden and obvious cameras. Some of them are even very close to the demonstration, but they remain silent and watching, standing on the dividing line between the possibilities of hostility and the salvation of obedience enjoyed by the obedient citizen who distinguishes himself from the "enemy" by his performance.

We can see a moment of standing on the border in another demonstration, where the spectators, or the fearful obedient, intervene to hide the voices of

122- Augusto Boal defines Invisible Theater as "It consists of the presentation of a scene in an environment other than the theatre, before people who are not spectators.... The people who witness the scene are those who are there by chance." (BOAL Augusto, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. Maria-Odilia Leal Mc Bride, Emil, 1st ed. London, Pluto Press, 2008, p. 122)

123- *Ibid.*

124- *Ibid.*, p. 84.



the demonstrators, and the signs get lost between the two categories. What interests us, as can be seen in image (1), is the border. The veiled woman chanting personifies (the enemy). Those who tried to silence her and those who stood at the back of the car, without movement or speech, are witnesses to what is happening, outside the confrontation, not responding to anyone's call. They are either silent spectators or obedient followers, we can't say, especially as the space of the demonstration here is blurred, making categorization unclear.



It is noteworthy that these silent persons have clear faces and are involved in the space of protest, an unexpected event. More importantly, unlike the protesters who have an escape plan, the involved viewers find themselves in front of the camera and a call to chant. Their silent response appears as a rejection of (enemy) categorization and as a means of survival.

At the end of a recording documenting a demonstration in Damascus, during which “freedom, freedom, freedom” is chanted<sup>125</sup>, people are shown outside the demonstration space. They have not intervened to participate in or stop the event, but are watching from a distance, silent, motionless. They observe from a distance the space of the chant, which is marked by the bodies of three or four people. As for the others, they remain silent, denying that they belong to the circle of the chanters, in other words, the space of exception formed by the manifestation neither includes them nor is activated by them; they are, by their silence, the limit between the obedient and the enemy.

A description of this moment of silence and the attitude of the spectators are mentioned in *Aladhin Massahm Al shr* (Those Touched by Magic): “One night in May 2011, Mehvan Hajo witnessed a small demonstration as he drove home.

125- SHANUBA FM, « Damascus Protest/The Dawn of Syrian Revolution 15/3/11 », [online], March 2016. Available at: [https://youtube.com/watch?v=j\\_\\_INVqWPKs](https://youtube.com/watch?v=j__INVqWPKs) ; TAMER Turkmane, « First Demonstration in Damascus: Marwa al-Ghamyan, Noura al-Rifai, and Some Young People Arrested in Damascus », Damascus, [s.n.], March 2011.



Around seventy young men were chanting: ‘The bird goes high and high Bashar bye bye, Goodnight’. Mehvan forgot himself and watched the demonstration stroll confidently between the interlocking alleys of Al-Hajar Al-Aswad, watching the movements of their hands, their footsteps and their glances from beneath their kufiyyeh. When the shooting started, Mehvan ran like a madman between the houses, panting and terrified. For the first time, he felt such palpitations, his heart almost stopped”.<sup>126</sup>

The representation of silence has a political value from the point of view of protesters, who accused the silent of being passive or wasting the lives of their peers, and described them as silent witnesses or participants in the killing. We don’t adopt this accusation, but we focus on the creation of a new political category (the silent ones). We don’t know whether it’s a homogeneous, obedient mass or a very different one with different aspirations. Surprisingly, these categorizations are very fragile. For example, In a demonstration in Damascus, where protesters chant: “There is no god but Allah, the martyr is Allah’s lover, and the people want to execute the president”, silent spectators appear on the far left<sup>127</sup>. We could not include a photo of them because the video of the event was too blurry. Similarly, at a demonstration in Sha’alan, the silent ones also appear (naser2016, 2011), as a speechless mass watching from a distance, not involved in movement and chanting, as it is shown in image (2).



126- YASSIN AL-HASSAN Rosa, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

127- SHAM Network, « Sham-Damascus - Shalan Protest in the Heart of Damascus 8-6-2011 », [online], June 2011. Available at: [https://https://youtube.com/watch?v=O9f\\_\\_gNg1W4](https://https://youtube.com/watch?v=O9f__gNg1W4)

The search process itself in the blurred images is very difficult as it's not really possible to determine who is chanting and who is silent. It is also a distribution of accusations and categories based on overt signs that cannot be precisely controlled. This indicates the fragility of the distributed accusations and their relationship to silence. It also reveals a heterogeneous mass whose intentions or roles are unknown to us. We only know that they survive without understanding their political orientation.

Here, we face what might be called “performative and theatrical citizenship”. In other words, the relationship with political sovereignty, the definition of the citizen and the rights he possesses, are governed by forms of public performance. The adoption of official political symbols in public space is not only for the sake of defining belonging and avoiding the violence that can be applied to enemies due to the state of exception, especially since the authority's relationship with (enemies) in public space is also publicly broadcast on screens. Silence here is linked to the effect of terror created by images of torture, death, and witnessing what happens in the security branches, or the killing in demonstrations. These images portray not only an imaginary relationship with authority, but also a circulating reality; in other words, the punishment promised by authority to its “enemies” is a public punishment and not just a narrative.

We return to the question: “Where am I?” asked by the one who is silent, the one who finds himself on the edge between the space of protest (the possibility of death) and the space of obedience (survival), between his status as an obedient citizen and the possibility of becoming an insignificant life. He may become involved in and witness of an act of protest that invites him to participate, to risk his life and to change his political categorization. The person on the edge has possibilities of escape, as in the case of Mehvan Hajo, described by Rosa Yassin Hassan. In the same novel, we find a description of the space of protest itself, the position of the individual when he is involved in it, and the terrible effect it has on him, paralyzing his movement. We also read about a girl involved in a demonstration in Damascus who said: “I was afraid and tried to leave the place, but something nailed me to the spot and opened my eyes wide, as if to say, ‘Remember... engrave it in your memory,’ and I engraved it in my memory, that late morning: ‘Enabling Disobedience’”<sup>128</sup>.

The metaphorical edge on which the silent person stands, watched by those around him and by the cameras, constitutes the moment of deciding whether or not to participate in the act of protest. The place here is both physical, as the images and recordings show, and conceptual, as the edge embodied by the silent person shows the effect of the terrible, where “there is no instinctive movement of flight in order to survive”<sup>129</sup>. Silence and stillness are used to avoid

---

128- YASSIN AL-HASSAN Rosa, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

129- CAVARERO Adriana, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

accusation. Because of the movement of the demonstration, the location here is impossible to determine, but being on the edge in silence puts the person in the circle of accusation if he does not run away like Mehvan Hajo. His efficacy and his decision are denied. He defines himself through the denial of movement and voice, taking the form of an iconic object, parading without intervening in what's going on around him, offering no sign other than obedience.

### *When Will Farouk al-Sharaa Defect? "How to Avoid Talking"*

At the beginning of the revolution, Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa became the hope of many revolutionary supporters. There were bets that he would defect, that he would be one of Assad's closest and most senior figures to turn against the Syrian regime, but he didn't, and the whole affair became something of a popular joke. It was then interpreted that al-Sharaa was under pressure to appear in public or that he was under house arrest and unable to express his views. He did not speak out about what was happening in Syria at the time<sup>130</sup>, even when his book was published. His previous public appearance, before the book was published, was presented as a way of clarifying the situation, as we read in one of the press articles referring to it: "Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa appeared in public on Sunday for the first time in more than a month (news published on August 26, 2012), following reports of his defection"<sup>131</sup>.

This silence (instead of talking) is not limited to political figures; it also applies to cultural and artistic figures active in the public sphere, especially since the Syrian regime uses this class to play a political and public role on the screens<sup>132</sup>.

130- The Arab Center for Research has published a book by Farouq al-Sharaa that is more like a memoir, titled "The Lost Novel." The book was published in 2015, but we read in the publisher's introduction, "This book was completely finished in April 2011, but we decided to wait and not publish it because of the situation in Syria, but the delay was too long. Recently, we felt that we could not delay the publication of the book any longer." (AL-SHARAA Farouk, *Al Riwaya Al Mafquda (The Lost Novel)*, Doha, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015, p. 10) This is the only reference to what Syria has witnessed since 2011, without any reference from Al-Sharaa.

131- FRANCE 24, Syrian Vice President's First Public Appearance in Over a Month, *France 24*, [Online], August 2012. Available at : <https://france24.com/ar/20120826-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%>

132- Donatella Della Ratta, an Italian academic, describes in her book "Shooting a Revolution" the Syrian regime's use of artistic and cultural figures to improve its image among Syrians, moving them from the artistic to the political sector. This can be seen in the meetings to which artists, more specifically actors, have been invited to discuss what's happening in Syria at official conferences, thus bringing the class of artists and intellectuals into a political position on the screens. She notes that the actors themselves became negotiators "who went to the places of conflict to listen to the demands of the protesters and try to negotiate with them to find a solution to the crisis. (DELLA RATTA Donatella, *op. cit.*, p. 41.)

This is an “information war”, in which image and a clear public position play a role in controlling public opinion, whether inside or outside Syria. In this context, a category of public players emerged, preferring to be silent or avoid entering this war<sup>133</sup>. We won’t list all their names, but it is possible to mention the spread of the so-called “black lists”. This category was divided according to their positions, with each party producing its own lists and categorizations. Some of them even refused to be in the same camera frame as supporters of the Syrian regime, as in the case of Fares al-Helou, who refused to participate in “any work in which Syrian artists who have kissed the boots of the military in one way or another are present”<sup>134</sup>. All these divisions are also reflected in the protesters’ call, which is summarized by the slogan: “Your silence is killing us”. Silence here expresses a political stance with a performative effect, namely the accusation of complicity in the killing. This accusation is directed at the Syrians, the international community, and any group that has not recognized or at least taken a stance on what is happening, and has not heeded the call “He who does not participate has no morals”.

This accusation of silence and division in the ranks of artistic and cultural personalities is historically recurrent and not limited to the Syrian case: Why did Konstantin Stanislavski remain silent about Stalin’s crimes<sup>135</sup>? Why did Heidegger remain silent about Nazi practices and at one point supported them<sup>136</sup>? Why is anyone who denounces dictatorship in the Arab world considered a traitor<sup>137</sup>?

---

133- It’s also worth noting that many artistic personalities have turned to political activism, such as actor Jamal Soleiman who participated in the negotiation sessions. This is not the first time that Assad has met with actors and workers in the cultural sectors, as if direct dialogue with the head of power is capable of change, since only he - Assad - has the authority to change, in any sector of the state, even if it means closing a department of the Higher Institute of Dramatic Art, as Soleiman said in an interview he gave on the details of his meeting with Assad, which was published in Qalamoun Magazine, issue 17, October 2021.

134- Cf. YOUSSEF Dellair and HELOU Fares, *Resistance through art, Untold Syria*, [Online], December 2021, Available at: <https://syriauntold.com/2021/12/16/fares-al-helou-resistance-through-art/>

135- There is uncertainty about the position of the Russian director and theorist Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938). Despite the Soviet Union’s adoption of his approach to acting, he remained fearful and suspicious of the eyes and pens of informers. In Paris, when Harold Clurman (1901-1980) insisted on asking him about his stance towards Stalin, Stanislavski answered with a single sentence: “He is not a stupid man” (BUTLER Issac, *The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act*, 1st ed. New York, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2022, p. 170), and his political position has remained unknown until now, but it is said that his approach changed at the end of his life; that is, he did not focus on psychological aspects because the Soviet government would not approve of it.

136- The debate about Martin Heidegger and his position continues to this day, and Jacques Derrida offered a playful interpretation in 1987, in his book “Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question”, by asking the following questions: “Is it possible that he did not know how to avoid what he knew he had to avoid? What he had promised himself to avoid? Is it possible that he forgot to avoid? Are events more complicated and intertwined than they are?” This could be the chapter of another book, which I imagine could be entitled: “How to Avoid Talking.” (DERRIDA Jacques, *op. cit.*, p. 12).

137- In the introduction to the chapter on “Silence” in his book “Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World,” Kanan Makiya raises a number of questions about the Arab intellectuals and their relationship to dictatorships and their practices. He calls himself a “traitor” (MAKIA Kanan, *Cruelty and silence: war, tyranny, uprising, and the Arab World*, 1st ed. New York, WW Norton & Company, 1993, p. 234) for raising these issues and can even be stripped of his Iraqi citizenship for thinking about them, which in our case applies to Syrians for expressing views that are not in line with Baathist ideology.

This silence is justified by a sectarian fear<sup>138</sup> and spread to different personalities, all the more so as many artists and public figures remained silent in the face of what is happening, despite the testimony of many of them on the practices of the Syrian regime. Here we understand the difference between the silent masses and the justifications for this silence: fear of the brutality of the Syrian regime, fear of losing one's job, fear of the revolution itself, and the inability to find a place in the new changes and the worlds of migration and refugees. On the other hand, some of them have turned into sycophants, others into delusional spokesmen for the regime, others into mockers and "worshippers<sup>139</sup>" of Assad for sectarian or other reasons.

What interests us is the "silence" of this heterogeneous group, different to the point of contradiction, as if certain expectations that were disappointed. This system of expectations is based on an assumption that has nothing to do with political positions, but rather with the sectarian division in Syria on the one hand, and being aware that a group cannot remain silent because of its previous positions on the other.

Thus, attempts to answer the question "What is the position of the silent one, or what is he doing in his silence?" are futile. For example: in the book "Operation Caesar" we read about a military photographer who leaked photos of dead detainees, and hid his political position until he left Syria. During this period, he shared photos, while maintaining his "silence" even after his survival for fear of reprisals from the Syrian regime. Moreover, there were also those who kept silent in order to protect their interests, so that they could move freely in and out of Syria without being counted on one side or the other.

No coherent reading can explain the previous silence. Each of the readings and their different sectors do not provide a generalizable explanation nor a basis for further analysis, especially since we do not have precise information about who is silent; that is, silence is a strategy that makes analysis difficult. Considering silence here as a political position, which is a form of representation and belonging to the obedient people, reveals that obedience is only a mask and that what is really under it cannot be detected, especially since some are silent but contribute to the cultural and political production in Syria.

138- Lisa Wedeen published a book entitled "Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria," in which she refers to the silence of a group of Syrians, some because of sectarian fear, or perceived sectarian fear, and others, public figures, because they benefit from the regime and the (freedom) it offers them, as in the case of Syrian filmmaker Al Laith Hajo.

139- Fawaz Haddad describes a character who worships the immortal leader to the point of slavery. This character approaches Hafez al-Assad and draws up a plan to make him a kind of god, present everywhere through statues, photos and other propaganda methods; on the ground, we also see images of public movements and performances that resemble the cult associated with Assad, perhaps here we can adopt the concept of symbol consumption behavior to the point of sanctification because of the political promises they offer when taken to the extreme.

Beyond these analyses, Farouk al-Sharaa's silence can perhaps be seen as a pragmatic strategy. It's a strategy that doesn't involve withdrawing from the public space (if it exists at all), nor ignoring the "exceptional" event the country is witnessing. Rather, it's a strategy by which individuals renounce being politically effective, i.e., they play no part in what's happening, giving up decision-making as the sole prerogative of political sovereignty. That is to say, there are those who witness what is happening in Syria but do not take a clear stance at the moment of division between opponents and supporters because they do not have physical and economic guarantees. Perhaps this explains the "I know very well, yet nevertheless ..." methodology that Lisa Wedeen uses to explain the political phenomenon in Syria and its relationship to individuals, meaning: ("I know that the Syrian regime is killing the people and suppressing the revolution, yet nevertheless I must remain silent for the sake of my life.)

Although we are not able to interpret this silence and analyze the silent characters or the silent human mass, it can be seen as an extension of the horror effect and the fear of being in the place (of the victims). The images and videos showing the brutality of the Syrian regime prompted those who witness it to imagine horrible things, and revealed the fragility of the human body and its capacity to fragment and deny its identity, especially with the transmission of bare lives inside the security branch to the outside, whether the regime intends it or not, whether we document it or call the world to action. The images broadcast sow fear in the viewer: "Gripped by revulsion in the face of a form of violence that appears more inadmissible than death; the body reacts as if nailed to the spot"<sup>140</sup>.

We can say that the frequent and constant broadcasting of images of demonstrations, accompanied by severe repression and images of corpses, spread mana of fear. These products, which are consumed as the city and official cultural products are consumed, have a horrifying effect on individuals, especially since "the dead body, no matter how mutilated, is only a residue of the scene of torture."<sup>141</sup> However, it is notable that the scene of torture is present and visible in many cases, witnessed, commented on, and circulated as an event that can happen to any "'vulnerable' viewer." As a result, the disciplinary or horrific nature of these recordings is revealed, as the violence in them "aims to produce vulnerable beings"<sup>142</sup>. Needless to say, the political value of these images shows how to deal with the enemy, not as a prisoner, but as an "ontological threat to our existence"<sup>143</sup>.

The former silence is similar to the silence of the detainees, however, after 2011, stories from the (inside) became public, circulated in serious and entertainment

---

140- CAVARERO Adriana, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

141- *Ibid.*, p. 31.

142- *Ibid.*, p. 34.

143- MBEMBE Achille, *Politiques de l'inimitié*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.



spaces, and were part of the imagination of sovereignty and how it deals with “enemies”. The extreme violence and the images of dead children<sup>144</sup> reveal a powerlessness or vulnerability that can be described as the category “that bear no arms, and thus cannot hurt, kill, or wound ... a person who, attacked by an armed other, has no arms with which defend himself ... like a child”<sup>145</sup>.

It’s important to note that these horrific images have an aesthetic aspect. The way they are photographed, their low resolution, and the voyeuristic way in which they were taken give them a certain authenticity: “The less polished pictures are not only welcomed as possessing a special kind of authenticity”<sup>146</sup>. Here, Salwa Ismail’s approach is noteworthy, as the use of violence and its horrific images is evident “in a visual display of the repugnant and also in an imagining of the spectre of the repugnant and grotesque. Moreover, this is an imagining that threatens to engulf the self, positioned as an at-risk subject or spectator drawn into the conflict by virtue of being there, witnessing or watching.”<sup>147</sup>. What we’re trying to describe here is the effect of horror, both physical and psychological. Here, silence is a fear, not only a fear for oneself, but a reaction to protect oneself from disappearing. This violence threatens the unique self of the spectator/witness, the self that shapes us in a physical, psychological and political sense, the self that can find itself in the place of those killed and plunge into a horrible silence.

The horror thus prevents any logical reaction (ignoring what’s happening in Syria and remaining silent about it, as in TV interviews), paralyzes those who witness it (the linguistic sense of the horrible), and keeps them silent and afraid of being a surrogate for those killed (the empathy effect). When the silent one asks: “Where am I?”, the characteristics of a traditional place disappear: The home, the street, the school, the playground, the hospital are all combined into a single image. They are all potential spaces of extreme torture, painted with images of bodies subjected to violence. This is what can be described as the Uncanny Effect, a word that has no equivalent in Arabic, which is the aesthetic, psychological, and physical effect that can be defined as (the frighteningly familiar, the suspiciously known, the terrifyingly distinctive, the strange in its familiarity, the terrifying

144- One of the terrifying ironies is the use of photos of some of the Syrian regime’s victims in entertainment products, as in the case of the child Alaa Foz, who died in 2013. His photo appeared dead in the background of a scene in the 2014 series “A Very Hard Birth.” His father discovered the matter while watching the series and confirmed that the photo used in the second season of “A Very Hard Birth” was the same photo he had taken of his son, which he had published in his archive documenting the crimes of Assad’s forces (BAQBOUK Omar, « Using the Victims: Drama Invests in Massacres », In ALARABY.co.uk, May 2018, [online]. Available at: <https://alaraby.co.uk/%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8F-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B6%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AB%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%B1>).

145- CAVARERO Adriana, op. cit., p. 30.

146- SONTAG Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 1st ed. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 27.

147- ISMAIL Salwa, op. cit., p. 12.



in its presence, the lonely in its uncertainty, the confusing in its obscenity, the obscene in its certainty, the vaguely obvious and ambiguous)<sup>148</sup>. This feeling creates an imaginary place in the mind where we resemble those we see, a silent place where we are helpless victims, a place that the mind cannot imagine despite its close correspondence to reality. This is what the question “Where am I?” refers to and can be answered with: “I am where everyone I see is”.

## Conclusion

The question “Where am I?” was repeated throughout the present research, in different contexts, and each time, the “self” had a different political definition: (enemy, friend, bare life, citizen, obedient, rebel, accused, etc.). Each of these definitions unfolded a different context, revealing that silence is a space that does not reflect homogeneity, but rather difference, sometimes to the point of contradiction. For example, someone who is silent in a march in support of the Syrian regime is different from someone who is silent in a protest against the same regime.

It is also interesting to note that silence in its simplest meaning, i.e., refraining from speaking, was a survival strategy in many of the states of exception we mentioned. In other words, the practice of silence is essential to protect one’s life, both literally and figuratively (“keep one’s job,” “keep one’s property rights,” etc.). This strategy involves not only telling the truth or lying, repeating or criticizing official propaganda, but also ignoring and distancing oneself from the tragedy itself. At the same time, what detainees tried to avoid talking about was somehow revealed. Surviving the silence later allowed the survivor to “talk”, “speak” and “testify”, which means that it is a temporary strategy, not a choice based on a conviction or a total belief that nothing happened or that what the official media repeats is the “truth”.

The previous forms of silence threaten the archival regime in Syria. We relied on literary works and compared them with testimonies as a technique for attempting to track the nature of the Syrian regime’s work and the dynamics of its physical and ideological repression. However, they were not sufficient because they were only indicators and could not be generalized to all cases, which was also one of the issues of silence, then of speaking out later and remembering what happened. The absence of official or semi-official archives leaves a great deal of room for improvisation, whether on the part of those responsible for silence in the broadest sense or the witnesses themselves. Words like: “everyone”, “all”, and “Syrians” are generalizations related to the politics of silence and attempts to uncover them, but at the same time they do not

---

148- I tried to find equivalents to the word “Uncanny” and its relationship to horror in the Syrian case, as shown in the article “On the Valley of Familiar Strangeness and Dreadful Similarity”, published in Syria TV on December 17, 2020.

allow for a deep and extended reading of the nature of stories and the politics of their production, which is precisely one of the consequences of the memory assassination or memory annihilation that we talked about earlier. Silence creates a mass of terror and fear that can be used by the most powerful as an instrument of repression and, more importantly, as a horror scenario or, in the terminology of the term, “an imagination of the relationship between political power and its citizens. Such scenarios regulate the behavior of individuals in the form of unwritten norms, but with results that can be said to be guaranteed.

It is also noteworthy that silence is not limited to a single class or category of society. Everyone (the word here is an exaggeration) is silent, from a citizen who ignores what is happening around him, or who remains silent when a security officer beats another in public, to the highest officials of authority, as in the case of Farouk al-Sharaa. This technique has several interpretations - we’ve adopted the one associated with terror - but it also has several political dimensions. Bashar al-Assad’s silence on the subject of torture in Syria is problematic, especially since he is the only one lying about it, as “everyone” knows that there is torture in Syria. These contradictions between the official, the societal and the personal threaten the self, which asked “where am I?”, the place sometimes disintegrates, or is transformed by silence. The poetic language we’ve used to describe it affects the “seriousness” of what is written, but this is sometimes unavoidable, as the place and the self-reproduce themselves according to each context.

What’s most remarkable about Syria’s multiple states of exception - and we’re not talking about a broad definition here - are those moments, or instants, that separate killing with impunity from surviving. The effect of the dual state in Syria affects everyday life; laughing and expressing opinions become a dangerous act, they can create a “temporary state of exception” and influence how Syrians see themselves and others. This is exactly what the Syrian regime’s terrorization does. Extreme cases of empathy, where a Syrian alive finds himself in the place of a Syrian dead in public, strengthen a silent bond between Syrians, and survival becomes a daily and continuous effort, whether inside or outside Syria.

Conclusions are usually intended to summarize the results of the research, or to point out the research question and how to deal with it. I must emphasize that silence is a policy and a strategy that the Syrian regime applies to its subjects and that the latter also adopt in order to survive. This is what we tried to examine in the research, but we did not succeed in obtaining a real result to “talk about” because silence still has a wide political and cultural impact, even after 11 years of revolution. What we are trying to say is that observing and attempting to theorize the techniques and forms of silence does not mean revealing what was kept secret, and this is precisely what is terrifying: to know that there are still people who are silenced, and that whatever the reasons and contexts, there are atrocities that have not yet been “talked about”.

## Bibliography

- ADORNO Theodor, HORKHEIMER Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1st ed., New York, Continuum, 1969.
- AGAMBEN Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Le Pouvoir Souverain Et La Vie Nue*, trans. RAIOLA Marilène, 1st ed. Paris, Seuil, 1997.
- AHMAD Fawaz al-Midani, *Bab Sreija Market Demonstration 5/11/2011 in the Center of the Capital Damascus*, Damascus, [s.n.], November 5, 2011.
- AL-ARABIYA, « Syrians Comment on Assad's Third Speech: «Germes Want to Overthrow the Regime» », [online], January 20, 2011, [Accessed December 2021]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/STmrxCr>.
- AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *Al-Sultan al-Hadith*, 1st ed. Beirut, Arab Institute for Research & Publishing, 2020.
- AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *The Terrible and Its Representation - Deliberations on Syria's Ruined Form and its Difficult Shaping*, 1st ed. Beirut, Dar al-Jadeed, 2021.
- AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, *Bilkhalas, Ya Shabab! 16 a'man fi Al Sujun Al Suria (Salvation, Guys! 16 Years in Syrian Prisons)*, 1st ed. Beirut, Dar Al Saqi, 2012.
- AL-HAJ SALEH Yassin, « A State of Extermination, Not a Dictatorship », *Jumhuriya* [online], April 2018, [Accessed October 17, 2024]. Available at: <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2018/04/30/الدولة-إبادة-نظام-وليس-ديكتاتوري/>.
- AL-SARRAJ Manhal, *Assy Al Dam (Blood Defiant)*, 1st ed. Beirut, Lebanon, Dar Al-Adab, 2012.
- AL-SHARAA Farouk, *Al Riwaya Al Mafquda (The Lost Novel)*, Doha, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015.
- AL-SHARIF AL-JURJANI Ali ibn Muhammad, *Kitab Al-Ta'rifat (A Book of Definitions)*, Beirut, Bibliothèque du Liban, 1845.
- Amnesty International, *The Human Slaughterhouse* [Report], London, Amnesty International, 2017. Available at: [https://www.amnesty-international.be/sites/default/files/2017-02/human\\_slaughterhouse\\_exec\\_summary\\_en.pdf](https://www.amnesty-international.be/sites/default/files/2017-02/human_slaughterhouse_exec_summary_en.pdf).
- AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, *Between Prison and the Grave: Enforced Disappearances in Syria*, London, Amnesty International, November 2015.
- Anonymous witness, *Activist's testimony about Branch 285 State Security, Violations Documentation Center in Syria* [Online], August 2013, [Accessed August 30, 2021]. Available at: <https://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/ar/reports/branch285>.
- Anonymous Writer, *Two Syrian actors perform a play in prison after being arrested at a demonstration (Mumassilan suriyan yaarudan masrahiya fil sejen baada e'tiqalihima fi muzahara)*, *Zad Jordan News* [Online], September 2011. Available at: <http://www.jordanzad.com/index.php?page=article&id=49907>.
- BAKHTIN Michael, « The Problem of Speech Genres », In EMERSON Caryl, HOLQUIST Michael (eds.), *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986, p. 204.

- BIGUENET John, *Silence*, 1st ed., London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- BOAL Augusto, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A., Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, Emil, 1st ed., London, Pluto Press, 2008.
- BOËX Cécile, DEVICTOR Agnès, *Syrie, une nouvelle ère des images : De la révolte au conflit transnational*, 1st ed. Paris, CNRS Edition, 2021.
- BUTLER Isaac, *The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act*, 1st ed., New York, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2022.
- BUTLER Judith, « Conscience doth make subjects of us all », *Yale French Studies*, 1995, no. 88.
- BUTLER Judith, *Rassemblement: pluralité, performativité et politique*, 1st ed. Paris, Fayard, 2015.
- CAVARERO Adriana, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, 1st ed. Columbia, Columbia University Press, 2011, 168 p.
- CORBIN Alain, *Histoire du silence : De la Renaissance à nos jours*, 2nd ed. Paris, Flammarion, 2018.
- DAGHER Sam, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria*, 1st ed., London, Hachette, 2019.
- DELLA RATTI Donatella, *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria*, 1st ed., London, Pluto Press, 2018.
- DERRIDA Jacques, *De l'esprit : Heidegger et la question*, 1st ed. Paris, Galilée, 1987.
- FERGUSON Kennan, « Silence: A Politics », *Contemporary Political Theory*, April 2003, vol. 2.
- FOUCAULT Michel, *Il faut défendre la société : Cours au Collège de France (1975-1976)*, 2001, *Le Foucault Électronique*. Disponible sur: [https://monoskop.org/images/9/99/Foucault\\_Michel\\_Il\\_faut\\_defendre\\_la\\_societe.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/9/99/Foucault_Michel_Il_faut_defendre_la_societe.pdf).
- FRAENKEL Ernst, *The Dual State: A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*, 1st ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, (1941 - original publication), 2017.
- FRANCE 24, *Syrian Vice President's First Public Appearance in Over a Month*, *France 24* [Online], August 2012. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/ar/20120826-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF->.
- FULLER Matthew, WEIZMAN Eyal, *Investigative Aesthetics*, 1st ed. London, New York, Verso, 2021.
- GOFFMAN Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1st ed. New York, Anchor Books, 1959.
- HADDAD Fawaz, *Al Suriyun Al' Aeda' (The Syrian Enemies)*, 1st ed. Beirut, Riad Al Rais, 2014.

- ISMAIL Salwa, *The Rule of Violence: Subjectivity, Memory, and Government in Syria*, 1st ed. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- JAMAL Ahmed [et al.], *The capital's checkpoints are disappearing. Is Damascus safe?*, *Enabbaladi* [Online], June 2018, [Accessed December 15, 2021]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/DTmrk4p>.
- MAKIA Kanan, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising, and the Arab World*, 1st ed., New York, W.W. Norton, 1993.
- MBEMBE Achille, « Nécropolitique », *Raisons politiques*, 2006, no. 1-21.
- MILGRAM Stanley, *Obedience to Authority*, 1st ed., London, Harper & Row, 1974.
- NASER2016, الفيديو الكامل لمظاهرة الشعلان وقمعها, Damascus, [s.n.], August 2011.
- SAKRAN Abdul Jawad, "The Joke... What if we investigate it as a criminal?!", *Al Jazeera* [Online], July 2018. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.net/blogs/2018/12/7/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%88-%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7>.
- SCHMITT Carl, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. SCHWAB George, 1st ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- SHAABAN Buthaina, *The World is Starting to Realize the Extent of Western Disinformation against Syria* *Al Aalam Bada'a Yudrek Mada Al Tadleel Al E'lami Al Gharbi* Dodd Surya, *AL Manar TV* [Online], February 2019, [Accessed December 15, 2021]. Available at: <https://cutt.ly/VTmrfdp>.
- SONTAG Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 1st ed. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- STANISLAVSKI Constantin, *An Actor Prepares*, 1st ed. (original 1963), New York and London, Routledge, 2003.
- SYRIA JUSTICE AND ACCOUNTABILITY CENTER (SJAC), *Trial of Anwar Raslan and Eyad Al-Gharib, Regional High Court - Koblenz, Fourth Court Monitoring Report* [Report], Koblenz, 2020. Available at: <https://syriaaccountability.org/content/files/2022/04/200420-Trial-Report-1.public.pdf>.
- TAMER Turkmane, *First Demonstration in Damascus: Marwa al-Ghamyan, Noura al-Rifai, and Some Young People Arrested in Damascus*, Damascus, [s.n.], March 2011.
- TOMLINSON Matt, KĀWIKĀ TENGAN Ty, *New Mana: Transformations of a Classic Concept in Pacific Languages and Cultures*, 1st ed. Canberra, Australia, Anu Press, 2016.
- WEDEEN Lisa, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, 1st ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- WEDEEN Lisa, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- WEIZMAN Eyal, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, 1st ed. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2017.

- YASSIN AL-HASSAN Rosa, *Those Touched by Magic (Alladhina Masahom Al Seher)*, Beirut, Manshurat al-Jamal, 2016.
- YOUSSEF Dellair, HELOU Fares, *Resistance through art, Untold Syria* [Online], December 2021. Available at: <https://syriauntold.com/2021/12/16/fares-al-helou-resistance-through-art/>.
- ZENETTI Marie-Jeanne, *Factographies: L'enregistrement littéraire à l'époque contemporaine*, 1st ed., Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2014.
- ŽIŽEK Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1st ed., London, Verso Books, 1989.

**ملخص |** يناقش هذا البحث «الصمت» ضمن مفهوم «سياسات الفناء» في الحالة السوريّة لرصد «المكان» المفاهيمي الذي يحيل إليه الصمت، بمعانيه السياسية والأدائية، حين يتم تطبيقه بعنف على الأفراد، عبر رصد ما يسمى «ضباط الصمت» سواء في الأعمال الفنيّة أو الأدبيّة، أو أشكال الأداء العلني المطيع والاحتجاجي، في محاولة لفهم سلطتهم وأثرهم السياسيّ خصوصاً لرصد أشكال «الصمت» ضمن الفضاء العام في سوريا. نعتمد في دراستنا على مقارنة تقاطعية بين النظرية السياسية مع أشكال الأداء اليومية والنظرية الأدائيّة أدائيّة performative، وعناصر من فن عناصر الأداء (performance art). كذلك نستخدم الأعمال الفنية والأدبية من منطلق «فاكتوغرافي» من أجل تطوير فهم لأساليب تسجيل الواقع ضمن العمل الأدبي، كل هذا في محاولة لتجاوز أزمة غياب الأرشيف في سوريا بوصفها «مملكة الصمت» في الشرق الأوسط حيث يطبق الصمت مجازياً وسياسياً وواقعياً على الأفراد وتساهم مؤسسات في ترسيخه وتفعيل أثره.

**الكلمات المفتاحية |** سوريا، سياسات الفناء، الصمت، التوقيف، ضباط الصمت، حالة الاستثناء

**Ammar Almamoun** is a cultural journalist and essayist working in Arab international media (such as Alarab, Raseef22, Daraj, Aljournhuria, Alaraby). With interests in theater and cultural theory and a main focus on performing arts and aesthetics, he has published papers in collective editions, in addition to articles covering a wide range of subjects (book reviews, cultural events, and cultural phenomena) translated into English, French, and Spanish. He also worked as a cultural reporter in Syria and France covering arts in the diaspora whilst co-writing and producing a number of performances. In addition to his work as a translator and a dramaturge, he is currently preparing a thesis in cultural studies at La Sorbonne – University.