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Ethnography as thrownness and the face of the sufferer

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Ethnography as thrownness and the face of the sufferer

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Abstract:

This article provides a self-reflexive account of ethnographic research conducted on the outskirts of *Burj Al Brajneh*, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, run by Hezbollah. It focuses on ethnographic research conducted with a Syrian refugee family including the mother, father and three children. The research is well captured, in hindsight, by Sarah Pink's definition of ethnography as 'reflexive and experiential process through which academic and applied understanding, knowing and knowledge are produced' (Pink: 2015: 4-5). The article demonstrates how the ethnographer's experience with the refugee children was marked, regardless of long and diligent preparations, by several dislocations: methodological, sensorial and epistemic. The ethnographer pursued a non-media centric approach (See Morley, 1992, Moores, 1993) allowing him to explore both the refugee family's media uses as well as the lived, everyday conditions that marked their media uses. Children's illiteracy and the context of war made it necessary for the ethnographer to rethink the entire methodological approach. Talk about media uses occurred in the wider context of everyday life in the time of war.

Keywords: *throwness, phenomenology, ethnography, fear, spectacle, children, Hizbullah*

Hicham: I dream of flying on a plane somewhere far
Tarik: That's your dream - to fly away to another place?
Hicham: Yes, I dream of taking people to other places.
[Hicham is a 12-year-old Syrian refugee working as a mechanic in the Dahia, South of Beirut]

Perhaps, along with describing the methods of fieldwork in which the researcher has complete control over his field, we should also draw attention to the opposite pole: when society seems to take control of the researcher who simply has to lend himself or herself to become the anonymous space on which the hitherto suppressed knowledge of society inscribes itself. (Veena Das 1985: 5)

I recall a memorable instant from the fieldwork in Beirut, in a youth club named after the late Marxist Lebanese thinker: Mahdi Amil, (interestingly situated in Dahia, an enclave of Hizbullah), when my co-researcher and I held three workshops with young refugee children from Syria, who were aged between 7 and 12. The aim was to learn about the children's media uses. Our local researcher, Miriyam, had assiduously designed a whole set of activities for the children, including writing, drawing and interactive games. No sooner had the workshops commenced than we realised that many of the children were struggling with writing, some of the children had not been to school for at least 3 years and had almost forgotten how to read and write. Hicham a 12-year-old Syrian refugee, with whom we went on to conduct family ethnography on the outskirts of a Palestinian camp in southern Beirut, certainly could not read or write, though he'd shown a keen interest in singing. His dream was to become a famous singer. Towards the end of the workshop, I coaxingly asked Hicham if could sing something for us. After some hesitation, followed by more encouragement from everyone present, Hicham started to sing in the softest and most poignant voice I had ever heard: 'the railway to *Halab* is cut off … my loved one lives in Halab'. *Halab* is the Syrian city from which Hicham and his family had to flee because of the Syrian and Russian armies' constant bombing. Hicham's voice, and the affect it produced in the room that day, initiated my metamorphosis (and that of the research team) from being a researcher(s) of media audiences to being a witness to something I can only describe as the face of the sufferer. Hicham's voice and face were the equipment/media through which I, as a researcher, had been transformed into an audience member.

Drawing on research conducted in the Lebanon in the summer of 2015 with a Syrian refugee family, also part of a bigger audience research project including fieldwork in Morocco and

the UK[1], (See Sabry, T. and Mansour, N. 2019), this article uses findings from family ethnography and participant observation, conducted over a period of 4 weeks in Beirut, to explore the relationship between media uses and fear in the context of war. However, rather than merely focusing on audiences' everyday experiences through the consumption of screen media texts, this work delineates a 'non-media-centric' approach (See Morley, 1992, and Moores. 1993) that situates the media within a wider, complex and relational structure (including both screen and non-screen media). Through the use of this intra-actional, methodological manoeuvering (between screen and non-screen media), a useful question came to the fore: Do the everyday uses of screen media by the Syrian refugee children at home replicate/mirror, at the level of content/form, the everyday, non-screen media 'absent-present' structures that envelop the refugee camp, or do they open up new spaces that make flight from such structures possible? Moreover, this work uses the notion of 'fear' to describe sensorial structures experienced by both those researched and the researcher, and uses the word 'media' to delimit a more capacious phenomenon that includes the face, body, architecture, posters, graffiti, ritual, as well as the mobile phone, etc. Doing fieldwork with refugee children kilometres away from a war zone (Syria) ensnared both the researcher and his interlocutors into an affective regime which decentred the initial aim of the research: to explore how refugee children in Beirut consume conventional media (television, phone, Internet) in the context of war and conflict. It was through encountering the face of the sufferer in the context of war, and not just uses of screen media, that *fear* and throwness (my fear and throwness) came to the fore as an economy. There were instances in the fieldwork where my interlocutors' faces, and voices instrumentally and intentionally functioned as a medium and I as the audience! How am I to interpret the audience when I, the

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researcher/ethnographer had, I need to confess, become entangled in a whole affective regime from which it was simply impossible to escape? Here, the conventional audience/researcher binary is just unhelpful, as fluctuation takes place so seamlessly and in complex affective ways from one condition/position to another. What I am alluding to here, and I hope this will become clearer as I make my argument, is more than just a plain call for self-reflexivity on the positionality of the ethnographer. My positioning, as both an audience member and a researcher of audiences, hinders the conventional audience – researcher/interpreter structure, and my analysis therefore will certainly not conform to a conventional audience/ researcher interpretation. This article is concerned with describing and unpacking an ethnographic process, a relationship of 'intra-activity' and 'entanglement' (Barad, 2007).

Thrownness as *process* and method

It is through the *thrownness* I encountered as a researcher in the outskirts of Burj al Barajneh (a refugee camp in southern Beirut) that a wider relational structure between violence, fear and 'media' was un-concealed. I borrow the concept *thrownness* from Heidegger (*Being and Time*, 1962, p, 276) to depict a double-ontological condition. As ethnographers we are often thrown into situations, settings and experiences with which we are rarely familiar. Our figuring out/finding out what things are, how they work, is only possible after such an act of throwness into the world had occurred. That's when phenomenological work starts. Ethnographers, however, are not only thrown into the world; they are, I need to add, also thrown into the face of the other. Our relation to the face of the other (in the case of this research, my interlocutors') – is part of an ethical event that decentres the phenomenological task as it reorients it towards an ontology that is primarily founded on the 'impossible' responsibility towards the other. It is through the lens of this double-thrownness that I will weave the story of my encounter with the Maimoun family. The argument of this work is

weaved using *thrownness as a double-manoeuvre*: manoeuvre 1 is inspired by a Heideggerian phenomenological take, which prompts the ethnographer to figure things out for themselves (outside pre-packaged hermeneutics/institutionalised semantics), manoeuvre 2 subscribes to a reading of ontology that is 'accomplished not in the triumph of man over his condition, but in the very tension in which that condition is assumed' (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 1998: 2). This ontological take is inspired by a Levinasian ethical human inversion:

> 'of the in-itself and the for-itself (of "every man for himself") into an ethical self, into a priority of the for-the-other—this replacement of the for-itself of ontological persistence by an I henceforth unique certainly, but unique because of its chosenness for a responsibility for the other man…this radical turnabout would take place in what I call an encounter with the face of the other… he calls to me and orders me from the depth of his defenceless nakedness, his misery, his mortality. It is in the personal relationship, from me to the other, that the ethical "event", … lead beyond or rise above being' (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 1998: 202)

Spatial Thrownness

Bourj-el-Barajneh Refugee Camp, situated in Dahia (Southern Suburb of Beirut), was established in 1948 to accommodate the influx of Palestinian refugees from what is now Northern Israel. The camp is in a southern suburb of Beirut and it is the most overpopulated camp in the city. More than 20,000 Palestinian refugees live in the camp – which was initially built to accommodate 10,000 refugees – with an influx over several years of different waves of refugees from Iraq, and, more recently, Syria – into this one square kilometre site

has made living conditions in the camp extremely difficult. The sewage system is regularly flooded during winter. The camp is run by UNRWA. The security at the entrance to the camp was extremely heavy – it still is: I, accompanied by my co-researcher, Nisrine Mansour, who was born and bred in Dahia, had to go through three check points, yet three months after the fieldwork, on the 12th November, 2015, Bourj-al Barajneh was the scene of two suicide bombings, which killed 37 and injured 180. My encounter with Dahia, in all its glory, brought to the fore elements of Arab difference, even strangeness, that could only be grasped through the phenomenological encounter. The gaze of the other (tattooed young men standing in the corner of narrow streets in the refugee camp, the army by the check point, went right through me, as Nisrine (my co-researcher) drove into the camp, questioning my being there, interrogating me, in minute temporal sequences. Let's be clear about this: I was a suspicious outsider. It is the kind of encounter that no camera lens can mediate. Distance orientates the affective nature of encounter. The phenomenological encounter of being-there, unlike televisual mediations, is a reciprocal process: I was both observing and being observed. It's a reciprocal dynamic of unsettling. However, as the gaze moves away from the face of the other into buildings, architecture, posters, graffiti, mourning mothers in black, another form of unsettling ensues (See Sabry and Mansour 2019). I conjured up memories from my childhood of the conspicuous displays of the then King of Morocco [Hassan II] at the school, the shops, the university, the hospital, railways, streets, highways, government offices, the barber's, the baker's and in hotels. I am not sure how they missed out hammams! In Dahia, such imagery of power, and its monopoly over appearances was more diverse, what you get is images of religious leaders, resistance heroes, martyrs, all men, of course, but different men, none the less (see Sabry and Mansour 2019). As a stranger, and an estranged British North African, what I found eerie was not just the religious and warring nature of the posters or the aura they exuded, but their size. Gigantic posters of Hizbullah religious leaders and

war martyrs are part of a violent strategy, it is an imposition on the eye, not one to just see or glimpse at, but for the vision to be filled in its entirety with nothing other than images of the religious leader and the dead young men of the resistance. The posters denote sacrifice as an idea, but also as a proposal for moral and political commitment. The length of the larger than life martyr posters serves to immortalize, to keep the dead alive in the present, in talk, popular culture, and in folk memory. These are the same streets that my interlocutors: Hicham, Sanaa and Omar, walk in and through day in and day out. They are an extension of a traditional media-ideo-scape, part of an ongoing struggle against Israel and a calling to resistance and martyrdom. They are instruments of political mobilisation.   As one observes the images of the martyrs; a live museum of the dead, I could not help but take a glimpse into the distant future of an even more sinister, dystopic reality: Hizbullah will have digitalised all the martyr posters and have by now mastered the technology of the hologram. The resistance youth are taught guerrilla warfare and hologram technology manipulation. Holograms of speaking martyrs will remind passers-by, children, and perhaps indifferent youths, of their political responsibility, of commitment – they can re-enact how they were martyred. Children may have access to interactive digitised touchscreens on street corners with holograms of martyrs teaching them guerrilla warfare.   On the way to an ethnographic session in the camp, I looked up from the car window and my eyes caught an 8 or even 9 metre-long and four-metre wide poster of a young martyr, dressed in Hizbullah attire. The poster was hanging between the first and second floor. A middle-aged woman, dressed in black, moved almost in slow motion, as she hung the washing on the line – her face intoxicated with pain and sorrow – it is the mother of the Martyr. *Um al-Shaheed*!

Thrownness **into the face of the sufferer**

We are in the family's sitting room in a second-floor apartment on the outskirts of the Camp. The room is three metres wide and in the middle of it there was a television that did not work. The room had one window, which was wide open every time we visited, but because of the high temperature and the curtain that remained down to prevent the neighbours looking in, there wasn't much air. The father, Maimoun, a 35-year-old from Rif Dimashq, who had suffered a major burn injury at work (a gas banister exploded, as he was trying to fix it), sat facing us throughout the fieldwork visits. He had to leave hospital after only three days, as his family could not afford the treatment. Abu Hicham chain-smoked as he listened to us and every-time he took a cigarette out, he courteously offered us one. He would ritually change the bandage in front of us, each time we visited, as if to make a point, revealing severe scalding and a mixture of blood and pus.

Maimoun: I tried to fix the gas bannister, but it exploded all over me. I was really lucky to survive, thank God.
Mother: 'The hospital will only have him for 2 days, even if the burns, as you can see are, severe. We could not afford it. Now we have to nurse him at home, it's very tough, I do not know how we'd have managed without people's donations. Now Hicham, my 12-year-old son, has taken over his dad's job as a mechanic. We really do not want to stay in this country, we hope to go to Europe. Only one of our 5 children is going to school. It's really a nightmare and a constant struggle'.

The noisy electric fan, which was interrupted by power cuts, a daily occurrence in Beirut, did not bring much relief. It circulated the stench of burned flesh, pus and cheap cigarettes, as we talked and sipped our very hot tea. The mother, a 30-year-old Syrian from Aleppo, talked incessantly about the war, her daily struggle to pay rent, and the abuse her children endured from the neighbours because they are Syrian, a burden on the camp, a burden on the war effort. On one occasion, Hicham, the eldest boy at 12, was late for the ethnographic session. When he showed up 30 minutes late, his face was bruised. He had been beaten up at the

entrance to the camp. It was shocking and unsettling to see the bruises on Hicham's face, and I wondered whether it made any sense at all to start asking the children about their media uses, or to even carry on with the ethnographic session that day (See Sabry and Mansour 2019).

Tarik: What happened to Hicham's face (Hicham's face was badly bruised)?
Mother: He got into a fight.
Nisrine: Who hit him, an adult or a child his age?
Mother: An adult…we were at home, and Hicham goes out to work at 6h30 in the morning, and comes back at 5:00PM

[A brief silence (stammering – indecisive ethnographic moment) as we stare at Hicham's bruised face].

Tarik: Can we use our phone to take pictures of the drawings you made?
Hicham's mother: So, you like the drawings?
Tarik: Of course, we do!
Nisrine: They're beautiful.

The research team designed the diaries in Arabic, with key cultural/social and political specificities in mind, but nothing prepared us for suffering as an encounter, and certainly nothing prepared us for television as a cadaver – the television took centre stage in the Maimoun family's sitting room, but it was a mere ornament – it was a beautifully adorned cadaver. However, it was also a live memorial of a time lost, when the Maimoun family could afford and enjoyed watching television in Aleppo. So, television as a medium, can, in this context, be read as both a dead and a live object, it lies at the intersection between multiple temporalities, a mnemonic and more stable past, a tragic present fraught with death and loss, and there's the futural possibility for revival: the revival of television as a screen and a technological object, and with it the revival of a hopeful situation, of a resolution and a better future. In the Maimoun family's household, the mother's mobile phone was *the* technology of communication, and entertainment.

Tarik: …and what is this? [pointing to Hicham's drawing]

Hicham: This is a flower vase.

Nisrine: And roses? Do you like roses? (Silence) Do you have flowers here? Or plants [Child: No] Oh, next time I'll bring one with me; you'll take care of it, and water it, yes?

Hicham: We have lots of them in Syria

Nisrine: During the '70's and the '80's there was a war in Lebanon, mobile technology did not exist, refugees would record on cassettes and send it to their families only for it to arrive 2 months later, and the families did the same.

Nisrine: But it's good that there is a way you can make sure your family is fine.

Nisrine: We hear that the situation [in Syria] lately is changing, right?

Mother: the number of people living in our village was 45,000, only 3,000 are left, they need… (Inaudible audio because of fan noise) … we honestly can't imagine life there. Every time I ring home, I hear of other deaths in the family, we have lost a lot of relatives and friends to the war. My husband was shot by a sniper few months before we escaped, he could have died.

Thrownness, Suffering and Ethnography as a form of stammering

Being thrown into the voice, the gesture and the gaze of the sufferer, as an event, is a pre-philosophical moment that resists theory and analysis and that poses different and difficult questions for the ethnographer.

Mother: I just gave Hicham and Omar a haircut two days ago, there is a young man, our neighbor he grabbed them and gave them another haircut, this time with a knife! It was uneven, and I had just given them a haircut two days ago, I went to talk to him and asked him: why did you cut their hair this way (Unclear audio because of fan noise). but for him to grab children from the street and cut their hair, it's not normal. I was really mad…If anything bad happens, they say it's the Syrians, I swear, I'm not the kind that would take someone's defense just for the sake of doing it, if my son has done something wrong; he should answer for it, but this is too much! They hate us, and they treat us like second rate citizens because we are Syrians.

The fixation thus becomes with the face of the sufferer, their speech, their daily grievances. The subjectivity of the researcher, who has here turned into an audience, reveals itself as a distorted other, a spectator of suffering, a stutterer; projecting messiness, clumsiness – a state of deferral, even desperation. This encounter with the Maimoun family invited the researcher, much later, to reconsider the 'whatness' of media, moving from its conventional definition – that of broadcasting/digitality/screen/computer to a more ontological interpretation that considers bodily organs as extended forms of technicity. (See Andre Leroi Gourhan's *le gest et la parole* 1964, as well as Gilbert Simondon's engagement with the 'trans-individual' 2018). The Maimoun family needed to make their fears and concerns part of a collective knowledge, and to do that they used speech, the body, the face, as *equipment*. '*Equipment'*, as Heidegger put it in *Being and Time*, 'is essentially something 'in-order-to'… A totality of equipment is constituted by various ways of the 'in-order-to', such as serviceability, conduciveness, usability and manipulability'. (1962: 970). My interlocutors' uses of their bodies as affective technicities of narration – including voice and face, amount to forms of media. To limit the *worldliness* of the media, therefore, to screen-media or to limit, in our case Hicham, Sanaa and Omar's media uses to the mobile phone or other screen media *alone*, reinforces the power of 'the absence of presence' (Sapiro 1988: xii, in Kleinman 2009: 233): the structural mediation of power and ideology through the poster of the martyr – the religious leader - the poem on the wall – mural art – mourning men and women – the funeral – or what amounts to the aesthetics of structural violence. The findings from participant observation and family ethnography with the refugee children and their parents intimate a more complex picture. While the children clearly derived immense pleasure from playing video games, listening to music videos and watching cartoons on YouTube (using their mother's phone), the texts they enjoyed the most showed a high level of violence.

In the absence of a working television set in the household, the Maimoun family alternated in using the mother's mobile phone to watch different content, when the mother is not using the phone to ask about family members in the war zone, or to get information (from different NGOs) about housing, and other matters such as food allowances and education for her children, the phone and its uses move intermittently from an equipment used for survival to becoming an entertainment equipment. Sanaa, an 11- year-old girl who aspires to be a doctor, negotiates her phone time after the household chores are done to play *Candy*. After finishing work, showering and eating, Hicham, the 12-year-old mechanic and the main bread winner, gets his phone time to play war video games and to listen to some Lebanese music video clips on YouTube. Omar, a young Hizbullah cadet, gets to watch his favourite cartoon, the *Child and the Colonizer*, produced by Taha TV, which is owned by Hizbullah.

In the narrow streets of the camp, gigantic images of Hizbullah martyrs converge with electrical wiring hanging from lamp posts electrifying (literally, through electricity) a dystopian live spectacle of death and martyrdom that 'monopolizes the realm of appearances' (Debord, 1994: 15), where the dead are more alive than the living and where mourning is suspended in a perpetual state of deferral - the spectacle, here, does not conform to Debord's definition of the term. It is part of an intentionally synchronized economy which normalizes death and martyrdom as a structure of feeling (as opposed to 'sleep' and 'dreaming') and, more importantly, as an instrument of political mobilization against the imperialist West and Israel's occupation of Palestine. The monopolization of appearance, in this context, and unlike Debord's definition of the spectacle, does not declare: "everything that appears is good", it is not passive acceptance that is demanded of the spectator, but a commitment to action and armed struggle. The Hizbullah spectacle is not, therefore, as in Debord's case, the guardian of a neo-liberal social dream; it is quite the opposite; it is a call to arms! Hizbullah has thus intentionally produced a Brechtian spectacle – in bringing the dead back so that their

gazes follow the passers-by, as they walk the narrow streets of the camps, and Hizbullah are

not just seeking catharsis, but political action, affiliation, solidarity and commitment. Here,

the spectators are presented with both a space for catharsis and a solution: resistance.

However, the Hizbullah spectacle is not concerned with exposing the contradictions inherent

to social and political reality (Bradley, 2006: 4). It is, instead, interested in preserving power,

as 'practical changes in conditions of existence proceed' (Debord, 1994: 20). The structures

of violence I observed in the camp (physical, visual) are, of course, the product of an

objective, even an historical reality (to say otherwise would be politically naïve). Here, the

spectacle 'is itself the product of real activity' (Debord 1994: 8). However, I argue that this

activity is concealed by the very spectacle it creates. The normalization of death, and with it

patriarchal and religious ideology, that give it aesthetics, becomes the mechanism through

which society, as Veena Das put it, hides truth from itself (Das, 1984: 5). Images of martyrs,

funerals, mural texts, the hanging wires in the camp's narrow streets, as media, reproduce, to

use Sapiro's words again, 'an absence of presence', what the spectacle conceals (through its

signs, forms and language) is exactly the workings of the political economy that sustains the

spectacle as ideology, and ideology as a spectacle. I argue that the un-concealment of the

workings of the spectacle-as-commitment requires us to see it, to use a Heideggerian phrase,

as 'a relational totality of involvements' (Scannell 2019: 39). The spectacle, as the

ethnographic fieldwork demonstrated, and as I will show, extends from the street, funerals

and posters, to other forms of aesthetics, moving image, video games, cartoons, and other

forms of visual texts.

The Child and the Coloniser

The *Child and the Coloniser*, a cartoon series produced by Hizbullah TV, was the most

popular programme for the children in the Maimoun household. Using their mother's phone,

Hicham 12, Sanaa 11 and Omar 7, showed us several episodes from the cartoon during our family visits. While viewing the cartoon with the children we could not help but notice the excitement in their faces as they explained the relationship between the child (children) and the coloniser.

Below is a brief analysis of one episode of the cartoon[2]: [opening scene] a boy and a girl (aged around 9-11) are riding their scooters in an idyllic, green setting (blue sky, trees, flowers). The boy and the girl, dressed in blue jeans and brightly coloured shoes and tops, glide happily, giggling [with happy music in the background]. As the boy and girl cross a road junction, a big bulldozer appears, driven by a soldier, wearing an army helmet with a conspicuous blue Star of David (denoting that he is an Israeli soldier). The soldier notices the two children, acts as if he's come up with a plan, then charges towards them with the bulldozer.

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[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gBYt8KwSoA

Before the soldier takes the turn at the junction in pursuit of the two children, the boy stops abruptly and points to the warning road sign denoting a cliff edge ahead. Both the boy and the girl take a detour then turn around on hearing a loud noise approaching. To their horror, they see a bulldozer approaching very fast, driven by the Israeli soldier (the coloniser) and aiming a bazooka at them. As the children try to escape, the soldier fires his bazooka at the children letting out a huge ball of fire. The boy appears to be hit, as his scooter goes under the bulldozer, and the girl looks as if she were run over by the bulldozer.

The soldier, thinking he'd killed both children, looks extremely satisfied and cheers in celebration, only to be hit by a stone on his helmet by the boy, who had apparently survived. The girl appears unharmed and gives the boy a big smile. The boy then points at the soldier and threatens to get him back. The boy and the girl take off again, this time on the same

scooter (as the other one was run over by the bulldozer) and head towards the same road that shows the cliff warning sign.

The soldier focusing entirely on the pursuit, misses the warning sign (it was his initial plan to drive the children off the same cliff), the children make a quick turn to avoid the bulldozer, half of which now hangs over the edge of the cliff, with the soldier screaming for help. The little girl then touches the bulldozer with one finger and tips it over the edge of the very high cliff. As the soldier screams, the boy and the girl look at each other and laugh in celebration.

The children found the cartoon extremely funny, and they fully identified with the child, who manages at the end of this episode to outmanoeuvre the much stronger and more resourceful Israeli soldier.

Identification, in this case, however, was not with the child as a Palestinian under occupation, for the children had little knowledge of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The children identify with the character of the child in this Hizbullah produced cartoon because he spoke to and informed their everyday lives in the context of war and survival. It spoke to their status as refugees who had had to dodge bombs and snipers as they fled the oppressive regime of Bashar Al-Assad. Below, the children show us and recount a different episode of the *Child and the Coloniser*:

Hicham: This is Omar…he watches on the telephone he goes on YouTube and writes whatever he wants.
Researcher: so, this is a children's programme on YouTube
Hicham: this is a children's programme…it's called *The Child and the Coloniser* …It's about two boys and a girl who are orphans, and a policeman who has a tank, a dog and a car, he chases the children. One time they were crossing a bridge, and he broke the bridge, he said I want them to fall, but they didn't fall, so he went to the bridge and started jumping on it so they would fall.
Researcher: So, at the end of every episode who wins? The children or the coloniser?
Hicham: The children.
Sanaa: Yes, the children, when he tried jumping on the bridge, so they'd fall, he fell instead.
Hicham: When he fell, he took his helmet off and started jumping on it, then the crocodile comes and tries to eat him [Fatima: It was funny], but then he jumps over it and runs away.

Hicham borrowed his mother's phone to show us his favourite videogame:

Hicham: I play war games.
Tarik: Where do you play? On the phone?

Hicham: Yes, there are cars in the game, they come and try to shoot at me, and I shoot first. They bring ammunition, and this is money.
Nisrine: you pick the car that you like, right?
No, I need to have the money to buy the car, but I have a selection of cars that I can choose from, because I already bought them.
T: Hicham is good at this game, the tank throws rockets at him and he dodges them.
Researcher: Hicham, what are you shooting?
Hicham: I'm shooting these cars to gain money and steal their ammunition. I have been playing it since I was working with a man as a mechanic, when I don't have work, he lets me play it.
N: Do you have internet cafés here?
Mother: Yes, we do, but I don't let them go. It's not safe.

Screen media uses by the children (including, videogames, cartoons and Skyping relatives in Syria and in the diaspora) are, as the ethnographic material showed, deeply engrained in the everyday life context of war and suffering. The children's laughter; their enjoyment of the violent cartoon series *The Child and the Coloniser,* provided a momentary affective flight, but it is none the less a flight within, rather than outside of, the spectacle. The cartoon, the murals, ceremonies, video games, are part of a relational communicative strategy that involves the core of social and everyday life. What the spectacle hides is the power structures that sustain it. As Matar, Khatib and Alshaer observed in their cogent analysis of Hizbullah's communication strategies:

> 'Hizbullah's political, economic, military and cultural mobilisation and activism cannot be seen as natural or taken-for-granted responses to accumulated grievances … or as a reactionary product of cultural essence…Rather, Hizbullah activism and mobilisation have resulted from the agency of its elites and ideologues and their implementation of a political communication strategy designed to widen its support base and increase its influence (2014: 5).

Otherness as 'uniqueness'

In the context of this work, engagement with the face of the sufferer as media (and not just with conventional screen media and its content), is an invitation to critique and trouble epistemologies and methodologies that deny the other her uniqueness, and deny us, as researchers, an ethical engagement with our research subject. This positioning that also strives to affective entanglement is, by default, an invitation to put responsibility at the heart of epistemology. 'Uniqueness' is a term that is frequently used by Levinas. Below, I quote him in full, from his work *Entre Nous.* as he describes the ethical dilemmas that come with encountering the face of the other:

> "My problem consists in inquiring into how to reconcile what I call the infinite ethical requirement of the face that meets me, dissimulated by its appearance of the other as an individual and as an object. How to enter into this comparison of incomparables without alienating the faces? For beings are not compared as faces, but already as citizens [or in the context of this work as refugees – my emphasis], as individuals, as a multiplicity in a genus and not as "uniqueness"" (Levinas, 1998: 205).

Levinas's take on 'uniqueness' exposes a discursive process in which the experience of the other, (their suffering), is carefully sequestrated by modernity's institutions *par excellence*: the media, who mediate, reveal the other's distant suffering, but they conceal something important: the uniqueness of the sufferer. Levinas's critique can be extended to exclusive ideologies that, instrumentally and intentionally, sequester the uniqueness of the face of the other, and their experiences, into big data, numbers and carefully ordered discourses of citizenship, nationalism, and even pluralism. Thrownness into the face of the sufferer as media raised a number of ethical questions, the most insistent being: What can we do? What is our responsibility as researcher? How are we to alleviate our interlocutors' suffering? What

is the relationship between knowledge and commitment? Boltanski (1999) makes the point that for a politics of pity to count as *politics*, it has to avoid the pitfalls of singular suffering – it must instead be able to convey a plurality of 'situations of misfortune'. Here, for Boltanski, a hyper-singularisation through an accumulation of the details of suffering is necessary (ibid., p,12). In this work, it was exactly because of our objection to 'hyper-singularising' the condition of suffering that we were able to encounter the 'uniqueness' of the face of the sufferer. Politics of pity cannot be developed, argues Boltanski without the 'division and separation between the unfortunates and the fortunate' (p.13). Again, in the context of this work, a total separation or divide was unattainable because of our affective entanglement with the family and its experienced daily grievances. The research team was caught between two types of commitment: commitment to the field (media audience research/cultural studies), and our role as ethnographers and the resultant ethical commitment to the face of the sufferer. The main intention of our ethnographic research was to observe media uses by Syrian refugee children, but our ethnographic encounter altered our course, and so our intended observations of media usage had largely been substituted by observations of suffering and other non-screen media cultural forms. However, in refocusing attention on suffering and the face of the unfortunate, without any real or practical plans to relieve the sufferer of their abject suffering and desolation, are we not, by default, and to misquote Madame Riccoboni (in a 1769 letter to Garrick from Paris), 'readily creating unfortunates to taste the sweetness of feeling sorry for them' (quoted in Boltanski, 1999: p.101).

Back to thrownness as method

As a method of un-concealment, thrownness reveals a complex structure where the affective, the empirical and the ethical collide. *Thrownness,* in this case, is both traversal and

processual. It is also a resource of knowledge. Phenomenologically, *thrownness* is the process through which the researcher encounters, and is affected by, the world: its joy, suffering, objects, equipment, feelings, (mis)understanding, messiness, and it is also partly this process that makes the production of knowledge possible. It is the process through which we figure things out for ourselves, as I observed at the start of this work. In encountering the other's face, the other's culture and suffering, *thrownness* also comes to the fore as an existential condition. In reflecting on encounters with children and their parents on the outskirts at the Dahia refugee camp of Burj al Brajneh, I resisted the institutionalised, meaning-making structures that privilege 'objective' truth and 'empiricism' over process. The irony is that the two are inseparable. In fact, *thrownness* was, both for me and the rest of the research team, a source of critical reflection, without which I may not have been able to modify our initial research strategy. Thrownness, as method, has a dual structure: it is at once an ontological condition and a thinking/figuring out process. Thrownness cannot be separated from the ethical events, produced by a collision between the objective world and affective regimes. It is this complex relationship that I have essayed in this work. It is an attempt at dis-entangling, a messy process, that leaves a lot unsaid and unthought.

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