Towards an Understanding of Wartime Residues Typifying Syrian Pictorial Genres: A Socio-Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to understand manifestations of psychological residues in the non-verbal discourse appertaining to Syrians who witnessed the period of warfare in Syria. It seeks to mull over the propositional content communicated in an assemblage of Syrian child refugees’ drawings and Syrian citizens’ graffiti. It also aims to convey the extent to which such pictorial genres reflect their traumatic experience along with their dilemma of agony and resilience. Essential to such an investigation is a social semiotic framework set out by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) in their pioneering study on the grammar of visual design. This theory is applied to the corpus so as to reveal eminent and thorny themes through unveiling the interaction among several semiotic resources. A descriptive-analytic approach is adopted to enquire the significance of interactive and represented participants in an image. The choice of Syrians’ creative expressions as simulacra of reality is motivated by the assumption that they are pregnant with profound meanings that echo wartime repercussions left in their psyches.

Keywords: psychological residues, non-verbal discourse, propositional content, represented participants, traumatic experience, social semiotic framework.
I. Introduction

The foci of interest of this paper are predominantly the notions of design and meaning-making brought about by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) in their seminal work on the grammar of visual design. Their theory is considered as the first socio-semiotic framework for reading images. Visual social semiotics describes “semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001: 136). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, visuals are seen as language. Ferreira (2007) cements this view as well stating that painters work in a *pictorial language* going through a range of basics governing the making of a picture. For her, the mechanisms underlying the creation of a written language and a pictorial image are very similar. In fact, the theory of the grammar of visual design cast in doubt the old theories which advocated that form and meaning are arbitrarily connected by virtue of convention.

In order to have a brief understanding of the earliest accounts in semiotics, as this is part and parcel of background knowledge to this study, it is essential to look in retrospect. The trichotomy that first derived from Peirce’s Sign Theory, for instance, distinguishes three kinds of signs, namely indexes, icons, and symbols. According to this theory, a sign has two aspects, which are form and meaning. In the early account of De Saussure, signs were seen as two-dimensional encapsulating the *Signifier*, which means a sign for something (*e.g.* a picture of a bird) and the *Signified*, the object to which the Signifier associates (*e.g.* the bird in the real world).

The corpus of this study consists of Syrian child refugees’ drawings and Syrian civilians’ mural paintings which can be described as iconic signs with reference to Ferreira’s (2007) views. She holds that pictures with all their types like drawings, paintings or photos, which are a representation of reality, are to be called icons. She also highlights that the majority of pictures are endowed with two dichotomies of meaning: visual and symbolic along with conventional and arbitrary. This scholar considers that “[p]ictorial semiotics is often concerned with the study of pictures into a more constructive verbal description while maintaining confidence in the objectivity of the practice” (*n. pag.*).

Based on the literature available, it is claimed that works remain sparse regarding studying visual art in the context of war from a semiotic perspective in the Arab context under the overwhelming tendency towards studying media products. Since the paucity of research relating to Arabian visual genres is noticeable, this piece of research tries to be among the tentative attempts to analyze graffiti proliferating in Syria and Syrian infantile drawings in the light of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996, 2006) socio-semiotic framework. Its main objective is to unveil the extent to which the non-verbal discourse echoes the silenced voice of the sign maker. The choice of such creative expressions as simulacra of reality is due to the fact that they conjure up reminiscences of dramatic ramifications of war on human psyches.

II. Literature Review

1. A Bird’s eye overview on the concepts of graffiti and children’s drawings

Tagging walls is a phenomenon that has proliferated worldwide as an act of free expression and space appropriation meant to expose the tagger’s views to the public. Gadsby (1995) argues that graffiti is observable on roughly every surface that is why it has become a logical center of interest for many scholars belonging to diverse fields of study. She holds that the term refers to scratchings, symbols, markings or mural painting on any surface not
considering the motivation of the writer. She outlined six categories of graffiti which are as follows: latrinalia (i.e. restroom graffiti), public, folk epigraphy, historical, tags and humorous. More to the point, according to Abel and Buckley (1977:3):

Graffiti is a form of communication that is both personal and free of everyday social restraints that normally prevent people from giving uninhibited reign to their thoughts. As such, these sometimes crude inscriptions offer some intriguing insights into the society in which these people belong.

Des Forges (2001) denotes that street art abounds in the world taking a range of forms and styles. She mentions that contemporary graffiti dates back to the 1960’s in New York. Yet views vary concerning whether it is art or vandalism. She considers it as a way of marking space and place. The work is an attempt to discover its different aspects including the visual, spatial, and temporal in Wellington, New Zealand.

Campos (2010) compiled 1,000 images of graffiti works located in the world’s major cities. He focused on abstract and figurative graffiti namely, letters and tags along with murals and images. Notably, the work concentrated on Western and Asian street art to the neglect of Arabian works though the Arab scene is rich in graffiti. It is to be noted, however, that there is a non-profit website, called the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, which has been trying to document revolutionary works like murals on the façades of towns and cities where the Syrian revolution has ignited. Moreover, graffiti in the while and post-revolution phases in Tunisia engendered attention and curiosity in a number of blogs (e.g. a blog entitled Tunisia Graffiti Project aiming to document Tunisia’s graffiti) and online articles (e.g. Galliot, 2011; Mekki, 2012). Thus, graffiti is a prevalent unrestrained art form that no culture can claim its property.

Children’s drawings representing sketches and personal depictions as a delineation of the real or the imaginary are important semiotic resources too. For Perry (1992: 89), “drawing is taken to be an activity which is completed when its product is complete. This product is also known by the same word, ‘drawing’”. Hence, he perceives that drawing is a binary activity comprising a process, being the child’s experience, and a product, being the final artwork. In a study on children’s drawing as iconic coding of the environment, Krampen (1991) reviewed taxonomies of drawing development. Among these taxonomies is Luquet’s (1927) who delineated five developmental stages typical of infantile drawings:

- Scribbling (ages 2-3)
- Fortuitous realism (i.e., the discovery of similarities between certain features of scribbles and objects in reality) (ages 3-4)
- Failed realism (i.e., synthetic incapacity) (age 4-5)
- Intellectual realism (i.e., the child draws what she “knows” about reality, e.g., what is inside the house as well as it exterior) (ages 5-8)
- Visual realism (i.e., the child draws what is visible only from a certain point of view in reality, e.g., with a certain perspective) (ages 8-12).

(Adapted from Krampen, 1991: 38)

Wilson and Wilson (1982) in a different account distinguished two distinct types of children’s drawings, which are the asked for and set versus the free and spontaneous. The aforesaid respectively mean solicited productions by someone (e.g. a teacher in a school) in contrast to unsolicited ones. In a semiotic piece of research, Kress (2000) drew attention to drawings created by two six-year kids. The first drawing is that of a sketch of an elephant while the second is made on the prompting of the teacher after the class visit to the Toy
Museum in London’s Bethnal Green. He studied their design arguing against the view that language represents the only fully articulated mode of representation. In a subsequent joint work, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006: 153) read children’s drawings in the light of their theory of the grammar of visual design considering them worth investigating. For them, “children actively experiment both with the interactive resources of language and with the interactive resources of visual communication. They are active sign-makers”.

Towards an understanding of the relation between psychological residues like trauma to art, it is worth peering into some papers which tackled this interconnectedness. Malchiodi (2008), for instance, asserts that when trauma happens, children draw. Their art provides a window into their experience of trauma revealing its neuropsychological nature. Such a non-verbal modality is effective because of the impact that trauma often has on language. To her opinion, “words tell our stories, but art makes it possible to bear witness to them” (n. pag.). Kaipainen (2007) also pinpoints that following periods or incidents of trauma and repression, spaces are liable to be converted into “mnemonic battlegrounds”. In the same vein, Alderman et al. (2009) point out that graffiti are evoked after tragedies as a way to express trauma. They are valuable narratives as they address different aspects of tragedies.

2. An introduction to the grammar of visual design

For long decades, focus was primarily laid on language as the only mode of representation and communication in a lot of cultures to the neglect or even suppression of other modes along with the failure to notice human potentials in various areas (Kress, 2002). Kress (2002:153) turned this to the theoretical understanding of such modes. That is why he postulated the notion of multimodality thinking that:

Semiotic modes have different potentials, so that they afford different kinds of possibilities of human expression and engagement with the world they facilitate differential possibilities of development: bodily, cognitively, affectively, or, to put it provocatively, the single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language has dampened the full development of all kinds of human potentials, through all the sensorial possibilities of human bodies, in all kinds of respects, cognitively and affectively, in two- or three-dimensional representation.

Nevertheless, the importance of language cannot be denied when placed in the visual. On the one hand, Dillon (2000) affirms that as a matter of principle verbal and visual systems are completely discrete. Yet practically speaking, one can scarcely find images without texts relating to them. He further explains that the act of assembling a text and an image constitutes a dyadic relation of explication and illustration. Ferreira (2007), on the other hand, reveals that in advertisements attaching a linguistic message to a picture is an act of “anchorage of meaning”. Such an attachment gives rise to a multiplicity of meanings compelling the mind of the reader to construe media products intricately and accurately.

It is worth mentioning that Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006: 177) differentiated between single and composite or multimodal visuals. In single pictures, the meaning is made through one semiotic mode whereas in multimodal texts, text and image or any other graphic elements are comprised as a whole. The writers suggested examining the whole visual as an integrated text. Put differently, they recommended not considering the picture as illustrating the verbal text since this entails preferring the verbal to the visual.

More to the point, in diverse visual genres such as naturalistic versus schematic pictures, visual and verbal participants are depicted. The co-authors claim a linkage between them putting forward the notion of interchangeability. They alleged that despite of the
heterogeneity of visual and verbal participants, they can be gathered under one umbrella category, which is the visual semiotic. Such a visual semiotic encompasses these discrete participants into what they call “a coherent semantic structure” or “a text” (ibid: 57). Consequently, crucial to the understanding of such texts is an understanding of this coherent whole as a unit.

Looking at what has been covered so far, a new orientation entered the semiotic scene with a special focus on pictorial grammar in the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). Language was no longer the sole mode of representation and communication. Kress (2002: 196) illustrated this notion of design saying that leading to ‘visual grammar’ in the visual semiotics is “the logic of the disposition of elements in a given space”.

In essence, Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) consider that the process of meaning-making in visual data necessitates the interaction among three communicational functions: the representational or ideational function, the interactional function, and the compositional function. In fact, this typology derives from Halliday’s (1985) theory of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFL). Kress (2002: 196) summarized the meaning of these functions as follows:

[Any grammar, whatever the mode, must serve three communicational demands: to communicate about events and states of affairs in the world; to communicate about the social relations of the participants in a communicational interaction; and to have the ability to form internally coherent entities-messages.]

Hence, studying the triadic functions of semiotic codes is required to provide a thorough reading of the corpus. The linguistic category of modality, which has to do with the degree of credibility of pictures, has significantly several connections to the aforementioned communicational functions seeing that it reveals itself in visual texts and bears different connotations. All these topical areas are going to be thoroughly reviewed in the following sections.

2.1. The representational function

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), any semiotic system represents different aspects of the experiential world. This ideational metafunction has two distinguished structures in visual communication: narrative and conceptual.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) dwelled on the topic of visual communication perceiving it as a process of structuring. They observed it distinguishingly not as a mere reproduction of reality structures but as a creation of meaningful propositions through visual syntax. For them, the representational function is twofold as it involves two kinds of visual structures or processes of representation: narrative and conceptual. The former, has to do with the design of social action while the latter, has to do with the design of social constructs.

In their work, two types of participants are identified as involved in every semiotic act. First, interactive participants “who speak and listen or write and read, make images or view them”. Second, represented participants “who constitute the subject matter of the communication: that is, the people, places and things (including abstract, ‘things’) represented in and by the speech or writing or image, the participants about whom or which we are speaking or writing or producing images” (ibid: 48). The following sections attempt to provide an understanding of each process separately.
2.1.1. Narrative processes
Narrative patterns depict participants as involved in doing something. They are connected by means of vectors. A vector is a connector formed by discernible elements (e.g. arrow, outstretched arm, tool, gaze among others). It emanates from a participant toward another or toward nothing apparent. From the earliest Perceian perspective, vectors can be said to be analogous to active verbs in language. The presence of a vector in narrative structures is considered as “the hallmark of narrative visual ‘proposition’ ” (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996, 2006: 59). Sometimes, the notion of embedding comes to the fore in visuals with a narrative, especially when a minor process is embedded in a major one.

2.1.1.1. Action processes
In narrative processes, two types of action processes can be identified, transactional and non-transactional processes. The former necessitates two participants, an actor and a goal mediated by a vector. The latter involves one participant. In other words, an actor is found without a goal. Both processes are reminiscent of transitive and intransitive verbs in descriptive grammar. It is to be noted that the presence of a goal only when representing actions denotes what is called an event. An event is clearly noticeable when “something is happening to someone, but we cannot see who or what makes it happen” (ibid: 64).

2.1.1.2. Reactional processes
A process is called reactional when the vector is formed by means of a perceptional content (i.e. a gaze or a glance). The participant from whom the vector stems is called a reacter and to whom the vector is directed a phenomenon. The co-authors highlight that “the participant who does the looking must necessarily be human, or a human-like animal- a creature with visible eyes that have distinct pupils and capable of facial expression” (ibid: 67). They also believe that such reactions are similar to actions as they can either be transactional or non-transactional.

2.1.1.3. Speech and mental processes
The contents of internal mental processes like thoughts or dreads can be portrayed as thought balloons. These contents are mediated through a Senser. The contents of speech processes, however, take the form of dialogue balloons that are transmitted via a Speaker.

2.1.1.4. Conversion processes
They can be identified as transactional processes, a form of chained representations from an actor to a goal where a goal can act as an actor in itself. In this process, the participants are called Relays. It is common in food chains among other diagrammatic representations.

2.1.1.5. Circumstances
Circumstances are secondary participants whose removal does not affect the propositional content of a narrative image but rather results in information loss. They are categorized as:

- **Locative circumstances:** Participants are linked to a definite participant called setting. The setting can be represented differently in terms of contrast between foreground and background or color saturation.
• **Circumstances of means:** Stand for the utilized tools in an action process. They are not necessarily objects. The tools can bear the function of vectors in case of absence of a vector between a tool and its user.

• **Circumstances of accompaniment:** Similar to prepositions in language particularly ‘with’, the role of such circumstances is to accompany. There is no clear vector relating participants.

(Adapted from Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006)

2.1.2. Conceptual processes

Unlike narrative patterns, conceptual patterns do not represent happenings in an image in terms of narration, that is to say in this case no actions and events unfold. Participants are rather represented “in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning”. (ibid: 79)

2.1.2.1. Classificational processes

Classificational processes are composed of two categories: *covert* and *overt taxonomy*. These taxonomies are frequently present in diagrams and charts. Covert taxonomy means that “[a] set of participants (‘Subordinates’) is distributed symmetrically across the picture space, at equal distance from each other, equal in size, and oriented towards the vertical and horizontal axes in the same way” (ibid: 87). Overt taxonomy, however, is further classified into *single-levelled* and *multi-levelled*. The former means that “[a] participant (‘Superordinate’) is connected to two or more other participants (‘Subordinates’) through a tree structure with two levels only”. The latter indicates that “[a] participant (‘Superordinate’) is connected to other participants through a tree structure with more than two levels” (ibid). In this case, interordinates are positioned in-between while subordinates at the lowest or highest levels.

2.1.2.2. Analytical processes

Participants are identified as parts and parcels of a whole structure. The whole is labeled *Carrier* whereas the parts *Possessive Attributes*. For instance, a map or an outfit showing all its parts are said to have analytical patterns. There are different sub-categories under this category but focus will be laid on one only in line with the scope of this work, which is the *temporal analytic process*. In fact, this process is based on the notion of “timelines”. This means that “the participants are arranged on an actual or imaginary line, usually horizontal, sometimes vertical. The timeline maybe topographical, drawn to scale, or topological, assembling the participants in the right sequence, but not drawing the time intervals to scale” (ibid: 94). Temporality puts forward the notion of narrative as timelines embody gradation in happenings of times gone by.

2.1.2.3. Symbolic processes

Symbolic processes revolve around “what a participant means or is”. They are classified into *Symbolic Attributive* and *Symbolic Suggestive* processes. In the symbolic attributive process, there are two participants involved: the *carrier* and the *symbolic attribute*. The former designates “the participant whose meaning or identity is established in the relation”. The latter stands for “the participant which represents the meaning or identity itself” (ibid: 105).
In the symbolic suggestive process, we speak of no more than one participant called the *Carrier* through which the meaning is carried. Mood or atmosphere is emphasized over detail and is highlighted through fluctuation of color and light. This aspect endows pictures with “genericity”, that is to say “quality of depicting not a specific moment but a generalized essence” (*ibid*: 106).

The major difference between the two overarching categories is that “Symbolic Suggestive processes represent meaning and identity as coming from within, as deriving from qualities of the Carrier themselves, whereas Symbolic Attributive processes represent meaning and identity as being conferred to the Carrier” (*ibid*).

### 2.2. The interactional function

Kress and Van Leeuwen suggest that this metafunction has to do with the interaction established between interactive participants (sign-maker and the viewer) and represented participants (human, quasi-human or inanimate participants) in an image. Different dimensions belong to this function and contribute to meaning-making like contact, social distance, and attitude.

#### 2.2.1. Contact

For Valtonen (2003), contact refers to “the presence of gaze or an ‘image act’ where something is done to the viewer” (*n. pag.*). For Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), contact is established through two forms: *demand* and *offer*. On the one hand, demand denotes that a gaze is directed to the viewer by means of a vector formed by an eyeline and sometimes a gesture in the same venue acting by that on the viewer and creating what is called an image act. Represented participants are not necessarily human by definition as animals or inanimate entities (*e.g.* the headlights of a car) can establish demand. The researchers affirmed that “[t]he point is, whether they are human or not, by being represented as looking at the viewer, they are represented as human, anthropomorphized to some degree” (*ibid*: 118). Offer, on the other hand, entails that the viewer is addressed indirectly. The represented participant(s) is the center of scrutiny of the viewer or the “invisible onlooker”. They maintained that these represented participants are offered to the viewer “as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (*ibid*: 119). Both are disconnected in that “the viewer must have the illusion that the represented participants do not know they are being looked at” and “the represented participants must pretend that they are not being watched” (*ibid*: 120).

As indicated earlier, demand and offer are associated with the linguistic category of person. In demand pictures, for example, a visual ‘you’ is addressed rather than ‘I’ as the viewer is the one being directly addressed. The researchers also relate the concept of image acts to that of ‘speech acts’ which was tackled by Halliday (1985) in his introduction to Systemic Functional Grammar. For them, image acts and speech acts are inextricable. Yet seemingly, they do not operate correspondingly in that once images offer, they offer information and once they demand, they demand the goods-and-services creating a specific social relation.

#### 2.2.2. Social distance

Social distance refers to the distance or proximity between represented participants and viewers. There are three sub-categories of distance: Intimate or personal, social, and impersonal or public. Hall (1964), as quoted in Kress and Van Leeuwen’s work (1996, 2006:
125), argues that each corresponds to a given “field of vision” which matches “the visual system of size of frame” in filmic terms. The co-authors claimed that Hall draws this notion of size of frame from the ‘proxemics’ pertaining to “everyday face-to-face interaction”. The following is a description of types of shots:

- **Intimate/personal**: An intimate shot where only the face or head that appears. In a close personal distance, the head and shoulders are taken in and in a far personal distance the person is captured from the waist up.
- **Social**: A medium shot that can be either close or far. At close distance the whole figure is seen while at far, a space around the entire figure is noticed.
- **Impersonal/public**: A long shot where the torso of no less than four or five persons is seen.

(Adapted from Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, 2006)

### 2.2.3. Attitude

Two notions fundamental to the understanding of attitudes toward visuals bubble to the surface: subjectivity and objectivity. Images expressing subjective attitudes are more likely to be naturalistic. In fact, attitudes toward the represented participants are linked to perspective or angle. The horizontal angle, for instance, designates whether the producer of the image and the viewer are involved with the represented participants or not. Involvement is indicated through a frontal angle while detachment via an oblique angle. The vertical angle, on the contrary, determines power relations. Power of the interactive participants over the represented participants is signaled through a high angle whereas a reversal of power between the two is shown via a low angle. Equality, where there is no discrepancy in terms of power, is manifested through an eye-level angle.

Conversely, pictures expressing objective attitudes are inclined to the symbolic. Examples of objective images are the scientific and the technical (e.g. diagrams, maps, charts). They are expressed by two ways: Frontal or perpendicular top-down angles suggesting by that the observer’s position. Both angles are not evenly objective. The frontal angle, as a case in point, bears action orientation and denotes a high degree of involvement. The top-down angle, called “god-like” or a “view from the satellite” (ibid: 143-147), bears knowledge orientation and symbolizes informational power.

### 2.3. The compositional function

Kress and Van Leeuwen contended that what links representational and interactive meanings of an image to each other is composition. As a matter of fact, textual meaning resides in compositional arrangements of information within a visual. This metafunction is carried out by means of three principles, which are: Information value, salience, and framing.

#### 2.3.1. Information value

Syntagmatic relations among participants necessitate placing elements in accordance with different zones which confer specific informational values to an image. Different positions are distinguishable like left and right (i.e. theme and rheme/given and new), top and bottom creating a structure of real (i.e. the factual) and ideal (i.e. the imaginary), or center (i.e. the core of information) and margin (i.e. the ancillary).

#### 2.3.2. Salience

So as to lure the viewer’s attention, some elements are emphasized while others are de-emphasized by means of placing them in the foreground or background, creating contrast in
color, or differentiating their sharpness among other means. A reading path is created oscillating from the most salient elements to the least salient ones.

2.3.3. Framing

Elements of an image are associated or dissociated by the presence or absence of framing devices like dividing lines or actual frame lines. On the whole, it is considered that the preceding principles dealt with are pertinent to study both single and composite visuals. But in order to offer a comprehensive overview, it is worth considering modality as it provides grounding on the question of the degree of truthfulness allocated to a given image.

2.4. Modality

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006: 155), modality originates from the field of linguistics and it refers to “the truth value or credibility of (linguistically realized) statements about the world”. This concept stands for the degree of truth or falsehood related to visuals. In other words, the extent to which one can say that an image conveys reality or not. For them, “[v]isuals can represent people, places and things as though they are real, as though they actually exist in this way, or as though they do not- as though they are imaginings, fantasies, caricatures, etc.” (ibid: 156). Modality oscillates from high to low. High modality is ascribed to what is more real and truthful in a naturalistic sense whereas low modality is attributed to what is less real and truthful.

There are specific markers that can enlighten the observer about the degree of modality in different accounts of visual communication. The tonal value or color, for example, marks modality in relation to three scales: Saturation, differentiation, and modulation. Other markers include contextualization, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness.

III. Methodology

This study is based on a corpus comprising eight pictures pertaining to two distinct visual genres: Syrian child-refugees’ drawings in the aftermath of their exodus and Syrian muralism that stretched across walls during the Civil War on Syria. Artworks pertaining to sheltered kids, namely survivors of traumatic incidents, were solicited and spontaneous artistic performances. Murals were also free expressive endeavors to externalize through tagging walls where the Syrian revolution blazed. Both parties found a leeway in artworking that helped them pour down wartime psychological residues. The current study’s visual representations are hyped as copyrighted materials online. They are derived from some articles and websites listed in the reference list. Although photographs or paintings are interrelated in that a history of photography started with that of painting, in conjunction with Ferreira’s (2007) standpoint, the visuals are not going to be addressed as snaps, shots, or works of art but rather as semiotic systems with regard to their design and propositional contents.

The selection criterion hinges upon randomization. The pictures appealed to the writer behind this study. In fact, the ones deemed more revealing were analyzed. They are worth being studied and understood since artworks are endowed with a conceptual meaning that triggers people’s minds (Ferreira, 2007). The paper analyzes a cluster of pictures from a socio-semiotic perspective deriving a repository of toolkit from Kress and Van Leeuwen’s theory of the grammar of visual design thoroughly dealt with in the literature review section.
The overarching concentration is the link among the tripartite functions of the semiotic code: The ideational, the interactional, and the compositional function. The image collection is studied away from aesthetics focusing on its functional semiotic dimension. The adopted approach can be characterized as two-dimensional as it is descriptive-analytic.

Each figure is studied separately and classified according to the main and sub-category it belongs to. The study is an attempt to examine the visuals in an objective manner following a given procedure. The first step consists in skimming of the semiotic systems so as to identify with their entirety adopting by that an etic stance. The second step requires scanning of those texts in order to understand the elements comprised in the composite. The third step necessitates categorizing and tagging each visual under the appropriate rubric derived from the theory. The final step takes interpreting the propositional contents and meanings of each figure adhering by that to an emic stance. And as Brend (1974: 3) put it:

The emic and etic standpoints are alternate ways of viewing the same reality. The etic standpoint is a view from outside, either random in its selectivity or with a set of presuppositions that have only a chance relationship to the scene being described. The emic standpoint is a view from within that notices just those features of the scene that are marked significant by internal criteria.

Overall, this paper seeks to reveal self-evident manifestations of wartime psychological residues epitomizing the visuals in question through examining the underlying patterns of visual design akin to meaning-making that probably do not appeal to the lay person reading them. It rests largely on a qualitative measure as the method consists in a textual analysis whereby the analyst scrutinizes and analyzes the contents of the texts qualitatively following the guidelines of the theory in question. This is to the end of coming up with hopefully plausible conceptions, interpretations, and implications based on the analyst’s angle.

IV. Realizations of the Three Semiotic Codes in the Corpus

- Drawings:

![Figure 1 A mental narrative process](image_url)
In terms of composition, the norm is to read an image from right to left, top to bottom in the Arab culture. When adhering to this mode whilst reading this image, one fracture between top and bottom and another between left and right are noticed. The top contains the peaceful warm atmosphere of Syria where a number of represented participants interact in the scene (e.g. flat, mosque, swing, kids, garden, lawn, tree, birds). The bottom, however, displays the violent cold atmosphere of war. It encompasses a gamut of interactive elements (e.g. an armed soldier, a tank, a mountain chain, stones, a jail gate). In terms of angle and perception, an oblique view of the participants (e.g. boy, tank) is highlighted. The boy is portrayed as sitting down sideways in a position of reflection and meditation, his hands cuddling his knees. His gaze denotes sorrow and suffering. In this narrative process, no vectors are discerned only the facial expression alongside the peripheral words elucidate the mental process. Notably, the mental process is not always typically identified by drawn thought balloons as claimed in Kress and Van Leeuwen’s account. In this case, the content of the inner thought is spelled out without a bubble. The senser’s utterance, which reads as follows “God when will my dream come true”, explains what the image demonstrates. The flag of Syria above the utterance contextualizes it and further cements the boy’s aspiration. The contrast between upper and lower parts and left and right sides can be read in terms of information value (i.e. given and new information). This organization brings about a dichotomy familiar to the viewer, which is peace versus war. The given image reveals the war scene, what the viewer is already familiar with (i.e. the deteriorating situation in Syria). The new depicts Syria in peace and harmony, what the boy is longing and praying for.

Arranging elements according to top and bottom produces an ideal-real association. Reading the image in this fashion, the viewer experiences the ideal, which shows the dream and desire of the senser, followed by the real, which represents the war scene as the genuine situation. Since the main participant, being the subject matter, is located in the ideal, the reading of the upper part gains supremacy. Separating him from the real is a line on top and a barrier on the left.

As far as the interactional function is concerned, modality and color are the most eminent categories. This image is endowed with a high modality or a high degree of veracity as there is a developed sense of depicting the real in a naturalistic way. This can be deduced from the sign-maker’s choices of tone. Darkening the real by means of color (e.g. brown, green) creates a dramatic effect and lightening the imaginary with soft, bright, and lively colors (e.g. green, red, orange) endows the image with a pulsating aspect.
Figure 2 A transactional narrative process

In this drawing, there is a transactional narrative process given the presence of two participants, an actor and a goal. There is an action unfolding, a shooting between two men. This process is mediated by means of a directional value. In other words, the vector emanates from the actor. It is formed by the gaze and the outstretched arm of a man at the left side holding a gun. The dotted line displaying the track of the bullet towards the goal’s head clarifies the direction of the vector. Compositionally speaking, the picture reads from left to right following the chain actor, vector, and goal. This instance depicts someone being killed as the goal is portrayed another time lying on the ground with a peripheral word written on top of the corpse as a verbal reinforcement to emphasize that he is “dead”. The goal is replicated as in picture-cued story sequence to show the next instance and outcome of the event, which is death of the victim. This representation is highly descriptive as it is drawn with a great detail of the assault. There is a demonstrated awareness of the act of murder. The gun and the bullet as circumstances of means as well as tinges of red are easily identifiable and concomitant in this act. Besides, the background is blank and devoid of details. This tells that the focus is on the event and action as it is put at the forefront rather than on the space or place. Presumably, the child mirrors a social experience typical of the theatre of war in Syria.
Figure 3 A reational narrative process

This is a transactional reactional process linking a reacter to a phenomenon. The reacter represents a bereaved woman in black shedding tears and frowning, her face is obtrusively lined and full of woe. The vector emanates from the reacter via a sad glance toward the phenomenon representing a bruised dead man presumably her relative, or acquaintance. The other human participants (e.g. a dead amputee, a baby corpse) are circumstances of accompaniment seeing that no clear vector is relating them. Yet their role is not only to accompany, but also to accentuate the meaning of death and bereavement. From an interactional stance, the whole figures are portrayed frontally creating a sense of involvement. This image can be said to bear a subjective attitude since it tends to the naturalistic. In terms of composition, a reading path is created starting from the most salient participants (i.e. the reacter and the phenomenon) who are placed in the foreground to the least salient ones (i.e. the circumstances of accompaniment). The reacter and the phenomenon are centralized as the core of information. This picture can be described as an offer picture since the represented participants are portrayed as the nexus of information and the entities for contemplation. Mood and atmosphere are further highlighted through the tonal value. The black color, for instance, designates sorrow and mourning while the dark red, the color of blood. Regarding modality, a high credibility is attributed to the drawing through color and detailed depiction of human represented participants. The putting of the Syrian flag paired with the sentence “The Family in Syri[a]” as well contextualizes this drawing and render it credible.
Figure 4 A conceptual process: A suggestive symbolic process

The representational function is realized through a conceptual process as this drawing does not represent anything in terms of storytelling. There is a total absence of action and narration. However, there is one single represented participant called a carrier, an eye glistening with tears, through which the meaning of torment is carried. Dramatic mood is emphasized through the representation of tear shedding. The crying eye is presumably a female’s eye given the shape of the eyebrow and the eye itself. Inside drops of tears two words are written in red: “Syria, dearly loved” putting the feelings of anguish and nostalgia across.

Color bears significance as it also relates to the dramatic atmosphere. In fact, the apple of the eye and the eyebrow in addition to the eye and tears contours are put in black. The words are also written in emphatic red including the signature of the creator of the image “Yazin”. According to Robert Burns, an American psychologist, doodling eyes can designate people who are vigilant observers and in severe cases those who are paranoid.

- Graffiti

Figure 5 A transactional reactional process/ a speech process/ a demand picture

This image can be understood as a narrative since it is a transactional reactional process
embedded in a speech process. As a matter of fact, the light is shed on one represented participant, an icon of infancy, who is put to the fore as playing a dual role of a reacter and a speaker. The former is a fictional character plainly known in children’s cartoons, called *SpongeBob Square Pants*. This quasi-human character who has received worldwide rapturous acclaim was often featured as fit and grinning. Conversely, in this instance, he is represented as bleeding and crying. Unquestionably, what is happening around to Syrian students is what reduced him to tears. The reacter/speaker is giving a groan of dismay inferred from the words “Save Syrian students” and is raising his arms beckoning to the world like a sign of a distress call. He is evidently calling a halt to glaring human injustice and iniquity.

In fact, what makes this picture a demand is the vector emanating from the reacter toward a phenomenon formed via contact (i.e. an eyeliner and a gesture). Creating contact helps acting on the viewer and fulfills by that what is called an image act. The gaze which is paired with a gesture is toward nothing apparent. Yet out of a priori reasoning, it must be addressing “the world”. Here comes speech as emphatic enhancing the dialogic connection between the represented participant (i.e. SpongeBob) and the interactive participant (i.e. the viewer). Thus, the Arabic noun “يا العالم” meaning “hey, world” along with the imperative verb “save” entailing a visual “you”, or the invisible onlooker, emphasize this notion of dialogism. Remarkably, involvement is realized through the portrayal of the reacter/speaker from a frontal angle as though facing the world.

As far as circumstances are concerned, locative circumstance encapsulating the setting is highlighted by means of contrast between foreground and background as well as tonal value. A reading path is discerned luring the viewer’s attention from the core participant toward the dusky-colored war theatre depicting aerial bombardment and detonation. This alerting situation is cemented by circumstances of accompaniment (e.g. two quasi-human characters, two military transport aircrafts parachuting cargoes, a tank, blasts, and demolished buildings).

The utilization of the best-loved anthropomorphic character, *SpongeBob*, is meant to exert influence on the spectator-participants and stir them to take action since the world is depicted as an inoperative global community before the worsening conditions in Syria. A vital theme is entangled with the comic character, which is “grabbed childhood”, as Syrian students are incapable of leading a normal life like other children living in serene countries elsewhere.

**Figure. 6** A transactional narrative process

The narrative pattern is transactional as two participants are represented, two actors and a goal. The actors are a child escorted by a woman in black with a bag on her back
referred to as “we”, Syrian citizens. The goal is the word Homs, a city in Syria. The painting of a faceless woman with a travelling bag on her shoulders symbolizes the notions of fragmentation, asylum seeking, and piercing diasporic and traumatic experiences. In terms of information value, the reading of the image starts from left to right. The English sentence “Homs we will [be] back” and its equivalent word in Arabic on top of it dictate the reading path. A woman and her child are portrayed from an oblique angle as leaving their hometown and Homs is located on the right as their terminal direction and portal entrance. Color is significant indeed. The red color is emphatic as it is meant to highlight the notion of return after departure no matter what happens. The black color, however, denotes sorrow and mourning for Syria.

Figure .7 A Conceptual process: A suggestive symbolic process

In this process one represented participant called carrier is portrayed. A personification of the carrier is spotted seeing that the land holds human characteristics (e.g. head, neck, shoulders). Hence, the carrier is formed by an amalgamation of two entities, person and bleeding homeland, as if they were two facets of the same coin. The harrowing experience is evoked through the gloomy mood which is emphasized by means of tonal value. The red color which is highly saturated at the shoulders or mountains bears blood connotation. The green and brown colors at the levels of the hair and the neck are suggestive of the colors of vegetation and soil. The salience of elements through color in the foreground transfers the meaning that though injured, though bathing in blood, the Syrian land still blossoms. An atmosphere of optimism is transmitted through the secondary participants, the flowers. Hence, the mood unveils feelings that are torn between agony and resilience. This duality of feelings is encompassed in the metaphor of the budding flowers watered by the blood of the martyrs. The Facebook page of Homs’ Walls, comments on the mural as follows: “This flower will bloom one day. Even if we watered it with our soul and blood. And its name is Syria” (Quoted in the website of the Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution).
The visual portrays four distinct participants who are a woman in white playing the violin symbolizing Syria in 2011, a Syrian soldier pertaining to Bachar’s armed forces in 2012, revolutionists opposed to the Assad’s government in 2013, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. Obviously, the common goal of all human represented participants is the woman, the mother country.

In this graffiti, conversion conveys the notion of sequentiality. Besides, there is a communicated sense of targeting. Significantly, the transaction is bi-directional where an actor in one circumstance is the goal in another. These participants are called Relays. As far as the informational value is concerned, the reading of the image starts from right to left. In fact, the conversion process is represented as occurring in a chronological succession of years from 2011 to 2014. Transaction, however, is indicated by vectors revealed by means of outstretched shotguns. The analytical process is realized differently through temporality. In this temporal analytic process, the notion of timeline bubbles to the surface as the represented participants are arranged horizontally on an actual time scale. Hence, this engenders an act of historicizing as viewers can recall the unfolding of specific events encapsulated in one single participant. Each participant is in fact a mnemonic. Such a depiction can be said to enhance the notions of chronicle and historicity.

V. Discussion

In this study, Syrian child refugees’ drawings and Syrian inhabitants’ graffiti were analyzed for traces of war’s residues. In fact, the interaction among the three communicational functions, the representational, the interactional, and the compositional, pertaining to Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (1996, 2006) grammar of visual design, fostered understanding that the mass of residues blended in the visuals most often unfolds as a narrative, in terms of doing and happening, especially in children’s artworks. It attunes to figurativism rather than abstraction in Syrian creative expressions. This goes back to the fact that personal stories lie behind their wounds which are spelled out by means of painting.

As a matter of fact, interpreting emergent visual genres like child refugees’ drawings and city dweller’s murals is important for lifting the veil on a deeper layer to what people are thinking and feeling in the context of a war-torn country. Such visuals are vehicles for...
describing a macro-level collective trauma. More specifically, they are indicators of feelings of paranoia, shock, agony, fragmentation among others. These views are consistent with some researchers’ arguments who established a linkage between art and trauma. Malchiodi (2008), for instance, argued that children’s drawings help us peep through their experience of trauma. Besides, Alderman et al. (2009) contended that graffiti arise after incidences to convey traumatic feelings. They can be construed as an attempt to face up to symptoms of trauma and to the bitterness of the experience. They are a form of recovery meant to put psychological breaches on the mend.

Additionally, language gains importance when placed in the visual. This point of view hinges on Kress and Van Leeuwen’s views (1996, 2006) who confirmed that a visual must be read as an integrated text for the visual and the verbal are equally important in the stabilization and interpretation of a composite or a multimodal text. Ferreira (2007) stressed its significance as well stating that when a linguistic message comes attached to the picture, it is an act of “anchorage of meaning”.

After the reading of the semiotic systems, manifold themes were juxtaposed in the images realizing a binary combination of iconicity and symbolism. These themes include the personal, the social, the cultural, the historical, the political, the patriotic, and the like. Also, it is noteworthy that apart from the semiotic approach, drawing conceptions from different fields of study is recommended. Sociolinguistics, for example, can help in examining the relation between the notion of gender and psychological residues. Culture studies can assist in investigating their relations to folklore. While pragmatics can provide a toolkit to lay bare their link to the notions of context and speech acts. Besides, rhetoric and the synergy of the triadic rhetorical appeals of Aristotle (i.e. appeal to Logos, Pathos, and Ethos) can be illuminating. Critical metaphor analysis can also provide analytic frameworks to locate metaphors within pictures in an attempt to grasp how producers of an image appeal to their viewers. Such fields can yield a holistic and a comprehensive analysis of this study’s visual genres.

The light was regularly thrown on applying the theory of the grammar of visual design to semiotic systems pertaining to the Western culture. Conversely, this paper has expectantly a potential significance to both theory and practice as it provides further insights on eminent psychological residues manifestations in visual semiotics relating to the Syrian country afflicted by war.

VI. Conclusion

This study examined various aspects of two distinct pictorial genres, drawings and graffiti. In fact, it tried to address their corresponding narrative and conceptual patterns in a sample composed of a selection of eight visuals painted by Syrian child- refugees and Syrian city dwellers. These images were deemed worth investigating due to their depiction of psychological residues, especially personal and collective trauma. The researcher attempted to tackle such a naturalistic ensemble from a socio-semiotic angle by having recourse to the theory of the grammar of visual design appertaining to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006). Corpus analysis revealed that drawings and graffiti are more likely to represent image patterns narratively and figuratively in terms of doing and happening. The creative expressions of Syrian people describe scenes depicting intolerable and indelible moments that they could not and probably cannot cope with them. Moreover, they represent psychological remnants, being mental or emotional, conceptually so as to capture a timeless essence and visualize the unrepresentable in terms of motion and action. Such artworks are not a fun playtime showing
itself on a sheet of paper or a surface of a wall like their counterparts in peaceful areas around the globe. These are sincere evocations that tickle the spectator-participant’s mindset and worldview given the fact that they weave a bitter story to be told to the world sealed with individual agony and a longing for resilience.
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