

# To/for Syrialism: Towards an 'embodied' kind of war story

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## Abstract

How would what we know about war change if we took seriously the 'embodied experience' of its violences? How do we write 'war' and 'violence' in such a way that we can capture the complexity of what Bousquet, Grove and Shah refer to as 'war's incessant becoming'? How do we, as Sylvester puts it, 'pull the bodies and experiences of war out of entombments created by [international relations] theories . . . into the open as crucial elements of war'? In other words, how do we write 'war' as if people, lives, suffering, pain, anger, cruelty, hope, resilience, survival and the creativity of it all – the embodied experience – mattered in international relations? In this essay, I wrestle with these questions by re-creating my encounter with Omar Imam, a Syrian artist whose conceptual photography forms the backbone of this piece, and by fleshing out a conceptual framework through which to explore this 'embodied experience': Syrialism. Here, Syrialism, imagined as a 'machine' (borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari) declares that war is experienced as an embodied process that is consistently, though not constantly, partially connected to other violence/violent processes, and this refiguration brings the actual machinations of the injuries of war and the particulars of how it is sensed and made sensible into focus.

## Keywords

Affect, critical security studies, Deleuze, Guattari, Syria, violence

## The Syrialism of Omar's photography: (Re)encountering surrealism

*Or, What the (insert profanity of choice) is Syrialism?!*

I was sitting in my work-from-home swivel chair, twisting around in the ever so slightly uncomfortable embrace of its salmon flesh-coloured (artificial) leather, warming my hands on a cup of scalding ginger tea, intensely/intently peeling away at space, lulled by the murmuring of abject silence into a paralysed screeching stillness, when the greyed icon of Omar's Zoom profile flickered on my screen. My heart dove into my stomach.

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‘Connecting Audio,’ Zoom declared.

This is how I met Omar.

Inhale. It had been hard to track Omar down, harder to get him to meet, and, despite (or perhaps because of) my desperate attempts, I wasn’t sure if he would make it. I became a little nauseous. I remember being uncomfortably aware of my own breathing, of the fact that I should have used the webcam instead of the inbuilt camera, of the dishwasher I had inadvisably left running, of the Zoom waiting room I should have enabled so I would have had a moment to collect myself, of having left the teabag in the cup just a little too long, of the wall of posters behind me and the ways in which they might betray me, of the lucky bamboo stalk that was growing in a darned Monkey Shoulder bottle, of the blanket I should have kept handy. I had goosebumps. It was April in Geneva after all.

Maybe I was just uncomfortably aware of the violence of this encounter.

I was asking someone (Omar) to speak to a complete stranger (me) about the intimacies of their lived experience and, no matter how much care, kindness, respect and vulnerability I could garner in reciprocation, no matter how hard I worked at making it a conversation instead of an ‘interview’, or at subjectivizing him as an ‘interlocutor’, no matter how much reflexivity I could perform, there was an unrelenting apprehension I couldn’t shake: I was ‘studying’ Omar. Not that Omar was unagentic in our interaction at all: what he chose to reveal to me would shape my work. But there is a directionality to ‘studying’ that is rather extractive, I think, and I wonder if it is perhaps ingrained in the physical machinations of ‘doing research’ as such.

Exhale. I reminded myself of Veena Das, her engagement with Wittgenstein, conjured the image of her twisted pen and her gestures of waiting, and I pressed on<sup>2</sup> before the caution of *care-full*<sup>3</sup> research became the crippling paralysis of over-dissection.

Death by a thousand cuts is still death. Two seconds(?) later, Omar appeared at the window himself, and for the next 3 hours and 37 minutes we spoke about family, home, love, children, trauma, pain, violence, anger, media, photography, films, vision, reimagination, activism, Damascus, Beirut, Amsterdam, One Piece, and how we were twinning in blue and white. Mostly we spoke about surrealism and Syria.

*Surrealism + Syria; Syria + Surrealism.*

*Surrealism in Syria.*

*Surrealism by Syria.*

*Syrian Surrealism. The Surrealism of Syrians.*

*Surreal Syria.*

*Syrialism.*

Omar (pseudonym, more of a sobriquet really) is an Amsterdam-based photographer and video/installation artist from Syria. He first took to the camera in 2002, ‘inventing his own brand of dark ironic personal work in his hometown of Damascus’ (Gottesman, 2016). That was the era of black-and-white films and manual cameras for him – a time when photography was ‘just a hobby’ (Interview 1). The ‘Uprising’<sup>4</sup> changed that. For the majority of 2011, then, Omar found himself creating Facebook posts starring his photographs alongside small captions that helped him discuss

the ‘new normality we were facing in Syria, about what to expect, and what is revolution, and what is war’ (Interview 1).

I thought I heard hiccupped pride in his voice – the hiccups, as I soon realized, were a vestige of the injurious realities that came fettered to these gestures of activism. About a year after Omar started sharing his work, in September 2012, he was abducted and tortured by ‘a small group of unofficial fighters’ (Interview 1). Those 24 hours continue to shroud his living sporadically. Later that year, Omar left home, his camera, his irony, this shroud and him making their way to expatriation together.

And somewhere through the next/last 11 years, 2 countries and 14 exhibitions, Omar and this camera of his created something that traversed well beyond irony and Damascus into the bordering lands of surrealism and Syria: Syrialism. That is where I encountered Omar.

‘Encountered’ . . . I have always rather liked that word. Though I met Omar only on 29 April 2021, I had encountered him already in 2018. I make this distinction between meeting and encountering because the latter – this instance, this moment, this process of encounter . . . a weighty stumbling upon – is one of the ‘foundational (implicit) assumptions’ of this text. I think, with Deleuze here, that we think, conceptualize, research, write and live through encounters: through moments that force us to think.<sup>5</sup>

Syrialism, even before I met Omar, did just that. This collection of photographs (so ingeniously – I think – titled ‘Syrialism’) is a montage (almost) of a rifle-bearing goat, a teddy bear–beheading ‘terrorist’, a morbid gondola ride, an exploding superman, a photographer developing photographs on a barricade, and so much more, that toys with our understanding, our conceptualizations and/or our ‘figurations’ (Haraway, 2004; Weber, 2016) of war and its violences – it toys with our *sensibilities* towards them by crafting a Syrial worlding.<sup>6</sup>

In this collection, banal objects, regular people, mundane spaces – the carefully designed pegs on which we hang our socially constructed realities – stand in bizarrely (?) harmonious juxtaposition with brutal objects, petrifying characters, terrifying spaces, all markers of violent conflict. At first, this juxtaposition was a little incapacitating – intuitively we might think, or at least I did, that these worlds should not be meeting. These objects, these places, these materials, these people should not be doing what they are doing: teddy bears do not belong on Charon’s ferry, and mannequins decked in orange prison suits do not model among wedding dresses. It feels unnerving, unsettling, twisted. But intuitively, as well, I think, these worlds have always met – they have always been connected no matter how thin and/or tangled the tethers are. Rifles inhabit the rural combat space just as goats do; barricades are populated by CCTV cameras; anti-aircraft guns and photographers both point and shoot; and IEDs go off in urban-ish underground passageways – there is a different framework within which these twistings don’t feel so twisted; that is, *within the ‘new normal’* (of Omar’s descriptions) *of war, this surreality isn’t so surreal.*

In (re)creating these surreal landscapes, then, Omar is showing us a surreal kind of war story,<sup>7</sup> one that is primarily affective, sensory, aesthetic, material and corporeal – embodied. These are not stories about war, but rather about the experience of war: what war feels like, how its violences are sensed, how it materializes, and/or which technologies it latches on to. These stories are about what war feels like as a ‘dimension of living’ (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995: 5), giving us a lexicon of sorts, an affective grammar, with which to engage with the corporeal, the sensory, the affective, the material, the technological, the temporal and the spatial dimensions of war. They allow us to engage with the daily machinations of war, the politics these machinations (re)produce, and how all this becomes intelligible – or, rather, sensible – through lived experience.

Different from scopic regimes<sup>8</sup> that see war through statistics, or narratives that focus on structures, groups and institutions, or lexicons that (in)advertently regurgitate justifications for this

martial practice (among others), the Syrial worlding treats this lived experience as a form of experience-based knowledge – Omar’s situated knowledge about what war feels like as a Syrian, as an artist, as a refugee, as a person whose home continues to be assaulted every single day, as it has been for the past 11 years – and in that is a site worthy of care-full investigation. It acts as a theriac of sorts for the myopia (re)produced by those structural/institutional scopic regimes. For instance, within those regimes, the plurality of actors that are affected by/affect the daily performance of war is obscured; or, the entanglements war’s violences have with violences of everyday governance and politics (which effectively deconstruct that dichotomy) are rendered invisible, as are the legacies/durabilities of different violent/violence ecologies on the daily minutiae of the performance of war. Here, the ‘enactment of injury’ (Scarry, 1987: 63–81) – war’s primary task – somehow loses its corporeal, experiential dimension in such a way that this ‘injury’ becomes a logistical aftermath, an unfortunate necessity that takes the shape of justifiably collateral damage (and can be measured as such), a sociopolitical residue or an afterthought in analysis. Knowingly or otherwise, these conceptualizations, these structural/institutional scopic regimes, have created a repertoire of surreptitiously sociopolitically contingent theoretical models/universes that have systematically evicted theorizing the processual nature of war (and violence) from the domain of {capitalized} International Relations. As a result, as Christine Sylvester, Elaine Scarry, Carolyn Nordstrom, Veena Das, Tami Jacoby, Tarak Barkawi, Shane Brighton, Swati Parashar, Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove and Nisha Shah (among others) have pointed out, there is a ‘conceptual black hole surrounding the notion of war’ (Barkawi and Brighton, cited in Bousquet et al., 2020: 100).

Omar’s work, Syrialism, on the other hand, gives centre stage to this ‘injury’. It cajoles, compels, coerces us to see how war is sensed – both sensed/felt and made sense of – through the body; through noise, sight, sound, smell, touch; through materials, technologies; through cruelty, duress, ruination and fear . . . how war is an intensely embodied experience/process.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Omar’s Syrialism lays bare how war, through its violences – its trauma, its grief, its cruelty – is *felt* – that is, sensed and made (un)sensible, as an unrelenting onslaught on an individual’s body, mind, emotions, sensibilities (aesthetic and otherwise) and materials through (other) bodies, (other) minds, (other) emotions, (other) sensibilities and (other) materials. Pliers, teeth, toothbrushes (Interview 1), hands, chairs, basements, hallucinations, confusion, pain, death, contemplating death – these are the registers through which this war/violence is perpetrated and endured. Any act of violence, then, is experienced as an avalanche of complete and utter mutilation across every dimension of living. In Omar’s worlding, and mine, violence “‘unmakes” worlds, both real and conceptual’ (Scarry, 1987: 19–23) and remakes them in/through injurious surreal twistings that reveal the mangle of sociopolitical processes that participate in its becoming. In Omar’s worlding, and mine, ‘Syrialism’ is what best captures and communicates this ‘unmaking’ and ‘remaking’. . . this twisting. It is a lens, a gaze, an aesthetic, an aesthetic technique, a methodology, a positionality, a particular way of thinking, an imaginary, a worlding and the process through which that worlding generates . . . it is a ‘machine’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009) that fractures our understandings, our conceptualizations, our sensibilities towards war – ‘real and conceptual’ – and reassembles them to ablaqueate the *lived experience of war*.

I think by focusing on this surrealism in the lived experience of war and its violences, Omar’s work, and this collection in particular, make excellent expats in the worlds composed as corollaries to Sylvester’s 2012–2013 clarion call: ‘to pull the bodies and experiences of war out of entombments created by [international relations] theories operating at higher levels of analysis and into the open as crucial elements of war’ (Sylvester, 2012: 503). In fact, I think Omar constantly, and consistently, reminds us that ‘war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied up from people’s physical, emotional, and social experiences, not only down from “high politics” places that sweep

blood, tears, and laughter away, or assign those things to some other field' (Sylvester, 2013b: 2). I am willing to bet that if we can take his work – and the embodied experience of war – seriously, we can access 'the in-between moments (of war) after causes and before endings' (Sylvester, 2013a: 672). After all, 'for many of us, those in between moments that Parashar refers to<sup>10</sup> – when war has started and has not been declared over – are the guts of war, not the wastelands of war refuse' (Sylvester, 2013a: 671).

And these guts are wailing, waiting to be heard.

## **This is not Syrialism/Ceci n'est pas un surréalisme Syrien: (Re)situating surreality**

*Or, Fine. War in Syria feels surreal. But what the (insert profanity of choice again) is surrealism?*

The whole thing [not just the art] is goddamn surreal isn't it? (Interview 2)

It is like the surrealism of Orwell. (Interview 3)

I feel even we [Syrian artists] are not even getting . . . I don't know . . . to like 10 % to how . . . to the extreme of it . . . or how surreal it is. (Interview 4)

Omar is not alone in (his) Syrialism. Ayham Jabr, for example, has also been marrying surrealism to the experience of the Syrian revolution, particularly from the collection he released on Instagram in 2016, 'Damascus Under Siege'. In these collages, we see spaceships sailing across the skies in Damascus, alien architecture (the soaring towers that populate futuristic sci-fi vocabularies) occupying its urban landscapes, and Martians inhabiting, or rather invading, its alleyways. For Ayham, who 'loves science fiction books, films, and theories', 'Damascus is still under siege (sanctions) to this day. . . . [T]he Martians are governments that are paying loads of money to destroy us. . . . Yes, they are trying to destroy and kill the civilians in my country not the system or the officials' (Interview 5). These collages, then, and the surreal juxtapositions at their core, I think, are a way for Ayham to tell stories about what the war looked/looks like, or *felt/feels* like, in Damascus when he couldn't 'express that (experience) with any language or word'. They show us a world in ruins, a world whose fragmented cadavers have been erratically sutured together to (re?)create a (Frankensteinianly) monstrous reality: one where living owes its life to death.

Or, I am thinking of Sulafa Hijazi's digital illustrations in *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Frontline* (Halasa et al., 2014) and in her project 'Ongoing', through which she explores how, 'suddenly, death in Syria became a fact of life' (Hijazi, 2014: 11) owing not just to the ongoing conflict but to a larger circuitry of a hyper-masculine militarized society that is constantly reproducing cycles of violence. Her illustrations, for instance, show a 'sewing machine making use of a human being for thread' (see *ibid*) stitching together a military uniform or a naked agonizing man in labour, giving birth to an assault rifle.

These stories that Ayham and Sulafa are composing stand in strong solidarity with Omar's *Syrialism*. Though they differentially rely on juxtaposition (/other forms of twisting) as a poetic, that is, world-making, or rather world-reassembling, technique – focusing on different aspects, dimensions, processes and/or stories of the embodied experience of violence – this technique is repetitively geared towards (re-/co-)producing a pluralistic dynamic imaginary of violence through which war is surreally sensed, and made sensible, at the very least within the context of the Syrian revolution.

*Difference and repetition.*

*Different repetition.*

*Differently repeated.*

*Repeating difference.*

*Repetition and difference.*

These sensibilities of plurality/multiplicity, of hiccupped, partial connectivity, processual-ness, of the twistings and the Syrialism of it all, also animate the stories being told by many other Syrians besides Omar, Ayham and Sulafa. I am thinking here of Ossama Mohammed's (2014) story 'The Thieves' Market',<sup>11</sup> or of *Goats* – a play by Liwaa Yazji,<sup>12</sup> of Hello Psychoaleppo's (Samer Same El-Dahr's) music,<sup>13</sup> of the cartoons from Kafranbel,<sup>14</sup> of the memoirs of Dara Abdullah and Faida Lazkani,<sup>15</sup> of the remixes of Kareem Farok,<sup>16</sup> of initiatives like *SouriaLi* (the name itself a double entendre that roughly translates to both 'Syria is mine' and 'surrealism'),<sup>17</sup> of the 'Land of Childhood',<sup>18</sup> and the list goes on.

In fact, I think we can see this intimate entanglement between surrealism and Syria (or, more accurately, between surreal lexicons and the embodied experience of the Syrian revolution) even in the user-generated footage that has been streaming out of the country. Whether it takes the form of videos, photographs and/or posts that platform 'open-source intelligence' identifying equipment and providing advice and insight into military tactics and weapon use, essentially creating a cottage industry of sorts, or it details stories of hope, laughter,<sup>19</sup> joy, solidarity – stories of survival that stubbornly continue to inhabit the martial landscape – there seems to be an element of surreality to all these narrations. Even BuzzFeed has curated a catalogue of '33 *surreal* photos of the civil war in Syria' (Johnson, 2013).

This entanglement – this Syrialism, as Omar so ingeniously put it – is what I am (perhaps morbidly) fascinated by and, echoing (and extending) Mitchell's (1996) original call, I am hoping to trace its intricacies by focusing on *what Syrialism wants* – that is, what Syrialism does, which realities it draws out, which experiences it intensifies, which war stories it (re)makes – how it affects the way we engage with war and its violences.

Towards the end, I think, in/through these stories three things become clear.

First, *surreality is the texture of the lived experience of war and its violence* – a texture that we can map, trace, feel, and therefore investigate;<sup>20</sup> a texture that allows us to 'stay with the trouble' of looking at/through the embodied experiences of war's violences. Think here, for example, of how this entanglement between surrealism and war is not unique to the Syrian context – that is, their entanglement is not necessarily always (shaped as) Syrialism. Instead, their peripatetic affair stands well documented. Journalists, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, investigators, soldiers, victims, witnesses, perpetrators – anyone and everyone in the business of (re)collecting and (re)producing 'testimony'/intimate stories of war's violence – all tell us that war and its violence in/from the 'frontlines' is *chaotic, absurd* (Arendt, 1970), *slippery* (Taussig, 2007) and has an *abundance* (Bousquet et al., 2020) – or, at the very least, it *feels* chaotic, absurd, slippery and excessive – surreal.

For me, the presence of this lexicon of surreality that captures the embodied experience of martial violence – this notion that there was an 'excess' beyond sense/meaning to its affective, sensory and narrative experience – was/is rather intriguing. If war – as I had mentioned above, expanding on Scarry and thinking with Sylvester – "unmakes" worlds, both real and conceptual' and



grotesquely reassembles the cadavers, the relics, the detritus, then surreality, in these stories, is the mechanism of generative unmaking (of an ‘uncanny reversal of worlds’ [Hirsch, 2014: 289]), of twisting, through which the lived, embodied, excessive, ‘surreal’ experience of war becomes intensified. It is about thinking with Bousquet et al. (2020: 111) that, ‘in war, through war, beyond war, the tumult of conflict periodically unsettles and shatters the reality principle of our understandings’. These surreal stories derive their lifeblood from the ‘stream of consciousness that experiences war’; that is to say, their power, their affective potential – their potential to affect – lies in their ability to tap into and magnify moments/experiences/slices of life where war and its violences are made sensible through an ‘unbridled deregulation of the senses and emergent subjectivities’ (Bousquet et al., 2020: 112), through an utterly violent, and violating, twisting.

Second, as practice, this Syrial storytelling wants to emphasise particular things when it comes to this lived experience. It *wants to emphasize that the twisting of the relationalities* between materials, spaces, temporalities, technologies, bodies, affects, senses and sensibilities declares that war and its violences are felt/sensed/experienced as (1) *embodied* (co-produced) *processes* that are (2) *multiple* in texture and (3) consistently, though not constantly, *partially connected* to other violence/violent processes. Through expository (4) *defamiliarizations* and (5) *critical reimaginations*, these surreal stories widen the apertures through which we understand war, allowing for a (6) *refiguration* that brings the actual machinations of the injuries of war and the particulars of how it is sensed and made sensible into focus.

And why shouldn’t they? The aetiologies of the artform itself stand embrangled with the history of World War I. From what I understand, beyond/beneath/beside the totems of the bowler hat man of Magritte and/or the moustache of Dali – and perhaps his melting clocks – surrealism’s skeleton is seared with poetry, revolution, military service, psychoanalysis, medical science and manifestos, and forged in the sociopolitical ecologies of 1920s and 1930s Paris.<sup>21</sup> The ‘movement’ was formed around a reaction almost, a response, a rebellion, against the structures of thought and social life that certain artists (who had lived through the war) believed had led the world to this war in this first place: structures of control grounded in (Western, modernist) rationalism.

Tinted by the political alignments of these artists – most of them identifying as Trotskyist, communist or anarchist – the movement was designed to reimagine the very metaphysics of our worlds and the manners in which we engage with them in such a way that surrealism became a modality of being more than just a form of aesthetic expression. Artists, poets, playwrights, literary critiques of this bent were all aiming to somehow ‘resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality’ (Breton, [1924] 1969: 10), or sur-reality, because their lived experience of the war had itself eroded these boundaries. What these works then had in common was an ‘insistent obsession with rendering the supposedly self-evident strange, of transforming platitudes into paradoxes through contortions, and rhetorical twists and reversals’ (Hirsch, 2014: 302). The ‘object was to undo the reigning bourgeois mentality of order and luxury and to replace it with aesthetic forms derived from the deepest depths of the human imagination’ (Hirsch, 2014: 302). The movement, then, I think, desired to make visible and render absurd – among other things – the naturalized, internalized control structures of our societal infrastructures, borrowing visions from what could have been and can be. In this regard, beyond/beneath/beside dreams, automatism, the sub/unconscious and absurdism, surrealism, Hirsch (2014: 289) thinks, and I wholeheartedly concur, ‘is first and foremost, about the uncanny reversal of worlds’; about the experience of twisting and the deductions and excesses born of it. It was born of, expressed and found expression within a moment where a world war and its violences reassembled worlds, individual and collective; and it is in that capacity that I think it finds putrefying symbiosis with any expression of the lived experience of war.

This relationship between surrealism and the embodied experience of war becomes even more pronounced perhaps in the more recent, and more global, histories of surrealism. Looking at the encounters between surrealism and Haiti, Martinique, Cuba, Egypt,<sup>22</sup> Turkey, Lebanon, Algeria and, of course, Syria, art historians and critics seem to find some consensus in the notion that while surrealism remains ‘multiple’ (Mol, 2003) – its manifestations unique at every juncture, its semiotics deliciously diverse and divergent – there is an echo, a refrain of two themes. For one, as described earlier, surrealism was birthed as a form of expression, a way of seeing the world, a way of experiencing it – and giving voice to that experience all at once – where embodied reality constitutes not just the rational (or often not the rational at all) but also the sensory, the affective, the corporeal, the material and the technological – all as equals. Reality itself is seen, experienced and expressed as Frankenstein – especially violent reality, especially the reality of violence.

And, second, as Ahmad Sa‘dāwī<sup>23</sup> and Hassan Balāsim<sup>24</sup> so poignantly make clear, and as I alluded to earlier, this embodied experience shares a thematic – it is an experience of constant processual unmaking and grotesque reassembling . . . a ‘derangement of the senses’ . . . a surreality born of twisted relationalities, creating an alternate ordering. Surrealism is/has always been a highly populated affective worlding, and Syrialism and the violences of war are but one of its inhabitants.

*Syrialism.*

*Surrealism in/by/from Syria.*

*Syria’s surrealism.*

*Omar’s surrealism/ Omar’s Syrialism.*

*My/whose Syrialism?*

And, third, Syrialism is a ‘machine’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 36–42).

## **The exquisite corpse of surrealism/The surrealist machine: (Re)conceptualizing Syrialism**

*Or, Fine. War is surreal. And surrealism is an ‘affective’ artform. What the (insert profanity of choice) does that have to do with international relations?*

Surrealism ‘is’ . . . , Syrialism ‘is’. . . ‘Is’, here – and perhaps everywhere – ‘is’ a treacherous word. It implicates subsequent words in the definitional process, somehow implying that the subject in question has a particular essential characteristic that can be methodically drawn out, effectively bound and functionally communicated as the object of said sentence. In that regard, it is safe to say, that, prima facie, surrealism/Syrialism – which, as its histories betray, has always been an asignifying signifier – ‘is’ nothing, not within the parameters of this essay anyway because, as mentioned earlier, the argument here isn’t about what surrealism or Syrialism ‘is’, nor about the bramble of what it means, but rather about what Syrialism wants – what effects does Syrialism produce, how it affects the politics of the things it finds itself entangled with. In this reading, surrealism – or, rather, Syrialism – ‘is’ – or, rather, wants to be – a machine.

According to Deleuze and Guattari:



A machine may be defined as a *system of interruptions* or breaks (*coupures*). These breaks should in no way be considered as a separation from reality; rather, they operate along lines that vary according to whatever aspect of them we are considering. Every machine, in the first place, is related to a continual material flow (*hyle*) that it cuts into. It functions like a ham-slicing machine, removing portions from the associative flow: the anus and the flow of shit it cuts off, for instance; the mouth that cuts off not only the flow of milk but also the flow of air and sound; the penis that interrupts not only the flow of urine but also the flow of sperm. . . . In a word, every machine functions as a break in the flow in relation to the machine to which it is connected, but at the same time is also a flow itself, or the production of a flow, in relation to the machine connected to it. This is the law of the production of production. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 36, emphasis in original)

There is quite a bit to unpack here, but, I think, what is perhaps most useful for us is the idea that this ‘breaking’, this ‘interruption’, that a machine produces/generates/creates,<sup>25</sup> this slicing off, is simultaneously a moment of rupture and, in that it breaks away from something and is a moment of reassembling/re-production/re-creation, of suturing, and in that it generates something new/different/else . . . something twisted. From where I stand, Syrialism is a machine – in fact, I would argue that it is a desiring machine – that slices us off from certain war stories (and the machines that produce them) and instead generates an affective kind of war story: a chimeric account of the embodied experiences of war, allowing us to feel war differently. Perhaps, this – at least for me, for us – is the most crucial ‘affect’ of Syrialism: it is an avenue/a tool/a machine through which we can attempt to ‘translate war experience into war knowledge’ (Sylvester, 2013a: 673).

*Refrain.*

*Syrialism, then,*

*is an analytical lens but ‘not only’ (De la Cadena, 2015);*

*it is a particular gaze but ‘not only’;*

*it is particular aesthetic and/or*

*a particular aesthetic technique but ‘not only’;*

*it is a methodology but ‘not only’;*

*it is a particular positionality but ‘not only’;*

*it is a particular way of thinking but ‘not only’;*

*it is a particular imaginary but ‘not only’.*

because it is at once a worlding/a war experience that is generated, the process through which that worlding/war experience is generated, and the epistemological tool through which this worlding/war experience is generative of war knowledge; it is all this and more – it is a *desiring machine*. And its desires have shaped this text.

Syrialism desires a worlding wherein war is seen, felt, understood and analysed as an acutely social and embodied process that intensifies the multiplicity and (partial) connectivity of the actors (human, non-human, technological, material) that shape/inhabit it in such a way that its politics are

sensed/become sensible through iterative (re)entanglements with practices, logics and affects of violences that are considered discrete and ecologies that are considered removed from the war front. It (re)creates an affective story of war that essentially erodes figurations of sanitized-war-as-an-extension-of-politics, instead insisting on its messiness – on the dissolution of dichotomies such as exceptional–mundane or home–war fronts or its different typologies. War becomes about injury, about harm, and the daily machinations of these violences, because war is felt through this injury, this harm. Its sociopolitical register then shifts from a focus on groups, military tactics and/or cause–consequences to processes, practices, performances, their embodiment, aesthetics and affects: an image more akin to ‘gore capitalism’ or ‘racial surveillance’.

This machine, this Syrialism, then – Omar’s and mine, differentially, but repetitively – elicits ‘war’s incessant becoming’ (Bousquet et al., 2020: 99), insisting that war and its violences be ‘studied’/‘understood’ as they are sometimes ‘felt’ – as intensely embodied, aesthetic and affective processes that violently ‘unmake’ – and ‘remake’ – ‘worlds, both real and conceptual’ (Scarry, 1987: 19–23) so we can trace the politics of their daily machinations . . . the politics of injury and harm.


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### Notes

1. A small heads-up: the ‘theory’ is in the footnotes. This is in part because I get immense pleasure from experimenting with the stylistic hierarchies of a journal article – whether in terms of preferred voice or the character of footnotes and the power relations therein (Grafton, 1997; Sylvester, 2007) – but mostly it is because I am trying my best to fortify the flow, style and surreality of the narrative. The medium is the message (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967)? Walking on the narrative-international-relations-brick-road-that-is-indeed-yellow-in-my-head, I take inspiration from the deliciously rich scholarship in narrative international relations that explores the entanglements of narration/storytelling, lived experience and the politics of the latter (Choi et al., 2019; Daigle, 2016; Dauphinee, 2013; Edkins, 2019; Inayatullah, 2010; Inayatullah and Dauphinee, 2016; Löwenheim, 2010, 2014; Nagar, 2013; Park-Kang, 2015; Ravecca and Dauphinee, 2018; Welland, 2021). Working through them, I have cautiously designed this text to (hopefully) invoke ‘openness, contradiction, ambiguity, fracture, surprise’ (Ravecca and Dauphinee, 2018: 1)

and a deep engagement with surreality – or, rather, Syriality. I hope that this engagement, like finger-painting, will be bumpy and messy and chaotically productive, and that the text, like Mitchell's (1996, 2005) image, will have an agency of its own. (Disclaimer: the distinction between theory and narrative assumed here is purely fictional and meant to ensure that readers read through the footnotes as well. Any resemblance to dichotomies popular or obscure is simply coincidental. No narratives or theories were harmed in this process – it is intended that all narrative is a form of theory-crafting and all theorizing is a form of narration.)

2. In *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Das (2006), to paraphrase Cavell (who wrote the Foreword), chronicles a 'reality of pain' (Cavell, 2006: xii), detailing how moments of extreme violences during the Partition of India in 1947 and the massacre of Sikhs in 1984 formed part of the 'recesses of the ordinary' (Das, 2006: 1) instead of something exceptional, and, in doing so, presents the readers with a rather inventive argument. Perhaps more 'importantly' though – 'important' strictly for the context of this essay's thesis – her anthropological observations are interspersed with extensive philosophical reflections about how we can understand and interpret violence better. It is towards that end that, in Chapter 1, 'The Event and the Everyday', she engages with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to flesh out a 'gesture of waiting'. She argues that, for Wittgenstein, if in life we are surrounded by death, 'so too is in the health of our understanding we are surrounded by madness' (Das, 2006: 17). Instead of excising these voices of madness and/or any trace of them, according to Das, Wittgenstein introduces the notion of waiting: 'If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: This is simply what I do.' Das takes this invitation to wait, to breathe, to take a moment of pause in the midst of reflective madness to create a space where her interlocutors, their percipience, can find room for expression. She argues, 'In this picture of the turned spade as indicative of a turned pen, we have the picture of what the act of writing may be in the darkness of this time. For me the love of anthropology has turned out to be an affair in which when I reach bedrock I do not break through the resistance of the other, but in this gesture of waiting I allow the knowledge of the other to mark me' (Das, 2006: 17). This interview then, this encounter with Omar, became my 'gesture of waiting'. I found solace in being marked, being affected, by his knowledge, experience and work . . . in waiting for Omar to play an equal, if not leading, role in shaping this work. This essay, then, is a collaborative albeit parasitic (Austin, 2019) act of translation. More on that next.
3. I have been boxing, a lot, with what this 'care-full research' would look like, what it would even mean, what it would give voice to, what it would obscure, which violences it would address and which it would exert. I spent so much time in the ring with these questions that the first drafts of this essay didn't bear even a slight shade of a bruise or ache from these questions of positionality, of ethics, of the politics of writing about these themes in this exact way. I was trying the usual if-I-just-squeeze-my-eyes-shut-hard-enough trick, but object permanence, especially of the deeply ethical kind, is always more sticky and obstinate than I am. So here is my grossly feeble attempt at mapping the politics of this text. Once upon a time, I sat in a boiling room that looked and felt like the inside of a wood-burning stove if it were painted pale blue. Cramped against 12 or so other sweltering bodies, I shakingly presented a version of this essay and waited to be baked inside out while my brilliant co-panelists presented their works. Halfway through the panel, we were choked. Some of us (read, me) were in tears. In that blueish room, in the far corner of a whiteish building, nestled in a corner of Thessaloniki, we had made our own little corner of the (international relations) world. Or at least that is how I (choose to?) remember it. We spoke about domestic torture, about the violences faced when living with fluid identities, about how we write and live through/write about these violences, especially when trying to grasp, articulate and do justice to the violent experiences of others. In that room, I fell in love with postmodern feminist international relations (part of the panel title) all over again. There was a fierce vulnerability that had taken possession of the very ether of the room, of the sweltering bodies that were broiling inside it, of even the words, questions and ideas that were spilling into the spaces in between us. We shared, supported and appreciated each other, but also didn't give an inch. It was mutually agreed yet never discussed that scholarship like the one being chewed through here demanded and deserved feedback that was manifestly soul-piercing. I, for instance, was asked the question I dread the most: How do you live with knowing how extractive it is to do this work? Before my mind could even register that I was speaking, let alone realize what I was

speaking of, words began gushing out of me. I was pyretic-ally possessed by the affect of that moment (space-time-ether-bodies-relationalities-all-entangled) too. ‘The truth is, I don’t live with it. It eats me up inside. I feel like a vulture . . . like I am sitting there picking over the bones and flesh of people’s most intimate, most violent memories, and how they make sense of it. Like I am consuming their literal pain and stuffing it in a place somewhere between my stomach and intestines where its dark enough so I don’t have to see it quite clearly and I can ruthlessly selectively absorb only what I need to nourish my arguments and build this theoretical world. And it’s beyond selfish . . . not just extractive, which it clearly is. I came to Omar, to these Syrian artists, to their cause, to their lives, to their works, to their pains for entirely selfish reasons. I was struggling with my own (Complex) PTSD, trying and trying and trying to find the words, images, music, films – anything – that would help me give shape to what I was feeling, what I was/am drowning in, because it just . . . it felt like if I could explain it or understand it, or at the very least articulate it, then I could purge it out of myself. But I just couldn’t. And then I started seeing these social media posts, these artworks, these photographs that were coming out of Syria (me and the conflict came of age together) and . . . it just clicked. I had found in their work a way to express everything I didn’t know how to. I use – in every sense of that word – Omar’s Syrialism to personally, professionally and politically build a living for myself. And it’s sickening. The only thing that helps is Omar’s, Khaled’s, Ayham’s, Sulafa’s, Malu’s and Zaher’s insistence that they want this work to be seen, to be interpreted, to be studied. They, too (because we spoke of this quite a bit), made these works to find articulation for their own experiences with violence. This is what they went through the literally pains-taking process of building Syrial worlds for. I know that recognizing their voice, acknowledging their anguish and their sheer bravery, and caring for their works with as much respect as my brittle bones can muster is the most I can do, and I try my very best to do it, but it . . . it never feels enough. But it has to be, because I truly believe that this work is a necessary part of us being able to reimagine what war feels like, how it infiltrates our lives and bodies, how we carry in our very nerves and bones the violences that we experience, and if we can just see it, really see it, in all of its damage in this thoroughly embodied, affective dimension, maybe, just maybe, we can find a different way of navigating the politics of it all.’ This is the aporia I am stuck with(in). There is quite a rich legacy of authors, particularly ethnographers, who have wrestled with these questions more coherently than I have (Arendt, 1970; Daigle, 2016; Das, 1996, 2006; Das et al., 2000, 2001; Dauphinee, 2013; Della Ratta, 2018; hooks, 2006, 2015; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Scarry, 1987; Stoler, 2008; Sylvester, 2012, 2013a, 2013b), and I wish I could add something compelling to their care-full discussions, but I find myself, yet again, unable to express what I feel/think. All I can say is that, for me, ‘Syrialism’ is not about finding a theory of violence that is universal or representative or contextual even. It is ‘simply’ one way of thinking/feeling through/about political violence and its embodied experience – a theoretical framework that I have collaboratively (or, in spirit at least, co-productively) built with only these specific artists, the specific theorists I list here, and the specific ideas and examples I build on. It is, at its core, a critical reimagination of how we sense and make sense of political violence – one that makes visible ‘war’s incessant becoming’ (Bousquet et al., 2020: 99).

4. Nomenclature reverberates politics. All due respect to Shakespeare, a rose by any other name is not a rose. For a detailed discussion on the politics of naming, please refer, inter alia, to Bhatia (2005); Kalaycioglu (2020); Mamdani (2007); Mundy (2011). The Syrian revolution has differentially been called an ‘uprising’, a ‘revolution’, a ‘revolt’, a ‘conflict’, a ‘civil war’, a ‘proxy war’, a ‘front on the War on Terror’, and so on. Each of these names brings with it a politics of (in)visibility (regarding which actors, events and sites are taken into consideration), of discourse (regarding what is securitized within this consideration) and of practice (regarding which practices are justified through this securitization). Each name (re)creates subjectivities and (re)produces worlds with very particular ideas and sociomaterial practices. Omar’s politics are reflected in his calling the ongoing conflict an ‘uprising’, mine – very much in the same neighbourhood – are reflected in ‘revolution’.
5. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze (1994: 139) hypothesizes that ‘something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hatred, suffering. In which tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed.’ Here, thought and

thinking are presented as antithesis to cognition and recognition – the latter being something we do as a force of habit (since it is an aspect of repetition). According to Deleuze, only when we fail to recognize something, when something falls outside the schemas of cognition we have cultivated (or been conditioned to cultivate), do we really think. This moment of confrontation, when we face difference itself, is what is termed a fundamental encounter, and thought, then, becomes a product of the sheer force of this encounter. Now, I remain uncertain about Deleuze's distinctions and dichotomies and their relationalities and semiotics here, but I find the idea of thought not being one's own but rather a process, almost of co-production, between what is encountered and what it makes us feel and think, rather compelling. The imagery is neither of a muse that possesses us making us but mere vessels, nor of individual ownership as if there were title deeds for thoughts. It is the imagery of a *pas de deux*. This text would not be possible without the art, the artists, the images, the newspaper articles, the social media accounts, the theorists mentioned here or the abstractions that string them together. Therefore, I am writing it, but it is not mine – it is born of my 'encounter' with Srialism.

6. For more information on how photographs and photography are entangled with martial and other security practices and politics, see inter alia, Andersen and Möller (2013); Beier (2007); Galai (2019); Hansen, (2011, 2015); Heck and Schlag (2013); Kennedy and Patrick (2020); Kirkpatrick (2015); Lisle (2017); Loken (2021); Möller (2007); Shapiro (2007); Simon (2012).
7. A 'surreal kind of war story', much like an 'affective kind of war story' (from the title of this article), is a play on words toying with Carolyn Nordstrom's (1997) book title *A Different Kind of War Story*. In the book, Nordstrom takes the reader to the frontlines of the Mozambican civil war (1988–1997), focusing on the stories of soldiers, civilians, profiteers and children to show that by paying attention to individual narratives that might seem fragmented and occupied by silences and pauses, we begin to see that there is a 'different kind of war story' in Mozambique – one where the violence of war is not a given, but, rather, is seen as something learned, which can, in time, be unlearned. In doing so, she explores how state power and civil resistance manifest differentially within a culture of terror warfare. As will be explored later in this article, I borrow from her (among others) the urgency and necessity to look into both the non-verbal dimensions of storytelling vis-a-vis war and its violences and the need to trace these stories within situated, embodied, complex worlds.
8. War, here, is either an event or a tool, often both, and as such the contours of this regime are marred by concerns of causations or correlations and/or consequences: of aggregated actors/'stakeholders' like states, systems or organizations that participate in war, or of trends that correspond to (un)desirable outcomes or of tracing ordering principles that operationalize war.
9. 'Embodied experience' is the spectre that haunts this text. Typically, embodied experience is just that – how the body experiences certain sociopolitical phenomena and/or how sociopolitical phenomena unfold along the corporeal dimension. I think there is incredible feminist (/critical) scholarship that has sketched out the contours of what this looks like in practice . . . what it looks like when the bodies/embodiments of different subjectivities are taken seriously as sites of political struggles. I am thinking here of the works of Lauren Wilcox, Elaine Scarry, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Franz Fanon and Iris Marion Young, among others. Building (ever so slightly away) from them, I think about this concept as and through a congealed entanglement with 'lived experience'. I hypothesize that 'lived experience' is profoundly an embodied experience, but 'not only' (De la Cadena, 2015), because 'living' and/or this 'lived experience' is mediated not just through the corporeal, but also through the sensory, the affective, the material, the technological, the aesthetic and the sociopolitical. We live through our bodies, through our senses, through our emotions, through our thoughts, through the materials that build us and our lives and worlds, through the technologies that do the same, through the art – in whatever way, shape, form it might be – that shapes us, just as we shape it, and the sociopolitical ecologies that we (re)produce and that (re)produce us, all at once. Living is a collage, and therefore, at least to me, embodied experience is an 'exquisite corpse' (Zalewski, 2013). If I was being generous, I would call this is a 'tricky move' (which I have learned is academic speak for 'that's one step away from impossible to pull off with any rigour'), but mostly it is a haphazardly composed (perhaps slightly frenzied) laundry list of onto-epistemological, almost metaphysical, commitments. It stretches the notion of 'embodiment' to awkwardly accommodate at least five dimensions, arguing that it is perhaps within the hyphen between embodiment

and experience (embodied - experience) that the politics of lived experience, of its surreality, are located, for it is neither a phenomenological argument nor a post-phenomenological one, but rather one that is geared towards reflecting the multiplicity (Mol, 2003) of the lived experience. (Insert profanity of choice) co-constitution. I spent quite sometime wondering if this (re)conceptualization of embodied/lived experience was strictly necessary. It is – at least to me – an ‘avalanche’ of academic theorizing that is quite overwhelming at best and terrifyingly, dizzyingly, confusing at worst. I tried my best to dismember this composition or, at the very least, maim it somehow to make it more manageable, but the interviews, the artworks, personal experiences and Adichie’s (2021) *Notes on Grief* kept pestering me. So, we are stuck with this figuration.

10. While engaging with the work of Swati Parashar, Sylvester points out two things that are particularly salient for this text. First, through her work on Sri Lanka, Parashar (2013: 617) provides us with examples of what life looks like ‘between these two moments (why a war happens and how it ends)’, painting war as a social practice as much as a political one. This does not imply that there is a distinction between the social and the political – I think the relationality between them is always that of sociopolitical – but rather speaks to a politics of emphasis: of which stories get told, by whom and towards which ends. Second, ‘she [Parashar] also insists that IR (thinks it) knows war but does not consider the possibility that war knows something about international relations and IR’ (Sylvester, 2013b: 669). This text is about the latter: about what war can tell us about ‘those bits of itself blanked out of IR’ (Sylvester, 2013b: 669).
11. Where she brings out the surreality of the different ‘demonstrations’ her protagonist has attended, of the domestic violence endured, the death of a close friend and how these different experiences of violence and their differential traumas made her feel ‘as if on film’.
12. Where she investigates ‘how we normalize surreal happenings in war’ (Graham-Harrison, 2017).
13. And the genre of electro-tarab he pioneered (Cusack, 2017).
14. Anonymously created by its inhabitants as sardonic political commentary (Halasa and Omareen, 2014).
15. Where the former transports us to a communal cell in the al-Khatib prison in Damascus, laying bare its abject, surreal brutality, and the latter takes us along her ‘Kafkaesque journey’ to find her brother who disappeared in prison.
16. Who took ‘*Salil as-Sawarim*’, or ‘Clanking of the Swords’ – one of the most popular *anasheed* (an anthem/chant) of Daesh (ISIL) – and ‘managed to turn it around completely, from death and violence to dance’ (Hagerlid, 2015) by making a remix that was played in clubs all around Egypt.
17. An online non-profit radio station.
18. A subterranean theme park-esque improvised playground in Arbin (Laurent, 2016) that was built by volunteers from the city to transform tunnels and basements – the underground landscapes of Syria – ‘from being a place associated with attacks, fear and horror to a fun place that engages children as they pass through it’ (UNICEF, 2016).
19. See for instance, inter alia, the video from Archer about being a sniper volunteering with the Quwwāt Sūriyā al-Dīmuqrāfīya (Democratic Forces), where he shares with his audience the experience of producing (with both of that word’s connotations) violence in very minute detail, going over his daily routine, his choice of ‘equipment’, the strategic principles of tracking down locations, the psychological terrain of boredom, anxiety, adrenaline, of ‘going crazy’, the fatigue and the fog of such enactments, the censorship he dances with in an attempt to tell this story, and, most importantly, allows us to see, quite literally, the act of shooting (with both of that word’s connotations) – all while listening to Avril Lavigne. Or, of Selva’s laughter at the bombs raining down near her house.
20. Somewhere along note 3, I had explained how I found/continue to find myself woefully incapable of engaging conscientiously with/through someone else’s affective experiences, how to do right by those stories, how to even (re)tell them in the first place, especially when these are stories of life, death, pain, anger, anguish, hope, resilience . . . of living. I am terrified at the prospect of being violent towards those whose stories I would want to tell, of lacking the vocabulary to convey their flesh-and-blood-ness, of not knowing how to capture, especially not verbally, the sheer depth of human emotional experience of anything, let alone violence. I wouldn’t know how. And so, focusing on this aesthetic lexicon of ‘excess’, of ‘twisting’, of ‘surrealism’, of that which cannot be explained through the (frankly) suffocating structures of our Cartesian-ized ‘rational’ thoughtscales, is more feasible, more honest, for me. And these aesthetic



representations are, undoubtedly, both sites to understand politics and political sites in themselves. For a more detailed discussion on the same, see, inter alia, Agius (2013); Amoore (2007); Bleiker (2001, 2012, 2015, 2019, 2021); Hansen (2011, 2015); Harman (2019); Lacy (2008); Lisle (2007, 2017); Sylvester (2015); Welland (2017, 2021).

21. For more information on the same, consult inter alia, Breton ([1924] 2020); Chadwick (2022); Dempsey (2019).
22. It has been rather difficult to find surreal archives and histories beyond the West, for there seems to be a (barely) latent Eurocentrism in the crafting of surrealism's histories. But the works of certain authors, such as Anneka Lessen (expert in the surrealism of the Levant), have helped tremendously, as have books like Bellan and Drost (2021).
23. Through *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Saadawi, 2018).
24. Through novels such as *The Corpse Exhibition* (Balāsīm and Wright, 2014) and other works.
25. These interruptions/breaks can take three distinct forms: The first, of course, is that of a hiccup or a rupture in the circuitry of a given machine through which another flow is generated – it is a slicing-off. The second form that this breaking can take is that of detachment, while the third can be characterized as the residual break (*coupure-reste*). From where I stand, any given machine may perform any given twisting – or all of them at once – at any given time depending on the processual circumstances; and Syrialism is a rather surreal machine.
26. I would like to quickly flag that 'interview' is used rather broadly here. Since Ayham was – and continues to remain – in Damascus, for a variety of security and logistical reasons, a conversation could not be arranged online. As such, we have been in extensive correspondence via email, where we essentially write long-form letters back and forth to discuss his work, life and politics. He makes collages using the surrealist technique of superimposition. Jabr takes photographs of Damascus on his daily walks and then superimposes stills from different science-fiction films and/or images (animations of green aliens, for instance) onto these photographs to create digital illustrations that make sensible the 'surreality' of his Damascus-Everyday, best exemplified in his collection 'Siege of Damascus' (available on his Instagram account).

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3. Zaher Omareen, interview with author, WhatsApp, 1 March 2022.
4. Khaled Barakeh, interview with author, Zoom, 14 March and 15 March 2022.
5. Ayham Jabr, interview with author,<sup>26</sup> Gmail, 22 March 2022.

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