

Beyond Propaganda: Discourse of War and Doublethink. “When the Lie Becomes the Truth”

The Example of Syria

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Since the attacks of September 11, we are witnessing a transformation of the way the media report the news. They lock us in the unreal. They base truth not on the coherence of a presentation, but on its shocking character. Thus, the observer remains petrified and cannot establish a relation to reality.

The media are lying to us, but at the same time, they show us that they are lying. It is no longer a matter of changing our perception of facts in order to get our support, but to lock us in the spectacle of the omnipotence of power. Showing the annihilation of reason is based on images that serve to replace facts. Information no longer focuses on the ability to perceive and represent a thing, but the need to experience it, or rather to experience oneself through it.

From Bin Laden to Merah, through the “tyrant” Bashar al-Assad, media discourse has become the permanent production of fetishes, ordering surrender to what is “given to see.” The injunction does not aim, as propaganda, to convince. It simply directs the subject to give flesh to the image of the “war of civilizations”. The discursive device of “War of Good against Evil,” updating the Orwellian doublethink process must become a new reality that de-structures our entire existence, of everyday life in global political relations.

Such an approach has become ubiquitous, especially regarding the war in Syria. It consists of cancelling a statement at the same time as it is pronounced, while maintaining what has been previously given to see and hear. The individual must have the ability to accept opposing elements, without raising the existing contradiction. Language is thus reduced to communication and cannot fulfill its function of representation. The deconstruction of the faculty to symbolize prevents any protection vis-à-vis the real to which we are in submission.

Enunciating a Statement And its Opposite at the Same Time

In the reports on the conflict in Syria, the double think procedure is omnipresent. Stating at the same time a thing and its opposite produces a decay of consciousness. It is no longer possible to perceive and analyze reality. Unable to put emotion at a distance, we cannot but feel the real and thus be submitted to it.

Opponents of the regime of Bashar al-Assad are dubbed “freedom fighters” and Islamic fundamentalist enemies of democracy at the same time. It is the same with regard to the

use of chemical weapons by belligerents. The media, in the absence of evidence, express certainty as to the Syrian regime's responsibility, although they mention the use of such weapons by the "rebels". In particular, they relayed the statements of magistrate Carla Del Ponte, a member of the UN independent commission of inquiry into violence in Syria, who said, on May 5, 2013 on Swiss television, "According to the testimonies we have gathered, the rebels have used chemical weapons, making use of sarin gas." This magistrate, who is also the former prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia can hardly be called indulgent toward the "regime of Bashar Assad." "Our investigations should be further developed, verified and confirmed through new evidence, but according to what we have established so far, it is the opponents who used sarin," she added. [1]

The White House, for its part, did not want to consider this evidence and has always expressed an opposite position. Thus, as regards the August 21 Ghouta massacre, it released a statement explaining that there is "little doubt" of the use by Syria of chemical weapons against its opposition. The statement added that the Syrian agreement to allow the UN inspectors in the area is "too late to be credible."

Reduction of qualitative to quantitative.

Following the use, August 21, 2013, of chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus, Kerry reiterated the "strong certainty" of the United States concerning the liability of the Syrian regime. A U.S. intelligence report, released by the White House and said to rely on "multiple" sources, also said that the Syrian government used nerve gas in the attack, the use of which by the rebels is "highly unlikely". [2]

The individual is placed outside the differentiating power of language. That which is qualitative, that which is certain, is reduced to that which is quantitative, to the "different degrees of certainty" expressed previously by Obama or the "high certainty" pronounced by J. Kerry. The "very little doubt", as to the liability of the Syrian regime, also mirrors the "highly unlikely" responsibility attributed to opponents. Quality is thereby restricted to a quantitative difference. Quality, that which is, becomes at the same time, that which is not or at least that which may not be, because it no longer expresses a certainty, but a certain amount or degree of certainty or doubt. The opposites, "certainty" and "doubt" become equivalent. The qualitative difference is reduced to a quantitative gap. There is no longer any quality other than that of measurement.

This reduction of qualitative to quantitative has otherwise already invaded our daily lives. We no longer refer to the poor but to the "less fortunate". Similarly, we no longer encounter invalids, but "less able persons". The least skilled jobs are now given names that deny de-qualification. Thus, a cleaning woman becomes a "housekeeper", the cashier disappears in favour of the "sales assistant" and garbage Collector are now called « sanitation worker ».

The separating power of language is annihilated. Words are turned into verbal phrases that build a homogenized world. We are in a world in which everyone is advantaged. No more are there qualitative differences between human beings, but only quantitative differences. The vision of a world of perfect homogeneity where only equals exist, no longer differing other than quantitatively, was already foreseen by George Orwell in *Animal Farm*: « All are equal, but some would be more so than others » [3].

Absolute Certainty in the Absence of Evidence.

The word, which describes and differentiates things, is replaced by an image, by that which is everything at the same time as being nothing. Instead of a word referring to an object, degrees of certainty concern only the feelings of the speaker. These verbal phrases are not intended to designate objective things, but to place the person who receives the message in the perspective of the speaker, to lock them in the warped meaning created by the latter.

Expressed certainty can detach itself from facts and present itself as purely subjective. It does not refer to an observation, but refers to a condition posing as objective through a quantization operation.

The certainty of U.S. and French authorities also distinguishes itself in that it is built on equivocal data, on the invocation of evidence of liability of the Syrian regime, although they recall the impossibility of knowing who struck and how chemical weapons were used. It is no longer possible to construct an objective certainty, because the observation of facts is defused and leaves room for the stupefaction of the observer. Expressed certainty no longer separates true from false, since the ability to judge is suspended.

Precisely, subjective and objective certainty is undifferentiated. It is not a matter of believing what is stated, but of believing the authority who speaks, no matter what he says. Statements of Presidents Obama and Holland are immediately given as absolute certainty, ie: they occupy the place that Descartes gives to God “as a principle guaranteeing the objective truth of subjective experience...” [4]. The matter of going through the steps of objective verification, through the judgment of existence, does not arise to the extent that certainty is set free from all spatial and temporal constraints. It is posited in the absence of limits, in the absence of what psychoanalysis calls the “Third Person”, the place of the Other. [5]

Removal of the “Third Person”

Absolute certainty, posing as the be all and end all, installs a denial of reality, that which escapes us. It does not recognize loss. Constituting “we” is no longer possible because it can only be formed from that which is missing. The monad, for its part, lacks nothing because it is fused with state power. Fetishes fabricated by “the news” fill the void of reality, occupy the place of that which is missing and operate a denial of the third party.

Absolute certainty is opposed to the establishment of a symbolic order integrating the “third person” [6], the domain of language. The proper function of language is to signify that which is real, knowing that the word is not reality itself, but that by which it is represented. Jacques Lacan expresses this necessity with his aphorism “the thing must be lost in order to be represented”. [7]

On the contrary, absolute certainty attaches words to things and does not take into account their relationships. In the absence of a ‘third person’, it prevents any real articulation with the symbolic. This absence of linkage is the formation of a social psychosis wherein that which is stated by power becomes reality. The deficiency also allows the emergence of a perverse structure that reverses the speech act and prevents identifying the reality of the psychosis.

Enrolling us in psychosis, the discourse of French and American authorities originates in perverse denial. It constitutes a coup against language “coup because disavowal is situated at the logical basis of language” [8]. Denial of reality is realized by a commodification of

words and a procedure of cleavage. The cynical coup is this: “pervert that by which law is articulated, make language the reasonable discourse of unreason” [9] as with “humanitarian war” or “counter-terrorism”.

Counter-terrorism legislation is presented as rational actions to dismantle the law in favour of the fabrication of images. U.S. law is particularly rich in these pictorial constructions, such as the “lone wolf”, a lone terrorist related to an international movement, the “enemy combatant” or “unlawful belligerent” that exist, because they are designated as such by the U.S. President. The enemy combatant, as illegal belligerent, may be a U.S. citizen who has never been on a battlefield and whose “military action” amounts to an act of protest against a military engagement. Deviation from that which is stated by the powers that be is no longer possible. Similarly, any protection against its real threat is removed. The reality manifests itself without dissimulation and can henceforth petrify us.

The suppression of the Third Person reducing the individual to a monad, no longer having an Other outside of state power, allows authority, especially as regards discourse on the war in Syria, to produce a new reality. Evidence of the guilt of the Syrian regime exists, because authority says so.

A “disturbing strangeness”.

The absence of a “third person” settles us in transparency, in a never-never land beyond language. It removes the relationship between interior and exterior. The expression of the omnipotence of the U.S. President, his will to break free from the constraints of language and of any judicial order, reveals our condition, its reduction to “naked life.” There then occurs “a special kind of scary” Freud calls *Unheimliche* [10], a term which has no equivalent in French and which can as well be translated as “disturbing strangeness” and as “disturbing familiarity.”

It would be, as defined by Schelling, something that should have remained hidden and which has reappeared. Unveiled, worldly things appear in their raw presence as Real. Where the individual believed himself at home, he suddenly feels driven from his home and becomes strangely foreign to himself. The inside of our condition, our annihilation is thrown out and appears to us as a plaything of the U.S. executive branch. The staging of our division, “disturbing strangeness”, becoming that which is most familiar to us, suppresses intimacy by replacing it.

Freud suggests a dissociation of the ego. The latter is then pulverised and can no longer display the Real, the threat that petrifies it. Freud speaks of the formation of a stranger “I” that can turn itself into moral conscience and treat the other part as an object [11].

This mechanism reappears as the return of the repressed archaic, that which is intended to hide the distress of the nursing child. The “disturbing strangeness”, produced by Obama’s speech is of the same order. It instrumentalises what happened in Iraq in order to prevent us from forgetting our impotence. Thus, it reinforces “the permanent return of the same” constitutive of a sense of “disturbing strangeness” or disturbing familiarity. The process of repetition presents itself as an inexorable process, like a power that we cannot confront.

Jacques Lacan confirms this reading. Echoing the work of Freud on the “disturbing strangeness”, he shows that anxiety arises when the subject is facing the “lack of lack” that is to say, an all-powerful otherness that invades the self to the point of destroying every

faculty of desire. [12]

In fact, the two translations, the first highlighting the strangeness, the second its familiar character, make each highlight one aspect of this particular anxiety that one can also deal with thanks to the notion of transparency. Interior and exterior confusing themselves, the individual is at once struck by the strangeness of seeing his impotence, by his interior deprivation exhibited outside himself and by the colonization of his intimacy by the spectacle, become familiar, of the enjoyment of the other.

Denial and Splitting of the Ego.

Dissociation is an archaic defense attempt when faced with a power with which one cannot cope. This disintegration of the Ego allows the return of a “*déjà vu*”. The Superego calls one to see oneself as an infant, as one who does not speak, thus causing a feeling of “disturbing strangeness”.

Faced with the imperative need to believe in the responsibility of Bashar Assad, the individual must suspend contrary information and treat it as if it did not exist. He proceeds to a denial of all that is different, then couched in the regressive position, that of the umbilical union with the mother, a stage preceding language, before the appearance of the function of the father. [13]

The denial of the contradiction between a thing and its opposite, the responsibility of the Syrian government and the use of chemical weapons by the rebels, is the act of denying the reality of perception seen as dangerous because the individual would then have to face the omniscience displayed by the powers that be. To contain the anxiety produced by the “disturbing strangeness”, the subject is forced to juxtapose two opposing and parallel ways of reasoning. The individual then has two incompatible unlinked visions. The denial of the opposition between these two elements removes any conflict; because there coexists within oneself two opposing statements that are juxtaposed without influencing each other. This denial rests on what psychoanalysis calls the “splitting of the ego.”

The cleavage gives one the opportunity to live on two different levels, placing side by side, on the one hand, “knowledge”, the use of sarin gas by the rebels, and on the other hand a dodging of confrontation with a suspension of information. This is to prevent any struggle, any symbolism in order to enjoy the full omnipotence of the powers that be. In the absence of a perceived lack in what one is told, one finds oneself beneath the conflict in an annulment of any judgment.

Orwell has also highlighted this procedure in his definition of “doublethink.” It consists in the following: “to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancel each other out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them,” while being able to forget, « whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed ». Then one must forget, ie: “consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you have just performed. ” [14]

Cleavage is recurrent in the speech surrounding the war in Syria. Things here are regularly affirmed, at the same time as that which contradicts them without a relationship being established between the different enunciations. Contrary to statements by Carla Del Ponte, Washington would first have arrived, “with varying degrees of certainty,” at the conclusion that the Syrian government forces had used sarin gas against their own people. However,

Barack Obama, at the same time, said the United States didn't know " how [these weapons] were used, when they were used or who used them" [15]. The operation places the subject in fragmentation, unable to react to the nonsense of what is said and shown. One cannot cope with a certainty that is claimed in the absence of evidence.

The logical reversal of language building becomes a manifestation of the power of the U.S. executive. It exhibits a capacity to overcome any language organisation and thus all symbolic order. The absurdity reclaimed by the statement is as a coup against the logical basis of language. It henceforth has a petrification effect on people and captivates them in psychosis.

Notes

[1] « Les rebelles syriens ont utilisé du gaz sarin, selon Carla Del Ponte », *Le Monde.fr* avec Reuters, le 6 mai 2013.

[2] « Syrie : les États-Unis ont la "forte certitude" que Damas a eu recours à des armes chimiques », *Le Monde.fr*, le 30 août 2013.

[3] « All are equal but some than others », Georges Orwell, in *Animal Farm*.

[4] Charles-Éric de Saint Germain, *L'Avènement de la vérité Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger*, L'Harmattan 2003, p. 37.

[5] Dominique Temple, "Lacan et la réciprocité", 2008, http://dominique.temple.free.fr/reciprocite.php?page=reciprocite_2&id_article=202

[6] Le « Tiers » est ce qui défusionne l'enfant de la mère, lui donnant ainsi accès au champ du langage et de la parole. Il permet l'assujettissement du sujet à un ordre symbolique.

[7] Jacques Lacan, « Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse » - in : *Écrits 1*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1966.

[8] Houriya Abdellouahed, « La tactilité d'une parole. Le pervers et la substance », in *Cliniques méditerranéennes* N° 72, Érès, p. 5, <http://www.cairn.info/revue-cliniques-mediterraneennes-2005-2.htm>

[9] *Op. Cit.*, p. 8.

[10] Unheimliche est un adjectif substantivé, formé à partir de deux termes : le préfixe Un, exprimant la privation et l'adjectif heimlich (familier). La traduction « l'inquiétante étrangeté », d'abord proposée par Marie Bonaparte, ne tient compte ni de la familiarité signifié par heimlich, ni de la négation marquée par le Un. Aussi d'autres traductions ont été proposées telle que « l'inquiétante familiarité ». Lire les remarques préliminaires de François Stirn à la traduction de Une inquiétante étrangeté, par Marie Bonaparte et E. Marty, Profil Textes Philosophiques, *Philosophie*, octobre 2008, www.esparedes.pt/escola/images/freud_etrangete.pdf

[11] Le partage en deux éléments séparés a pour conséquence « que l'un participe au savoir, aux sentiments et aux expériences de l'autre, de l'unification à une autre personne, de sorte que l'on ne sait plus à quoi s'en tenir quant au moi propre, ou qu'on met le moi étranger à la place du Moi propre —donc dédoublement du Moi, division du Moi, permutation du Moi— et enfin, le retour permanent du même », S. Freud, « Inquiétante étrangeté et clivage », in *L'Inquiétante étrangeté et*

autres essais, Gallimard 1988, p. 236.

[12] Régine Detambel, « Sigmund Freud, L'inquiétante étrangeté autres essais, http://www.detambel.com/f/index.php?sp=liv&livre_id=656

[13] « Inquiétante étrangeté et clivage », http://theses.univ-lyon2.fr/documents/getpart.php?id=lyon2.2002.ravit_m&part=66598

[14] « *Retenir simultanément deux opinions qui s'annulent alors qu'on les sait contradictoires et croire à toutes deux... Oublier tout ce qu'il est nécessaire d'oublier, puis le rappeler à sa mémoire quand on en a besoin, pour l'oublier plus rapidement encore. Surtout, appliquer le même processus au processus lui-même. Là, était l'ultime subtilité. Persuader consciemment l'inconscient, puis devenir ensuite inconscient de l'acte d'hypnose que l'on vient de perpétrer. La compréhension même du mot « double pensée » impliquait l'emploi de la double pensée.* », George Orwell, 1984, première partie, chapitre III, Gallimard Folio 1980, p.55

[15] « Les rebelles syriens ont utilisé du gaz sarin, selon Carla Del Ponte », *Op. Cit.*

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