PERFORMING AND TRANSLATING ACTIVISM INTO ART
A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

MICHAELA QUADRARO
UNIVERSITÀ DELLA CALABRIA

Abstract – In May 2007, Iraqi American artist Wafaa Bilal confined himself to Chicago's Flatfile Gallery for thirty-one days. He decided to live in a room under the 24-hour surveillance of a webcam connected to the web together with a robotic paintball gun that allowed both the audience in the gallery and online users to shoot the artist with sticky yellow paint. *Domestic Tension* is part of a provocative project proposed by Bilal to contribute to the discussion on the separation between 'comfort zones' – the safe spaces where war is imagined and articulated both linguistically and visually – and 'conflict zones', the many war-torn areas across the world whose voices are often lost. The project was accompanied by a video diary posted on YouTube and the book *Shoot an Iraqi* (2008). The book not only enriches the experience engendered by the event of the performance but also makes the YouTube video commentaries more explicit. In this sense, it acts as a form of translation of the several modes of communication of the artist. Integrating Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) and Machin and Mayr's (2023) models, the article will adopt a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis perspective to investigate both the visual and the linguistic aspect of Bilal's multi-semiotic and intermedia art project. Bilal's intervention is crucial in this process not only by showing the complex dynamics of the racialised regimes of visual power and the intersemiotic strategies of resistance, but also by offering a performative counter-narrative that translates the otherwise inexpressible condition of living in a conflict zone.

Keywords: performance; translation; Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis; activism; Wafaa Bilal.

> *I saw this work as a matter of fighting*
> *for human rights, for my country as a whole,*
> *commentary and activism on a collective level.*
> (W. Bilal and K. Lydersen "Shoot an Iraqi",
> 2008, p. 9).

1. Introduction

The concept of performativity usually calls attention to the simultaneous presence and interaction of actors and audiences in the art context. The focus is thus not so much on the actor/performer but rather on the relation between

the social actors who participate in the meaning-making process of the art event. As a principle, performativity questions normative power relations and allows to rearticulate hierarchies and identities. Inspired by Judith Butler's argument about the performative nature of gender (1990), this also entails a rethinking of language, in particular of the several ways in which it can be used as social action. According to Kita Hall and other linguists such as Deborah Cameron and Anna Livia, this perspective has been quite promising for discourse analysis since it sheds light on the ways in which our understanding of the world is discursively produced (Hall 1999). Indeed, the discourses we encounter are intertwined with social values and the ways we act. As Norman Fairclough highlights, discourses are "ways of representing aspects of the world – the processes, relations and structures of the material world, the 'mental world' of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and so forth, and the social world" (Fairclough 2003, p. 124). Not only do discourses represent the world but they influence the way we act, relate to one another, or try to change social relationships.

Performativity presents a case for opening up a way of considering language use and identity formation: "[P]erformativity, particularly in its relationship to notions of performance, opens up ways to understand how languages, identities and futures are refashioned" (Pennycook 2004, p. 17). The notion of performativity involves an interesting way of considering language as a crucial part of a performance, in which different semiotic modalities of communication are integrated in a meaning-making process. In the artistic intervention, the process of meaning creation and negotiation is particularly interesting. Furthermore, enhanced by the widespread use of digital and mobile media of communication, new forms of activism and protest are facilitated by the modalities of networked media. A change in the dynamics of discursive power is evident in the fluid mediated communication of the participatory web that offers a new paradigm of communication to users across platforms, spaces, sites, and technologies (KhosraviNik 2017). This includes Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Instagram and Facebook as well as video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. The essence of this communication protocol involves forms of participatory communication with potential decentralised discourses conveyed by texts.

The semiotic modes of networked media "contribute to the emergence of new constellation of actors; they create new forms of articulation and performance that often resist and question the long-held power of institutions, parties or other bodies of (civil) society" (Foellmer *et al.* 2017, p. 1). The possibility to communicate and interact via chats or mobile media platforms allows citizens to contribute to transnational social movements and to be involved in forms of intellectual engagement. YouTube, for instance, embodies an influential multimodal form of communicating ideas to a wide

audience "by merging multiple modes (text, visuals, visual effects, audio, animation, etc.) presented by a user (the narrator, the singer, etc.) through an interface (youtube.com and its video player)" (Balirano 2015, p. 4).

This is particularly evident within the artistic scenario: in this context, language as a force of social transformation plays a crucial role in the debate about activism and cultural change. When digital media are embedded in artistic interventions, artists and audiences have alternative ways of connecting to each other. Through a focus on the performativity of interventions, it is possible to investigate new spaces for activism and social identities. This is also stimulating for the investigation of the relationship between language and social change. Through language we evaluate events and make choices that demonstrate how people, things, and events are perceived. As Fairclough (1992) has demonstrated, the analysis of language as a social practice can shed light on the relationship between discourse and social relations.

By stressing the transformative force of language, it is possible to highlight the micro level of practices and choices that question power relations and to propose counter-discourses. In the contemporary digitalised world, where conflicts, traumatic events, and oppressive regimes and discourses take place on a daily basis, the artistic sector seems to offer alternative bonds of solidarity and empathy by contributing to giving voice to war-ridden territories. Drawing on these conceptualisations, the central topic of this article is to shed light on how activism is constructed, performed, and transferred in the artistic discourse. Acts of translation counter-narrate dominant discourses and re-actualise the experience of living in a conflict zone under the constant danger of warfare. Baker's approach (2016) to translation as solidarity, where the significance of collaboration implies a work that is crucial for the political arena, has been an inspiring resource to consider artistic practices as strategies of activism. Understood in both its narrow and broader senses, translation involves on the one hand "rendering fully articulated stretches of textual material from one language into another, and encompasses various modalities such as written translation, subtitling and oral interpreting" (Baker 2016, p. 7). On the other hand, in its broader and more metaphoric sense,

> translation involves the mediation of diffuse symbols, experiences, narratives and linguistic signs of varying lengths across modalities (words into image, lived experiences into words), levels and varieties of language […], and cultural spaces, the latter without necessarily crossing a language boundary. (Baker 2006, p. 7)

In the case under investigation, the act of translation encompasses the use of English in the oral narration and the writings about the Iraqi conflict zone.

Translation, both in its narrow and broad senses, permeates the personal experiences of activists/artists/writers who focus on the difficulties and the complexities of translating into words the experiences of living under the constant danger of bombs. As a case in point, Wafaa Bilal's live installation *Domestic Tension* (2007) and his book *Shoot and Iraqi* (2008) demonstrate how the broader and metaphoric sense of translation is actualised in the transfer of a lived experience into words and images.

Creative cultural industries are contributing to developing translation as an inclusive form of communication that embraces activism and promotes the dissemination of narratives (Rizzo 2017). By stressing the role played by acts of translation in the transfer of war and conflicts into the artistic domain, it is possible to highlight the performability of translation beyond the linguistic domain, given the increased coexistence of semiotic resources in contemporary multimodal texts. Thus, translation extends towards spaces such as the museum or the art gallery that become sites of translation, or "intersemiotic translation" considered as "the basis of cultural communication through which ideas are circulated, translated and explained using language, images and other semiotic resources" (O'Halloran *et al.* 2016, p. 199). From this perspective, intersemiotic acts of translation can be conceptualised as a strategy of 'resemiotisation' that investigates the shifts of meaning taking place across different semiotic resources and what meanings are articulated as a result (O'Halloran *et al.* 2016, p. 199).

Translation is therefore given a crucial role in its use as a metaphor with the aim to generate and share public knowledge about the devastated conflict zones around the world. Strategies of translation in the artistic sector are based on choices applied to textual and non-textual contributions, such as audio-visual installations, exhibitions, documentaries, video productions, non-fictional books, and so on. In a world devastated by conflicts and wars, the artistic arena provides zones of exchange and acts of translation that activate powerful counter-discourses. Putting the conflict zones into words, images, and sounds within the artistic domain is an attempt to give a form to otherwise inexpressible conditions and to represent real-life tragedies to new audiences from a variety of perspectives by means of acts of translation.

By emphasising the role of the artistic sector in performing and translating activism, this article draws attention to an art project that demonstrates the modalities by which the arts can contribute to giving voice to the otherwise unexpressed voices coming from conflict zones, such as those of the Iraqi people who have experienced years of war under the bombs and in refugee camps. In contrast to mainstream discourse, the stories that emerge from the art project analysed in this article encourage an interest in the performability of translation as a metaphor that implies the transfer of ideas that would otherwise be unspoken in dominant discourses. This choice

is motivated by the intention of suggesting a system of narratives built by contemporary artworks that re-narrate stories of war, loss, and tragedy and ask readers and viewers to register nameless identities.

The work that will be surveyed in this study offers a space of political activism and promotes practices in the space of translation embodied by the art gallery. The analysis will focus on the intersection of linguistic perspectives, based on a social semiotic approach to language, which has its origins in the work of M.A.K. Halliday (1978) and in the later development by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2021 [1996]). Multimodality will provide the tools to investigate both the visual and the linguistic aspects of the multi-semiotic and intermedia art project proposed in this article. This perspective is further implemented with the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin, Mayr 2023), which has contributed to the extrapolation of the lexical choices that support the re-narration of the experience of living in a conflict zone.

2. A methodological overview: from Halliday's 'metafunctions' to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Language conveys information but also provides resources, options, and choices to assess how people feel about that information, how certain they are about it. The question of modality expresses the speaker's judgement or the obligations involved in what s/he is saying. Therefore, modality is seen in terms of a relationship between authors and representations:

> Modality is important in the texturing of identities, both personal ('personalities') and social, in the sense that what you commit yourself to is a significant part of what you are – so modality choices in texts can be seen as part of the process of texturing self-identity. (Fairclough 2003, p. 166)

Similarly, the concept of modality can be applied to visual communication because semiotic modes, such as static and moving images, present visual details which contribute to meaning-making practices. Indeed, this perspective is inspired by a social semiotic approach to language, which derives from M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978). In opposition to a focus on language as an abstract system of rules, or grammar, social semiotics considers language as a set of semiotic resources that are chosen and used for achieving specific communicative purposes. Social semiotics is concerned with the ways people use the available resources both in language and visual communication (Machin, Mayr 2023). At stake is how language can be used not only to represent the world but to constitute it and create social practices.

Halliday's systemic-functional model investigates the ways language can be used to produce social practices since "[m]aking sense of our experience […] and acting out our social relationships" (Halliday 2004, p. 29) are the basic functions of language that construe human experience. According to Halliday, language is organised around three metafunctions: 'ideational', 'interpersonal', and 'textual'. The 'ideational' metafunction aims at representing what happens in the world; the 'interpersonal' metafunction relates to 'language as action', whereby we question and express our evaluation and attitude towards the others; the 'textual' metafunction relates to the way texts are constructed (Halliday 2004, pp. 29-30).

These metafunctions can also provide tools in visual communication. In Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) the ideational metafunction becomes the 'representational' dimension that refers to the 'represented participants' (people or things) involved; the active meaning of the interpersonal metafunction becomes the 'interactive dimension' that relates to the relationships of the interactive participants or social actors; the textual metafunction becomes the 'compositional' dimension that refers to the way coherence is visually accomplished. As for the representational dimension, it is important to identify the represented participants who are implicated and their qualities. With regard to the interactive dimension, an example of a visual technique used to investigate this dimension is represented by contact, when participants look at the viewers and establish a connection with them (Kress, van Leeuwen 2021, p. 116). This kind of image can be identified as a 'demand', one of the most fundamental types of speech role, according to Halliday's model (1978). When images do not directly address the viewer, the represented participants become the objects of the gaze and 'offer' themselves as parts of information. Furthermore, other strategies through which images express relationships are the 'size of frame' (the choice between a close-up or a long shot) and the 'perspective' (the alternative between an oblique angle and a frontal perspective). In addition to the above-mentioned dimensions, there is the element of the composition of the image, or the way in which the elements are integrated. For example, 'information value' refers to the positions occupied by the elements in the image (left/right, top/bottom, centre/margin), while 'salience' indicates the most relevant element in the image (Kress, van Leeuwen 2021, p. 179).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) have developed a model of analysis where language is considered as one mode of communication. Indeed, this approach investigates the multiplicity of 'modes' – or semiotic resources – which contribute to the communicative function of a text (Jewitt 2009; Kress, van Leeuwen 2021; O'Halloran, Smith 2011; O'Toole 2011). Multimodality is thus considered as an integrated and inter-disciplinary perspective for the study of representation "with the aim of analysing concepts and methods

within a systematic functional framework" (Balirano 2015, p. 4). Since multimodality is "the normal state of human communication" (Kress 2010, p. 1), multimodal approaches can be applied to the study of several forms of cultural representation such as art, literature, and social media.

This kind of approach, combined with Critical Discourse Analysis, can reveal "the implicit and not merely explicit aspects of communication" (Carbonara 2018, p. 91). Therefore, conducting a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) means to examine how communicative aims are achieved as well as the features used by speakers and authors "to persuade people to think about events in a particular way" (Machin, Mayr 2023, p. 2). More specifically, MCDA explores lexical choices (word connotations, overlexicalisation, adjectives); the use of particular quoting verbs; the iconographic resources employed for evaluating social actors (gazes and poses); the linguistic and visual strategies used to represent and classify 'social actors' (personalisation versus impersonalisation, individualisation versus collectivisation, specification versus genericisation, nominalisation versus functionalisation, the use of pronouns, etc.); transitivity, i.e. the representation of what participants do both linguistically and visually; linguistic strategies of concealment (nominalisation and presupposition); the use of metaphor and rhetorical tropes; the use of modal verbs, modal adjectives, and their adverbial equivalents, which allow to assess people's commitment to truth, as well as the visual qualities that are used to conceal or embellish what we see (Machin, Mayr 2023).

What follows is an example of how MCDA may serve to analyse multi-semiotic and intermedial artworks such as Wafaa Bilal's art project *Domestic Tension* and his book *Shoot an Iraqi*. The critical reflection on the co-articulation of different semiotic resources enables an exploration of the ways in which in Bilal's work certain identities and actions are foregrounded. A consideration of the resulting political implications can shed light on the strategies adopted to construct, perform, and translate activism into the artistic discourse.

3. Case study and analysis

Domestic Tension is the name of a provocative live art installation in which Iraqi American artist Wafaa Bilal confined himself to Chicago's Flatfile Gallery for thirty-one days. On 4 May 2007, he entered the gallery and lived for one month in a room set with a robotic paintball gun aimed at him which people could shoot over the Internet 24 hours a day. The project originated out of his grief at the death of his brother and his father in his hometown, Kufa, Iraq, and his need to connect his life as an artist in the comfort zone of the United States to the sorrow of the conflict zone in which his family and

many other people lived. In 2007, in fact, Bilal saw a TV interview with a young female American soldier, whose job was to drop bombs on Iraqi targets behind a computer in Colorado. This circumstance made him think about America's seeming callousness about Iraq and the war. His brother Haji had been killed precisely by a bomb dropped from an American helicopter, "orchestrated by someone just like this young woman, pressing buttons from thousands of miles away, sitting in a comfortable chair in front of a computer, completely oblivious to the terror and destruction they were causing to a family – a whole society – halfway across the world" (Bilal 2008, p. 10). By the end of the project, more than 65,000 shots from a paintball gun had been fired at him by people from 136 countries, as he explains in the book *Shoot an Iraqi*, published in 2008, to make sense of that experiment. Therefore, the aim of the project is to contribute to the discussion on the disconnection between the 'comfort zones' – the safe spaces where war is imagined and articulated both linguistically and visually – and the 'conflict zones', the many war-torn areas across the world whose voices are often lost.

In *Watching Babylon*, Nicholas Mirzoeff highlights that "[i]n the second Gulf War, more images were created to less effect than at any other period in human history" (Mirzoeff 2004, p. 67). It seems worth noting that American networks CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News broadcasted continuously during the six weeks of the war, as did the BBC and Sky in the UK, al-Jazeera in the Middle East, and many other networks worldwide. Crowds of journalists were present using all the advantages of digital technology to transmit reports. According to Mirzoeff, whose statement preceded the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, what is remarkable in retrospect is the lack of any truly memorable image. Though there was a constant circulation of images, there was nothing to see: "To adapt a phrase from Hannah Arendt, the war marked the emergence of the banality of images" (Mirzoeff 2004, p. 67). As a result of media saturation with non-stop anonymous images, the visual impact of war images has been reduced to such an extent that there is no longer anything spectacular.

Bilal's project can be considered as a way to react to media saturation and the consequent distance between the visual representation of war and perceived reality. The Gallery was his house for a month: he set up his bedroom with a bed, a desk, a computer, a lamp, and a coffee table. Several plexiglass screens separated his room from the space of the gallery, where the paintball gun was located. During his residency he never left the building though he had to leave the room for using the bathroom and the shower. Apart from these moments, he spent most of the time as a target of the gun, interacting with the people participating in the chat room on the project's website. The paintball gun had a robotic mechanism that fired in response to

the clicks of online viewers and gallery visitors. When more users attempted to fire the gun at the same time, their effort was to take control of the gun. It is also worth saying that there were users who tried to rescue the artist by turning the gun away from him.

The whole month was streamed live on the Internet without sound. This was in contrast with the environment of the gallery, where the gun was very loud. Each day, Bilal recorded hours of video and edited the footage into several video diary entries he then posted on YouTube.[1] According to the artist, "the stress and manipulation of one's every movement to avoid being hit" (Bilal 2008, p. 3) in *Domestic Tension* are powerful reminders of the constant threat experienced by those who live in a conflict zone. Thus, his performance aims to "shed light on the destruction and violence of warfare in a language that […] people who have never experienced conflict can understand" and to create "dialogue and build bridges – human being to human being" (Bilal 2008, p. 5).

Drawing on MCDA, it is possible to analyse Bilal's work on two levels – verbal and visual – following a comparison between the video diary posted on YouTube and the intersemiotic translation of this discourse in the book he published in 2008 with Chicago-based author and journalist Kari Lydersen as a co-writer. Following O'Halloran *et al.* (2016), we can claim that not only does the book integrate the artist's diary but also functions as an intersemiotic act of translation and a strategy of 'resemiotisation'. A series of comments will be made in order to show the implications of such a work and its counter-narrative potentiality in terms of activism. In order to trace ways in which activism is performed and translated into art and to reflect on the forms such an intervention involves, twelve videos from the online diary on YouTube and the corresponding entries in the book were selected. This choice was motivated by the idea of exploring these acts of translation both visually and linguistically in order to reflect on the choices of representation. To this purpose, the selection of entries where language is analysed is limited to instances in which Bilal expresses his experience of living in the Iraqi conflict zone and how this is re-actualised, performed, and translated into the gallery space that hosts his live art installation. The co-articulation of the different semiotic resources (mainly language, image, and sound) is investigated in order to evaluate how they contribute to conveying activism in a specific form of representation. The selection of the diary records was also guided by the presence in all of the entries of strong references to the emotional evaluation of the experience of living in a conflict zone: from a predominance of specific expressions to the choice of objects and settings, from the use of adjectives to the value of colours. This analysis intends to

---

[1] In Bilal's own words: "I interviewed my visitors and recorded my own rambling, raw, often painful monologues" (Bilal 2008, p. 3). For the videos of the online diary, see Bilal (2023).

identify some of the semiotic choices found in these texts both visually and linguistically in ways that allow us to outline a broader discourse on activism, resistance, and counter-narration. The choices create a field of meaning that can serve to foreground or symbolise some meanings and background others.

The choice of words used by Bilal is useful to underline the disconnection between a conflict zone and a comfort zone. Following Machin and Mayr (2023), we investigate the kinds of words used and if there is a predominance of some words or expressions. In the following extract from Bilal's book, we can take into account the kind of discourse the words we find in the text realise, the kind of world they constitute:

> I was overcome with feelings of intense hatred and anger toward this woman in Colorado and all the other young, fresh-faced US soldiers. But in my heart I knew that wasn't fair; they're mostly just kids caught up in a cycle of greed and power they don't understand, naïve pawns in the age-old game of aggression and warfare. Born and raised in the United States, an encapsulated sphere of privilege and safety, it's not surprising they would be unable to fathom the reality of a distant, foreign society and the ramifications of their actions. I was struck again by the anguish that has plagued me ever since Haji's death: though my consciousness and memories are forever connected to the conflict zone that is Iraq (and so many other wartorn countries across the globe), my present reality has become the same comfort zone as this young Colorado soldier's. I have a warm bed in a comfortable apartment, a hot cup of coffee or a pepperoni pizza at a moment's notice, a health club membership, wine and cheese at Friday art openings. I live in complete comfort and security, even when I am constantly worried about my family and my people. (Bilal 2008, pp. 10-11)

A lexical analysis of the text reveals the choice of words and expressions such as *hatred*, *anger*, *greed*, *power*, *naïve pawns*, *aggression*, *warfare* to connote the representation of the conflict zone in discourse. On the contrary, the type of lexis, in particular adjectives, chosen for the comfort zone where he lives now, plays an important role in the emotional evaluation.

According to Machin and Mayr (2023), adjectives enrich language and achieve a more powerful expression for the text producer. For example, *warm bed*, *comfortable apartment*, *hot cup of coffee*, together with *pepperoni pizza*, *health club membership*, *wine*, *cheese*, *comfort*, *security*, are revealing as far as the quality of the comfort zone is concerned and are associated with what Bilal defines the 'chasm' and the 'duality' in which he lives. Instead of producing a didactic work and explaining the real conditions of living in a conflict zone, he decides to produce a more interactive and dynamic work, turning the viewer into a fundamental part of the project. Even the expression chosen for the title of the installation, *Domestic Tension*, is particularly ambiguous in the contrast between the adjective *domestic* (which suggests ideas related to home and family) and *tension* (related to stress and pressure).

The conflict zone performed and translated into the artistic discourse conveys sets of associations:

> Friends tried to pass me wine and beer, but I knew I couldn't risk drinking; I was in a conflict zone. One paintball hit hard right on one of the openings in the bike helmet. The impact jarred my skull, and yellow paint dripped down my face behind the visor, stinking of the fish-oil base. I felt woozy for a moment; watching myself on video later I could see I was visibly swaying. One person was shooting constantly from Shabbona, Illinois. 'I hope he's not an adult', I thought. 'What would make one person shoot so much?' Little did I know that this was nothing compared to what was to come. Even with the pain and anxiety, there was still a party atmosphere. All parties have to end however, and finally I found myself alone with the gun. As the reality of what I was getting myself into fully dawned on me, I began to feel incredibly lonely and vulnerable. There was no way to escape the ticking noise of the gun when someone moved it, which was the worst part. I found myself wishing I could sneak away somewhere to paint, like I used to do when the abuse from my father became unbearable. (Bilal 2008, p. 30)

A lexical analysis of the above text reveals a prevalence of words such as *woozy*, *swaying*, *pain*, *anxiety*, *lonely*, *vulnerable*, which are also associated with the time when his father perpetrated violence and abuse on his family. By using terms such as *lonely* and *vulnerable* and sentences like "There was no way to escape the ticking noise of the gun", Bilal re-creates the tension he experienced both at home and in his home country within the space of the art gallery. Furthermore, he does not so much tell us about what happens in a conflict zone, but he creates an emotional evaluation of it. For example, the sentence "I found myself wishing I could sneak away somewhere to paint" to describe his feelings at the beginning of his live art installation makes the experience of the exhibition seem like an alternative experience, in other words, a performative counter-narration.

The analysis will compare the multimodal text of the YouTube diary and the entries of the book, where the diary starts on Day 7, in order to investigate how discourse is articulated in both texts and how the book integrates and translates the audio-visual text. The following research questions were formulated: how does Bilal use language to achieve a specific effect, to perform and translate activism into the artistic discourse? How is language used to let the audience and readers understand what art can do? How does the artist use the semiotic resources available in order to realise his goals? How does the selection of choices take place for the discourse on activism?

Let us begin by looking at the online diary posted on YouTube, how the discourse is articulated visually and linguistically in some relevant visual frames and extracts from the scripts that were selected on the basis of their relevance to the above-mentioned research questions (Figures 1-5). The

multimodal analysis is designed as follows: one significant visual frame fits into the corresponding column, while an extract from the script can be found in the other column.

Day number	Visual frame	Extract from the script
7		The place is absolutely a mess and I started cleaning up a little bit and you could see here is um the gun […] and people keep still keep shooting […] I have to stay low because the gun is just you could see just above me so I can stay out of the direct line. (Bilal 2007a, 00:38-01:24)

Figure 1
Still and extract from the YouTube video of *Domestic Tension* (day 7).

As we can infer from Figure 1, Bilal is particularly interested in narrating his experience, especially the mental and physical pain he goes through while being confined to the gallery space. In the videoblog, Bilal always portrays himself with goggles (Frame 7), which seem to connote something related to self-protection and allude to the necessity of defending himself from the paintballs. At the level of the representational metafunction, Frame 7 portrays Bilal in the gallery room where he is confined. The situation is very confused because of the constant sound of gunshots. Bilal is at the centre of the frame, while the fast and trembling movement of the camera expresses anxiety and a powerful emotional evaluation of the situation. The same effect is achieved by the many pauses and exclamations such as 'um' that bring more of a sense of pausing and uncertainty. As for the type of lexis, we notice the repetition of the word *gun* and the overlexicalisation of terms related to the fact that he has to protect himself from the shots ("I have to stay low"; "I can stay out of the direct line"). The repetition of words is woven into the fabric of discourse and gives a sense of persuasion. This is similarly reflected in his storytelling while he is in the gallery room and stands in front of visitors and online viewers.

As for the translation of this storytelling and how it is rendered in the book, the act of cleaning the room from the paintball residue makes him think of "how in Iraq, in a war zone, you must constantly be cleaning up and repairing the damage done, even though you know your work will likely just be destroyed again" (Bilal 2008, p. 32). The act of cleaning the gallery is rephrased in the book as the re-actualisation of his experience in the Iraqi conflict zone. In particular, the verb *to repair* is chosen to talk about the damage left by years of war and the impossibility to find a final 'repair'.

Day number	Visual frame	Extracts from the script
8		We're getting a constant bombardment and I'm just going to let the camera roll for a few minutes to show you what's going on right here. I think just I haven't replaced these shields yet so some of these paint balls platter […] We have a few problems here some people were able to do multiple shots, and we have some damage to the plexiglass so we can I go in and fix it. (Bilal 2007b, 3:23-5:27)
9		It starts to bother me although I tried to be strong, but I start to be agitated more and more by it. We're hoping to continue and hoping to keep the conversation go on. (Bilal 2007c, 00:21-00:57)

Figure 2
Stills and extracts from the YouTube videos of *Domestic Tension* (days 8 and 9).

The evaluation of damage and the necessity to repair are reiterated in the Extract 8: the 'damage' to the plexiglass shield expresses again the idea of being in danger and suggests fear. Moreover, following the use of colour as a semiotic resource, we notice that the contrast of colours between the wall and the robotic paintball confers a dramatic effect, enhanced by the articulation of light and shadow (Frame 8). The videoblog of Day 8 is translated in the book mainly as the storytelling of his childhood that "coincided with Saddam's rise to power":

> In 1972 and 1973, when I was six and seven, there was a serial killer on the loose in Baghdad—or so we thought. Many mornings there would be news of another prominent family hacked to pieces by Abu Tubar — "the one with the axe." We didn't learn until later that "Abu Tubar" was actually Saddam's security service, killing communists, educated people, dissidents, anyone who might stand in Saddam's way. (Bilal 2008, pp. 34-35)

Here, the use of the pronoun *we* sounds personalised but also expresses a vague statement about the identity of those he presents as a 'we', perhaps suggesting his family and close friends.

Frame 9 depicts Bilal lying on the bed, 'agitated' and exhausted. According to Kress and van Leeuwen's interactional metafunction, which looks at the relationship between the represented participants and the interactive participants, Frame 9 is an offer image, because the represented participant looks up without making eye contact with the viewer. In this frame, the represented participant is the object of the viewer's scrutiny, so that the viewer becomes an invisible onlooker. Following Halliday's model, Kress and van Leuween would call this image an 'offer', since "it 'offers' the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of

contemplation" (Kress, van Leuween 2021, p. 118). The image looks like an imaginary barrier between the represented participant and the viewer, thus producing a sense of disengagement. However, Bilal's facial expression of pain creates a kind of social affinity with the viewer. This pain is translated in the book as the 'killing' of the lamp:

> Why is the lamp of such significance? Years of war in Iraq and constant danger in the refugee camps have left me with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) […] [I]n the gallery I can't let myself fall into a deep sleep, or else I might forget where I am and sit up, putting my head in the line of fire. So in order to remind myself I'm in a dangerous place, I've been leaving the lamp on at all times. (Bilal 2008, p. 41)

The destruction of the lamp makes him cry. This is another sign of how 'agitated' he is and of the sense of the expression he wants to convey:

> As an artist my work is driven by my emotion […] but I didn't anticipate the emotional roller coaster this project would become. Usually my artwork is a reaction, sculpted by the feelings and thoughts unleashed by an event. This time the event itself is the artwork, and the emotions it releases become a direct part of the work. (Bilal 2008, p. 42)

Day number	Visual frame	Extract from the script
11		When I got up in the morning I noticed there was a heavy bombardment to the lamp to the point it was totally destroyed […] It was sad for me because the lamp represented just the only thing that stayed alive beside me in this space especially at night. (Bilal 2007d, 00:15-00:44)

Figure 3
Still and extract from the YouTube video of *Domestic Tension* (day 11).

The broken lamp is at the centre of Frame 11: here there is a dramatic representation of the lampshade, destroyed by paintball shots. In the verbal storytelling the lamp becomes "the only thing that stayed alive" (Extract 11). At the core of Day 11 in the book there is a visit of a former US Marine who had seen the YouTube video and got the artist a new lamp. This visit 'warms' Bilal's heart, who is "overcome with emotion":

> Matt says he never thought much about the consequences of shooting another person in war. He says he and his fellow Marines were always too busy trying to survive to be worried about their targets. But the paintball project has made him see things in a different light, enabled him to see his adversaries as human beings. (2008, p. 54)
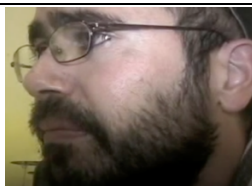
Day number	Visual frame	Extracts from the script
13		The shooting is continued the gun is just above me and I just wanted to let you know just how it feels like to get hit repeatedly […] now I'm lying in bed I cannot get up because of their repeated shots so I just gonna lay down here until there is an opportunity to get away from the bed. (Bilal 2007e, 03:00-04:23)
14		It has been absolutely non-stop for the last three hours and I think it just these people are so disturbing, and I don't know what why this much hate in them […] it's so disturbing it's so disturbing […] I'm gonna go in a safer place […] very disturbing very hard. (Bilal 2007f, 01:18-05:39)
16		My body is just getting weak […] I think it's the lack of sleep the combination of the lack of sleep and stress um I start hating the sound very much […] I hope I will continue this I'll show you some of the room how destroyed it is […] you could see the level of destruction and the yellow colour as well. (Bilal 2007g, 01:34-02:40)
21		The good thing I see the end of it only nine days to go but the bad think I have started having a lot of health problems […] I started showing post-traumatic symptoms […] I could see that shooting has not stopped and in fact intensified […] I just want to illustrate the point that we are disconnected from reality there is a comfort zone and then there is a conflict zone. (Bilal 2007h, 00:29-01:40)
24		I hope that does give you an idea of how hard it is to be in this place the game is not no more or it's no longer physical it's mental it's mental because physical harm doesn't mean anything anymore I'm not afraid of the gun I could just and that's scary […] My intent is to raise awareness of my family in Iraq. (Bilal 2007i, 05:03-06:23)
25		As you can see we are under a heavy heavy bombardment. It has been very steady this morning and almost every second or even sometimes a few seconds and it has been any global not just United States. (Bilal 2007j, 00:02-00:20)

Figure 4
Stills and extracts from the YouTube videos of *Domestic Tension* (days 13, 14, 16, 21, 24, and 25).

To stimulate engagement seems to be one of Bilal's main interests. The use of pronouns, in particular *you*, is predominant in most of the extracts: for example, "I just wanted to let you know just how it feels like to get hit repeatedly" (Extract 13); "I'll show you some of the room how destroyed it is" (Extract 16); "I hope that does give you an idea of how hard it is to be in this place" (Extract 24); "As you can see we are under a heavy, heavy bombardment" (Extract 25); "Thank you very much you have been great". Following Machin and Mayr (2023), personal pronouns personalise relationships and convey a sense of personal involvement, as an important way to communicate a sense of community. In Frame 13, the yellow colour of the paintball shot on the plexiglass shield expresses intensity. Indeed, saturated colours tend to be emotionally engaging and bold (Ledin, Machin

2020). One of the effects of increased saturation is sensory, or a "modality of the senses", to put it in Kress and van Leeuwen's words (2021, p. 156). The yellow colour makes the paintball shot more than real and adds an extra intensity to the viewer's engagement.

The book translates the visual emotional intensity of the yellow colour into the multiple shots fired by online users: "The shooters have figured out that they can fire the gun multiple times in quick succession if they open multiple browser windows on their computer" (Bilal 2008, p. 58). Here, it is useful to consider how participants are described as a part of a collective, the 'shooters'. The shooters are in this case a generic group, without additional referential information that would individualise them. Therefore, the group of shooters is not humanised and cannot receive any kind of empathy for the way they are interacting with the art project. Furthermore, an Iraqi visitor (a friend of Bilal and a former war photojournalist) states:

> A lot of people ask me about war because I've seen so much of it, but most of the time I cannot tell them what war is. This project shows exactly what it is. It's not a video game. I see you sitting there in fear; you are a human being. (Bilal 2008, p. 59)

Bilal is sitting in the gallery and is frightened, like in a real conflict zone. Those who do not experience war are disconnected, dehumanised, and collectivised as 'them'. This disconnection returns in Extract 21, where he states that "we are disconnected from reality there is a comfort zone and then there is a conflict zone".

A pivotal point here is to understand how Bilal attempts to bridge the gap between the comfort zone and the conflict zone. The language and the visual resources that he uses demonstrate he intends to achieve the specific effect of emotional intensity. His linguistic and visual performance of activism translates the experience of living in a conflict zone within the gallery space. Frame 14 presents again his face as an offer image, with a close-up on Bilal's face looking up without making eye contact with the interactive participants (the viewers). In this image, the viewer is the subject of the look, while Bilal's painful face, as a represented participant, is impersonally offered as an item on display. This reinforces what is happening verbally as he continuously repeats and overuses the adjective *disturbing* ("It's so disturbing") in the fabric of discourse (Extract 14). This strategy of overlexicalisation tends to give a sense of over-persuasion and proves that something problematic is represented. The aim here is to connote a sense of activity and engagement in terms of affect. Moving images can articulate dynamic meaning-making processes. Indeed, as Bilal looks up, we can notice that he looks towards the section that according to the compositional metafunction represents the 'ideal' level. This part has a stronger emotive

power, as opposed to the lower section that represents the 'real'.

"It's so disturbing" is the sentence repeated by Bilal in his videoblog entry Day 14. In the book this is translated as the disturbing horror of the war that he experienced during US bombing:

> So I stayed in Kufa through weeks of U.S. bombing that destroyed the whole city's infrastructure, and most of the country's; electricity generation, communications and bridges. My favorite spot to paint was the Kufa Bridge— until it was bombed, killing scores of people including a wedding party. I was painting at my aunt's house at the time, it was just luck that I had decided not to go to the bridge that day. The reverberations shook the house and all the surrounding buildings, sending tremors through my bones. I raced toward the bridge with my heart pounding, joining a screaming, wailing crowd converging on the site of the explosion. There were pieces of flesh and twisted metal everywhere. Staggering through the destruction in a state of collective shock, we gathered up the bits of flesh and torn clothing and threw them in the river, my eyes smarting and my throat swelling from the horrific smells and sights. (Bilal 2008, p. 73)

The above passage demonstrates that certain expressions were chosen by the text producer for his own motivated reason. For example, if he chooses to say that "they [he and other unnamed people] gathered up the bits of flesh and torn clothing and threw them in the river", this immediately brings certain sets of associations. The disturbing situation of the online shooters is translated in the book as the black void of death and the endless pain produced by real bombings. The aim is to try to engage the reader by producing a sense of disgust and pain.

Day number	Visual frame	Extracts from the script
26		There are about over 120 people right now online something really amazing is happening right now I have about thirty-six or so people doing left action which means they are pressing the button down on the left preventing people from panning into my direction and I do have a name for this action now it is on the chat and it's called virtual human shield what an amazing event. (Bilal 2007k, 00:08-00:48)
30		To the supporters thank you very much you have been great it has been very hard to me ups and down united people body people but that's what art is supposed to do it is supposed to inform it's supposed to educate and it's supposed to be part of life so thanks everybody for your great support and one more thing I have no resentment to the people who shot it's an encounter it's not a didactic piece and it's an open narrative we could all impose our own narrative on it. (Bilal 2007l, 01:02-01:46)

Figure 5
Stills and extracts from the YouTube videos of *Domestic Tension* (days 26 and 30).

In Extract 26, Bilal defines people who are pressing the button trying to prevent users from shooting as 'virtual human shields'. This is defined as an "amazing event". Nothing is said about those people in the videoblog, while the book integrates this entry of the diary and clarifies that Beverly Wilson, an Art Institute graduate, came across the website during a heavy shooting:

> She figured out that by constantly clicking the gun left, she could keep it away from me, as long as her clicks outnumbered the aggressive shooters aiming at me. Through the chat room she organized more people to protect me. They are calling themselves the Virtual Human Shield. (Bilal 2008, p. 142)

Bilal sees the Virtual Human Shield as "a form of the cyber political resistance", given the fact that "the internet opens new frontiers for fighting oppression and injustice" (Bilal 2008, p. 142).

As already anticipated, moving images can construct meaning-making sequences. Indeed, the shift to Frame 30, a shot from the second last day of the confinement, shows a close-up on Bilal's face who looks straight into the camera and talks passionately. Frame 30 is in fact a 'demand' image because the represented participant demands something from the viewer through a direct gaze. In this particular case, Bilal is asking the viewer to enter into a relation of emotional affinity with him since he tries to bring the viewers and the online users (both are the interactive participants) into his personal experience of living in a conflict zone. Drawing on proxemics, Kress and van Leeuwen highlight that in everyday interaction the distance we keep from one another determines social relations according to which we carry invisible barriers that allow the others to come closer to us or not. This goes from close personal distance to far social distance. The close shot implies an identification with the viewer, who is involved and thanked for the "great support" and for being "great" (Extract 30). Here, Bilal expresses that his project does not intend to be a "didactic piece"; rather, it is "an open narrative" where "we could all impose our own narrative on it". Again, the use of the pronoun *we* personalises relationships and conveys a sense of personal involvement. The viewer is thus asked to intimately and emotionally partake while Bilal concludes his video diary. This entry is rendered in the book with the unexpected arrival of a package with a "graceful white peace lily" and the message "From a grateful left clicker. The world is a better place because of people like you" (Bilal 2008, p. 157). One of the users taking part in the virtual human shield sent this to the artist to thank him for his activism. "Hope is alive" is what he proclaims in the book to express his gratitude and joy.

4. Conclusion

Employing a theoretical framework derived from Systemic Functional Linguistics, this essay has proposed a MCDA of Wafaa Bilal's art project *Domestic Tension* (2007) and his book *Shoot an Iraqi* (2008) with the aim to explore one of the possible ways in which the experience of living in a conflict zone is performed and translated into the artistic discourse, and to investigate what forms of activism this project produces. The project represents the artist's intention to narrate in a YouTube diary and a book both his experience in the gallery and the time he spent in the Iraqi conflict zone. The book not only enriches the experience engendered by the performance but also integrates the video commentaries and acts as a form of translation between the different semiotic modes of communication.

The analysis has focused on a selection of still images and extracts from the video commentaries representing Bilal in his confinement in a Chicago art gallery with a paintball gun directed at him that could be activated by visitors and online users. In the selected entries (which are representative of the whole project), the different semiotic resources implicated in the representation of Bilal as a confined man in a conflict zone have demonstrated, on one hand, the desire to involve the viewer in an active way and, on the other, the need to produce a counter-discourse. In particular, the specific choices in language and visual communication contribute to an emotional involvement of the viewers and the readers. The linguistic choices and the visual resources used in the art project achieve the effect to perform activism into the artistic discourse and to translate the otherwise inexpressible condition of living in a war zone. Specifically, the terms used by the artist and the predominance of some expressions re-create the tension and the constant fear that the artist experienced in his home country. The type of lexis, in particular the use of adjectives, plays an important role in the emotional evaluation. Furthermore, the use of different semiotic resources, such as moving images and the endless disturbing loud sound of the gunshot produced by the paintball gun, intensifies the meaning-making process.

The need to produce a counter-discourse is evident in the way the different semiotic resources contribute to the narrative of the art project and produce meanings that disrupt dominant discourses on warfare and conflict zones. In particular, the comparative analysis of the multimodal text of the YouTube commentaries and the entries of the diary published in the book allows to investigate how discourse is articulated in both texts. As Bilal declares on Day 30, the goal of this art project is to engender the possibility of an encounter and to try to bring the experience of living in a conflict zone closer to viewers and readers. Finally, the MCDA of the linguistic and visual

semiotic resources can shed light on the various strategies adopted to perform and translate a militant action into art.

Bionote: Michaela Quadraro, PhD, is a tenure-track Assistant Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Calabria. Her main research areas include Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and the investigation of identity, diversity, and strategies of resistance. She has published in edited volumes and peer-reviewed journals on diversity, migration, and contemporary art practices in the English-speaking world. She has authored two monographs and co-edited two volumes. Between 2011 and 2015, she participated in the research project MeLa* European Museums in an Age of Migration.

Author's address: michaela.quadraro@unical.it

References

Baker M. 2006, *Translation and Conflict. A Narrative Account*, Routledge, London/New York.

Baker M. 2016, *Beyond the Spectacle: Translation and Solidarity in Contemporary Protest Movements*, in Baker M. (ed.), *Translating Dissent. Voices* from *and* with *the Egyptian Revolution*, Routledge, London/New York, pp. 1-18.

Balirano G. 2015, *Framing Identities in Advertising: Multimodal Discourse Analysis*, in Balirano G. and Nisco M.C. (eds.), *Language, Theory & Society: Essays on English Linguistics and Culture*, Liguori Editore, Napoli, pp. 1-31.

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007a, *The Paintball Project day 7* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zPb2JbzWPo&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=30 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007b, *The Paintball Project day 8* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4yApRkisa4&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=29 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007c, *The Paintball Project day 9* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rqw79wTB7M0&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=28 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007d, *The Paintball Project day 11* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AkwY9g-iDA&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=26

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007e, *The Paintball Project day 13* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUvwoTUTozE&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=23 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007f, *The Paintball Project day 14* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3M95kfbhlY&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=24 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007g, *The Paintball Project day 16* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ne61ysFx57s&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=21 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007h, *The Paintball Project day 21* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTNTPBc5jVs&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=15 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007i, *The Paintball Project day 24 – part 2* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maaZ7fiyQhA&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=11 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007j, *The Paintball Project day 25 – part 1* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jGXLOkBSNDQ&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=10 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007k, *The Paintball Project day 26* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xr9Y9suPyOc&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=8 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. [wafaa bilal] 2007l, *The Paintball Project day 30* [YouTube video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtvvVbeaSHk&list=UUt11epfyqEV5qBYNakUbARQ&index=4 (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. 2023, *Domestic Tension*. https://wafaabilal.com/domestic-tension/ (15.4.2023).

Bilal W. and Lydersen K. 2008, *Shoot an Iraqi. Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*,

City Lights, San Francisco (CA).

Butler J. 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York.

Carbonara L. 2018, *Translating marginality into art: A multimodal approach*, in "*In*Verbis" 1, pp. 89-103.

Fairclough N. 1992, *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Fairclough N. 2003, *Analysing Discourse. Textual Analysis for Social Research*, Routledge, London.

Foellmer S., Lünenborg M. and Raetzsch C. 2017, *Introduction*, in Foellmer S., Lünenborg M. and Raetzsch C. (eds.), *Media Practices, Social Movements, and Performativity. Transdisciplinary Approaches*, Routledge, London, pp. 1-10.

Hall K. 1999, *Performativity*, in "Journal of Linguistic Anthropology" 9 [1/2], pp. 184-187.

Halliday M.A.K. 1978, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*, Edward Arnold, London.

Halliday M.A.K., 2004, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3rd ed), Routledge, London.

Jewitt C. (ed.), 2009, *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, Routledge, London/New York.

Kress G., 2010, *Multimodality: A Social Approach to Contemporary Communication*, Routledge, London/New York.

Kress G. and van Leeuwen T. 2021 [1996], *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Routledge, London.

KhosraviNik M. 2017, *Social media critical discourse studies (SM-CDS)*, in Flowerdew J. and Richardson J. (eds.), *Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis*, Routledge, London, pp. 582-596.

Ledin P. and Machin D. 2020 [2007], *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*, Bloomsbury, London.

Machin D. and Mayr A. 2023, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis. A Multimodal Introduction* (2nd ed.), Sage, London.

Mirzoeff, N. 2004, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*, Routledge, New York/London.

O'Halloran K.L. and Smith B.A. (eds.) 2011, *Multimodal Studies: Exploring Issues and Domain,* Routledge, London.

O'Halloran K.L., Tan S., and Wignell P.F. 2016, *Intersemiotic Translation as Resemiotisation: A Multimodal Perspective*, in "Signata. Annales des sémiotiques/Annals of Semiotics" 7, pp. 199-229.

O'Toole M., 2011, *The Language of Displayed Art* (2nd ed.), Routledge, London/New York.

Pennycook A. 2004, *Performativity and Language Studies*, in "Critical Inquiry in Language Studies: An International Journal", 1 [1], pp. 1-19.

Rizzo A. 2017, *Translation as artistic communication in the aesthetics of migration: From nonfiction to the visual arts*, in "Ars Aeterna" 9 [2], pp. 53-70.