

Controlled Denotations

An archival conversation on the al-Mutanabbi Street car bombing in Iraq, March 5th 2007

*By Elçin Maraşlı
Chicago, November 2012*

The Latin word for book is “liber” which also refers to the inner bark of a tree, and the concept of freedom. The front cover of a book is most often compared to skin, or perhaps clothing. As much as it is a flat surface, a smooth, glossy, hard, or paperback object, it is also a bodily relatable entity; it is very human. Once the cover is flipped open, the eye follows an order of introduction, forward, body text, conclusion etc., a process, which we may find useful compared to being introduced to a new person and furthering relationships. By way of such comparison, it should not be to our surprise that these familiar modes of daily existence could provide us with a metaphor: a cover under a cover, or a book within a book enfolds layers of our liberty. This could be a symbolic project proposing a critical take on structures of book making, writing and reading, and more significantly, it could be a fundamental intervention in freeing history from its limited existence inside abstract systems of ideology.

I propose to you, *Controlled Denotations* – a metaphor constructed to challenge its own metaphoric stance. As much as it sounds like a referral to the military practice of controlled detonations, officially known as Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) – it is instead, an imaginary term coined to help us denote primary meanings of words and images, and challenge processes of abstraction that assign them symbolic significance for ideological purposes. As simple as it may appear to make use of this metaphor, there are some major points I want to point your attention to. In order to be able to let it function properly, we have to avoid

convoluted, dehumanized language, and think of taking literal action as our ultimate goal. We have to request from words and images the very literal meanings they carry; we have to activate our very human sensibilities to break out of ideological complications, and positively embrace these verbal and visual elements as means to generate societal peace. In order to do all of this, however, first we have to give into this metaphor and the metaphoric language itself; treat it like an object by holding it in our hands, opening and closing it. We can then familiarize ourselves with its fault lines, and with this knowledge, we can establish criticism. We can say no to metaphors whenever we fear them acting upon and against our freedom.

Before we begin taking on any of these seemingly already abstract challenges, we must note some concrete information: Al-Mutanabbi Street was named after the 10th century classical Iraqi poet, *Abū al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad ibn Ḥusayn al-Mutanabbī* (915-965), and was known to be the historic center for bookselling at the heart of Baghdad's intellectual community. There were thousands of books published and sold in tens of different languages at the Street's bookstores, and it was the hub of multiculturalism. The poet al-Mutanabbi's major works ranged in length from a couple of lines to tens of stanzas, and reached out to people outside of the Arab world through translated copies and manuscripts. On March 5th 2007, a car bomb exploded on the Street, killing more than thirty people and leaving about a hundred wounded...so say most sources in their documentations and discourses on the case of al-Mutanabbi Street. From this history, we must understand that the case of al-Mutanabbi Street covers a curious dividing line between knowledge and imagination, and it constructs a metaphor that operates through a mechanism of abstraction. It is precisely this that we should engage ourselves with: a discursive metaphor to be turned inside out. And, now, how to be fully heartfelt in our actions, how to mean what we do, and how to mean that and that only?

Living on top of skyscrapers and looking from above tens of stories, open up abstracted fields of vision that operate a wide enough lens, and activate an omniscient overview that can help us understand the many ways by which elements of power and authority in real life get transformed into abstract concepts, their grander damaging social implications get sanitized, and their resulting consequences become metaphoric representations of deadly military and political interventions. For purposes of inserting ourselves inside a similar abstraction, first and foremost, it is important to locate our bodies on a higher position, in the literal physical sense, and take a bird's eye view at the case of al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad. It is also essential to make sure we are, metaphorically, on top of everything else; we are superior, first and foremost, because we have all the right to do so, and act freely in this self-assuring way; we give life to the metaphor of al-Mutanabbi. This act is, therefore, very much self-directed. It endeavors to investigate metaphoric operations through the actual formation of a metaphor. Cover after cover, reading the history of al-Mutanabbi is our heartfelt act of seeking out the assumed-to-be-lost social significance of the following images and words, the literal meanings of which shall be utilized in taking straightforward action and overcoming ideological doctrines.

By entering into this system of metaphoric language in order to ultimately break out of it, we shall embrace the single case of al-Mutanabbi from multiple perspectives. Before doing so, we should note that this metaphor would unquestionably make connections across historical events in Iraq throughout the period of the Iraq War which spans roughly from 2003 to 2011, and the visual documentation of historical events that fit within this time period. Therefore, at an early stage, we should make sure to avoid profusion of interpretations on other possibly related events or things; we should concentrate on the particular case of al-Mutanabbi Street first; we should break it apart in detail, and understand it as a total metaphor on all that was before and will be after. We should make sure to know all about it in and of itself, and its ability to function as a metaphor before crossing territory into other related discourses. This is the only way with

which we shall not shy away from giving or taking blame, from practicing or assigning responsibility for any major political defects. This will, therefore, be our main task, our heartfelt ambition, to learn about this metaphoric entity, and ultimately break out of it and take action against similar forms of imaginary ideologies.

Precisely because the case of al-Mutanabbi Street embodies the gap between factual knowledge and imaginary construction, through its operations as a metaphor, we shall fight its techniques of abstraction, and bring back to it definitive moral good. In doing so, we will always remember that before its disappearance, its name directly embodies the Iraqi poet *al-Mutanabbī*, however, after the interruption of the bomb, we will know that the Street broadens its identity, and can then manifest itself as a common ground for global political discourse. Once we embrace this abstraction wholeheartedly in all its specificity, we can then speak to other persons, places or histories, which may locate themselves next to the case of al-Mutanabbi. We should not however, suspect them as other spiteful political interventions, or biased national interests, but we must fully embrace them as equally heartfelt attempts in taking action against abstraction as a form of ideological practice. We shall regard the case of al-Mutanabbi Street as a discursive metaphor that will strike back at the ideological conventions that shaped it in the first place. Also, at this point, we will note that the fluidity of our task in understanding this metaphor and the operations of metaphorical meaning thereof, start to heat, all stir and become our single duty.

Now, to give this abstraction a body through which we can objectively analyze it, we should look specifically at *aerial sites* in detail. It is not hard to make note that these aerial images do not refer to any specific target destinations; rather, they seek out to define a generalization of sites as targets. Generalizations, on the other hand, are pre-determined control mechanisms under which a variety of elements can fit and furthermore constitute ideological abstractions. An aerial

image makes sense in the mind, only because it is pre-conditioned to seek out meaning within a general notion that equates the term *jpg* with a visual; an image with a place; and a site with where a bomb can be dropped. This situation in creating meaning should prove to us that abstract fields of ideological objectives surround these aerial sites; they are not merely images. It does not matter to what sites they referred to once, or where these sites belonged (an assumption on always past histories). Even if multiple forms may seem to document a variety of different sites, in each alteration, these visual representations refer to the single metaphoric body of al-Mutanabbi. Now, our task to break out of this metaphor can happen precisely by cultivating a keen sensibility to recognize these visual manipulations as ideological variations upon real life events with explicit social significance.

At this point, of course, we should understand that the process of abstracting these sites, targets, strategies and motivations, are in fact what is full-force in charge of individual expectations and hopes for democracy, peace, and freedom. Exactly at the same time, we will remember that these wills, furthermore, are also imaginary meditations on what one believes the other to be in need for. We must repeat to ourselves, while these motivations are listed as universal rights to all human beings and protected via ethical virtues or duties that guard a common morality, they simultaneously operate through completely individualized laws or rules, which rather privilege personal desires. Under the universalism of such principles, the contradiction lies between this so-called need for freedom and the ideological restrictions that safeguard the construction of such freedom, by someone for someone else, or by parties for other parties, resulting in a self-deprecating task of freeing freedom from itself. It is precisely so our main heartfelt task to restore this freedom for ourselves, before we intervene with freedoms that are outside of our own.

Now, may we all make note that this is where things shift. While our discourse on al-Mutanabbi Street has begun as a poetic metaphor, it now wholly transforms into a bluntly literal and significantly moral act. Even though some of us may hesitate to take such action from fear of lacking the experience in actually having lived this history, those of us will still manage to cooperate between the different histories that are carried within the metaphorical structure itself. While neither the history of the poet, nor the history of the Street is authorized to any specific ownership by anyone outside of the actual event, the visual and verbal representations in this metaphorical body also adhere to the same rule. Those who used to stroll along the bookshops and cafes; those who were killed during the car bombing on March 5th, 2007; those who later visited the Street; or those who wrote and read about the case before and after its existence and disappearance, may not be exchanged with any of these found images or words. The main abstraction, however, lies exactly at this point, when these found elements could, on the other hand, be exchangeable for any and all of these individually specific sites, persons and histories. Any aerial view of a military site, or any car bomb explosion may stand for the particular case of al-Mutanabbi Street, as they are all abstract formations resulting in metaphorical conversations around concepts of power and authority outside of our control. It is our foremost instinct to fight against these collected images from anonymous sources through the web in drawing an abstract map that can only dislocate our orientation.

In trying to get back to our feet, what type of a structure should we create to understand these metaphorical operations of language in an orderly fashion? What type of a system can provide us with the right skin to metaphorically dress up for political action in the literal sense? In order to do this, we should build our vision around a sequential organization that is based upon a certain scientific rule inherent within the system, and that, which is abstracted precisely due to this very rule. I am talking about *seriality*, which, in cooperation with aerial views, assigns processes of abstraction a secondary physical body. The rhythmic visual structure in presenting

a variety of anonymous images as comparable test strips, accomplishes to organize thought and interpretation; this is not only economical, but also very practical for us in achieving our activist goal. The serial ordering of images of car bombs creates a filmic sense of continuity, and allows us to recognize the abstract concept of contemporaneity in its visual form. The simultaneity of these different explosion sites represent a multiplicity of time as a metaphor for the case of al-Mutanabbi Street and its social significance at large.

Again, at this point, it is our main task to make note of the irony that is inherent within these images. While they are illustrations of both sites and persons that we, literally, do not have in hand anymore (as they have been exploded or dead), they are also the only remaining metaphors for all that is gone. As our intervention proves, time appears to be our major problematic here. At this instance, then, we must mark the concurrent appearance of these lost and found abstractions representative of al-Mutanabbi as a temporal metaphor for the continuous transparency between multiple images, words, historical events, and ideological concepts in general.

This exact moment, should direct our attention to understand forms in which science appears as ideology. We must acknowledge Internet as a source of knowledge that is always changing, updating itself through its own affirmative techniques and means of scientific technology. We must also underline that seemingly objective scientific rules become abstractions when they are confronted with subjective interpretations of metaphoric operations. We can think of a curious example; While Arabic, Persian, Kurdish or Turkish may indicate an imaginary comprehension on the likelihood of closer distances on a map, German, Italian or English, on the other hand, may relocate the mind within an alternatively farther, but subconsciously sought after space of desire. How do we see the metaphor operate here? What happens, when we read a name, *Mohammed Abdul Rahman Hayawi*, out of all thirty or more names that died on March 5th, 2007,

or what happens to our understanding of the *Saddam Hussein* statue that came down in Baghdad Square on April 9th, 2003? How can these bodies be exchanged for one another, or how can one record a history of this point of exchange, that otherwise never enters into public consciousness, and will never be taken seriously unless it is written in the pages of history of the war in Iraq? Is it a matter of political tolerance or intolerance; or are we instead talking about the ideological systems that link history not to the lived experience of individual names, but to the abstract structures within metaphorical usage of language?

The conditions of emergence for a historical event are more significant than any historical consequence. Internet, as a tool in constitution of knowledge and history through methods of preservation and distribution, presents a case in which images and words tend to exist as metaphorical abstractions of power relations, carried out through a virtual system of scientific language. It is therefore our primary task to break out of this preemptive method of abstraction, which in the first place allows ideology to exist as an imaginary, authoritative conduct over our moral understanding of the social significance of al-Mutanabbi Street car bombing, and its related subjects.

This is why it has never been or should have been our aim to include or show any specific images of the actual event of March 5th, 2007 car bomb explosion on al-Mutanabbi Street. Instead, our aim is explicitly, and not metaphorically anymore – note that this change is key – to clarify some of the grander social concerns, ideas and themes that are anticipated as abstract concepts; such as terror, violence, pain, grief...etc. We must make clear that these seemingly abstract themes are not metaphorically interchangeable; instead they are the primary literal fault lines which should be detected in order to restore freedom where it belongs. Freedom belongs to ideas, and it is freedom of the mind that can let us think.

It is now apparent why we should investigate this system of abstraction specifically through an experience of the Internet, since it is what should be identified as the ultimate, virtual and globally metaphoric body, with equally global power in convoluting any image, word, or meaning to its utmost abstracted state. A presumption on the universality of grief as an abstract entity becomes unavoidable, yet we sure should make note that the Internet continues its battle not on individual levels with a sword, a paper and a pen; but precisely on these grander social scales with its ownership, use and distribution of universal content.

We do not intend to privilege metaphoric systems or processes of abstraction. In direct opposition, what we must strive to achieve is to read out loud the only literal language that is clear: acts of political violence in any form, anywhere in the world should be considered crime against humanity. We may need to use yet one last metaphor, but we will only do so with our profound intentions to make realize ourselves that, ideology itself is a metaphor. It shall, however, be deconstructed through our very literal acts as simple as breathing, touching skin, changing clothes, or reading a book.

Bibliography/ Influences:

Foucault, Michel. *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Harper & Row; 1969. Print.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Zone Books; 2002. Print.

Cadava, Eduardo. *The Monstrosity of Human Rights* (2006). Electronic.

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University Of Minnesota Press; 1996. Print.

Latour, Bruno. "Visualisation and Cognition: Drawing Things Together" in *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture and Present*, 6 (1986): 1-40. Print.