Towards An Analysis of the Visual Images of the Drawings of the Child Survivors of War: A Semiotic Study

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ABSTRACT

In this research, children used poster narratives to communicate their perspectives of the Marawi Siege. A social semiotic approach was utilized to understand their visualizations. This study aimed to look into the aspect of understanding the narratives of the child victims of the Marawi Siege through their drawings, referred to as poster narratives in this study, by extracting the visual images present. The collection of data was limited to the two temporary shelters in Marawi: Boganga and Rorogagus. The researcher collected 40 poster narratives from the different temporary shelters in Marawi City, and the recurrent visual images were those of Social Actors, Shattered Place, Battle Aircraft and Weapons. The child-respondents included significant minute details in illustrating the social actors such as tears, sad and scared expressions, color and position, and at times, supported these emotions with texts which served as anchorage. From these findings, it could be drawn that a careful study of the shapes, strokes, colors, position, number and size of the images was of paramount significance to better understand the data output of the children-respondents. The posters are not meaningless forms or shapes. They convey materials or images from the deeper recesses of the minds or psyches of the respondents.

KEYWORDS

semiotics; drawings; war; narratives; visual images

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INTRODUCTION

“Kyadaan kami sa walay, kyadaan kami sa eskwelaan, myablag ami so mga ginawae ami, da kami iran mapikir a mga wata a Marawi?”

These are the words of an 11-year-old child victim of the Marawi Siege, yet, these could also be the same thoughts resonating in the mind of every child victim of war in places laid waste by war. These lines are loosely translated to “we lost our homes, we lost our schools, we were cruelly separated from our friends, haven’t they considered us, the children of Marawi City?”. Political experts pronounced the war in Marawi City, which began in May 2017, as the most significant terrorist event in Southern Asia (Morallo, 2017). This pronouncement is enough to force recognition of the need for government to heed the tales of terror, hope and faith of the victims during the siege, especially the children. For more than five years, the narratives of the forgotten thousands of children whose world they must live with has been ruined by the war, and shattered innocence, daily terrors and stifled hopes have been accorded scant attention, if at all.

Despite being freed years ago from the hands of the terrorists, the victims left with nothing in certain but to accept their fate and to remain as one of the most affected groups of war. To quote Eglantyne Jebb, founder of the Save the Children program, “All wars, whether just or unjust, disastrous or victorious, are waged against the child”. They are the most vulnerable sector of society and defenseless in their innocence. Hence, the researcher attempts to take
a look into the aspect of understanding the narratives of the child victims of the Marawi Siege through their poster narratives. Poster narratives as a means of communication, which is the focus of this research, is one of the mentioned experiences. In some cases, drawing seems to be the only effective method used to talk to children who do not, or could not, express themselves verbally. In consideration of this fact, other methods obtaining data like using visuals in dealing with certain cases like those of child victims of war, the privileging of language as a means of communication or expression is eschewed.

In this research, the poster narratives produced by children as a semiotic tool to communicate a particular message made up the corpus for analysis. Hence, meaning-making was not explored through a developmental perspective in terms of children’s construction of knowledge. Instead, a social semiotic approach was utilized in meaning-making as the messages children created in and through drawings in an effort to communicate their perspectives on their experiences of Marawi Siege. In meaning-making of the poster narratives, this study demonstrated what was being conveyed by the children in their poster narratives in relation to the impact of the siege to the community in general. It was deemed necessary to allow the children to communicate their emotions and thoughts, and be understood.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used an analytical research design which investigated the status of the child victims of Marawi Siege through the visual narratives drawn by the respondents situated in the two temporary shelters of Marawi, namely: Boganga and Rorogagus. The study was anchored on critically analyzing the poster narratives of the child victims of Marawi Siege in which visual images were critically drawn out from the data gathered.

Research Instruments

To be able to answer the research questions posed by the researcher, the following instruments were used: 1) Poster Narratives as the main instrument in this research, the drawing or poster narratives were collected as outputs of the respondents which the researcher utilized in order to deduce the visual images to better understand its relation to the respondents’ experiences of terror and survival during the siege; 2) Interview Schedule was also utilized to the child victim-respondents to serve as the guide for validation of the researcher in relating the deduced visual images of the poster narratives pertinent to the information gathered from the narratives of the respondents about the Marawi Siege; 3) Counselling Activity was used as an intervention for counselling purposes through an activity where respondents were able to freely say what they felt and thought about the activity.

Data Gathering Procedures

In this study, the gathering of data was conducted at the two temporary shelters of Marawi, namely: Boganga and Rorogagus Phase 1 and 2. Although Marawi City has three temporary shelters, the third shelter namely Sagonsongan was not part of this research due to unavailability of data directly from the Local Government of Marawi. The following was executed during the gathering of data. Entry protocol, drawing process, drawing collection, counseling to the respondents and interview were followed accordingly.

Ethical Procedure

This study was conducted with high regards to ethical considerations on the following: 1) Voluntary Participation where participants were free to opt in or out of the study at any point.
in time should they feel uncomfortable with any of the data gathering procedures. The researcher also explained to the respondents, along with their parents or guardians and the shelter head, the purpose of the study and how the gathered data are treated; 2) Informed Consent where the researcher made sure that before the participants were sent to the meeting area, a letter of consent was received by the parents, whereby agreeing to the participation of the children to the study. Participants knew the purpose of this study where consent was dutifully sought to the participants’ parents or guardians; 3) Confidentiality of the identity of the respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Visual Images in the Poster Narratives

The researcher had collected forty (40) poster narratives from the different temporary shelters in Marawi City. It is but significant to pick up the images found in poster narratives in order to commence this study. Among the 40 drawings collected, the recurrent visual images in the drawings turn out to be Social Actors, Shattered Place, Sun, Battle Aircraft and Weapons.

Social Actors

A noticeable presence of people is seen in the collected poster narratives. It is vital to note that these people, as a visual image, drawn by the respondents are identified to belong to different groups due to several features unique to them. There are civilians, military and militants found in Poster Narratives. Characteristics were provided in the presentation of the social actors. To say, the civilians are drawn differently, there are couples, families, individuals, group of people, young and old; as well as in different scenarios inside the houses, in the masjids, on the streets, on the cars, dead and alive, similar to the left image in the Figure 1 below. This image also shows the members of the military who are inside the battle aircraft, and a military truck that of the right image in Figure 1, and a few who are on the ground as well. Subsequently, the respondents conceptualize the militants in several aspects as well but the denominator is that they are usually drawn on the ground, holding guns, and are pointing these guns to other people or to the military, as shown in the latter.

One of the most captivating aspects of the conceptualization of the civilians in the poster narratives is a reflection of their emotions through the facial expressions. The child-respondents include significant minute details, as illustrated in the left image of Figure 1, such as tears, sad and scared expressions to the civilian’s faces in order to differentiate them to other people found in the poster narratives. This way of illustrating the civilians is the index in the poster narratives, as the inverted curved lines of their mouth and the tears testify to the sadness, pain and fear of the characters in their poster narratives. These details reflect what the civilians went through during the siege and much more speak their identity as victims of the siege. In addition to that, most of the civilians are also illustrated in the poster narratives to be either walking on the streets or inside the cars, as if portraying a scenario of leaving the place for survival. This scenario is abundant in the poster narratives that it could obviously narrate the scenes of flight of the civilians. Number is a very significant observation in this case. As the respondents demonstrate a number of people going on a similar direction in the poster narratives just like in the left image of Figure 1, thereby evoking an image of the en masse scenes of flight during the siege. Lastly, there is also the conceptualization of injustice to the civilians as illustrated by the respondents, this is highlighted by the appearance of dead civilians in some of the poster narratives.
The utilization of the visual space by the respondents reveals the relationship of the social actors, in this case, as family members. Furthermore, as presented in the poster narratives, the use of number of people illustrated speaks truth of the real number composition of the families of the participants. The illustration also vividly shows the differences in gender among the family members, and other civilians, by using lines to draw long hair for females and short hair for males, as well as with how the family members are clothed. Lastly, an illustration of an adult or child is made possible by the use of the differentiation of body sizes. There is an obvious illustration of the connection between the signified and the signifier. This serves as an icon in the poster narratives as the physical resemblance to the signified is illustrated.

Whereas, the respondents provide an interesting comparison of the visual images of the military and militants. As a matter of fact, it is most commonly illustrated in the drawings that the military wear green clothing while the militants are usually in black clothes. This juxtapose of color may be associated with green to hope, while black is to danger. This choice of color of the respondents also speak symbols, whereby the connection between the signified, either the military or militants, is arbitrary with the signifier, that is the color illustration. Secondly, another symbol found in the illustration in the position. The military are usually positioned in the drawing to be on top of the papers as if associating the position in the paper to a more power control of the situation over other social actors. They are usually situated inside the battle aircraft dropping bombs and rockets towards the ground. Meanwhile, respondents always picture the militants on the ground, either within the houses and masjids or on the streets, holding guns and pointing them at civilians. These militants on the ground are taking more of the actions in the posters as they are usually situated in different sides of the paper and are always holding and pointing guns to other people. Furthermore, the conception of the image of the militants is also clearly revealed by the appearance of the black flag or the ISIS flag, therewith defining the militants as the ISIS group. This black flag is a significant symbol present in the poster narratives. This black flag is not only an association to the militant group but also speaks the fear and horrors of the siege.

The poster narratives, like that of the right image in Figure 1, graphically depict the encounter between government forces who are the uniformed men carrying the Republic’s flag, one on board a tank advancing towards the enemy in the said poster. The other group is identified by the black flag they bear. This representation shows the respondent’s use of
symbols— that is the flags to identify the actors. In the same figure, bombing or explosion is represented by flame and black smoke rising above or behind a building. These combined details of aerial attacks and ground fighting capture the ferocity or fierceness of the confrontation of the two forces at wars.

**Shattered Place**

There is a clear indication of a shattered place in the drawing. This visual image of a shattered place is perceptible in thirty-four of the forty collected poster narratives. The destruction of houses with holes in different sizes, houses on fire, as well as other prominent damages such as on the doors, windows and roofs are shown in the drawings. Also, other properties are destroyed, including televisions, tables and chairs, among others. Moreover, it is also seen in the drawings the destruction of trees and other outdoor images such as the flagpoles. Figure 2 in the next page shows sample of the shattered place as a visual image in the poster narratives.

Primarily, the shattered place, as a visual image, is visualized by the respondents through different means. First is with the use of either vertical and crooked lines as part of the whole concept of the houses or other buildings, as demonstrated in Figure 2. These lines are drawn by the respondents to show fire-like characteristics as a result of the bombs and rockets dropped by the battle aircrafts from above. Moreover, another significant element in poster narratives are the lines and shapes that show cracks and holes in the houses, masjids and other buildings, as seen on the brown house in left image of Figure 2 and as well as the roof of the house in right image of Figure 2. Apparently, these lines and shapes of cracks and holes are the traces of the effects of the siege particularly to the houses and buildings around. As shown in the posters, the participants include a number of holes and cracks in the surfaces of each building as if highlighting the damage in the properties as an effect of the siege.

![Figure 2. Sample Posters with the Visual Images of a Shattered Place](image)

Nonetheless, the attempt to show the vast effect of the siege is supported by the darkness of the shades which the children use in illustrating the city. As demonstrated in the poster narratives, most of the houses and buildings were shaded dark compared to all other images in the posters. This darkness in the visual illustration is reflective of the severe feelings the children have from losing their sanctuary. It is vital to note that these lines are drawn vigorously and forcefully all over the houses with the use of hard strokes which reveals the intensity of the emotions of the participants when they did the task.

Furthermore, the choice of colors also by the participants also supports the attempt to disclose the ugly effect of the siege, where most used red, orange and yellow which are all
associated with fire. However, in some poster narratives, the respondents choose to color the houses with black which shows the smoke-characteristic like on another note. This smoke is an example of index, it is an index of fire, which demonstrates a causal effect of the destruction in the houses and some other buildings. It is also observed that most of the drawn houses by the respondents occupy the most space of the paper, this operation of the visual space may reflect the value and attachment they give for the destroyed houses and the impact of this loss to the participants. Lastly, there are also images of the perception of the past and present of the city where the respondents make a clear comparison of how they perceive the place in the past and how it looked like after the siege, thereby showing a devastated city. Hence, the concept of a shattered place, chaotic and horrifying, is revealed in the respondents’ poster narratives through the mentioned features of the houses and buildings as a visual image found in the poster narratives.

Finally, in connection to the illustration of the participants of the shattered place, there is an apparent picture of masjids, damaged or not, in the poster narratives. In the visualization of the participants of the Marawi Siege, the masjids are dominant image found in the poster narratives. As a matter of fact, there are some poster narratives which only include an image of a masjid before and after the siege. This inclusion of the place of worship of the Muslims is reflective of the mental knowledge of the participants of the setting of the siege, in a place with dominant structures of masjids being primarily an Islamic City. As part of the composition of the masjid, there is a utilization of significant symbols recurrent in the poster narratives which are the crescent and dome, which is a symbol of Islam. This further supports the perception of the respondents to the nature of the place affected by the siege as well as its people being dominantly Muslims. Furthermore, in the conceptualization of the participants of masjids, there are several scenarios which shows a number of people inside the masjid. This visualization could tell scenes of people hiding inside the place of worship, thus, leading to the perception of the participants of the image of masjid as a safe place during the siege.

**Sun and Nature**

It is also observed that in several poster narratives that either a sun, clouds, trees, plants and other nature-associated figures are also present. Figure 3 in the succeeding page shows a sample presentation of these visual images. The sun is demonstrated by the participants in several ways in the poster narratives. However, a significant observation in particular is on how most of the children depict the sun with human facial features as if considering the sun a living thing with the capacity to either be happy or sad as showcased through the use of curved and inverted curved lines to reveal the emotion. As a point of reference, left image of Figure 3 demonstrates an image of before and during the siege. But, the participant is obvious with his intention to show a devasted place during the siege not only with the use of other visual images such as battle aircraft, weapons and physical damages but most significantly with the portrayal of the sun in the said poster. As seen, a curved line is used to characterize the mouth of the sun before the siege which reflects happiness in the absence of war. On the other hand, the participant changes it to an inverted curved line to show a negative emotion towards the event of the siege. These emotions are revealed by the participants through utilizing the sun as a visual image, thereby revealing the participants’ actual emotion in reality.
In a different illustration, that of the right image of Figure 3, the participant similarly shows a picture of a masjid before and after the siege. Yet, one paramount observation is the participant illustrates his view of the effect of the siege with a devastated masjid and most importantly, the omission of the image of the sun. This simple omission could mean that the participant actually associates positive feelings with the sun as it is included in his illustration of the scene before the siege but is omitted in his presentation of the image of the effect of the siege. Hence, in this case, it could be inferred that the participant sees the sun as a representation of beautiful event of his life, that is the life before the siege.

Finally, it is also remarkably observed that in the poster narratives, the participants have included the illustration of other nature-like characteristics such as clouds, plants, flowers and trees along with the presence of the sun. This part of the participants’ visual representation is notably pensive of their artistic independence as they get inspiration from real life objects, that is the nature in particular. This presentation of nature in the poster narratives could also manifest the participants’ sense of completion as well as well-being, fun and happiness. This picture gives a message that the children actually have the understanding of the significant role that the sun plays in the plant life.

In essence, in the drawings of the sun by the children, there is a representation of the cultural significance of the astronomical object as opposed to its material nature. It is further discussed that in the reproduction of the concept of the sun, the children associate it with good disposition in life and as well as sense of well-being. This is parallel with the findings of this study where children identify positive feelings towards the presence of a sun. Furthermore, it is also revealed that children often perceive the sun as a living body with anthropomorphic features and habits, similarly, the findings of this study also convey that the participants human-characteristics to their conceptualization of the sun as if considering it as a living thing.

Finally, Anning, A. & Ring, K. (2004) explained that drawing has historically been the preeminent way of portraying the observations of the sun. They mention that that young children very frequently draw the sun in their spontaneous depictions and, also, that there are preliminary indications that this fact might be related to their conceptual development. The results of this study put weight to the assumption that children do not draw the sun without intent and allow for adding fresh data to the growing body of research showing the importance of considering young children’s graphical expression when it comes to gaining insight into their understanding regarding natural phenomena. They prove the connection that the representation of plant-related pictorial elements have with the illustrations of the sun; a fact that is understood as a consequence of the process of grasping the role that the sun plays in plant life. Lastly, they find out that children are more prone to consider that the sun is a living thing as a reflection of their innocence.
**Battle Aircraft**

A number of battle aircraft are evident signifier in the posters. In fact, among the forty (40) collected poster narratives, twenty-one of which contained battle aircraft as a visual image. It is also important to note that among the 21 poster narratives, nine of which battle aircrafts are colored by the respondents with green while the rest are either black or uncolored. Moreover, it is alsovaluably observed that the respondents positioned the battle aircraft in the 21 poster narratives always on top of the paper. In addition to that, sixteen of the 21 poster narratives with the image of a battle aircraft reveal that these battle aircrafts drop bombs or rockets towards the ground. Lastly, it is also displayed in seven among the 21 poster narratives that these battle aircrafts are operated by someone or group of people as the respondents had drawn person or a number of people inside these jets. Below, Figure 4 shows the sample of poster narratives with battle aircrafts.

![Sample Posters with the Visual Images of a Battle Aircraft](image)

**Figure 4. Sample Posters with the Visual Images of a Battle Aircraft**

The battle aircraft as a signifier in the poster narratives significantly shows that the respondents are very much aware of the presence of these battle aircrafts during the Marawi Siege. Although these crafts are drawn uniquely by the respondents, there are some features that had to be highlighted in the analysis of this visual image. The presentation of battle aircraft in the poster narratives is not just an image of an aircraft but it portrays power on the side of the government. This makes the battle aircraft as symbolic signifier. Furthermore, aside from the presence of these battle aircraft, it is obviously illustrated in the poster narratives that these battle aircrafts are the source of bombs and rockets which resulted to the destruction of the houses, schools and other buildings as demonstrated in both images of Figure 4.

As previously mentioned, several battle aircrafts are colored by the respondents with green while the rest are either black or uncolored. This choice of color is an association of the ownership of the aircrafts, that is on the side of the military, representing the government, whereas, respondents also associate green to the military. Furthermore, this choice of color could also demonstrate hope on the part of the respondents as they witnessed the presence of military in the city. Aside from color, position is another remarkable feature of how the battle aircrafts are drawn. As mentioned, the respondents place the battle aircraft always on top of the paper. This framing not just reveals the reality that aircrafts are usually situated on air but also speaks meanings of power and control over the situation. Hence, the battle aircraft in the poster narratives, is a visual image that produced meanings and these meanings are communicated by the child-victims through their drawings. This visual image creates a profound effect by its meaning evaluated and examined using semiotics.

In addition to that, the use of color is another important aspect that needs to be discussed in this paper. In the study Using Color Semiotics to Explore Color Meanings by Kauppinen-
Räisänen & Jauffret (2018), it is agreed that color is a source of communication. The shades of green represent several meanings, but in general Almalech (2014) in the study Semiotics of Color suggests that color green represents growth and renewal, life force, as well as dignity, wealth, depth, and inspiration. Object framing in a drawing is of similar importance in analyzing drawings. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) theorize that images or elements placed on top of a visual space is called the ideal. It was further discussed that this ideal demonstrates the most salient image and presents the idealized or generalized essence of an information, which in this study points to the battle aircraft (Widiastuti, N. M. A., Artawa, K., & Mulyawan, I. W, 2023).

**Weapons**

In the children's drawings, bombs and rockets are also prominent signifiers. Bombs and rockets as visual images are illustrated as an image dropped from the sky by the battle aircraft. Figure 5 below shows sample posters with weapons. These weapons found in the poster narratives unfold what the child-victims had witnessed during the siege. These weapons are footprints of the battle, especially when these weapons are illustrated to belong to different groups. Guns were usually owned by the militants, as shown in both images of Figure 5 below, this association is further illustrated with the choice of color; while the military always have bombs and rockets, similarly shown in the figure.

![Figure 5. Sample Posters with the Visual Images of Weapons](image)

On a different note, it is deemed equally important to discuss that these bombs and rockets are drawn in smaller sizes as part of a bigger image, that is the battle aircraft, as evident in Figure 5. This presentation clearly displays that these bombs and rockets are part of the aircrafts. Even more, the guns also appear in the poster narratives in smaller sizes than those holding the guns and likely, the bullets smaller than the guns. The point here is, the respondents’ choices of shapes and sizes actually reveal an outline of the process of destroying the city. Another significant observation with these weapons found in the poster narratives is that the object placement. It is identified that the bombs and rockets are placed on top of the paper targeting the objects below and are drawn in smaller sizes as compared to the aircrafts, on the other hand, the guns are usually held by people on the ground or inside houses and buildings, targeting other person or group of people of similar level of framing. Finally, the bombs, rockets and guns as portrayed in the poster narratives are all demonstrated by the respondents as one general visual image of battle weapons. These weapons obviously caused destruction to the city and to other people as clearly shown in the poster narratives. It reflects the way the respondents organize their experiences from siege into a storyline infused with personal meaning while maintaining its functionality.
The existence of weapons such as guns, especially when held by a group of people, reflected the readiness for a battle, much more in this study where it documented not just guns as a visual image of weapons but also bombs and rockets. In the case of the shapes and sizes of these weapons, Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) argued that a visual image portrayed in smaller size and placed further towards the background is called a minor process and this process is usually embedded to a major process. This meant that the dropping of bombs and rockets was a part of a process, which in this study meant the act of destroying the city. In particular, this was also supported by the visual images of destroyed houses and buildings. Critically, this supported the study of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) on minor process as mentioned previously because the bullets were from the gun, and the guns were held by actors, hence, smaller images were part of a bigger picture.

Foundationally, the use of the color black with the bombs, rockets and guns were prominently seen in the poster narratives. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) introduced the idea of color as classifying. Here, the weapons, even if the sources were different, were almost similarly colored with black in order to demonstrate a classification system that can be used by sign makers to relate objects together, that is classified as battle weapons. Specifically, the respondents used color black in the weapons as found in majority of the poster narratives. Following some notes, the black as a color is used to symbolize melancholy and death. When found in children’s drawing, this color was associated with the feeling of danger, depression, hopelessness and restriction. Eventually, this explained why the weapons were colored with black because these weapons played a big role in commencing and as well as ending the siege.

As to how these visual images speak the experiences of the child-victims of the Marawi Siege will be discussed in the next chapters. All throughout, people were surrounded by captivating and motivating images. This is visual communication, which excludes language codes in some sense. As universally accepted, language is considered the primary tools in communication. However, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) introduced a different form of communication through images. There has been a transition from the older technologies of print to digital, electronic means of representation. The current era in particular, is being marked by a major shift away from the dominance of writing to the dominance of screen images (Kress, 2016).

**CONCLUSION**

With the careful study of the gathered forty (40) poster narratives of the children-respondents, the researcher has collected salient visual images from the poster narratives as mentioned earlier. The ways how the respondents illustrate these visual images imply that in analyzing children’s visual representation of their experiences, it is significant to study several elements in the output, the shapes, strokes, colors, position and size as such. Having a better understanding of these elements in visual representation will help any researcher to better understand the data gathered. Without this, the poster narratives could not have been analyzed and understood well.

With these findings, the researcher also suggests that educators can be of great support to the children about thinking creatively, making creative comments, using creativity, and children’s abilities of drawing on their owns. Educators can be good guiders supporting the children’s attempt of expressing themselves through drawing with appropriate ways and provide them with opportunities in schools. In fact, teachers may also suggest to the institution the constitution of art education centers to encourage the children to involve in art activities where they do not only showcase their artistic abilities but as well as communicate themselves in ways that they cannot communicate verbally. Furthermore, this
study suggested that educators should cease seeing the war-affected youth as helpless sufferers, but instead focus on finding ways to build on their resilience, strengths, and capabilities. There should be educational programs with the goal of giving young individuals the tools and opportunities to rebuild their very own lives, as well as to create a safe environment to make it easy for them to do so.

REFERENCES