

The Audience They Assign Themselves: Three Arab Channels and Their “Self-Presentation” (al-Jazeera, al-Manar, al-Hurra)

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The landscape of Arab media was dominated for a long time by the monopoly of the national television channels. It is not our task here to reconstruct its history, and it will suffice simply to underscore that this era has passed. The national borders have been erased, first to the profit of satellite channels broadcasting in English and in French and, later, to those modeled after al-Jazeera--a television channel based in Qatar--which have begun broadcasting in Arabic. Thus, members of the Arabic-speaking public who have a satellite connection at their disposal have begun to gain access to a pluralistic and transnational media world.

The extreme reticence of the satellite television channels broadcasting in Arabic concerning the identity of their silent partners, their moneylenders, and their financial backers is equaled only by their verbosity concerning the profile they aim to give themselves and, therefore, the type of audience that they aim to attract by very reason of this profile. In this article, we describe the practical deployment of this self-production and the production of the virtual audience to which these three channels picked up by the satellite “Arabsat” are delivered. This production operates mainly through membership categorization of the audience these channels aim to reach, but also through the affiliations that supposedly characterize them. In other words, the spots in which these different channels present themselves participate in the production of an ongoing typology of their own identity and the identity of their supposed viewers.

This article analyzes in detail three advertising spots, each transmitted during the

month of April, 2004, by one of the satellite channels broadcasting in Arabic: al-Jazeera, al-Manar, and al-Hurra. Our purpose here is not to explain or interpret what these channels do, but rather to adopt, insofar as we are able, the position of ordinary television viewers “channel-surfing” in search of programs and coming upon the spots in question during their search. Obviously, our approach will be more analytical than would be natural to these viewers, but at least it has the merit of not being so much a demonstration of a pre-established theory as the uncovering of the inductive work carried out by these channels.

In examining carefully the constitutive elements of the spots broadcasted by al-Jazeera, al-Manar and al-Hurra, we will show how a televised image is the vehicle of a limited number of logical options. Having at our disposal only these spots, we will try to make explicit the possibilities for reading them which are open to their potential viewers. The analysis of their structural organization will permit a grasp of the range of possibilities resulting from the interaction of the spot, the background affiliations of its producers and intended viewers and the attitudes which result from them. The goal, then, is to draw an accurate picture of the structures and systems of intelligibility associated with these spots as well as the background affiliations which interact with these structures and systems in a way that generates a certain comprehension and appreciation of them.

Al-Jazeera: testimonial voices

The al-Jazeera spot consists of a series of images and of voices, seeming to be

testimonies and personal reflections and converging towards the logo of the channel and its tagline: “one opinion and the other opinion.” Here is a transcription of the words of the various speakers.

- 1- anâ 'admâ dâ'at biyya 'd-dinyâ anâ lessa mihâgiran min al-'Irâq (life really has never given me anything for free I have just emigrated from Iraq)
- 2- lâ yûjad hunâlik ay ard mumkin an asta'id 'an baladî wa 'an ardî (there is no land whatsoever out there that I could substitute for my country and my land)
- 3- anâ yawmiyyan as'al nafsi hâdhâ al-su'âl lêsh 'arabî (me every day I ask myself this question why Arab)
- 4- walâkin lâ tafsîr li-hâdhâ al-jawâb (but there is no explanation in answer)
- 5- lâ raqâba 'alâ harakât jasadî lâ raqâba 'alâ harakât kitâbî lâ raqâba 'alâ khiyâlî (no control over the actions of my body no control over the actions of my writing no control over my imagination)
- 6- zikriyâtî bi-l-fatra dî alîma bes li-ennî anâ ma-'amaltesh ellî kunt 'â'iz a'malu bi-masr (my memories of this period are painful only because me I did not do what I wanted to do in Egypt)
- 7- watanî al-haqîqî hiya lughatî ma ba'â a'dar ashûf hudûd aktar min-hâ (my true native land is my language and I cannot see any other borders but that)
- 8- *al-jazîra* al-ra'y wa'l-ra'y al-âkhar (x2) (*al-jazeera* the opinion and the other opinion)

The sequence of this spot breaks down into eight segments whose content we analyze as follows:

1)



Moon, boat, birds in flight
Image of a man expressing his suffering

anâ 'admâ dâ'at biyya 'd-dinyâ anâ lessa mihâgiran min al-'Irâq [male voice] life really has never given me any gifts I have just emigrated from Iraq

The first segment shows the rising moon on a background of pastel-hued water crossed by birds in flight, upon which is superimposed the image of a man who is clearly suffering. Right away one picks up the contrast between the “postcard” effect of the first images and that of the suffering individual. The voice is that of a man telling a personal story, and he speaks in an Egyptian dialect, noticeable in

the pronunciation and the use of certain expressions. The narration refers specifically to emigration to the oil-producing countries and to the recent events which have forced this man to leave Iraq. This testimony deploys various membership categories: Egypt--evoked through the dialect--alludes to the poverty of this country, the most populous of the Arab world; the emigration of numerous Egyptians to the oil-producing countries (thus the richest in the Gulf); the precariousness of this experience; and the vicissitudes of the politics and regional conflicts which transform individuals into the playthings of events. If the first images serve as an aesthetic introduction to the spot, the image of the person relates directly to the verbal testimony and serves as a direct entry to its drama.

2)



Jerusalem
Pleasure port
Pharaonic Egypt

lâ yûjad hunâlik ay ard mumkin an asta'id 'an baladî wa 'an ardî [male voice] there is no land whatsoever out there that I could substitute for my country and my land

The second segment opens with a view of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, on which images are superimposed--first of a pleasure port, then of Pharaonic ruins. A man's voice comes in, speaking in the manner of an existential witness.

The words are pronounced in standard Arabic and refer explicitly to the theme of land and country. The membership categorizations are many: the Dome of the Rock alludes to Palestine; Pharaonic Egypt, to the illustrious ancient history of the Egyptian nation; the vocabulary referring to land and country, to the unshakeable anchoring of identity in the land. With the exception of the pleasure port, images and words converge appropriately in the idea of symbols of territorial identity. On the whole, this segment continues the theme of the first “strophe”, that of the place of

identity (here, the land). On the other hand, in spite of the linking of images, there is no dialogic relation between the first two strophes.

3)



Pharaonic Egypt
A building of modern
architecture
(Emirates)
Writing in Arabic

anâ yawmiyyan as'al nafsî
hâdhâ al-su'âl lêsh 'arabî
[female voice]

me every day I ask
myself the question
why Arab

The strophe opens with the same Pharaonic image which ends the preceding one, thus providing visual continuity in the sequence. Then comes the image of a building which, with its avant-garde architecture, symbolizes the modernity of Dubai, in the Gulf; this is overlaid with a page of Arabic calligraphy. The strophe is narrated by the only female voice of the sequence; it is the voice of an older woman suffused with a tone of existential questioning. The woman speaks in standard Arabic which does not exclude occasional recourse to a dialectal word (*lêsh*). She explicitly introduces the theme of "Arab," without making clear whether it is an ethnic or linguistic reference, even though the superimposed calligraphy introduces the theme of language. In the logic of the sequence, the strophe seems to continue the preceding one, with the theme of Arab identity following that of attachment to the land. One notes also the formulation of the question, the first part of a pair directing attention to the second part--the answer.

4)



Text in Arabic
A building of modern
architecture (Emirates)
Panoramic view of a
modern city (New
York?)

walâkin lâ tafsîr li-hâdhâ
al-jawâb
[male voice]

but there is no
explanation in answer

This return to a male voice comes in over a background of the images of the preceding strophe, to which is now added the view of New York, which connects these Arab referents to a more global one. Generally, this strophe seems to constitute a transition. Narrated in standard Arabic, the strophe is suggestive of a set of questions and answers--and of questions without answers. In this sense, it forms the second part of the pair introduced by the previous strophe. The images and the words evolve independently of each other. The text, on its part, indicates that the question, even though it finds its response (whose exact nature we do not know), remains in the nature of the ineffable and inexpressible and is felt rather than articulated.

5)



Scene of repression and
fighting
Writing of a text in
Arabic
Backlit image of a man

lâ raqâba 'alâ harakât
jasadî lâ raqâba 'alâ
harakât kitâbî lâ raqâba
'alâ khiyâlî
[male voice]

no control over the
actions of my body no
control over the actions
of my writing no control
over my imagination

This 5th strophe, narrated by a man, in standard Arabic, in a manner suggestive of a "phenomenological metaphysics," opens on a background of images mingling a repressive scene of fighting, an Arabic text appearing on the screen, and a masculine silhouette evocative of testimony under cover of anonymity as well as the daydreams of a solitary walker. This strophe activates numerous categories: liberty, control, censorship; the power of writing and of the imagination; and the pre-eminence of thought over force (which could be read as a reference to a famous quote of Ibn Khaldun). Images and words are thus in direct relation to each other. In the sequence as a whole, this strophe joins the continuation of the subject of language introduced in the third strophe. One observes a progression of the question of

identity which begins with the land, passes to language, and ends provisionally with thought. We should also note that, from the point of view of semantics, this strophe alludes as well to the repressive climate of the Arab world, which has the force of thought expressed through language as the place of identity and of resistance.

6)



Commercial port
Pharaonic Egypt
Train

zikriyâtî bi-l-fatra dî alîma
bes li-ennî anâ ma-
‘amaltesh ellî kunt ‘â’iz
a‘malu bi-masr
[male voice]

my memories of this
period are painful only
because me I did not do
what I wanted to do in
Egypt

Narrated by a man in Arabic, in an Egyptian dialect, in an autobiographical mode, the words of this strophe are spoken over a background of images of a commercial port, of Pharaonic ruins and of a train passing at great speed. Reference is made to memory and to nostalgia, to Egypt and the frustration of the wish for personal achievement. Indirectly, the theme of emigration is also suggested. It is difficult to determine the logical place of this strophe in the sequence as a whole. Clearly, further testimony (that of businessmen of the diaspora) is being articulated here, and a transition, perhaps through the image of the train, is being made with the following strophe and the conclusion of the advertising spot.

7)



Figure of a man with an
umbrella
Text in Arabic calligraphy
Flower and face

watanî al-haqîqî hiya
lughatî ma ba’â a’dar
ashûf hudûd aktar min-hâ
[male voice]

my true native land is my
language and I cannot see
any other borders but that

The voice of a man speaking a Middle-Eastern dialect, and whose tone suggests an existential commentary, comes in over an image showing the silhouette of a man carrying an umbrella and crossing the screen, on which is quickly superimposed a work of calligraphic art, then an image of flowers and a face. The words suggest the theme of identity, associating native land, language, and non-geographic borders. The speaker gives the impression of belonging to the diaspora, of formulating his commentary from outside the Arab territorial space, with the language functioning as an anchorage of identity. In the whole sequence, this strophe constitutes a return to, and the culmination of, the principal theme which has emerged as a thread throughout the various testimonies. It seems clearly to announce the approaching conclusion.

8)



Calligraphic logo of al-
Jazeera
Candle, geometric
figures
Tagline superimposed

al-jazîra al-ra’y wa’l-ra’y
al-âkhar (x2)

al-jazîra the opinion
and the other opinion

After the testimonies, the moment of synthesis and conclusion has arrived and it is composed of a combination of geometric figures, a lighted candle, the calligraphic logo of the station and its tagline, literally, “the opinion and the other opinion.” After the diversity of the various testimonies, this conclusion is apparent in all its logic: the station is promoting a pluralistic “Arabicity.”

Al-Manar: fiction and news reporting in support of a militant text

The spot from al-Manar consists, on its part, of a sort of quatrain (four-line verse) juxtaposing printed text and images and leading to an affirmation of the militant presence of a channel which is at the very heart of the important questions of the moment.

- 1- min kibd [al-Umma] (from the heart (liver, side) of [the Umma])
- 2- min nabd al-abtâl (from the pulse of heroes)
- 3- min qalb Filastîn (from the heart of Palestine)
- 4- ma‘akum qanât al-Manâr (the channel al-Manar is with you)

The sequence of this spot thus breaks down into 4 segments, the first three forming a list repetitive in morphology, vocabulary and semantics and imparting a quasi-poetic rhythm to the whole; the fourth segment brings the culmination of this crescendo and the unveiling of the enigma. Here is the analysis strophe by strophe.

1)



Text being printed on a blue background
Image of a procession bearing the portrait of Sheikh Yasin
[music « adventure »]

min kibd [al-Umma]

from the heart (liver, side) of [the Umma]

Appearing on-screen on a blue background and preceding the images, the text of the first strophe is organized around a body-related metaphor (the liver) which itself is suggestive of the centrality of life. Images follow of demonstrators brandishing the portrait of sheikh Yasin, a direct allusion to the actual event that occurred in the days following the assassination of the spiritual leader of Hamas. The text and images correspond directly, the physical body of Sheikh Yasin representing the political and religious body of the Muslim Community (the Umma) and casting Palestine as the center of these themes. The first part of a list of three starting with the preposition *min* (from) followed by a noun referring to a part of the human body (here, *kibd*, that is to say, the liver) belonging to a whole that revolves around the identity of the channel and of its listeners (the Umma), this strophe functions as an introduction to a small dramatic plot.

2)



Text being printed on a blue background
Images of youths throwing stones at soldiers
[music « adventure »]

min nabd al-abtâl

from the pulse of heroes

The second strophe begins with text appearing on a blue background and is followed by images of young men (whom one takes immediately for Palestinians) throwing stones at soldiers (whom one takes immediately for Israelis). The text and images are in clear relation to each other, the stone throwers being the heroes of a revolt which follows the rhythm of their hearts and of the blood which they shed in sacrifice, with Palestine always the backdrop. As the second element of the list, this strophe evokes the body (and the emotions linked to it) through the word *nabd* and the centrality of the Palestinian cause through the reference to heroes (*abtâl*) which is read and seen as meaning the Intifada.

3)



Text being printed on a blue background
View of al-Aqsa mosque
[music: “adventure”]

min qalb Filastîn

from the heart of Palestine

The third strophe also appears onscreen over a blue background. It continues the metaphor of the body and emotions through use of the word *qalb* (heart) and places Palestine squarely at the center of the drama. The images of al-Aqsa mosque are also explicit, this being at once the most sacred place of Palestinian Islam and the symbol of the beginning of the second Intifada. This strophe forms beside the third element of the repeated list organized around the preposition *min* (from) and a noun evoking the body and the emotions (*qalb*, heart) and the centrality of

Palestine. The metaphor of the body and emotions may be read at this moment as a sort of equation: Palestine is the cause *par excellence* of the Muslim Community.

The list is one of the most effective techniques of communication and is widely utilized (Atkinson, 1984). To quote Matoesian (2001:92), “Lists are expansive techniques for producing family resemblances, for creating a conceptual unity between otherwise diverse elements in a perceptual field, and for classifying actions through a rhythmically textured and progressively expanded litany of similar items.” Lists used in this way often are composed of three items. Their effectiveness lies in their production of a sense of unity and wholeness and in the mounting power of their poetic rhythm. At the same time, they avoid the danger of wordiness and lead naturally to a conclusion which occurs as a real *denouement* of the drama built up by the morphological and semantic repetition. The list constituted by the first three strophes of the al-Manar spot leads naturally to the following conclusion:

4)



Calligraphic logo of the channel
Text superimposed
[music “adventure”]

ma‘akum qanât al-Manâr

the channel al-Manar is with you

The fourth and last strophe consists of an image of the channel’s logo, to which is appended a phrase which is presented as the culmination, and the conclusion, of the preceding list. The narrative framework of the spot, then, may now be understood as the association of the Muslim Community, of Palestine, and of the TV station, in a unity at once physical and metaphorical.

Al-Hurra: the model of the advertising clip

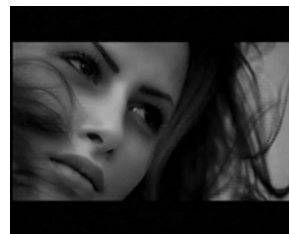
The spot from al-Hurra is presented like an advertising clip; it combines scripted images

and text directly interpellating the individuality of the viewer. Here is the complete text:

- 1- anta tufakkir (you think)
- 2- anta tatmah (you have ambitions)
- 3- anta takhtâr (you choose)
- 4- anta tu‘abbir (you express)
- 5- anta hurr (you are free)
- 6- al-Hurra (al-Hurra/the Free)
- 7- kamâ anta (like you)

The sequence of this spot may be broken down into 7 segments, the first five in the form of a repeated list, the sixth and the seventh as a summarizing conclusion.

1)



jetty in the sea alternating with a woman’s face/Text superimposed [generic music]

anta tufakkir

you think

The first strophe begins with alternating views of the seashore (a pier at the end of which a figure stands and looks at the horizon) and the face of a woman, to which is then added a text that directly appeals to the viewer by being formulated in the second person. The text and images correspond precisely, the people adopting poses that are evidently reflective. The viewer is, for his part, immediately interpellated by the positive description of person-hood in terms of thoughtful individuality. The text can just as well be read as a conditional of the sort “if-then”. It functions as an introduction to a sort of enigma built around the viewer of al-Hurra being revealed in his singularity.

2)



Skyscraper
Figure of a young man
The man directs his gaze to the horizon
Text superimposed
[generic music]

anta tatmah

you have ambitions

The second strophe shows a skyscraper. At its foot is a young man wearing a suit, whose gaze once again is directed to the horizon. The text then follows and is superimposed, appealing to the viewer in the same way as in the first strophe. Here also text and images correspond. The modernity of the scene and the clothing clearly allude to the idea of ambition. As the second element of the list, this strophe expands upon the positive description of an individualized spectator to whom it is addressed, likewise, as an enigma of the type “if-then”.

3)



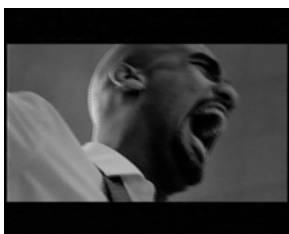
Man walking against the flow of a crowd
Superimposed text
[generic music]

anta takhtâr

you choose

In the third strophe, one sees a man walking--first alone, then parting a dense crowd like Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea. The power of individual freedom is thus opposed to the human tide, an idea confirmed by the text that, once again directly addressing the viewer, emphasizes the free will of the individual. The image is tailored to the message of the text which it supports and illustrates. The little enigma of the type “if-then” continues, with its portrayal of the viewer as more and more set apart in an individuality that wins out over the mass.

4)



A man shouts excitedly
Superimposed text
[generic music]

anta tu‘abbir

you express

In the 4th strophe, a man, likewise young and wearing a suit, tie loose, shouts with boundless enthusiasm. Superimposed text follows which, addressing the viewer,

establishes in advance the necessary and positive nature of individual expression. The purposely scripted image and the text singling out the individual spectator continue the list begun in the first strophes and therefore, also the enigma of the conditional “if-then”. The repetition of the formula of designation and the actions linked to it produces in addition a sort of categorization leading logically to a first conclusion:

5)



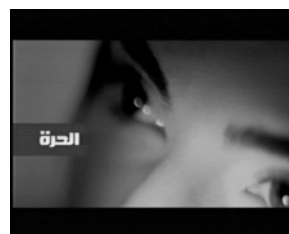
Two eyes are opening
Superimposed text
[generic music]

anta hurr

you are free

Singling out the viewer, but designating him in a predicate (“to be free”) and not through action, the 5th strophe seems to be the provisional conclusion of the list: you reflect + you have ambitions + you choose + you express = you are free. The enigma of the type “if-then” finds its resolution: “if” the viewer conforms--according to the set of directions--to this thinking, enterprising, decisive, and expressive individual, “then” he can be nothing else but free. The text appears onscreen and is superimposed over the image of two opening eyes, symbolic of the individualized gaze, free and critical, naturally asserting itself.

6)



Two open eyes
Logo superimposed
[generic music]

al-Hurra

al-Hurra/the Free

The spot does not end, however, with the conclusion of the list. On a background of the same eyes which are opening anew, the logo of the station is printed--al-Hurra, meaning “the free person” in Arabic, repeating, in a

sense, the previous strophe which is directed to the viewer as a “free” individual. By juxtaposition, the viewer and the channel are aligned with, and assimilated to each other through the symbolism of the eye, which embodies freedom as well as the act of watching television. This strophe draws a parallel between the list and its conclusion and the second part of the equation: “you are free//the Free Person” (“anta Hurr//al-Hurra”).

7)



Two open eyes
Superimposed logo
[generic music]

kamâ anta

like you (yourself)

The 7th and final strophe constitutes a sort of postscript. Once again taking up the image of the opening eyes with text superimposed, this strophe lays out clearly, for those who may not have already grasped it, the parallel established by the spot between the viewer, newly-validated in his individuality, and the channel. It recapitulates the equation: “you are free//The Free Person \Rightarrow [The Free (Person) is free] as you yourself are.” In addition, by doing so, it permits the spot to come full circle stylistically through the quasi-rhythmical repetition of its identical first and last words.

Choosing channels, identifying spots: the work of data collection

This article is the product of a method which consists of not imparting any information about the satellite channels studied beyond what may be inferred from the advertising spots they produce in order to present themselves to their audience and impute an identity to that audience. In a way, the undertaking consists of evaluating the description of naturally accessible empirical data and limiting the reflexivity of the researcher, inasmuch as it would be “an academic virtue and a source of privileged knowledge” (Lynch, 2000).

For all that, we would never claim that the choice of channels and their respective spots was completely unpremeditated and spontaneous. First, it is evident that the collection of data bears the hallmark of what legal experts might call an “insider dealings offence”--the analyst having, in fact, at his disposal, a certain prior knowledge of the Arab media landscape, the ideological orientations of the channels, their sources of financing, and the sociological characteristics of their public. The viewer should not, in any case, be taken for a “media idiot”--an expression inspired by Garfinkel’s “cultural idiot” (1967). In fact, one might reasonably assume that a male or female viewer who turns on the television and chooses one channel rather than another is not ignorant of its general character. Above all, he also has background knowledge to rely upon in determining his preferences and is not simply a passive agent of media communication, ignorant of that of which he is, moreover, the destined object. He is, in this regard, by no means a stranger to himself and the cognitive stakes of telecommunication. To be sure, his way of knowing is not necessarily reflective, which does not automatically imply that it is exterior-- the product of manipulation of an unthinking person by the grand masters of the media. In other words, our adoption of the natural attitude of the viewer looking at these spots should not obscure the fact that the said viewer generally knows what to expect when she views one channel or another and that it is often this knowledge which determines his choice. Thus, even if the collecting of these facts has not been completely blind, the fact that we do not precede the descriptions of the spots with an analysis of the channels should save us from the trap of hyper-reflexivity--that is, determining before the fact the identity of each channel and taking these spots merely as confirmation of a theory already formed through those analyses.

That said, there is no problem in identifying some of the criteria that have implicitly guided our choice of channels and of spots. The first is that of contrast. Reading the three spots clearly shows that the respective styles of al-Jazeera, al-Manar and al-Hurra are very

specific and distinct from one another. The reading of these spots, besides, permits easy access to that which we might call the “natural attitude” of the viewer. Far from placing the researcher in an ironic and intrusive position, the selection and description of these sequences places him, above all, in the ordinary position of a viewer relying on common sense to read that which is given to him and that which he allows himself to see. And, we should add, because they are media products constructed intentionally for the purpose of self-promotion, the spots are relatively simple to read. And because they aim for their own intelligibility, they have recourse to obvious stereotypes--though the spot from al-Jazeera is more complex than the two others.

Anthropology of televised reading: words and images for an endogenous categorization

Rather than to produce an exogenous and a priori typology, which would make these spots seem to be only particular instances of a general model, with everything that implies with respect to the effects of redundancy and ratification of what has already been determined, our purpose here is to render a descriptive account of typologies and categorizations both emerging and endogenous.

The production of identity undertaken in this way rests upon sets of membership categories--that is, of classifications or social types which can be used to describe people, communities, or objects. When these categories are deployed, they form what is called natural collections or categorical systems (Sacks, 1974). One of the chief characteristics of categorical systems of membership resides in the fact that some categories may have qualities or affiliations conventionally imputed to them, which include activities, rights, expectations, obligations, fields of knowledge, attributes and competencies related to the category. In other words, the categorical work is morally and normatively organized. That is, it is organized according to membership

categories of, on the one hand, ontological order (being Arab, Muslim) and, on the other hand, of axiological order (being moral, free, professional, employed).

The spot from al-Jazeera is organized as a sort of nimbus of words and images easily recognizable by an Arab audience. Within a system of juxtaposition of multiple personal testimonies is a categorical environment--varied and contrasting, yet intelligible--which is proposed to the viewer. Associating the denotative registers (land, native country, language, borders, writing, thought, body) and the connotative (speech: dialectal, educated, poetic; voice: young, old, working-class, distinguished), the sequence tends to produce an effect of diversity within unity. This aggregation of multiplicity points towards the tagline of the station, and to pluralism, but specifically to pluralism in the context of a single underlying identity--namely, the Arab identity. In a kaleidoscopic movement, the channel and the viewer find themselves linked to various figures whose experiences of life and feelings of identity allow the gathering up of threads that unify individuals, their community of membership, and the world in which they move.

The spot from al-Manar has a simpler structure. A militant text followed by symbolically strong images leads, by means of a repetitive list of three strophes, to the affirmation of engagement and the presence of the channel at the heart of the Palestinian--and thus the Muslim--cause. The categories deployed in this spot are simple and readable, the metaphorical language is very strong and makes a direct appeal to feelings of identity; the ideology of resistance is projected on the forefront of the scene. No diversity here, but rather support of militant engagement. No complexity, either, but the production of an unmistakable message. Consistent with the symbolism of its name (“al-Manar” means “the beacon”), the station presents itself as the beacon of the Muslim Arab consciousness, standing firm in the storm of events in the region, lighting the way to resistance. It is also a landmark for those engaged in the struggle.

The al-Hurra spot is presented like an advertisement. With images directed with evident attention to aesthetics, with alternating female and male figures (the first symbolizing the channel to a certain extent), interpellating the viewer very directly and constructed in such a way that the channel seems like his eye and the world or the prism of his gaze, the spot is presented as entertainment in the service of an obvious but implicit ideology. It is not concerned with great questions of current affairs or communal identity, but of a modern individual acting alone, independently of majority trends. It is not so much diversity that is being promoted here, but liberalism and individualism. The community of membership is even presented as an obstacle, the herd instinct against which one must march resolutely. The accessible narrative is simple and directly understandable, seeking to convince by the force of the self-evident (how can one refuse to think, to choose, to express oneself--in short, to be free?). The entertaining pleasure of the image allows one to be carried away by the action. There is no argument, in the strict sense of the word, but an enterprise of seduction which grows out of the accord between the entertaining nature of the spectacle and the validation of the viewer.

Such is the natural intelligibility of these spots that we can account for. As Metz (1974:145) underscores, "what must be understood is that films are understood." Therefore from this evidence (which has, in any case, the merit of having been articulated) we may assume that we are watching a filmed sequence from within a natural attitude, that of everyday life, and we understand it with the resources and means identical to those which we use to understand the order and characteristics of the social and natural world (Jayyusi, 1988:289). Watching television, if we limit ourselves to that aspect of visual sociology which concerns us in this article, is not done in a vacuum, but in a contextual and situated manner. By contextual, we mean that the activity is not independent of the moment and of the place in which it is inscribed; by "situated", we mean that it relies upon the shared background knowledge of the viewers,

that which one might call their culture. The coherence of the spots depends on our "resources of (tele)visual intelligibility," among which are our capacity for identification, for categorization and for inference. The competent viewer recognizes the Dome of the Rock, associates the stonethrower with the Palestinian Intifada, and infers the power of the free actor from the march against the flow of the crowd. The coherence of the televisual text "is not then a formal analytic coherence, but rather an organization of practical objectivities found in scenic recognizability of things like courses of action, visible relationships, familiar routines, etc." (Macbeth, 1999:148). It is then not at all the result of coded operations, but of scenes and activities recognized and understood for what they are by an ordinarily competent viewer. They are reflexively available in our descriptions and accounts, they are the recognizable characteristics of the daily life as it is lived, they are embedded in our ways of seeing and acting. Jayyusi (1988:273) speaks, in this regard, of the "scenic transparency" of the social world and of the images we have of it. That does not mean that no problems of comprehension could remain, but that these very problems form an integral part of the recognizability of the world. Thus, contrary to the commonly-held view, images do not possess an infinite number of meanings. The action possesses its visual coherence and the image is not radically abstract from its viewing context. As Jayyusi (1991:149) likewise shows, one may see in the street a picture of a birthday party and find, in its scenic organization, a "proto-narration" of who these people are, how the scene has come to be what it is, and how it has come to be that for us. The scene offers a limited number of possible interpretations which the viewer will seize upon in relying on resources available to an ordinary member of the usual society of people who might be drawn to look at this type of scene.

We should emphasize here the sequential organization of these televised spots. Far from being only juxtapositions of images operating separately and independently of each other, they form unities made of images, texts and

sounds, of complementarities and contrasts, of logical and dialogic successions and of linear or fragmented projections of propositions of identity. These lead to a single interpretation (al-Manar and al-Hurra) or are suggestive of multiple interpretations (al-Jazeera) in the service of the identity which the channel intends to give itself and to assign to its audience.

Watching a television program is not done as an analytical process, but in a natural attitude grasping the flux of images and of sounds in their continuity and in the unity that they seek to produce (Livingston, 1995). The viewer does not deconstruct each of the strophes of the spots they are watching as an interlude to other programs, but takes them as a whole whose various elements form the basis of intelligibility. Various scenic and contextual clues converge towards the production of this texture of intelligibility of the televised object. These clues and their mutual dependence do not proceed from a single spot, but from the activity consisting of watching the spot. These signs are at once present in the spot and discovered and assembled by the viewer. In other words, the work consisting of watching the spot is a work of searching for the organization of this glance which the spot describes. It is not, on the one hand, the spot, and, on the other, its viewing, in a correspondence more or less total, but one and the same thing--watching-the-spot--that one may conceive as a pair unifying the text and its interpretation (the pair: spot/viewing of the spot). The spot is always embedded within the work of viewing the spot and, at the very centre of this work, it furnishes the elements indicating how it should be interpreted. At the same time, the work of viewing the spot is irremediably embedded in the spot, and it resides in the work consisting of discovering how the spot prescribes the reading it should have. "In this way, a text provides an 'account' of its own reading; the text is a 'reading account,' a story about how its own reading should be done" (Livingston, 1995:15). The work of reading manifests itself as an activity in the transparency, intelligence, ambiguity or the grammatical non-sense of the text and the

extent to which the text is read in this manner. This work is manifested also, practically, in the fact that reading finds, in the text, the reasons to continue in the line of the first steps that are always placed with that in mind. Reading of the spot is a continuing work which relies upon prerequisite competencies, but not on prerequisite knowledge, and it is continuously accomplished within the essential relation of the spot and its watching by the viewer. The reading of televised spots that we have analyzed operates as a search by the viewer for the inductive enterprise of its designer. The texture of the spot induces a direction in the gaze of the viewer and this gaze retrospectively activates the induction operative in the spot. We are able to reach this conclusion from the perspective of the natural and ordinary viewing attitude of every competent reader.

The competent viewer will not have any problem at all in identifying the *genre* to which these spots belong and, moreover, what differentiates them from other programs such as news, video clips, ads, or sports broadcasts. The distinction which he makes results from the "attitudinal" (*Gestalt*) texture of the work of reading. Following Livingston (1995), we shall say that each text provides not only the semantic elements of comprehension, but also the contextual indications of its *genre* and thus of the reading that it should have. Thus, children's literature may deploy multiple contextual indicators and does not avoid repetition, because it is addressed to a reader who is in the process of developing his reading competencies. One may say, in this case, that it "overdetermines" its interpretation. A technical text, for its part, will also use multiple contextual indicators, but it will avoid repetition; it will seem "proportional" to its interpretation. Lastly, a poem, while likewise multiplying its indicators, will have the tendency to fragment, to scatter them, to obscure their relationship to each other. We may say then that it "underdetermines" its reading. The televised spot itself, like children's literature, tends to overdetermine the reading that can be made of it. It multiplies the contextual clues (the images of symbolic places, the types of

voices, the themes), it does not avoid repetition (the “*min* + part of the body” in the al-Manar spot, le “*anta* + verb” in that of al-Hurra, the theme of language in that of al-Jazeera). It proposes a form of argumentation that, by the abundance of elements pointing in one direction, leads to an over-determined conclusion. This being said, the spot provides as well the elements that enable the spectator to distinguish it (and, by the way, to distinguish its designer) from the next one. As we have seen, it would be difficult to confuse the spots from al-Jazeera, al-Manar, and al-Hurra. This has nothing to do with the fact that one knows which channel one is watching, or with the fact that one will have categorized the channels in this or that way, but certainly with the overdetermination in these spots of the channel’s membership categories and of the audience it aims to reach. By the production of sequences linking images and voices--or a text and its many contexts--to the frameworks of experience and to finalities (Barthelemy, 2003) the spot tends to produce an intersubjective feeling of belonging to a group, with the rights and duties which such belonging entail.

Natural reading and instructed reading: when the channels represent themselves on the web

We have stated that, rather than prejudging the nature of the self-presentation which the three Arabic channels are engaged in, we have preferred to respect, as far as possible, the natural attitude of the viewer engaged in reading the programs offered to him. The trajectory which would consist of first being instructed about the channels in order to then analyze the work is, then, the opposite to this process. For example, we could have begun by navigating the Web and searching the sites of the different channels, sites on which, assuredly, they must be presenting themselves and telling about themselves. In any case, the discourses that these stations might have about themselves constitute, in relation to the natural reading which one might have of the spots they produce, so many “instructed readings” (Livingston, 1995).

In situations of interpersonal observation (Sudnow, 1972), when our gaze operates naturally, in action, we seize upon a series of elements produced that can be seen and understood for what they are, and we orient ourselves towards these elements and act according to them. On the other hand, when we take a photograph we orient ourselves in such a way as to select a moment to preserve. What is more, the people we photograph are attentive to the final result of the operation and thus to the appearance which will be there at the moment it is taken. In other words, looking at a situation captured by a photograph (for example, six photos breaking down the stride of an athlete) does not amount to looking at the natural unfolding of this situation (the athlete who is running, in our example). To look at the photographs is to look at a description of the action of running (Livingston, 1995:78). The photographs are a fixed moment of continuing actions, they represent them, they take the place of them. One could say that, in the case of photographs, we are dealing with an instructed gaze, that is to say a gaze for which the total of possible readings is limited and channelled by the considered and organized intention of the photograph. If we turn now to the written text, we may make the same sort of argument. For an ordinarily competent reader, reading any text whatsoever is accomplished starting from the elements of analysis emerging naturally from the text being read. Literary critique, on its part, proposes an informed reading of the same text, which we have called instructed reading (Livingston, 1995).

The pages on which these three channels present themselves on their respective websites suggest, with respect to the spots we have analyzed, an instructed reading of that which the viewer may seize upon when she views them in a natural process. These pages give us a reflexive definition of the identity of the channel, of its project, and of the public to which it is addressed. These pages function as representatives, interpreters and decoders of the undertaking in which the channel they present is engaged. They serve as a *proxy* for the channel.

In other words, there is a great difference between the impression a televised spot may have upon the viewer engaged in a natural reading of the show which has been offered to him and that produced by the reflexive attitude which the editing and reading of a web page assumes. It is important for the analyst to account in every possible way for the mechanisms operative in the inductive work of these spots. But this accounting must be done in such a way that what is revealed has more to do with what the viewer may grasp in watching the spot than what the researcher is able to find out in investigating--here, there, and everywhere--the immediate and spontaneous understanding that an ordinary audience might have of it.

We should add that the choice of language of presentation on the web is not neutral. In effect, the fact that the use of English makes the object of a page more or less specific and that the content of this page differs to some degree from that of its Arabic equivalent clearly indicates that, for the designers of this site, the people likely to surf the Web and to consult the site correspond to different audiences and may feel a different need to see an explanation of what the channel is. The English page on the Website is addressed then to visitors seeking information in English, the Arabic page to different visitors doubtless corresponding more to the actual audience of the channel. Though the spots themselves are intended for the audience of the channel who, in the expectation of the broadcasting of programs (to which the spots form a sort of interlude), may enjoy a form of entertainment which reinforces what the channel itself wants to say about itself, repeats what the said public knows about the channel (or at least what the designer of the spots think they know about the channel) and ratifies the viewer's choice of this channel rather than another.

1)



من نحن

Independence, pluralism and professionalism

The al-Jazeera site targets Arabic-speaking as well as English-speaking audiences. Two different pages are thus dedicated to the presentation of the channel. The more detailed one is formulated in English--another, more succinct, in Arabic. Here is what we may read on the latter:

The satellite channel al-Jazeera: the vision and the project

Al-Jazeera is an audiovisual service of Arab affiliation and global orientation whose slogan is one opinion and the other opinion. It is a pluralist forum which aspires to truth and respects professional principles within an institutional framework.

If al-Jazeera is active in arousing public consciousness to matters which interest the whole world, it aspires to be a bridge between peoples and cultures which promotes human rights and the knowledge and values of tolerance, democracy, of respect for freedom and for human rights.

The themes of pluralism, truth and professionalism are explicitly mentioned in this text. In addition, there is the promotion of humanist values. It is good to note that following this summary presentation, the Arabic site proposes a "pact of professional honor" (*mīthâq al-sharaf al-mihanî*) and a "guide for professional behaviour" (*dalîl al-sulûk al-mihanî*).

The English page is organized, for its part, around several central topics. First of all it is the history of the channel, presented as the first of its kind in the Arab world, which has put itself forward as a source of pride, greatness and legitimacy. Al-Jazeera presents itself as at once independent and unable to be ignored.

Aljazeera has come a long way since it was launched in November 1996.

Today the channel that sent shockwaves through the whole Arab world from its very first day on air has become a global name which people, governments, and decision-makers cannot afford to ignore.

With more than 30 bureaus and dozens of correspondents covering the four corners of the world Aljazeera has given millions of people a refreshing new perspective on global events.

It is an English-speaking Arab audience targeted here, which is presented as having the right to benefit from information

independent not only of the censorship of the United States, but also with of the stereotypes conveyed outside of the Arab world.

Free from the shackles of censorship and government control Aljazeera has offered its audiences in the Arab world much needed freedom of thought, independence, and room for debate. In the rest of the world, often dominated by the stereotypical thinking of news «heavyweights», Aljazeera offers a different and a new perspective.

The inverse of those media dominated by prejudices, al-Jazeera aims to offer coverage of the news which is balanced and objective, but also bears the mark of professionalism. The means necessary to this end have been mobilized, which has sometimes allowed the channel to outclass its competitors.

Aljazeera's correspondents opened a window for the world on the millennium's first two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Our expanded coverage competed with and sometimes outperformed our competitors bringing into the spotlight the war's devastating impact on the lives of ordinary people.

We continue to cover all viewpoints with objectivity integrity and balance.

So now when Aljazeera speaks, the world listens and «reads».

Freedom of speech is intrinsic to the philosophy of the channel. And it is the pluralism of ideas and opinions that the channel aims to encourage, echoing its tagline, “one opinion and the other opinion.”

Aljazeera.net is the online version of the same Aljazeera.

The website promises to raise traditionally sidelined questions and issues. It upholds the same philosophy of the mother organisation: “The right to speak up”. This translates into allowing everyone to express their opinion freely, encouraging debates, viewpoints and counter viewpoints.

Finally, the channel emphasizes its engagement with a program of truth. A multiplicity of sources and the pluralism of opinion and truth are presented as the two faces of an objective that is declined in the singular: *the* truth.

Our team of dedicated journalists with their multi-national education and diversified backgrounds share a common set of attributes: **objectivity**, **accuracy**, and a **passion for truth**.

Truth will be the force that will drive us to raise thorny issues, to seize every opportunity for exclusive reporting, to take hold of unforgettable moments in history and to rekindle the willpower within every human being who strives for truth.

It is possible to argue that, if the English page is more detailed than the Arabic page, it is doubtless because, for the website designers, the non Arabic-speaking public is more likely to feel the need to see explained what al-Jazeera is.

2)



The Islamic beacon of resistance and moral revival

The site of al-Manar likewise intends to target the Arabic- and English-speaking audiences. Each of the two versions offers a page dedicated to the presentation of the channel. Their content is, in part, different. Here is what one may read on the Arabic page:

Who are we?

Al-Manar is an audiovisual channel which began to broadcast over the airwaves in 1991 and by means of satellite in 2000. The station is addressed to Arabs and to Muslims in all the regions of the world, in an open, consensual discourse. It pursues political objectives. What moves it toward that, is a great ambition for cooperative construction--construction of a better future for Arab and Islamic generations and societies throughout the world, by means of reorientation around conciliatory religious values and the development of the culture of dialogue, of meeting and cooperation among the faithful of revealed religions and human civilizations. The channel is centered on the very remarkable worth of man and this centering serves as an axis for the revelations which aim to protect his dignity, his liberty and the development of the spiritual and moral dimensions of his personality. The station avoids dealing with events and subjects of a vulgar type in order to concentrate with objectivity on the construction of valid questions and of greatest interest for the whole Community of believers, all the while placing emphasis in the broadcasting of its news programs on the ethical criteria of the journalistic profession recognized by internationally established laws and traditions. In this way it has been able, in a short time, to occupy a central place in the space of Arab media and to polarize a very large mass of Arab viewers within the country as well as outside it; in this

way it has appeared as the most accurate expression of Arab and Muslim life. Al-Manar is a member of the Union of Broadcasters of the Arab countries of the League of Arab States.

We notice first that the Arabic text identifies the audience of the channel as “Arabs and Muslims of the whole world.” Furthermore it emphasizes its work of promoting religious and ethical values. Finally, it emphasizes its professionalism and its concern for objectivity.

On its English page, al-Manar presents itself as a voice that, in the name of God, will be a distinctive one in the Lebanese media landscape.

In His Name Be He Exalted

June 3, 1991 was not an ordinary date at all, for it witnessed the birthday of an extraordinary TV station that has promised to be different, compared to the general visual media in Lebanon

This alternative voice is justified, the text of the page continues, by the weakness of other media faced with the Israeli occupation of Lebanese and the Palestinian territories, and with the suffering which accompanies the legitimate resistance which they give rise to.

There have been a lot of visual media in that country that had just emerged from a destructive civil war and that has a detested Israeli occupation on 20% of its small soil (10452 Km) ; none of these TV networks, however, really shouldered the concern of the occupied parts in the South and West Bekaa whether in giving the resistance activity its right in the media or in true sympathy with the suffering of the occupied territories ; therefore, it has not been strange for the South and Bekaa to be inflaming with the fire of Israeli aggression while singers chant on numerous TV channels simultaneously. There had to be a TV that committed itself to put in images the suffering of our people in the occupied territories, the victims of Israeli arrogance, and that of those living in areas bordering the occupation who suffer its semi-daily aggressions, besides focusing on the Resistance activity and establishing its role, hoping to formulate a resistance-governed by justice and equality; thus Manar saw the light of day.

This being the case, the channel presents itself also as the place of the spiritual movement against western decadence, depraved customs and apology for violence, of which other

Lebanese media would make themselves the champions and propagators.

Despite its huge burden on every Lebanese, the occupation was not the one and only concern. Lebanese TV channels have been overwhelmed by a trend of movies and programs that can only be described as immoral. At the time when the Lebanese - such as any people coming out of a devastating civil war - needed what could erase the effects of that conflict and work on building the personality of good citizenship, numerous TV channels have been broadcasting programs that would decay one's ethics and provoke his or her instincts in addition to instigating violence and identifying with western living patterns which are quite remote from our Islamic and Eastern values and culture. Here, once again, there was a desperate need for a channel that parents would be reassured when they knew their children were watching; then Manar was there

The agenda of al-Manar is presented, then, on both exterior and interior fronts at once. In this respect, the theme of social justice occupies an important place.

In addition to that, Manar has not stayed aloof from the suffering of the Lebanese throughout the country ; on the contrary, it has involved in public affair information, brought out the suffering and deprivation of our people and spoken out for solving their social, economical and educational problems. It has also criticized injustice and corruption in the country, demanding the achievement of the justice and equality state.

Besides, the channel also wishes to see itself as a source of ethical entertainment

In addition to that, Manar has not stayed aloof from the suffering of the Lebanese throughout the country [...] Furthermore, Manar TV observes the cultural activity [...] without forgetting the youth and their interests, focusing on constructive entertainment programs for them in addition to many sports programs [...] - away from moral decay and direct them towards formulating better personality.

Al-Manar does not hide its religious engagement--quite the contrary. Its intent is to be a militant channel serving as a guide inspired by religious Law, *shari' a*.

Manar stays, as its name, a guide and usher that draws its principles and laws from the magnanimous Sharia to come out every day and be seen by those who are eager to know the truth and entertain themselves with something that would not draw the anger of the

Almighty or contribute in corrupting them and their children. A vow taken and will be kept, inshAllah.

The fact that these pages on which al-Manar presents itself differ somewhat according to the language of expression shows only that the intent of the designers varies according to the public that it aims to address. Whereas, in Arabic, this audience is principally mobilized around religious and national values, it is resistance and religious and moral values that the English page promotes. It is, then, not the channel's usual audience that is targeted on the English page, but certainly those who would be searching for information concerning it.

3)

WELCOME TO ALHURRA **الحرّة ترحب بكم**

When the American people offer free choice

The webpage of al-Hurra on which the channel presents itself is the only one of the three pages to be published simultaneously in the two languages--English and Arabic. The al-Hurra site is very little developed. Essentially, it aims to publish the programs. The English and Arabic texts are identical. The designers of the page also feel the need to explain the nature of their enterprise to the Arabic-speaking audience of the channel and to those searching for information in English.

The channel presents itself as focused mainly on the production of news and of information, at the same time not neglecting broadcasts of entertainment.

Alhurra (Arabic for "The Free One") is a commercial-free Arabic-language satellite television network for the Middle East devoted primarily to news and information. In addition to reporting on regional and international events, the channel broadcasts discussion programs, current affairs magazines and features on a variety of subjects including health and personal fitness, entertainment, sports, fashion, and science and technology

Engaged in the production of accurate and balanced information, al-Hurra assigns itself the mission of broadening the horizons of the

viewers and thus giving them the possibility of making informed choices.

The channel is dedicated to presenting accurate, balanced and comprehensive news. Alhurra endeavors to broaden its viewers' perspectives, enabling them to make more informed decisions.

Finally, the al-Hurra page mentions briefly its source of financing--namely, the US Congress, which it presents as the agent of the American people. In any case, the text continues, this does not impinge on the independence and the professional integrity of its journalists.

Alhurra is operated by a non-profit corporation called "The Middle East Television Network, Inc." (MTN). MTN is financed by the American people through the U.S. Congress. MTN receives this funding from the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), an independent and autonomous Federal agency. The BBG serves as a firewall to protect the professional independence and integrity of the broadcasters.

Conclusion

The "self-presentations" which these three channels carry out are a projection of their own identity as well as the identity of those whom they claim to address. Relying on different scenes, situations, problems, incidents, news items, investigations, attitudes or events marking the life of every society, to which they strive to give, explicitly or implicitly, a signification, these spots are creators of ontologically subjective, but epistemologically objective identities (Searle, 1995). By "ontologically subjective," we mean that these spots seem to answer the questions, "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" By "epistemologically objective," we mean that these identities so created attain a degree of obviousness outside of individual interpretation. In other words, the channels produce the objectivity of their own identity and that of their public ("we know whom we are addressing and they know whom they are watching").

Analysis of questions of identity, belief, and behaviour is largely dominated by Habermasian inquiries concerning the public sphere. However, far from constituting a

sociological tool, these amount to a normative conception of the public space. We, on the other hand, have taken an approach that aims to describe exactly what happens when specific actors orient themselves contextually toward a specific public. (For a critique of the Habermasian conception, see Bogen, 1999)

Reality is inescapably mundane (Pollner, 1987), which means that, contrary to what Baudrillard claims, appearances are real (Bjelic, 1999) in the sense that what people say in certain circumstances is certainly what they want to say. But the preference is entirely contingent upon the circumstances, since no position exists detached from context. This epistemological orientation has the advantage of permitting one to argue that discourses should be considered distinctively as “circumstantialized” discourses intended for certain audiences in specific contexts. In brief, we might argue that discourses are oriented toward *audiences* rather than toward *an* audience and, above all, that they are oriented toward the audience that they ascribe to themselves, which constitutes a virtual community (Livet, 1994). The discourses are real, the audience is virtual: it is the audience which one wishes to address or the audience that one imagines.

We should, in addition, emphasize that identities are closely linked to courses of action and to the orientation of interactants toward a public at once specific and virtual, since it is seen through a self-evident set of categorizations. The public of a mosque is thus composed of “muslims”, the “Arab” public of “Arabs,” in such a way that it is the referent of the discourse that “modalizes” identity. Taking into account the dialogic and polyphonic nature of discourse, several identities may be put into play in the same sequence: Arab identity, Islamic identity, modernity (in the sense of a discourse based on the rights of man and international law) may follow one another easily from one sentence to the other. These identities become contextually relevant according to the discursive performances in which they are inserted (Matoesian, 2001:108). It is proper then, first of all, to consider referents of

identity only from within the discourses oriented toward them rather than to consider them as the clearly identified source of discourses (Moerman, 1974). It is necessary, further, to not consider identities as expressing a global, in effect civilizational position, regarding questions that are themselves globally perceived. Attention brought to bear on the completely contextualized dynamic of discourses, the orientation toward different audiences in the course of each one, and their dialogic and polyphonic character, should thus show clearly the illusory nature of every interpretation. On the other hand, such an investigation should also show the relationship, growing ever closer, among sets of categorizations used, the audience toward which the discourse is oriented, and the media through which it passes--that is to say, the specification of audiences according to contingent and circumstantial criteria.

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