

Can journalism make Gaza real to us?

One of the most startling and, if true, depressing anecdotes I have heard about life in Gaza is that living under constant threat of death destroys the human imagination. It has been documented that Palestinian children suffer trauma-related sleep disorders, but the anecdote suggests something more horrific. If all you have ever known is being in a condition of constantly trying to reach a safe place, of being unable to go to school or work with any degree of safety, of having to find food and water each day, then the brain becomes exclusively focused on the present. It must, for survival. At this point, neurologically, a person stops having dreams, and stops being able to hope, because hope implies a future, which is literally unthinkable.

Elaine Scarry has written about the annihilation of the mind during torture, which also breaks down a person's connection to time. 'It is commonplace that at the moment when a dentist's drill hits and holds an exposed nerve,' she writes, 'a person sees stars. What is meant by "seeing stars" is that the contents of consciousness are, during those moments, obliterated, that the name of one's child, the memory of a friend's face, are all absent.' After a certain amount or intensity of torture, the brain just goes.

The Guardian published an essay by Karma Nabulsi last week claiming to 'reveal the reality of life under daily attack'. She writes:

Before this week's war on the citizens of Gaza, the government of Israel and its war machine had been attempting to fragment the soul and break the spirit of one and a half million Palestinians through an all-encompassing military siege of epic proportions. The theory behind besieging a population is to annihilate the temporal and spatial domains, and by so doing slowly strangulate a people's will. Siege puts extreme pressure on time, both external and internal, and on space: everything halts. Nothing comes in, nothing goes out. [...] Under siege no one can find space to think lucidly, for the aim is to take away the very horizon where thoughts form their reasoning, a plan, a direction to move on.

Denied hope, the besieged population would eventually say 'enough'.

How can media convey this? In Britain, the sense of suffocation has been absent from daily media reporting of the situation. However, I am not sure we should blame journalists for this. The standard conventions of professional journalism demand a reporting of facts, or the representation of 'the live experience' through interviews with people present in the situation being reported on. But this can never be wholly realistic or capture what literary critic James Woods calls the 'liveness' of a situation. For both novelists and journalists, there is only space and time for a few scraps of information. In *How Fiction Works*, Woods writes, 'The narrative, the grammar of realism, exists in order to announce to us: "This is what reality *in a novel like this* looks like—a few details that are not extraordinary but nevertheless tastefully chosen and executed, enough to get the scene going'.

overlapping relationships of war; the former follows a troop of US marines, who kill and injure Iraqis, while the latter depicts the consequent attending to Iraqi and American casualties in a city hospital. Another HBO film, *Section 60: Arlington National Cemetery*, focuses on the mourning of US families. Finally, Halpern reviews a traditional war correspondent's account of the two wars, Dexter Filkins' *The Forever War*. Each of these works may spotlight different actual or fictional individuals, but all offer a view of the central categories – protagonist, victim, physical consequences and emotional aftermath – and how they have actually connected. This ensemble provides a richer impression of the character of these terrible situations.

The notion of lifeness proposed by James Woods is described by John Banville as, 'the delightful paradox that the novelist's transcendent lies are eminently more truthful than all the facts in the world'. All the facts on the ground cannot tell us what it is like to be in Gaza at this moment. To understand the war, we need enlarge our attention. To end with my own clumsy paradox, the imagination will take us as close to the truth as we can get.

Ben O'Loughlin
7 January 2009