

Chapter 2

Representations of Catastrophe Victims in Journalistic Narration: L’Aquila Earthquake of 2009



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Abstract This work explores the way the victims of traumatic events such as earthquakes are represented, from a narrative point of view, in journalistic discourses. In particular, it aims at investigating, with reference to the case of L’Aquila earthquake of 2009, the semantic connections between the terms “victim” and “martyr.” From a semiotic perspective, these terms deal with two situations that condense and presuppose different narrative programs and functions, but it is interesting to note that, in the case of L’Aquila earthquake, the term “martyr,” in the sense of “victim,” has been frequently used by local and national newspapers to indicate the deceased people. Moreover, in 2011, the “309 martyrs of L’Aquila Earthquake Association” was created, with the deliberate use of the word “martyrs” rather than that of “victims.” To investigate such a connection, the paper is divided into two parts: the first part offers an overview of the meaning and the semantic evolution of the terms “victim”—precising the differences with the word “martyr”—and defines the aims and the field of a semiotics of traumatic events; the second focuses, from a semiotic point of view, on the results of the analysis of 15 newspapers articles on L’Aquila earthquake, with a discussion on the strategies used by local and national newspapers in the representation of victims. The final part of the essay underlines the effect of sense produced by cultural conventions within media experiences, highlighting the specific role of semiotics in the interpretation of this process.

Keywords Earthquakes · Victims · Semiotics of cultures · Journalistic language · Trauma studies

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2.1 Introduction

This paper aims at studying the representations of catastrophe victims in contemporary journalistic narratives on L'Aquila earthquake of 2009.¹ Specifically, the paper investigates the semantic connections between the terms “victim” and “martyr” in journalistic discourses concerning the earthquakes, starting from the premise that local and national newspapers have often described and defined the earthquake victims as “martyrs.” From a semiotic point of view, these terms deal with two situations that condense and presuppose different narrative programs and functions. If the word “martyr” implies the modalization of “will”² and a pathemic involvement towards existential values, such as faith, freedom, truth, and identity, in the case of the word “victim,” this modal element is missing, because a victim is a harmed, injured, or killed person, as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action, beyond her/his control or will. Given this difference, why is the term “martyr,” in the sense of “victim,” often used in everyday language and in journalistic discourses? This document will try to answer this question showing how, through the close interrelation between media discourses and daily practices, additional and connotative meanings are added to the starting ones, giving rise to new configurations and interpretations.

The first paragraph offers an overview of the meaning and the semantic evolution of the terms “victim” and “martyr” in contemporary media discourses; the second paragraph focuses on the case of the earthquake of L'Aquila, showing how the term “martyr” has entered at the local level in common uses and expressions, not only assuming the meaning of “victim,” but also further additional meanings related to the collective feeling of territorial belonging; the conclusive part of the essay underlines the effect of sense produced by cultural conventions within media experiences, highlighting the specific role of semiotics in the interpretation of this process.

2.2 Semantic Evolution of the Word “Victim”

Dealing with earthquakes and other disasters, one of the key points of the journalistic narrative concerns the number of victims that, once enumerated, immediately gives note of the disaster extent. This paragraph moves from a recognition of the meaning and uses of the word “victim” to then describe its connection to the word “martyr” in journalistic narration on L'Aquila earthquake of 2009. The aim is to show how,

¹This work is part of a broader research concerning the media representation of the city of L'Aquila after the earthquake of 2009. The hypothesis is that the identity of the city is the result of a continuous negotiation between reality and the numerous discourses that represent it. In this regard, see Boero (2019). On the earthquake of L'Aquila, see also Bock (2017); DeVasto et al. (2016); Forino (2015); Herovic et al. (2014); and Pietrucci and Ceccarelli (2019).

²For an exhaustive description of the canonical narrative schema, see Greimas (1983).

through the different uses of such terms, the journalistic discourse implements specific narrative strategies: on one hand, the denunciation of facts, with a neutral and impersonal narration; on the other the dramatization of the events through the testimonial discourse, highlighting the human aspects of the narrative and engaging the reader's empathy. The different ways of narrating reveal different ethical approaches on catastrophes and on characters, thus constituting spheres of reflection on the strategies of journalistic discourse.

The word "victim" comes from the Latin "victima" (obscure etymology) and indicates an animal or man, consecrated and immolated to the divinity (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2019, voice "victim"). In an extensive and figurative sense, the word indicates a person who perishes in a disaster, in a calamity, following serious events or situations: for instance, victims of the earthquake, of the war, of terrorism, of an air disaster, of an epidemic, of drugs, and so on. A victim is also a person who succumbs to deception and arrogance, suffering oppression, damage, or in any case being persecuted and oppressed: for instance, a person who remains victim of an intrigue, of a betrayal, of the arrogance of others (Lorusso & Violi 2004; Demaria 2011). In hyperbole uses, we can intend with the word "victim" a person forced to suffer the impositions of others, to be dominated by others: to be victim of the husband, of the wife, of the oppressive authoritarianism of the parents (*Treccani Encyclopedia*, 2019, voice "victim"). Concerning the earthquake, the victims are not only the deceased; people who have lost their homes, their families, loved ones or friends are also victims; victims are the people who have lost the city in which to live, their places of the heart, their habits, their daily life. In the first case (people who died in catastrophes), the stories of the victims are told by others (testimonies); in the second case (surviving victims), we refer to individuals whose stories have not ended and whose life meanings have been changed.

One of the objectives of this article is to explain the meaning of the word "victim" in journalistic discourses in relation to the word "martyr." The choice of using a term rather than another reveals how the characters are constructed in the texts and the narrative place they occupy. Differently from "victim," martyrdom is an occasion when someone suffers or is killed because of religious or political beliefs (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2019, voice "martyrdom"). The origin of the term comes from the religious sphere. Indeed, as we read in the *Treccani Encyclopedia* (2019, voice "martyrdom"), the term "martyr" (gr. Μάρτυς, "witness"), in primitive Christianity, refers to the apostles, as qualified witnesses of Christ's life and resurrection. Subsequently the term passed to indicate those who attested to the truth of Christianity, giving evidence, in dangerous circumstances, of unshakable faith (Mitchell 2012). During periods of persecution, those who sealed the confession of their faith with the sacrifice of life were called martyrs, while those who had suffered persecution, without losing their lives, were called confessors. Although the word "martyr" refers more commonly to the first centuries of Christianity, it can indicate Christians killed by infidels even in modern times. The Church has defined within certain limits the circumstances to attribute the character of martyrdom to the death of a Christian: it is the violent death of a Christian, due to a *responsible will*, for a reason of faith or

moral virtue referred to or referable to God, with full awareness of the sacrifice, accepted and faced with fortitude and serenity of mind (Prisco 2017).

The concept of martyrdom that we mean today is therefore the result of a codification that originated in Christian thought and indicates an extrinsic condition distinct from that of the victim. However, although the concept of martyrdom has developed especially within Catholicism, in Western culture it is actually used with a multiplicity of scopes and connotations in different social-cultural contexts, with a plurality of religious and non-religious meanings. Consequently, the concept of martyrdom is widely used outside the strictly religious sphere and is being adopted in the secularized discourse. Looking at the semantic evolution of the term, we can see that martyrdom is an important component of civil religions and political discourse. For example, the expression “martyrs of freedom” was often used in 1900, especially in relation to the partisans who fell during the Resistance, or to indicate the victims of totalitarian regimes (Polidoro 2018). Moreover, in common language, the expression “martyr” simply refers to the “victim,” not necessarily to someone who has voluntarily sacrificed his/her life for the faith and can also be used with parodistic purposes. Even in this latter case, at the basis of the concept, there is the idea that martyrdom implies a choice.

Given these semantic differences, can a martyr be considered as a victim? And can a victim be considered as a martyr? Intersections are interesting and help us to understand the intricate system of relationships that emerges between the two terms both in everyday uses and in media discourses. We know that all martyrs are victims, but not all victims are martyrs. The condition of a martyr, in fact, is distinct from that of a victim: from the strictly narrative point of view, while the martyr is an *active-subject*, protagonist of his/her own narrative program, the victim plays a *passive role* since there is not an individual willingness nor an explicit ideal to fight for. Why then do newspapers use the term martyrdom in relation to the victims of events or disasters? The hypothesis followed in this work is that the idea of “martyr as a victim” is a second level meaning, as intended by Barthes (1957); in other terms a connotation that resides in the practices of use that is closely linked to cultural contexts and is ideologically spread by media discourses. For this reason, according to specific cultural beliefs, the martyr is not only the person who deliberately sacrifices herself/himself for an ideal or a cause, but a victim in the broadest sense, even when this willingness is not evident. The next paragraph tries to better explain this semantic shade by taking into consideration the case of the victims of the earthquake and the journalistic narration concerning them. Specifically, after a general examination of the terminology used in newspapers, the paragraph focuses on the case of L’Aquila earthquake.

2.3 Representation of Victims as Martyrs: The Case of L'Aquila Earthquake

On April 6, 2009, at 3:32, a violent earthquake of 6.3 magnitude moment (Mw) occurred in the city of L'Aquila, causing death and destruction.³ At the end of the event the final count was of 309 victims, over 1600 injured, around 80,000 displaced persons and over 10 billion euro of estimated damages. The effects of the earthquake were particularly destructive near the epicenter, with numerous deaths and injuries, several tens of thousands of displaced people, and damage mainly concentrated in the city of L'Aquila and surroundings. In the historical center of L'Aquila numerous collapses occurred, including the Student House, the Prefecture, and several churches, the most symbolic of which, in the collective memory, was the Church of Santa Maria del Suffragio (Chiesa delle Anime Sante). On April 10, 2009, the State funeral was celebrated, at the presence of the President of the Republic and the main exponents of the political world. The tragedy of the Abruzzo earthquake will remain long engraved in the memory of Italian people above all because many of the victims were young students residing at the "Student House" (almost entirely destroyed) or in rented houses in the city center.

Some years after the catastrophic event, newspapers began to talk no more about "victims" but of "martyrs" of the earthquake. Is the use of the word "martyrs," in the sense of "victims," an imprecision, a stylistic choice, or a conscious will to convey a message? The third option seems to be the most probable, considering that, in 2011, the "309 martyrs of L'Aquila Earthquake Association" was created with the aim of searching for the truth about the management of the territory of L'Aquila in the period of the pre-seism; moreover, in 2015, the photographic exhibit "309 martyr" of the earthquake was inaugurated in a historical building of L'Aquila to preserve the memory of the catastrophe.⁴ The choice of the term "martyr" therefore is not a mistake but indicates something more. In this paragraph, some possible interpretations of this practice of use in journalistic discourses are considered and discussed.

A first explanation can be the connection between earthquakes and religion. Indeed, in the city of L'Aquila a previous catastrophic earthquake occurred in 1703. In this circumstance, many people died during the celebration of February 2nd (the Candelora celebration). It is not by chance that the earthquake of 1703 is remembered as "the great earthquake of the Candelora," a significant event from a religious point of view. The tragedy deeply affected the community, so as to change the historical colors of the city (white and red) in current black and green, with the respective meanings of mourning and hope. From a religious point of view, the concept of victim is not so far from that of martyr: as we may read in the Gospel, the earthquake is not intended as a divine punishment but as a *theophany* (God manifestation), so that the connotation of the event is seen as positive. The chronicles of

³Models of social vulnerability to disasters are discussed in Alexander (2012).

⁴http://www.sismaq.it/rassegna/uploads/importa/ilCentro_2015031900.pdf.

the time speak of pain but also of acceptance of the event. In this sense, the victims can be seen as witnesses of the God will. Therefore, the link with the religious sphere can be a possible explanation of the use of martyr in the sense of victim even for the L'Aquila earthquake of 2009, considering that it occurred at the end of significant catholic day, the Sunday before Easter (Palm Sunday).

Nevertheless, in the case of the earthquake of 2009, the religious connotation disappeared from historical, literary, and journalistic stories, to remain confined to the specifics of religious publications. For this reason, the first hypothesis does not appear convincing. Newspapers do not talk about religious connections and implication but concentrate their discourses on the passion of anger and on the desire for justice. The earthquake is no longer an expression of the presence of God but a destructive force that leads to dramatic outcomes because of human negligence and corruption. The victims of the earthquake thus become martyrs, but this lexical choice does not indicate something different from the concept of victim. All the people dead are victims because they did not want to die; they did not choose to leave their lives. The use of the term martyr has the task to reinforce the concept and to highlight that they had to give their lives, although not deliberately, to ensure that the values of justice, transparency, truth, and legality could be brought back to the center of political discourse. This is a tragedy that testimonies the men's responsibility.

Even this second explanation, however, does not appear totally exhaustive. A third hypothesis is that in journalistic discourses about the earthquake, martyrdom is intended as an intermediate situation between a passive role, as the role of victims is, and an active role, as the role of martyr is, according to its primary meaning. This situation can be efficaciously expressed by the grammatical construction of the middle passive voice in Greek, according to which the action expressed by the verb directly affects the subject. Indeed, in the case of newspaper narration of the event, people are martyrs because they let themselves be martyred: in this statement we can see both the passive component (they are victims of the earthquake and of the human responsibility) and the active component (they were aware of the risk and, nevertheless, they choose to stay in the city). At this point of the discussion, it is possible to easily identify the reason why the victims of the earthquake can be considered even as martyrs: these reasons are the values of territorial belonging and identity, for which citizens of L'Aquila preferred to remain at home, claiming the right for a normal life in their place of origin. In this sense they are witnesses of such values.

In the articles belonging to our corpus, the discourse fluctuates between the second and the third interpretation, with a euphoric involvement⁵ towards the existential values of life, identity, justice, and truth. The consideration of some examples can be useful to better understand such an interpretation of the phenomenon. The following three groups include articles belonging to a corpus of 15 published in the period 2010–2020, on the earthquake anniversary, in local and

⁵See Marsciani and Pezzini (1996).

national newspapers (*Il Centro*, *Il Messaggero*). In the first group of articles, the journalistic discourse revolves around the passion of suffering and pain.⁶ The numerous dead, often young, are victims of a natural event which, however, is not disastrous in its naturalness, since it has been the men's action that caused the deaths. In the text, from a narrative point of view, a recurrent pattern emerges, which sees the community as a subject in search of justice. Anti-subject is the politics, slow and trapped by the bureaucracy. More specifically, the Great Risks Commission is guilty of having underestimated the danger of the seismic swarm, as well as having reassured the population claiming to have the situation under control. The victims are at the center of the commemoration; they are subjects without voices, who through the drama immediately push their loved ones to search for the truth. The dead are called "victims," though this term also indicates in a second instance those who lost their loved ones, their homes, their daily lives, displaced persons, and those injured. In this first group of articles, the idea of victims as martyrs is not followed: this term does not intervene in the journalistic narration.⁷

In the second group of articles, the narrative moves from pain to anger. Over time the responsibility of the man has emerged, and the absolution of the Great Risks Commission in the second appeal of judgment nourishes a sense of injustice that spreads within the population. The term "martyr" is used in the anniversary of the earthquake to refer to the victims of the earthquake. In these articles the narrative scheme follows a similar structure, although the underlying value becomes that of truth, beyond justice, which has disenchanted the expectations of citizens. The victims/martyrs assume the status of senders that ask their relatives/friends to search for the truth: their life becomes a symbol of this search because, through the loss of life, it has been possible to discover a situation of corruption and infringement of local building regulations kept hidden over the years for economic interests. In some articles the terms "martyrs" or "victims" are used interchangeably, as synonyms, which are then interchanged in the various parts of the discourse, arriving at a normalization.⁸ In other cases, the word "martyr" is used in a reinforcing sense, for example, in the title, while in the simple narrative description the word "victim" is still used; here the use is not accidental, but a specific connotation is attributed to each of the two terms.⁹ Finally, there are cases in which the term "martyr" is exclusively used, thus indicating death as something that paradoxically points to life, as the name of the association mentioned earlier reveals: the aims are to never

⁶ <http://www.ilcentro.it/l-aquila/l-aquila-5-anni-dopo-migliaia-di-fiaccole-per-ricordare-le-309-vittime-del-terremoto-diretta-multimediale-foto-video-1.304308>. On journalistic representation of death, see Hanusch (2010).

⁷ <http://espresso.repubblica.it/attualita/cronaca/2011/04/06/news/ricordare-l-aquila-due-anni-dopo-1.30232>.

⁸ <http://www.ilcentro.it/l-aquila/l-aquila-7-anni-dopo-il-dolore-e-il-ricordo-la-citt%C3%A0-celebra-i-309-martiri-in-the-earthquake-3-thousand-a-bertolaso-give-up-to-prescription-1.146293>

⁹ <https://www.abruzzoweb.it/contenuti/l-aquila-resta-sveglia-per-ricordare-i-309-martiri-del-sisma-nove-anni-fa-il-dramma/654641-302/>.

forget what happened and to never repeat the same errors in the future. In all these cases, however, there is a common element: the martyr is a thematic and pathetic role placed in well-defined narrative programs, modalized around the passions of pain, anger, and love. Concerning the narrative structure,¹⁰ there are typical actants in the texts: the victims (dead, wounded, displaced, deprived of their family) and the responsible of the disaster (nature or individuals, mostly politicians but also technicians, responsible for the absence of prevention or for having granted building permits, putting at risk people's lives). They are subjects and anti-subjects, with opposite narrative programs. In cases when the nature is an anti-subject, the basic value is the human impotence in facing the disruptive force of natural disasters; but also, the implicit condemnation of the man himself, responsible for ignoring the limits imposed by the nature and for having constantly tried to override them: nature reclaims its original shape and boundaries, and men can only accept its devastating power. In cases when a man is the anti-subject, justice and truth are the basic values. The narrative construction tends to enhance these aspects: man has chosen to go against nature and law, building where it was not possible and consequently risking lives of other men, who live in dangerous building constructions.

In the third group, the use of the term "martyr" does not refer to people, but to the city itself. In these articles, indeed, the city itself is described as a martyr, intended as victim of men negligence and corruption. An example is the article on L'Aquila earthquake published in *Il Messaggero* newspaper¹¹: as we read in the title, the city cries its victims and is represented as a martyr. It is therefore both subject of the narration and object of the carelessness of the man that has neglected the dangerousness of the faults of the territory, approving building criteria that did not respect the threshold of the security. Mass media discourses define a wounded city that is thus anthropomorphized and posed as the narration subject. The city asks to be rebuilt but first it cries its wounds and asks for justice. The choice of the term "martyr" aims at emphasizing the seriousness of the situation and refers to the responsibility of someone who has martyred innocent people, and for extension the whole city, because of inattention or illegal practices. Therefore, through the practices, new uses of the terms "victim" and "martyr" emerge and become part of the memory and the collective imagination, originating a set of semantic intersections around which it is useful to address a semiotic investigation.

¹⁰See Greimas and Courtés (1979).

¹¹https://www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/cronaca/l_aquila_ferita_terremoto_ricostruzione_declino-1650509.html.

2.4 Conclusion

This essay has focused on the way the use of the word “martyr” in the sense of “victim” has become part of the everyday and the journalistic language. In the analyzed cases, the term “martyr” indicates the victims of a traumatic or catastrophic event. The origin of this use comes from the dialogue between different discursive fields that interact with the journalistic language, such as the religious, the political, and the juridical ones. Monitoring the effect of sense generated by the encounter-collision among these different languages is one of the specific objectives of a semiotic investigation (Landowski 1989; Marrone 2001), able to decode the new emerging meanings and to provide specific tools for their interpretation. Indeed, over time, the use of a term can lead to new and different practices of use: as stated by Lotman (1985), a culture preserves the information and receives it again in a continuous process of coding and decoding of texts, messages, objects, and practices that come from other cultures (Eco 1975; Traini 2013). Semiotics is therefore the discipline that studies the correlation among the different sign systems that constitute a culture (Sedda 2006; Lorusso 2010).

Returning to the topic of this paper, the word “martyr” is commonly used by newspapers for referring to the victims of natural catastrophes. In the case of the earthquake of L’Aquila, the term “martyr” has entered in the common language not only to indicate the victims of the catastrophe, but also to designate the passionate state of the victims and their euphoric involvement towards the fundamental values of life, territorial identity, justice, and truth. The death of 309 people turns out to be a painful and dramatic event that must not be exhausted but becomes a warning for legacy and justice, so that a similar tragedy will not happen again. If the use of the term in journalistic discourse in some cases is used as synonymous of victims, in other cases the conscious use of the term strengthens the concept and brings to light the new emerging connotations, such as that of the victims that led themselves be martyred. Indeed, they did not want to abandon their everyday life, their normality, their memories, even if it could mean to risk their lives, because these latter would not be the same in another place. All these uses of the term “martyrdom” create around it a complex semantic field that, in the case of L’Aquila earthquake, is still changing and evolving. Therefore, from these practices of use, new meanings of a sign emerge, and these meanings are linked to concepts, values, and passions that only through a profound semiotic investigation can be effectively decoded and monitored over time.

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