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Through the pain of the gaze: multiple publics and the broken grammar of testimony in the visual representation of political violence in Palestine

Abstract

The article aims to draw critical reflections on the production, circulation and reception of images in Palestine, given the recent rise of political violence in the context of the Israeli military occupation and settler colonialization of Gaza and the West Bank. Reflections move from the author's personal relations built during fieldwork in the occupied West Bank, and from the exchange of pictures, messages and video calls as a sort of "protracted ethnography". In the context of Israel's control on images and the ban on international journalists to enter Gaza, the first part of the article questions Palestinian images as a mode of testifying to Israeli state violence. By contrast, in the second part, the representation of Palestinian suffering is considered through visual contents produced by Israelis, who made them circulating through social media. Ultimately, the article explores the performative character of images in creating multiple publics who differently relate to the visual grammar of testimony in the globally contested field of Palestinian memory. From this global perspective, "the pain of the gaze" is thought as a necessary although uncomfortable standpoint, from which to grasp traces of presence, life aspirations and the quest for justice.

Keywords

Palestine, political violence, visual mediation, publics, testimony

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Images, violence and testimony: contested memories and the intimate gaze

On 15 August 1944 14 partisans and three peasants were shot dead by German occupying forces along the wall of Malga Zonta, a cottage on the Alpine front between Veneto and Trentino regions in Italy[1]. Two pictures represent the scene before the massacre: in both of them we can see the partisans lined up against the wall with their hands raised as a gesture of surrender.

The two pictures are taken from opposite angles: although obliquely, we can see the partisans from the front. In one (Fig. 1), three partisans look at the camera, in the other (Fig. 2), we can see the back of a soldier standing in front of them, and the tip of a rifle appearing beside him. This second photograph reveals who's the gaze behind the camera. Today, these two pictures are hung in big size both on the external wall of the cottage and in the museum exhibition of what is known as "Malga Zonta - Base Tuono" park-museum[2]. A handwritten caption below both photographs say: "(12 August 1944) Final instances of the heroes of Malga Zonta (Photograph found in a German's wallet)"[3].

If these images were born to document the successful violence of the German occupation of Northern Italy by the very actors of that violence, they also became a testimony of the Italian partisans' "martyrdom" for freedom, which sustains their heroization in national memory[4]. The photographs of the Malga Zonta massacre therefore contribute to the patrimonialisation of memory that the park-museum intends to preserve.

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[1] The Italian word *malga* refers to a mountain cottage, to which peasants from the plain bring their cattle in summer to pasture in the green uplands. On 12 August 1944, 15 partisans of the Brigade "Garemi" were found hidden in the cottage by the German army. After last desperate efforts to resist the Germans who had encircled the place, they had been lined up against a wall of the cottage and had been shot, together with the peasants who had harboured them.

[2] "Malga Zonta - Base Tuono" park-museum officially aims to preserve the memory of "the short century" that goes from the Second War World until the end of the Cold War. "Base Tuono" was the NATO missile base that was established at the Coe pass in 1966 for anti-Soviet purposes and managed by the Italian Air Force. The original building of Malga Zonta was demolished to establish the military base. Today, the park comprises three main points of interest: a small house that is supposed to re-materialize Malga Zonta, a museum and the demarcated area of the NATO base. So, the park-museum simultaneously evokes and contributes to establishing the historical continuum between the Italian resistance against Nazi-Fascism and post-war Italy's commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
See https://www.basetuono.it/en/index.html

[3] All translations from Italian in this article are mine. Here is the original caption: "(12 August 1944) Ultimi istanti degli eroi di Malga Zonta (Fotografia rinvenuta nel portafoglio di un tedesco)".

[4] I use the expression "martyrdom" because of its widespread use in the memorialization of Italian fighters' resistance against Nazi-Fascism (see, for instance, toponomies in Italy, such as "via Martiri della Libertà" as street name). While the Italian resistance is still a debated discursive field that stirs up tensions between right-wing and left-wing parties, the language of state institutions reveals post-war celebration of the Italian armed struggle as an essential part of national memory. At the same time the "Malga Zonta - Base Tuono" park-museum clearly shows the connection of this process of memorialization with the Italian-American alliance, which resulted in the North-Atlantic Treaty in 1949.

Fig. 1 Malga Zonta, 12/8/1944. Cortesia di Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino.

Fig. 2 Malga Zonta, 12/8/1944. Cortesia di Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino.

Malga Zonta pictures help me to introduce some preliminary questions that this article attempts to address: how do images take part in political violence? In which ways do they circulate between the opposite poles of power relations, and what happens in this process? How does their mobility affect collective identities and memory construction? This article focusses on the production, circulation and reception of images in the context

of the Israeli military occupation and settler colonialization of Gaza and the West Bank. Starting with a small (visual) piece of Italian history, my aim is not to compare different historical and political contexts, but to grasp some insights about the ways of seeing violence and what they imply. I present here some preliminary considerations related to the Palestinian case, which stem from the anthropological analysis of visual contents produced both by Israelis and Palestinians. This visual production belongs to recent times, and has emerged from the escalation of political violence accompanying Israel's ongoing war on Gaza – what the International Court of Justice has defined as a "plausible genocide" of the Palestinian people. The visual contents I discuss here include photographs taken by Palestinians and sent to me, and Israelis' videos that have been posted on social media and can be easily found on the internet after having been republished by online newspapers. This various set of visual and audio-visual products share Palestinian suffering as their main subject. It consists of vernacular images that are produced by smartphone cameras and disseminated through social networks. This article questions how these images frame Palestinian suffering as a conflicting visual field within the broader frame of contested memories concerning Palestine/Israel. I rely on Ted Swedenburg's conception of memory as "complex and fractured global discursive field" (Swedenburg 1995: xxix), which is constantly reshaped by the interplay of nationalist discourses, Israel's ideological and repressive apparatuses, and the international support based on the "Zionist-Western liberal hegemony" in knowledge production (Said 1992). My analysis of these contents is wittingly grounded on a "situated gaze" (Haraway 1988), since it is based on personal relations I built during my fieldwork in the occupied West Bank from 2011 to 2014. My interest for images comes from the exchange of pictures, messages and video calls through smartphones, which I conceive as a sort of "protracted ethnography" based on affective ties and collaborative research reciprocity[5] that have exceeded the time limits of standard fieldwork. In my experience these emotionally involved exchanges intensify in times of intensifying violence against the Palestinians, like the present one.

The aim of my reflections is not to isolate images concerning the violence of Israeli settler colonialism as a peculiarity of the last period. Rather, I would like to explore how the mobility of images participates in a wider system of mobility, linked to invasion as the structure, and the elimination of the indigenous population as the main character, of settler colonialism as a historical phenomenon (Wolfe 2006). In this sense, the settler nature of the Israeli state makes its violence both the referent and the condition of possibility of images, which implicitly or explicitly relate to asymmetric power relations between Israel and the Palestinian people. Of course, both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides comprise different actors and positionings: when we talk about contextual

[5] Beyond the personal and affective dimension of my relationships with the Palestinians involved in this writing, the reciprocity of the collaborative method operates on two levels: on the one hand, analytical categories and critical reflections have emerged over time from our encounter, transcending the emic/etic divide, and are continuously and consciously tested through our relationship itself; on the other, my article is based on words and images offered to me, which are then explicitly discussed in light of my research aims – aims that simultaneously embrace my friends' goal of making images speak about Palestinian life.

expressions of violence that are captured through cameras, this especially involves the Israeli army and settlers on the one hand, and Palestinian civilians on the other[6]. However, my interest is to question images as cultural products, which connect the contingency of visual production to specific power relations. In this sense, the focus on the mobility of images, that is their local and global circulation, responds to the need to analyse visual contents while encompassing the social processes sustaining both their production and reception (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, Larkin 2002). From this perspective, the formation of "publics" who participate in the contested visual field of Palestinian suffering is a key issue of my visual analysis.

Approaching images through the relationality they presume reminds us of Ariella Azoulay's definition of photography as an "encounter" implying the medium, its user, the image subject and the ones who watch it (Azoulay 2015). At the same time, to focus on images produced during last Israeli war on Gaza we need to consider the historicity of visuality, that is how this "encounter" has been shaped over time. In her research on Israeli photographic archives, Azoulay has focused on the dispossession of Palestinians through the looting of Palestinian images and archives. This looting has been based on the progressive production of an "Israeli" visuality, born on the concealment of the violence of the foundation of the Jewish state. Archived images taken by Zionist militias that later conveyed into the Israeli army, are thus accompanied by a narrative that ousted or camouflaged the relationship of domination and resistance, which the images themselves were the result of. Arab figures were described as "infiltrators" or "refugees" in the captions, as well as Israel's destruction of Palestinian homes were presented as "targeted" demolitions to defeat "terrorists" (Azoulay 2011, 2015). Although Azoulay conceptualizes these encounters as relations between Israeli citizens and Palestinian non-citizens within the nation-state frame, her research results show how the Israeli state building was linked to the removal of Palestinian indigeneity and the naturalization of the Jewish settlers' presence in Palestine. What is more interesting in Azoulay's research is her attention to the looting that does not concern only material expropriation, but rather "takes place in plain sight". Referring to digital platforms that publicly share photos of Israeli soldiers taken

[6] "Settlers" and "civilians" are complex notions in the context of the Israeli settler colonialism. To provide a fundamental distinction, we refer to settlers as the Israeli citizens now living in the occupied West Bank, that is out of Israel's internationally acknowledged borders, which is illegal according to international law. Although the settlers' world is socially, religiously and politically composite, it reflects the settler colonial project of the Israeli state and its plan of annexation of the Palestinian land. The link of the Israeli settler population and the army is complex and multi-faceted, but the army's complicity with settlers' violence in the West Bank has been widely documented in recent years. The actual Israeli government and its extreme right leading forces have made the alliance between the military and the settler branch of the Israeli society more explicit (Pilotto 2024). From the Palestinians' point of view, settlers (*mustawṭanīn*) are an essential part of the military occupation and accompany the expansion of the Israeli sovereignty on the Palestinian land. "Civilian" has become a highly politicized notion in contemporary wars (Gordon, Perugini 2020). According to the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, civilians are the people who are not directly engaged in armed activities. In my use I refer to civilians to talk about ordinary Palestinian people living their daily life. Following the Oslo Agreements, which provided for "security coordination" between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority, it is this latter that has a monopoly on weapons and represses the spread of weapons among the population in the West Bank. What last Israel's war on Gaza clearly shows is the intentional blurring of the legal notion of "civilian" through Israeli representatives' public declarations claiming that "there are no uninvolved civilians" in Gaza, in order to legitimize the moral necessity of Israel's "self-defence" and the mass killing of Palestinians in front of the world.

during "reprisal operations" in the 1950s, Azoulay writes: "These public spectacles [...] are essential elements in training Israeli citizens not to see the violence they consist of" (Azoulay 2017: 11). Thus, Azoulay emphasises the emergence of an "Israeli" audience based on the pillaging of Palestinian life through the Israelis' gaze itself.

Although a comparative historical analysis is not the aim of this writing, we need to bear in mind the global dimension of visuality in the history of Palestine. Scholars have highlighted how a decolonial approach should consider the broader history of domination, displacement and resistance, as well as the Orientalist imaginary, in which "Palestinian" visuality has been entangled. From Ottoman times to European and Zionist colonialism, this visuality marks the Palestinian presence and its ethnic, religious and socio-economic diversity, despite various efforts to remove it (Aranguren, Barillaro 2016, Khalidi 2010, Nassar, Sheehi, Tamari 2022, Sanbar 2004). In this sense, images acquire the value of document and testimony to Palestine's existence "from its living past to its living present" (Nassar, Sheehi, Tamari 2022: 1). If cultural and visual production attest continuity and permanence, Palestinian life goes with the lively production of Palestine as "continuous meaning-making and productive labor of and by ordinary people, within and beyond formal structures and institutions" (Tawil-Souri and Matar 2024: 3). Questioning representation as part of Western epistemologies, this creativity is rather linked to "knowing practices" and "structures of feelings" that transform Palestine and Palestinians into moments of (political) becoming.

Ultimately, if visuality is the output of multiple positionalities, temporalities, practices and encounters, a crucial question remains: who is able to see the violence of images that is enclosed in the images of violence? Let us return to Malga Zonta pictures for a while. The Venetian writer Luigi Meneghello made reference to them in several of his writings, and told about the social life they acquired within the local Italian community. In his most famous book, *Libera Nos a Malo* (1963), he describes how Fig. 2 had touched Cattinella, a woman who worked as a maid for Meneghello's family. She was the mother of Zampa, one of the murdered partisans. The author writes that the woman had managed to get a copy of the photograph, which she kept in a drawer, while on her bedroom wall she had hung a framed depiction of the partisans of Malga Zonta "with small roundels of heads and names: among others there is the partisan Zampa, Giovanni Tessaro 1925-1944" (Meneghello 1963: 161). The woman's painful recovery of photographs of her murdered son is thus differentiated: his portrait can be exposed, while the scene of his death sentence must be hidden in a drawer. As Alberto Brodesco has sharply noted, "the rhetoric of memory all in all comforts, and can be exhibited; the direct testimony, the photograph that has managed to stop that dramatic moment forever, creates new pain instead. Official photography makes mourning noble; testimonial photography makes it alive" (Brodesco 2005: 3).

In Palestine the question of memory and testimony is crucial. Like Cattinella, who embodies both glory and mourning as a situated and affected relation to photographs, in this article I consider "the pain of the gaze" as a privileged site from which to watch and reflect upon images in Palestine. I draw this perspective from a feminist sensibility in visual studies, and particularly from Tina Campt's definition of images as "experiences of

intensity" that must be "felt" and not only watched (Campt 2012, 2017)[7]. One of the main points is thus: who's *shooting* whom – in the double sense of producing visual representation and hurting at the same time? The link of politics, memory and affects is thus central to approach the multiplicity of images, networks and audiences that affect Palestine both as locality and global discourse. This double sensibility to see and feel, which I give priority here in methodological and ethical terms, also prevents me to publish the images I discuss. Where possible, readers will find links to go and watch eventually. Through the media, those not directly involved in the war are inundated with images of violence and death in Gaza. However, the gesture of Palestinians exposing their own suffering – at the heart of this writing – cannot be mine: since my gesture would rely on the suffering of others, I prefer to focus on recounting that gesture, rather than offering a disjointed imitation of it. It is also a way to preserve confidentiality, especially for Palestinians who have collaborated to my research. This deals with the reality of images, and the link of intimacy and violence they expose.

Palestinian testimony in the digital world

In February 2024 55 American and British journalists sent an open letter to the Egyptian and Israeli embassies in London to claim "free and unfettered access to Gaza for all foreign media"[8], denouncing how reporters' entry into the Strip is only possible under "the rare and escorted trips with the Israeli military". These restrictions on foreign journalists implied that Palestinian journalists do the great job of reporting Israel's war on Gaza to the rest of the world, while they and their families are under bombardment and in some cases become direct targets of Israeli attacks. According to the Palestinian Health Ministry 190 Palestinian journalists were killed since the beginning of the war until the end of November 2024[9], and more than 74 were arrested, in what the Committee to Protect Journalists defined as "the deadliest period for journalists" ever documented[10]. UN condemned the ban on international journalists' entry into Gaza[11] and defined target attacks and killings of Palestinian journalists as "war crimes"[12]. Israel's control over journalists and images is not new, and is part of a long history of surveillance and appropriation of images that has been affecting not only Palestinians, but also Israeli activists and foreign observers[13].

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[7] Tina Campt built her methodological and theoretical approach from her research on photography concerning the African diaspora in Europe and the USA. The "intensity" she writes about is deriving from relations of subordination and inequality in Western societies, which also affected visuality of Afrodescendent people.

[8] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68423995 (last access on 30/1/2025).

[9] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/another-journalist-killed-in-israeli-attack-in-gaza-death-toll-rises-to-190/3406244 (accessed on 16/1/2025). The International Federation of Journalists documented the killings of 149 journalists until January 2025, see https://www.ifj.org/war-in-gaza (accessed on 16/1/2025).

[10] https://cpj.org/2024/11/journalist-casualties-in-the-israel-gaza-conflict/ (accessed on 28 November 2024).

[11] https://press.un.org/en/2024/sgsm22436.doc.htm

[12] https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/gaza-un-experts-condemn-killing-and-silencing-journalists (accessed on 28 November 2024).

[13] See the movie *Five Broken Cameras* (2011) by Emad Burnat and Guy Davidi. The control of images is also part of Israeli border control, both "internal" borders in the occupied territories, where soldiers at the checkpoints can check smartphones and cameras, but also "external" borders, where security guards verify the presence of Palestinian traces in travellers' luggage and technological devices. After 7th October, Palestinians' smartphones became objects of

At the same time, images taken by Palestinian journalists in Gaza spread around the world. Social media played an essential role in their diffusion, with journalists posting what they were simultaneously experiencing and documenting. Images of Palestinian suffering in Gaza also reached mainstream media. Newspapers and televisions around the world have accustomed us to watching from a distance the rows of displaced people, the wounded and the dead trapped under rubble, the amputated bodies, the corpses in the streets, but also the weeping women and the despair of those who find themselves survivors despite the death count that the same media have diligently informed us about on a daily basis. Journalists and critics have denounced the way mainstream media have reproduced images of Palestinians as anonymous bodies (Cruciati 2024), numbers that do not actually count, thus producing the trivialisation of horror (Haddad 2024) and the normalisation of the killing of Palestinians "on live broadcast" (Mhawish 2024).

Arthur and Joan Kleinman (1996) wrote about the commodification and the suppression of images as two intermingled dimensions of the cultural appropriation of suffering. While the suppression of images – which the authors attribute to totalitarian states – aims to deny the collective experience of suffering and prevent public witnessing, the commercialization of images – especially through photojournalism – questions the commodification of abuse and atrocities in the era of "disordered capitalism". According to these authors, the two essential elements of social experience – its collective mode and intersubjective processes – are "reshaped" through the images of suffering, missing the diversity and specificity of local life-worlds. John Berger had made a similar remark when, discussing the public visibility that photographs of the Vietnam war were having in mainstream American newspapers, he had written of images as "evidence of the general human condition" (2013: 33). Rather than exposing the causes of war and suffering, these generalising effects depoliticised visual production and allowed mainstream media to publish them "with impunity", simultaneously framing them within narratives that supported US war policies.

A long debate has highlighted the inherent ambiguity of images produced in contexts of political violence: on the one hand, photojournalism is deemed to document social suffering, and on the other hand, it reveals not so much its partiality as its very involvement in government policies. Like Susan Sontag (2003) underlined, photography has always accompanied military campaigns, and its selective character trained photographers to choose what to show. It established a regime of visuality that exposed the dead of enemies and hid the faces of deceased compatriots, serving to celebrate the victory of the "right" side. In contemporary wars, and especially since the war in Iraq, digital technology contributed to the "weaponization of the image" in the "military-visual

particular scrutiny by occupation forces in the West Bank, looking for evidence of affiliation or sympathy for Islamist parties in social networks. According to my interlocutors, the presence of Telegram was itself a cause for suspicion because this app was less subject to scrutiny and censorship by the platform itself, as opposed to Meta, which worked to remove and obscure pro-Palestinian contents (Human Rights Watch 2023). Inversely, the use of smartphone cameras by the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoints has become a strategy to collect visual material that can be used to intimidate Palestinians, such as the sexual harassment of Palestinian girls who are forced to undress and filmed with the threat of the videos being passed on to their family and community.

complex": first of all, by transforming the Humvee or the tank into the technical support of the moving image (Mirzoeff 2005). Thanks to digital technology and the internet, the professionalism of images has been complemented by new forms of amateur photography as an output of "digital militarism" (Kuntsman, Stein 2015). Owning their personal digital tools, also individual soldiers become producers of images and circulate them. The publication of Abu Ghraib pictures, which featured American soldiers posing while humiliating their captives, demonstrated the ever-shrinking distance between images of suffering and pure divertissement (Meloni 2022: 49).

Rebecca Stein has extensively researched on the rising role that smartphone cameras and social media have acquired in the first decades of the twenty-first century in the context of the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Despite the unevenly distribution of "digital rights" (AbuShanab 2018, Tawil-Souri 2012), since the second intifada a multitude of actors – the Israeli army, soldiers, settlers, Palestinian and Israeli activists, human rights workers – transformed cameras and networked visuality into political tools. The Israeli state violence has thus become an image subject itself, "now visible from new vantage points – both from the vertical eye of the drone and from the horizontal perspective of its Palestinian targets" (Stein 2021: 159). Shifting her approach from representation to the social life of images in Palestine, the anthropologist maintains that this visual production has shaped a shared "camera dream" that, despite political polarizations, assumes that images can support (different versions of) "justice". Like in the "Arab springs" or Black Lives Matters in the USA, images have been thought as visual evidences of state violence that can produce political change. According to Stein, the imagined link between visual exposure and political rupture, based on the transformation of the image into legal evidence, is not new[14]; however, what the Palestinian case shows is that this often ends up as a broken dream.

While Stein's work focusses on visual production, this disillusionment should rather question the processes that underly the formation of audiences. Much has been written about "humanitarian" witnessing and the moral affects, which emerge from watching the images of suffering. Susan Sontag (2003) identified the distance between the viewer and the image subject as "a quintessential modern experience", talking about the privilege of being spectators of faraway suffering thanks to photojournalism and television. Like many have underlined, this privilege is rather declined as a moral attitude, which should produce the viewer's sympathy towards those sufferers, and mobilize action through "global compassion" (Meloni 2022). These moral effects/affects do not contradict the depoliticization of violence through images, as discussed above. On the contrary, the sense of moral inadequacy and impotence accompany this mode of witnessing so that, as Berger puts it, either the viewer "shrugs off this sense of inadequacy as being only too familiar, or else he thinks of performing a kind of penance – of which the purest example would be to make a contribution to OXFAM or to UNICEF" (Berger 2013: 33). Rather than habituation or desensitisation in the face of countless images produced by the globalization of suffering, moral witnessing generates a specific mode of feeling that

[14] See visual production as legal expertise to investigate state violence in the work of Forensic Architecture https://forensic-architecture.org.

simultaneously shapes a certain type of audience. In the mystification of power relations that the privilege of the viewer produces, impotence and innocence blur: "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering" (Sontag 2003).

But what happens when there is no such distance between experience and reporting? Palestinian journalists themselves have become the subject of media attention as survivors who continue to tell the world about the war[15]. While Israeli attacks are going on with international support, they have asked what the sense of their work is, if the world keep watching without acting:

> You've seen us shedding tears over our loved ones, colleagues, friends and family members. You've seen us killed in every possible way. […] What more ways should you be seeing us killed in so that you can move and act and stop the hell inflected upon us? […] We never stopped to tell you the truth. […] And we don't know how many journalists should be killed so you can really act and stop Israel's impunity against us[16].

The pain of the gaze encompasses three simultaneous ways of seeing Israeli violence: watching becomes part of inflicted violence, an embodied way of suffering itself, and a form of witnessing. It is where the intrinsic polysemy of testimony condenses in one subjectivity: the third part who observes (*testis*), and the one who experiences and survives violence (*superstes*), coincide (cfr. Fassin 2008). The perspective of the pain of the gaze has been masterfully analysed in the long history of anti-Black racism in the USA. If obliging to witness physical punishments of African fellows was a form of collective punishment used by white owners during the slavery period, in more recent times television started to broadcast scenes of arrests and police brutality against Afro-American people. Elisabeth Alexander noted that this visual frame contributed to build the Americans' "videotaped national memory" based on white supremacy, and Black people's embodied memory of oppression "which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict" (Alexander 1994: 79). Victimisation is conceived here as a form of (political) subjectivation that intertwines impotence and innocence in a very different way than humanitarian witnessing. Testimony emerges from the superposition of embodied ways of seeing violence and being affected by it, bringing vernacular images into "living archives"[17] of enduring collective presence.

The lived lives of Palestinian images

In December 2023 Nabil, a friend of mine and member of the Palestinian family who had hosted me during my fieldwork in the occupied West Bank, sent me some pictures

[15] https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/02/middleeast/palestinian-journalists-gaza-world-press-freedom-day-intl-cmd/index.html, https://time.com/6343715/israel-hamas-war-journalists-gaza/ (accessed on 16/1/2024).
[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4Pj0ELb_4s, see also Mhawish 2024.
[17] I take the expression of "living archive" from Rashid (2025), which defines it as an archive "reluctant to dust and impotence". This definition concerns the photographic project and exposition "Qui resteremo" ("Here we will remain", from a verse of Tawfiq Zayyad's poem), organized in Massa Carrara (Italy) in January 2025.

through Whats App. It was late in the night when I happened to see them, just before switching off my phone and going to sleep. Since October 2023 the effort to avoid watching visual contents regarding Israeli violence against Palestinians has become a practice of care within my family. In different occasions my husband had chosen not to share videos, which he used to receive through the Arab diaspora's social networks. At the same time, regular video calls and messages with friends living in the West Bank kept us abreast of their plight and wider developments in the escalating Israeli violence. In our case avoiding to watch was not an act of voluntary ignorance, but an instinctive way of protecting us from the impact of mediated violence, while being conscious of the privilege of our physical distance from it. When Nabil sent me those photographs that night in December 2023, I missed the chance to look away. Watching the pictures made me nauseous. He had only added a short message: "Maryam's nephew from the village of xxx is a martyr (*shahīd*)".

Maryam is Nabil's brother's wife, and comes from a village where full control passed to Israel after the Oslo Accords. When I was in the field, I had spent countless evenings at their place, where women and men used to gather to chat and drink tea at the end of the day. After watching the photos, I got shocked and confused. I searched for the news in online local newspapers with the pointless aim of providing that dreadful event with a context. And I found the context, which my friend did not need to explain. Yunis, a 16-year-old boy, had been shot during one of the Israeli army's incursions into his village, which had become more frequent after 7th October. He had gone out with other boys to throw stones at the soldiers' jeeps. They had opened fire and he was shot. He had died in the hospital. The day after I received the photos, I wrote my condolences to Maryam and her family.

The core of the first image is the bullet hole in Yunis' neck, at jugular level. The boy is lying on his back, probably on a stretcher. We cannot see his face because it is covered by blue gloves. The bullet hole is so large that we can see the internal matter sprinkled with blood. The dark red blood has soaked his shirt, which has been lifted leaving him almost shirtless. His skin is also streaked with blood. Also red is a cloth lying under his head, maybe his jacket. Finally, half red is the gauze held by one of the blue gloves. There are three blue gloves and one white one. At the top of the photo, they encircle the boy's head like a crown. To the right of the boy's head, the hand holding the gauze is probably trying to stop the flow of blood from the wound. Another blue glove is holding the respirator over his mouth. The other blue glove and the white one are resting on the left side of the torso, perhaps waiting to know what to do. Although the photo was taken when Yunis was still alive, we know that in the end there was nothing more to be done.

The second photograph, which my friend sent me in chat after the first, shows Yunis standing, smiling and looking into the camera. The light in the photograph makes us wonder of a sunny day. He wears jeans and a T-shirt, and poses in front of a stone wall in what is probably his village. Blurred silhouettes of houses can be glimpsed in the background. His young face and fresh smile reveal that he is a teenager. He looks happy. It could be the portrait of any teenager, anywhere in the world. This is the photo that local newspapers published to accompany the news of his killing.

A few months later I mentioned the idea of this article to the friend who had sent me the photos, asking if he would like to talk about it. My friend explained to me it was one of Yunis' family members who took the picture of his last moments in the hospital: "They posted it on Facebook to make the world aware of the crimes of the occupation (*jarā'm al-iḥtilāl*)". From person to person, via Facebook, the photo could have reached a large number of people. The family sent it to local newspapers, too. Although the picture could have mainly reached a Palestinian audience, my friend said that even Palestinians need to watch it. He said that all Palestinians are exposed to images of killings, since now people use smartphones and social networks: "It is different from the past, when everything was experienced *live*". Although in media language *live* identifies a synchronic mediation of the event, in my friend's words it refers to unmediated lived experience. In his view, the multiplication of images of Palestinian death no longer makes difference to [Palestinian] people (*battal yfraq baynhum*). However, this does not mean people are not affected by these images. This mediation rather creates different "degrees of feeling" (*darājat ash-shu'ūr*). The "intimate gaze" of Yunis' mother and father was obviously affected more than others. He quoted an Arab proverb: "the hand on the fire is not like the beholder" (*al-yd fī-l-nār mish zay illī bitfarraj*). Those who watch are different from those who are burning.

Considering my friend's insights, the pain of the gaze appears to be diverse, socially situated and changes according to the watchers' positioning. Thus, we can connect it to different audiences, that is different modes of relating to images of political violence in Palestine. My friend identifies an intimate way of seeing violence, which concerns the world of personal relations and affects. The boy's pictures affect his parents first of all. Then, there are other Palestinians. To the collective Palestinian body Yunis is a "martyr", his killing represents a political death: images testify to the Israeli necropolitics, which my friend describes in terms of "crimes"[18]. Affects play a different role here: the Palestinian public identifies with the injustice of Yunis' death, more than devoting to a general sympathy for him and his family. In a way, political identification is stronger than pity (or, at least, it does not contradict it). Although other Palestinians have not "burnt their hands", they must witness the Israeli violence. This obligation is multifold. On the one side, they are exposed to Israeli violence on a daily basis: this is the sense of my friend's use of *live* as a direct and simultaneous experience of violence, which recalls its persistence in the Palestinian history. On the other hand, they are summoned to witness, they cannot turn away: this form of collective responsibility also defines their political subjectivity. After more than a hundred years of colonial rule, the violence Palestinians see "no longer makes difference". This "indifference" does not presuppose disengagement, but rather implies the double burden of being obliged to watch – witnessing Israeli violence even when it does not directly affect you – and obliging us to watch – testifying to violence to others. This is where the Palestinian public's suffering meets Yunis' family's grief: through the role

[18] The "crimes of occupation" does not only refer to the illegality of the military occupation itself, but to the illegitimacy of the Israeli violence more broadly. The subjective quality of "the occupation" in my friend's words recalls the governmental agency that deploys military and civil control in the West Bank, that is the Civil Administration, which today is part of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit of the Israeli Ministry of Defense.

of testimony that pictures play. In this sense, a supposed split between "private" and "public" affects shifts to the need to preserve the collective memory of Israeli state violence and testify it to the world.

As I have already evoked elsewhere (Pilotto 2023, 2025), images that capture violence in the everyday, and which are produced by those who are part of the victimised group, do not mainly respond to the representative function of documentation. The information – the reconstruction of the context and the details of the event – is not necessarily contained in the image in order that it becomes "evidence" in the legal sense of this term. The picture of Yunis' fatal wound at the hospital does not reveal who was involved in the clash, by whom he was killed and through what dynamics[19]. We could say that the indexicality of Yunis's photo is limited to the bullet hole in his neck, which is also undoubtedly the *punctum*, as Barthes puts it, of the photo itself – the point that "wounds" the eye. In this sense the image of Yunis' body testifies to an act of brutal force. Even Nabil does not need to explain what happened: saying that "Yunis is a martyr" is enough.

The Israeli treatment of Palestinian children through imprisonment and killing is well documented. Beside the effects of displacement and shelling during Israel's war on Gaza, UNICEF reported that one child was killed every two days in the occupied West Bank since 7 October[20]. The project "Visualizing Palestine"[21] produced infographics based on research and analysis that show the dynamics of these killings, which seem to be, if not intentional, at least not avoided by the Israeli army (Fig. 3, 4).

Discussing the humanitarian politics of testimony during the second Palestinian intifada, Didier Fassin wrote: "The young boys – they are increasingly younger – who expose their body to the enemy's bullets offer a dramatic manifestation of the powerlessness of Palestinian society. This imposed figure of male adolescence is the political subject who bears witness to resistance" (Fassin 2008: 542). Fassin argues that the figure of the young boy as a "hero-martyr"[22] represents a change in the political subjectivation of Palestinians at that time: "Where the balance of power is profoundly unequal, where negotiation has become impossible, where the nation's future seems blocked, offering one's life becomes the ultimate mode of subjectification in the political arena" (*Ibid.*). But is sacrifice really the true mode of political subjectivation of the

[19] Palestinian images that simultaneously capture victim and perpetrator are rarer than those exposing the consequences of Israeli violence, although videos and photos of clashes between the Israeli army and/or settlers and Palestinian civilians, have definitely increased with the advent of new technologies (Stein 2021).

[20] https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/child-casualties-west-bank-skyrocket-past-nine-months

[21] https://visualizingpalestine.org/

[22] In Arabic language "martyr" (*shahīd*) comes from the verb *shahida*, which means "to witness", while the Latin etymology of this concept in Christian tradition is *martyr*, from the Greek *martus*, that is "witness". Talal Asad (2007) has eloquently discussed the link of sacrifice and testimony in Islamic ethics, which goes far beyond suicide bombing as a contemporary phenomenon. It is not my aim here to delve deeper into the historical conceptions of martyrdom in Palestine. However, martyrdom is a key issue in political language, depicting all those who are killed, directly or indirectly, by the political violence of the Israeli occupation. In the Palestinian context this category is not simply based on religion: in fact, Palestinian Christian and Muslim "martyrs" are not differentiated, and their bodies are buried in the "cemeteries of the martyrs". A genealogy of the concept of martyr seems more urgent than ever where its changing meanings intersect the processes of construction of civil memory in the political theologies of "national liberation", even in the Western world, like the story of Malga Zonta pictures suggest.

Palestinians in times of escalating violence and war? I guess Yunis's photographs, as well as the sought-after global circulation of images, suggest we should go on a different path.

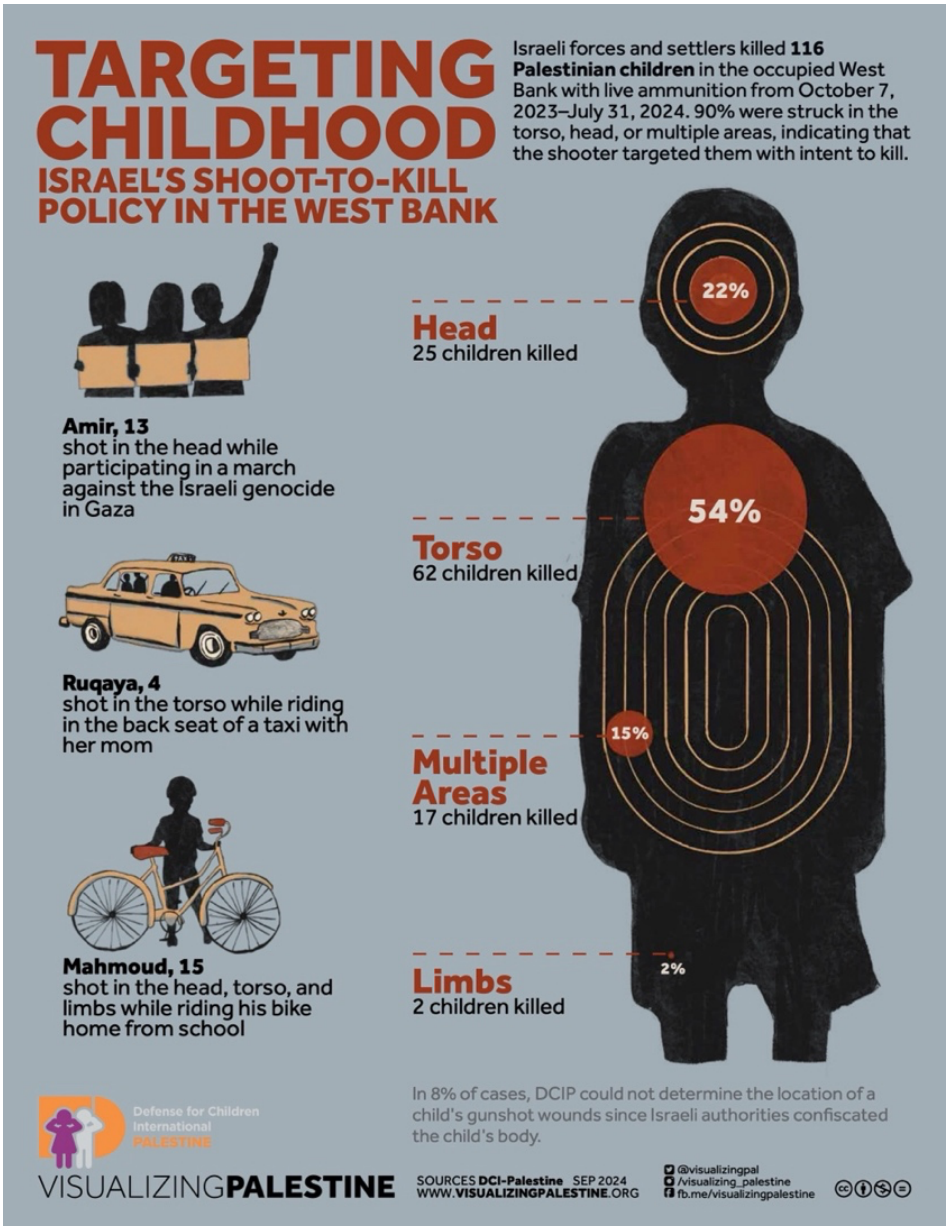

Fig. 3 Targeting Childhood in the West Bank-By Area (Visualizing Palestine)

Fig. 4 Targeting Childhood in the West Bank-By Distance (Visualizing Palestine)

Lori Allen explored the relationship between human rights, visuality, and affect during the second intifada. According to the anthropologist, the circulation of images of Palestinian martyrs in national media was part of a "politics of immediation", which entails a covert denial of mediation while aiming to produce the immediacy of pain – and sympathy for it. Rooted in human rights discourse, victimization becomes central to Palestinian politics, as the representation of Palestinian suffering "constitutes a particular kind of subject whose rights are seen to arise not from a political status but from the state of (human) nature" (Allen 2009: 163). The public thus emerges through witnessing and emotional participation. For Palestinians, the imagery of death circulating in national media generated a form of "affective intimacy" despite geographic, social, and political fragmentation. For the rest of the world, visceral images act as vehicles for a sense of shared humanity presumed to be pre-social and pre-political – based on a naturalized

notion of "human rights" rooted in the Western humanist and universalist tradition. Allen's reflections therefore connect the ethical and political dimensions of sacrifice – embodied in the heroization of "martyrs" – to the production of humanity that happens through the sensual link between visuality and affect.

Almost twenty years after the intifada, in an era marked by the genocide of the Palestinian people and the abdication of the Western-based framework of international law and human rights by liberal democracies (Fassin 2025), can we still speak of the same idea of "humanity"? If Palestinians continue to circulate images of their own deaths to denounce their dehumanization, what does the concept of humanity appeal to today? Nabil argues that the photo of Yunis makes the "crimes of the occupation" visible: it is his mortally wounded body that is exhibited as evidence of Israeli state violence. Undoubtedly, the production of such images is embedded in a social context shaped by broader practices of mourning and commemoration – practices that link violence against the individual to the violence inflicted upon the social group to which they belong (Khalili 2007, Latte Abdallah 2022). The connection between individual and collective experience is central to the definition of the "martyr."

Yet, two figures in this story represent life, not death: those who took the photograph – who remain after Yunis's death, as does the image they produced – and the smiling Yunis in the second photo. This prompts us to ask: what more is contained in the images of Yunis that we cannot see? Viewed together, the juxtaposition of these images is not merely a celebration of death as testimony, but a testimony to the endurance of Palestinian life under the threat of Israeli necropolitics, which renders the boundary between life and death increasingly unstable. The effect of Israeli settler violence is thus a politics of life that fuses individual and collective existence into a unified project of witnessing – a project aimed at leaving traces of Palestinian presence. If Palestinian images posted on social media are like "bottles thrown into the sea" – as Cécile Boëx (2021) described the videos of the Syrian revolution on YouTube – they are addressed to a virtual audience, summoned to acknowledge Israel's ongoing genocidal violence. Ultimately, Palestinian images do not relinquish hope – the hope captured in Yunis's smile.

"Trigger warning": Israeli images and parody as settler colonial violence

In 2024 I managed to see my friend Amina together with her husband Salim in a city of Europe. The joy of our re-union after many years mixed with grief for Israel's war in Gaza and worries about the settler expansion in the West Bank. In the course of our bitter conversation, Salim extended his smartphone towards me to show me something. His was a quick and coy gesture, revealing a kind of decency towards those digital contents. What he was showing and hiding at the same time, was a Telegram chat written in Hebrew. Like many Palestinians, Salim can speak and read Hebrew. He explained to me that he had joined some Israeli news groups in order to keep informed. He focused on a couple of pictures shared in the chat: they depicted murdered children lying amidst the rubble in Gaza. Salim pointed at the Israelis' reactions to these images: "fire" and "like" emojis appeared underneath them, meaning that many of the followers were expressing their

appreciation for the death of Palestinian children. Salim broke our silence only commenting that "there is no humanity".

Israelis' exposure of their own violence against Palestinians increased after the IDF's ground invasion in Gaza, thanks to the videos Israeli soldiers posted on their social media. Although the IDF is supposed to regulate the use of social media by its personnel – especially if this can affect its reputation in the eyes of the public (Toler at al. 2024) – images of Gaza's destruction and the degrading treatment of Palestinian captives went viral in TikTok, Instagram and other social networks, reaching a wider audience that is not on the battlefield. If we consider the soldiers' videos as an "audio-logo-visual apparatus"[23], we can identify three main *topoi* that emerge from it: humiliation, destruction and appropriation.

The "humiliation" *topos* results from filming Palestinian men arrested during the military operations in Gaza. Prisoners are usually shown in group, undressed, blindfolded, with their hands tied behind their backs. In some videos we can hear the voice of the soldier filming that mocks the prisoners, emphasising the signs of their fear (such as the trousers wet with urine, on which the camera zooms). The humiliating effect of these images is reinforced by the description of the prisoners as members of Islamist groups, producing a contrast between the "dangerousness" of the "enemies" and the victorious representation of their domination. Images of this kind remind us of the photographs American soldiers took in the Iraqi prison of Abu Ghraib. After their publication, Sontag (2004) underlined: "where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers – recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities". Through images war violence becomes good entertainment.

The most popular videos are those showing the destruction of Gaza. Many videos reproduce the moment of the explosion of Palestinian houses and buildings, showing soldiers jubilating and celebrating after the detonation. In some films Israeli music provides the soundtrack[24]. There are many filmed variables of this exultation over destruction. In one video, a soldier knocks on the door of a ruined house, pretending to be surprised that no one is there to open it. In another, goats are filmed frolicking among the rubble, and a smiling soldier says: "As you can see, these are the only uninvolved civilians in Gaza. We are taking care of them. Come here Fatima!"[25]. The destruction of Palestinian homes is therefore explicitly linked to the elimination of Palestinians. Israeli songs sarcastically accompany images of Palestinians leaving their homes. In addition to the explosions of buildings, destruction is also deployed in the intimacy of Palestinian

[23] Referring to Michel Chion reflections on audio-vision, Setrag Manoukian wrote about the audio-logo-visual as an "apparatus" conceived as "a network that links a heterogeneous ensemble of institutions, discourses, and techniques, capturing gestures, behaviours, and words of human beings and engendering processes of subject formation" (Manoukian 2010: 239). Manoukian mobilizes the concept of "apparatus" to refer to fractures and casualty in the subject formation, while I go back to the disciplinary dimension of the Foucauldian definition and its reading by Deleuze, where "lines of visibility and enunciation" are tied to "lines of force", which "rectify" the curves of possible variations (Deleuze 1992).

[24] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/world/middleeast/israel-idf-soldiers-war-social-media-video.html

[25] https://www.aljazeera.com/program/newsfeed/2024/1/18/israeli-soldiers-are-filming-themselves-mocking-palestinians

homes. Another strand of videos depicts scenes of soldiers inside the houses. The filmed destruction of furniture and interiors goes with the appropriation of Palestinians' personal belongings[26].

We can watch Israeli soldiers taking shoes, necklaces and even money, or filming themselves playing with Palestinian children's bicycles or footballs. The "appropriation" strand has a particular twist in the videos showing the appropriation of women's undergarments. This seems to particularly amuse Israeli soldiers. They open drawers and display what they consider to be an "excessive" amount of underwear, commenting on Arabs' "lust". Photos and videos portray them wearing bras and panties over their uniforms, or hanging them on the wall as trophies[27]. If the "appropriation" strand recalls looting as a consolidated practice of domination in the settler colonial history of Palestine, the hyper-sexualization of "Arabs" and "Muslims" is also part of Orientalist fantasies combining the sexual humiliation and dehumanization of "others" (Massad 2007). Furthermore, the soldiers' videos transform the war ground in a playground, normalizing violence as fun to be consumed by social media followers.

This digital video production, made possible by soldiers' smartphones as polymedia (Madianou 2014), oils the "audio-logo-visual apparatus" of Israel's war on Gaza. A key feature of this mechanism is the specific narrative style of the videos, which is based on mockery of Palestinians. This style probably does not derive from the current period of war in Gaza, but it certainly stimulates a circular video production, moving seamlessly from the war camp to Israeli civil society. For example, a video showing Palestinian prisoners blindfolded, tied up and sitting on the ground, forced to listen for hours to a children's song in Hebrew, has become a trend among social media users. Ordinary citizens started filming themselves blindfolded, pretending to have their hands tied, with the same song as a soundtrack. Many of these videos were filmed by family members during daily life, involving children as well. In this way the mockery of Palestinian suffering becomes a parody. In literature parody consists of an imitation of the style of a particular writer or school of writers, usually with the aim of mocking it, producing a caricatural and humorous effect. The multiple remakes of soldiers' audio-visual narrative contribute to reinforce emotional detachment from the victimization of Palestinians, transforming it into "a song sung alongside another" (that is the literary translation of the Greek word *parōidía)*.

Along the continuum of mockery, ordinary Israelis' videos generate also their own narrative *topoi*. The exposure of the Israeli privilege is one of them: some people film themselves standing with the tap running continuously, or turning the lights on and off in their homes. These images make obvious reference to the lack of water and electricity in Gaza as a consequence of war. The footage of the interiors of Israeli homes and their facilities also stands in stark contrast to the videos of soldiers destroying the interiors of Palestinian houses emptied of their inhabitants. The abundance of water and electric light available demonstrate the successful appropriation of Palestinian livelihood. A second

[26] A reservist confirmed that destruction out of specific "military reasons" were largely part of the IDF's operations in Gaza, see https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/01/middleeast/israeli-soldier-alleges-serious-misconduct-gaza-intl/index.html

[27] https://mondoweiss.net/2024/02/violating-intimacies/

topos went viral: Israelis disguised as Palestinians dance and smile in front of the camera. The disguise usually consists of covering the head with a scarf similar to a keffiah or a hijab, joining the eyebrows with a pencil mark, and painting a few teeth black. What is thus mocked in these videos is a different corporeality, mixing phenotypic traits, clothing and socio-economic conditions. Disguise thus becomes a practice of racialisation that represents Palestinians as poor and different, and therefore inferior. The intertwining of racism and classism becomes more apparent if we compare this type of videos with the celebration of the destruction of Palestinian life and the ostentation of Israelis' well-being contained in the videos discussed above. Parody is built on the Israelis' political imagination concerning "Arabs", which caricatures orientalist and miserabilist representations of colonized Palestinians.

In addition, the visual material being parodied are the very images that Palestinians produce to denounce Israeli state violence. Israelis' videos showing candles lit in the dark and taps from which no water comes out tell of living conditions in Gaza, and reverses the *topos* of the ostentation of Israeli's access to water and electricity. In a video posted on TikTok, an Israeli influencer with a keffiyeh on her head worn as a hijab, holds a mango wrapped in swaddling clothes like a baby in her arms. She cradles it with a contrite face, repeating in Arabic: "Ya ibnī!" (Oh my son!). When a voice-over shouts "cut!", she throws the mango over her shoulder and giggles as recorded applause breaks out. She then explains what ingredients are used to falsify the signs of Palestinian suffering: ketchup for blood and talcum powder for the rubble dust. The figure of the Palestinian mother is thus represented as the core of the "fiction" of Palestinian grief. The sarcasm of Israeli visual contents, which accompany the staging of Palestinian suffering with smiles, dances, music and theatrical gestures, is supposed to attribute the explicit artificiality of Israeli parody to the Palestinians' suffering itself. In this way, mocking results to be a further mode of dispossession that denies not only the Palestinians' grief, but also their victimization and the "global compassion" their images possibly raise in the international public arena. At the same time, if we look at the Israelis' audio-visual production and narrative *topoi* as a whole, the denial of Palestinian suffering contrast – but maybe does not contradict – the amusement for destruction, displacement and humiliation of Palestinians, which soldiers' videos from Gaza unequivocally show.

As Rebecca Stein (2021a, 2021b) showed, the accusation of fraudulence and media manipulation by Palestinians spread among Israeli extreme-right groups but soon became a governmental discourse. The Israeli "repudiation script" started with the footage of 12-year-old Mohammed Al-Durrah, shot while being trapped with his father in a crossfire between the Israeli army and Palestinian gunmen in Gaza on 30 September 2000, at the beginning of the second Intifada. At this time the term "Pallywood" was introduced into the Israeli public discourse to refer to the supposed tactical theatrics and staged news for propaganda of the Palestinian film production. Since images of Israeli state violence against Palestinians were still rare at that time, the military had to give explanations (and initially excused) since the filmed killing of Mohammed Al-Durrah risked to damage Israel's image and public relations on an international level. While the repudiation of indigenous claim has an established colonial history, Stein explored how

the Israeli "repudation script" reinforced in the smartphone era, given the multiplication of images and their facilitated circulation. The script started involving digital experts, military courts and media campaigns. It also expressed the growing conflict between right-wing settlers, and Israeli activists and human rights groups that contributed to producing visual evidences of Israeli violence against the Palestinians. As Stein wrote, "the charge of videographic inauthenticity worked by banishing all traces of military violence from the original incident" (Stein 2021a: 79). The more the Israelis' accusations gained terrain in the public discourse, the more Israeli state violence became invisible, until being completely denied. In 2012 a state commission convened by Prime Minister Netanyahu on the al-Durrah case, concluded that the boy wasn't really killed (Stein 2021b). The clinical eye of Israeli experts focuses in particular on the filmed moment of the death: they scrutinize the movements after the shooting, the way the bodies fall, the blood that appears or does not appear. Ultimately, the fakeness of Palestinian videos is encapsulated in the ways Palestinians die. The "repudiation script" ends up denying the Palestinians' death.

This is what Israeli influencers also convey during Israel's war on Gaza in 2023-2024, confirming the popularization of the "repudiation script" in the contemporary Israeli society. Parody seems to be a further development of it. In literature, one of the main features of parody is that it presupposes that the public knows the original in order to be able to laugh at its distortion. So, the author and the public share a cultural background. In his famous interpretation of parody, Bachtin underlined how in popular culture between XIV and XVI centuries, parody became a form of social critique against dominant discourses and institutions. He also underlined that its subversive function did not aim to destroy the original, but to create a "dialogic relation" with a supposedly "regenerative function" that opens up for social change. In the parody of Israelis' videos, only supporters of Israel can laugh, revealing how cultural intimacy is based on settler colonial imageries and populist nationalism. The cultural intimacy associated with national belonging, which Herzfeld (1997) identified with feelings of pride and embarrassment – respectively linked to the internal dynamics of a society and its relations with the outside world – seems unbalanced in this case on the virile display of pride and domination. This "culture of shamelessness" (Sontag 2004) reveals Israel's supporters' "moral abdication" (Fassin 2025). What has parody become in the age of digital capitalism? It certainly lost the hope for change that put the contestation of power asymmetries at its core, as Bachtin interpreted it. The Zionist-Western parody aims to reinforce the domination system based on "technological innovation", media control, settler expansion and the overtly claimed inequality of human lives. Epistemic violence goes unruled (Salih 2023). The rest of the world has little left to laugh at.

"Trigger warning: some readers may find details of this report disturbing. Discretion is advised" reads the beginning of an article on the Israelis' mockery of Palestinians through social media[28]. Violence remains a debated visual field. Established news networks have

[28] https://www.wionews.com/world/israel-hamas-war-social-media-scrambles-to-scrub-spoof-videos-mocking-palestinians-651829

mainly focused on the Israeli soldiers' videos from Gaza[29], others also brought attention to social media users' "spoof videos" and the netizens' widespread backlash[30]. Anyway, this kind of videos continue to circulate in the social media. Al Jazeera's Investigative Unit built a database of audio-visual contents and produced a film on Israel's "war crimes" thanks to the thousands of photos and videos posted online by Israelis. In the film, the director Richard Sanders comments:

> No one can say they didn't know, the Israelis could not have made it clearer to us what they were doing in their rhetoric social media they were posting and what their own media were saying, that this was an exercise in ethnic cleansing, quite possibly an exercise in genocide, they were making it abundantly clear to us. And if we are ignorant, we are wilfully ignorant.

On 11th January 2024, in the public sitting at the International Court of Justice, South Africa's lawyers made reference to six of the Israeli soldiers' videos (one was screened during the hearing), which had already been published in mainstream media such as BBC and Aljazeera English. Framed as a proof of "intent from genocidal speech", the prosecution read: "Israeli soldiers in Gaza were filmed dancing, chanting and singing in November [2023]: 'May their village burn; may Gaza be erased'. There is now a trend among the soldiers to film themselves committing atrocities against civilians in Gaza, in a form of "snuff" video" (ICJ 2024: 36). And he concluded: "Soldiers obviously believe that this language and their actions are acceptable because the destruction of Palestinian life in Gaza is articulated state policy" (ivi, p. 37). From the perspective of international law, the Israelis' videos become legal evidence and their parodic nature loses its jovial tone, ultimately revealing itself as a form of dehumanization that testifies to the horror of Israel's war crimes. At the same time, their circulation on social media also bears witness to Israel's ongoing impunity before the world.

Final remarks. Humanity and resistance in the pain of the gaze

In November 2024 my friend Nabil sent me a video, which he had filmed from the roof of a house under construction in his family's neighbourhood. The video offered a 360-degree view of his village, half of which was unilaterally annexed to Jerusalem in the early 90s. What we can see in the video is not only the village where Nabil lives, but also the high-rises of West Jerusalem advancing towards the village and the Israeli settlements built in the Palestinian land, so close that we cannot distinguish where the village ends and the settlements begin. There is a background noise throughout the video, first metallic, then like hammering, which gives the idea that someone is building something nearby. This overview of almost two minutes ended with the image of Nabil's home, on which he zoomed. The video was a kind of nostalgic postcard he sent me from the place where we had spent so much time together. He wrote: "Here is the image of the village.

[29] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/world/middleeast/israel-idf-soldiers-war-social-media-video.html, https://mondoweiss.net/2024/02/violating-intimacies/, https://www.internazionale.it/notizie/catherine-cornet/2024/05/21/guerra-gaza-tiktok

[30] https://screenshot-media.com/politics/human-rights/israel-palestine-trend-controversy, https://x.com/AJEnglish/status/1720158775418433643,

There's the noise of a machine today, they are demolishing a house". His "postcard" was therefore affectively charged with a greater value, that of home, in a context where Palestinian homes are constantly being destroyed.

The threat of disappearing is at the core of Palestinian lives in Gaza and the West Bank. In last years, both mainstream and independent media mainly focused on reporting the enormous impact of Israel's war in the Strip. The ceasefire negotiated in mid-January 2025 did not prevent Israel to launch the "Iron Wall" operation in the northern West Bank to eliminate armed resistance and further destroy Palestinian refugee camps. Presented as a war on terrorists, Israeli claims of annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories are fuelled by Trump's proposition to transfer "poor" homeless Palestinians from Gaza to Egypt and Jordan. The mission of reconstructing Gaza, which is envisaged in the third step of the ceasefire negotiations, enhances Zionist-American fantasies of settler colonial domination. Destruction and reconstruction, as Ariella Azoulay (2011, 2015) had already highlighted, are at the core of Israel's politics of devastation of the Palestinian life. Demolitions of homes and the destruction of Palestinians' livelihoods (water pools, animals, olive trees…) are widely documented by Palestinians' and other activists' cameras. The movie *No other Land*, which gained critical acclaim in numerous festivals worldwide, shows what Rebecca Stein has defined the broken dream of video testimony. While exposing Palestinian popular resistance to ongoing Israeli house demolitions and settler violence, the movie – whose shooting ended in October 2023 – concludes with the bitter realisation that part of the Palestinian villages of Masafar Yatta in the southern West Bank have been completely depopulated.

However, the Palestinians' camera dream does not end. Its ambition to document the truth of Israeli state violence and settler expansion is not the only aim. As I attempted to highlight in this article, the role of testimony of Palestinian images is not limited to denounce Israeli necropolitics, but also to affirm Palestinian existence. The pictures of Yunis remind us of what Roland Barthes wrote about photography as "the anthropological place of death", where "the dead returns". His specific reference to photographs of corpses led him to write: "if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of the dead thing" (Barthes 1981: 79). This shift from the present (the moment we watch) to the past ("this-has-been") is possible because "someone has seen the referent […] in *flesh and blood*" (*Ibid.*). These considerations highlight the role of testimony that images can play, like Malga Zonta pictures, which also kept the mother's pain alive. Instead of leaving them hidden in a drawer like Cattinella, the Palestinians throw them out into the world, hoping that one day they may become part of the memory of a world that recognises the injustice enclosed in their suffering. The twenty-two short films collected in the movie *From ground zero* by the Palestinian filmmaker Rashid Masharawi, painfully show how Palestinian life endures even under the rubble of bombarded homes in Gaza. "No", the short film realized by the Gazan journalist Hana Awd Eleiwa, refuses to include the Palestinian suffering in the visual frame, and joins the music group Sol Band to sing Palestinian songs together with children in the streets of Gaza. The Palestinian camera dream cannot end, because the testimony it bears keeps both joy and pain being alive.

Commenting on Sontag's work after the publication of the photos of Abu Ghraib, Judith Butler highlighted the importance of recognising images as being able to interpret events and not only convey affects. "Visual frames" do not merely represent something, but also determine the limits of representability, that is what can be seen. Thus, Butler asks, when does one see the framing of the frame? This does not depend only on media, but on "the structuring effects that certain larger norms […] have on what we provisionally call 'reality'" (Butler 2009: 74). Picking up on Levinas' thought, she argues that these norms work to *give face* and to *efface*. So, frames govern the perceptible as far as some portion of the visual field is ruled out: "In other words, the image, which is supposed to deliver reality, in fact withdraws reality from perception" (ivi, p. 75). These reflections are part of Butler's wider effort to ask which lives are grievable. Visual framing has to do with the inequality of life, first of all establishing the power of framing itself. We could reformulate Butler's question and ask: when does one see the violence of the framing?

As I attempted to show, the link of the representability and grievability of Palestinian lives is entrenched in the Zionist settler colonization of Palestine, which aims to replace Palestinian indigenous people with the "heirs" of the Biblical land of Israel. "This is my home" is the Israeli song that accompanies many videos of Israelis mocking the Palestinians' absence from their homes. Israel as militarized settler society creates a continuum of narrative and visual *topoi* alongside derision of Palestinian suffering, appropriating Palestinian images to parody them. Except as humiliated captives, Palestinians are eliminated from the Israeli frame, and replaced with Israelis playing racialized caricatures of colonized "Arabs". The parody of the "plausible genocide" of Palestinians aims to convey that "a genocide is not a genocide" (Fassin 2024, Hage 2010). The Israeli framing does not only dispossess Palestinians from their own grief, but also robs audiences from the pain of the gaze. Ultimately, the Israeli parody itself becomes evidence of the genocidal intent.

If Palestinian images attempt to frame Israeli violence, Israeli images make the violence of their framing imperceptible. My reference to "Palestinian" and "Israeli" visuality and social media circulation does not mean to rely on nationalist references or identity politics – although national and identity discourses cross the visual field in polarizing ways. Rather, Palestine/Israel refers to the asymmetric power of defining what can be included in the visual frame throughout the colonial history of Palestine. Relying on my Palestinian friends' appeal to the "humanity" of the gaze, I consider pain as the condition to acknowledge both the Israeli violence and the Palestinians' joys and suffering. According to Nabil, Amina, Samir and Yunis's family, "humanity" is what makes the difference in the multiplicity of publics, which emerge from the circulation of images and knowledge about Palestine/Israel. In this sense "humanity" does not concern a general feeling of sympathy, based on an abstractly shared human condition, nor another normative frame that hierarchically differentiate full "humans" from "human animals". Humanity rather depends on the resistance of the pain of the gaze – that is the ability to see violence both in the frame and in the framing, and to keep celebrating and grieving Palestinian lives.

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