Goldsmiths Research Online

Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)
is the institutional research repository for
Goldsmiths, University of London

Citation

Persistent URL

Versions

Goldsmiths

UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Mediation, Iteration, Possibility
Lee Douglas & Ali Feser

In an article published in *Visual Anthropology Review* in 2017, writer and visual theorist Ariella Azoulay considers how Palestinian history has been subsumed within imperial archives, specifically those created by the Israeli state and its international collaborators. Reminding us that imperial archives are assembled from fragments of the social worlds destroyed in the name of empire, Azoulay focuses on a photograph taken in Palestine during the Nakba in 1949 and that is now stored at the archives of the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC). At the center of the image, an elderly man kneels and, refusing to abdicate, plants his staff against the ground. He is surrounded by soldiers. A man in a suit, presumably an official from the ICRC, is also present. In Azoulay's reading, the soldiers and the international representative are "gesticulating around [the elderly man], trying to find the right words and gestures to force him, without direct violence" to leave Palestine (Azoulay, 2017, 8).

In her analysis, Azoulay argues that the soldiers abstained from exercising blunt violence only when within the camera's sightline. The cameras, after all, were there specifically to evidence that Israel's expropriation of land conformed to international law. In fact, she suggests, it was Israel that had invited the ICRC to witness the expulsion. The photographs resulting from this media spectacle were meant to demonstrate that Israeli forces were simply executing the innocuously named policy of "family reunification," a so-called form of restitution (Azoulay, 2017, 6). Ostensibly, the Palestinians in the photographs had signed papers agreeing to be displaced to Jordan where they would join relatives already expelled or incarcerated there. As such, Azoulay observes, any coercion exercised to obtain the semblance of consent must have occurred before photographers arrived (Azoulay, 2017, 7). In refusing to move, however, the elderly man flipped the fiction of this contract back onto the agents of imperialism. Together, cameras and the photographic gaze created an opening from which the Palestinian man could disrupt the smooth roll out of state policy. They also made visible his simple but profound act of resistance.

Turning her attention to the ICRC archive, where this photograph is now kept, Azoulay describes how the institutional treatment of this image diffuses the radical defiance of the man's gesture. In the archival context, the image caption situates this elderly man as a prisoner of war and describes the hovering soldiers as engaging in an act of interrogation (Azoulay, 2017, 5). Azoulay asserts this description is unlikely. Given his age, the man would not have been taken prisoner; he would have stayed behind with women and children. Besides, no one would bother to negotiate so politely with a prisoner of war. Azoulay reminds us that imperial archives are assembled from fragments of the social worlds destroyed in the name of empire. Her example illustrates how archival taxonomies and visual mischaracterizations contribute to how imperial visual collections remake and limit acts of resistance. A man's refusal to move—to leave his land—is transformed into an act of compliance that seemingly demonstrates the inevitability of the colonial state. Struggle is obscured; defiance muddled; resistance rewritten. Once in the archive, captions and metadata further this process by fabricating other realities, where one man's act of refusal is manipulated to suggest that "Palestinians comply with the destruction of their world" (Azoulay, 2017, 9). Despite this predicament, Azoulay is committed to resuscitating traces of resistance from the imperial archive. She recontextualizes the photograph of the elderly

man as an image of refusal. "[A]gainst the military operation of controlling the image of the destruction of an entire culture," Azoulay situates the photograph as a poignant reminder of how "the apparatus of a totalitarian regime made even the possibility of the existence of such gestures unimaginable" (Azoulay, 2017, 9). Her analysis makes the archive work against itself. It is a locus for the ongoing performance of imperial sovereignty, but also a resource for articulating the historical contingency of empire, the violence necessary for its reproduction, and the resistance, indeed existence, of those directly subjugated by it.

We return to Azoulay's article in this issue because we recognize the contemporary emergency that Israel's war on Gaza constitutes. We recognize the profound, indeed, uncanny ways that Azoulay's contribution to *Visual Anthropology Review* 7 years ago resonates with the events that have unfolded over the past 6 months. Rereading our archive and Azoulay's contribution to it forces us to ponder how the images produced and circulated today will be deployed in the future. By extension, we ask how the images and visual technologies used to document and mediate this genocide are transforming it in real time. Drone technologies, for instance, seem to figure in this conflict not only as weapons of assault and surveillance, but also as a means to inform and, even, manipulate popular opinion of the war. This was certainly the case with aerial footage of February's "Flour Massacre," when troops opened fire on Palestinians gathered around food aid trucks in Gaza City. The highly edited, black-and-white video footage of this event depicts Gazans through the crosshairs of a drone camera. They appear not as people, but as small gray specks, entities that seem to "swarm" around the aid-dispensing trucks. Distance and lack of detail make the imagery even more horrific; it seems to deliberately dehumanize Gazans, to show them as "pests," outside of the category of the human, and thereby exempt from international law.

Israel has tried to further control representations of the conflict by barring the entry of unembedded, foreign journalists. It has also used telecommunications outages to restrict Gazans from relaying their experiences to the outside world. In fact, as we write this editorial introduction, we become aware that Israel has shut down media outlet Al Jazeera's operations in East Jerusalem. Despite direct and indirect censorship, Palestinian journalists have been and continue to document the war. In fact, they are responsible for most of the on-the-ground images we have seen of it. As anthropologist Amahl Bishara has argued, Palestinian journalists have long been the foundation of US media coverage in the Occupied Territories (Bishara, 2013). Perhaps, the only change is that now their efforts are overwhelmingly visible on the screens that accompany our everyday tasks. We have seen Palestinian journalists grieve colleagues. We have seen them, in their blue vests, pull victims from bombed out buildings. We also see, on their social media accounts, glimpses of survival and ordinary life in the face of this violence. Perusing Instagram profiles and live feeds provides a peek into what preceded the current conflict: an occupied and over-policed territory that despite the circumstances showed signs of vibrant life on beaches, in cafes, and at universities. This has all been destroyed. The predominance of Palestinian self-representation seems to challenge conventions for imaging the Occupation. Critical education scholar Jaffee (2016) contends that Palestinians are only recognized as innocent and, thereby, human after they have been disabled by Israel and made incapable of resisting. In this moment, however, it seems as though Palestinian journalists are able to be recognized as human. By making this conflict visible and narratable, they retain as much agency as is possible when subject to historical and ongoing violence.

More recently, Azoulay has deepened the analysis she first put forth in this journal by unpacking how contemporary modes of thinking and organizing—so often, shaped by institutions like archives and museums that care for the images used to produce and reify social worlds—are intricately entangled with imperial modes of reason. Noting the inherent violence of the project of empire, Azoulay coins the term "potential history" to describe an approach—indeed, a sensibility—that considers what interpretations might emerge if we were to attend to the very forms in which imperial pasts structure how we understand and interpret things in the present (Azoulay, 2019). We read Azoulay's treatise on potentiality as a recognition of possibility, an acknowledgement of mediation and its capabilities, and an understanding that the repetition of iteration can produce change. The weight of potential possibility implicates visual anthropology in fundamental ways by posing a simple, yet difficult question: How might our discipline and our methodologies be tools for articulating and making visible potential histories? To put it another way, how can they be used to create, through multimodal means, forms of knowledge that make visible, indeed, possible these potential histories?

The themes of mediation, iteration, and possibility are recurrent threads in our Spring issue. The contributing authors explore the potential of visual, sensorial, multimodal approaches and, as a result, articulate ethnography as a practice of opening other modes of observing and understanding social life. Whether directly or indirectly, this points to the future of the discipline, indeed to its futurity. In this sense, the authors showcased in this issue are grappling with the possibility that visual anthropology makes plausible, thinkable, indeed possible through its deep engagement with the politics and ethics of visual and sensorial representations. Whether through a focus on mediation, iteration, or even creation, the authors identify a multitude of ways in which ethnographic practice can activate the visual to produce forms of knowledge that make perceivable unrecognized experiences and silenced histories, as well as potential forms of change.

This is perhaps most evident in Gabbi Guedes discussion of stereoscopic depictions of Indigenous subjects made popular in the mid-1900s through the technology of the View-Master. In her research article "'Come to life' realism," Guedes critically unpacks the histories of photographic technology and consumption. In the process, she describes how stereoscopy was integral to asserting, narrativizing, and reinforcing colonial powers. At the same time, she maintains that the affective qualities of stereoscopic images "complicate fantasies of unilateral viewing and domination and bring forth histories of resistance." Shifting our attention to contemporary visual practices, Meghanne Barker considers how a documentary film masterclass in Serbia can be a site for ethnographically engaging with the limits of creativity and authenticity. Focusing on how Serbian filmmakers understand experimentality, Barker describes how creativity offers a means to authenticity that rejects the *mechanical indexicality* of the film camera. In doing so, the author demonstrates how filmmakers move between representation and reality to create more vulnerable forms of creative expression. This celebration of vulnerability is, in the author's words, an invitation for visual anthropology to embrace the potential of experimentation.

In the Special Section "From the Field to the Screen: Reflexivity and collaboration in visual and multimodal contemporary practices" coordinated by Angélica Cabezas-Pino and Mattia Fumanti,

contributors explore the challenges, as well as the opportunities, afforded through reflexive, collaborative approaches to visual and multimodal ethnographic practice. The section includes reflections on the potential of autobiographical storytelling in Chile (Cabezas-Pino), the sensorial possibility of virtual reality as a mode of understanding experiences with urban heat waves (Montero), and the layered mediations made possible by engaging with and activating archival film (Ponte). Both reflexive and critical, these contributions are enriched by Sophie Shrago's description of collaborative failure. Reflecting on the challenges she encountered when attempting to co-write a film, Schrago argues that important power dynamics reveal themselves in the cracks and crevices of unsuccessful collaborative projects. Through a diversity of case studies and engaging with multiple creative multimodal methodologies, the Special Section argues that reflexive and meaningful experimentation can create "new opportunities for transformative research practices." Herein lies the possibility, indeed, the future of visual anthropology.

In his research article "The jaguar and the hummingbird," Claudio Riga embeds himself in the Comuna 13 neighborhood of Medellín where he explores the creative potential of urban art. Approaching "graphic anthropology" as a mode of engaging with graffiti art and the practices that surround it, Riga demonstrates how murals and painted walls engage with memories of armed conflict. Here, graphic anthropology is not solely about illustrating the ethnographic encounter, but also about taking quite seriously how urban artistic interventions shape collective understandings of belonging in a context marked by violence. Riga's attention to creative practices resonates with this issue's Critiques, where the authors engage with a wide range of multimodal works and position different media as both points of analysis and forms of producing anthropological knowledge. In her review of Carlos G. Gómez's film *Sama in the Forest*, Michele R. Gamburd follows how ethnographic filmmaking becomes a vehicle for exploring the narrative potential of the visual arts, folk festivals, and local theater production in a Mithila community in North India. Focusing on the multiple ways in which stories are told, the film becomes yet another layer that makes more complex the construction and circulation of community narratives. Moving to the stillness of the photographic medium, Clara Beccaro-Lannes reviews Camilo León-Quijano's *La Cité: Une Anthropologie Photographique* (The City: A Photographic Anthropology). A photo-ethnographic study of Sarcelles, a French banlieue near Paris, the book engages with photography as both a method and object of study. For Beccaro-Lannes, León-Quijano's approach pushes forward our discipline by considering the situated and dialogical ways in which photography can be used as both a methodological tool and a vehicle for communicating new forms of knowledge. This resonates with Eduardo Hazera's Critique of Alex Fattal's film *Limbo*, where the director experiments with the surrealistic potential of the camera obscura to think through the complex and disorienting aftermaths of armed conflict in Colombia. Hazera engages with philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of a "body without organs" (1980) to demonstrate how Fattal's aesthetic approach becomes a way to make evident the "unwritability" of violent conflict. In doing so, he considers what it means to represent that which cannot be spoken or translated. Similarly, Wytze Dijkstra's analysis of Christian Suhr's film *Light upon Light* pays attention to the "challenges of visually capturing an unseen presence." In the text, Dijkstra engages with Suhr's embrace of aesthetic and sensorial approaches while also critiquing the director's narrative thread. In doing so, the piece considers what ethnographic film can suggest over what it evidences or declares. Here, it is the form of iteration itself that deserves more paused reflection in order to understand the potential of

anthropological film to communicate "how notions of the transcendent are grounded in the material world."

Working from different perspectives and engaging with different visual forms, the contributions to this issue enrich contemporary debates regarding visual anthropology's potential. Throughout the issue, mediation, iteration, and possibility emerge as points of reflection, indeed, departure for imagining visual anthropology's future. They also demonstrate how careful attention to images and their social worlds make it possible to reimagine what is at stake beyond disciplinary debates. They potently and vividly illustrate a multiplicity of routes for thinking through the role of the visual in projects of settler colonialism, war, resistance, and survival. With that, we close our editorial introduction with a public invitation to authors who are thinking *with* and *through* images to analyze the current war on Gaza and the efforts to stop it.

References
Azoulay, Ariella. 2017. "The Imperial Condition of Photography in Palestine: Archives, Looting, and the Figure of the Infiltrator." *Visual Anthropology Review* **33**(1): 5–17.

Azoulay, Ariella. 2019. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. New York: Verso Books.

Bishara, Amahl. 2013. *Back Stories: U.S. News Production and Palestinian Politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1980. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Jaffee, Laura Jordan. 2016. "Disrupting Global Disability Frameworks: Settler-Colonialism and the Geopolitics of Disability in Palestine/Israel." *Disability & Society* **31**(1): 116–130.