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Political Visibility of the Palestinian

Our everyday environment demands to be seen. Moreover, we are born into a world of visual images, representations, signs and symbols that jostle for our attention. As such, the visual has come to play an increasingly central role in western contemporary society. This role has been underpinned by the omnipresence of visual technologies that offer us differing views of the world. From photography and film, video, digital graphics, television and even acrylics,¹ the images these mediums present to us come in a variety of forms, including Television programmes, advertisements, family photos and Facebook pages, surveillance camera and military drones, in sculpture and paintings. Even the Photographers Gallery, London has responded to the broadening consideration of the digital image, within screen-based and networked cultures, by hosting an exhibition dedicated to the animated GIF.² As such, the economy and availability of the image is central to its role as an object of desire, curiosity or knowledge. From the rarest painting, where the allure is to bear witness to the original in a gallery, to the use of gallery spaces, as a place to consider something so pervasive as the GIF signals, the depth of interest in the image related to medium specificity and specifically the emergence of 'post-photographic' research.

All of these technologies render the world visible in different ways, by offering us different views, some as interpretations, others as representations, but as technologies, the images, which are made visible, are always subjective. Seeing, and this extends beyond looking at just images, is never the result of 'pure vision'. Rather, as John Thompson notes, seeing is 'always shaped by a broader set of cultural assumptions and frameworks, either by the spoken or written cues that commonly accompany the visual image, by the choices and decisions of the authors, or the mediums upon which images are made visible to us'.³ These cultural assumptions and

frameworks shape the way in which the images are seen and understood. This includes the politics of a specific newspaper or in public spaces like cafés or museums, which channel their politics into how images are made visible in varying ways. Here I am thinking specifically at the denial of text or explanation alongside Jean Mohr's images, which later became the acclaimed photo-series, *After the Last Sky*. Commissioned to exhibit at the International Conference on the Question of Palestine, held by the United Nations in Geneva, 1983, the images of the Palestinian, in various settings, including the domestic sphere, at work and in exile⁴ were approved for exhibition in the halls of the building, but with one exception – no text. As Edward Said noted, in the opening page of *After the Last Sky*,

You can hang them up, but no writing can be displayed with them. No legends, no explanations. A compromise was finally negotiated whereby the name the name of the country or place (Jordan, Syria, West Bank and Gaza) could be affixed...but not one word more.⁵

These restrictions, although amongst various Arab states who were seen as supporters of the Palestinian cause, could be understood as a way of 'limiting the impact' of these disturbing images, keeping these disturbing images from taking on an even more disturbing voice⁶

Yet the contested nature of the Palestinian image is not a thing of the past. A significant aspect of my research is the photographic practice of the multi-national photography collective, Activestills. The eight member who mainly operate in Israel and the Occupied Territories, have since their inception in 2005, focused their practice on issues that would otherwise have been mostly invisible in the Israeli media. Their work included covering the Palestinian clashes with Israeli Authorities in the West Bank, Palestinian house demolitions and the issues of social housing in Israel, migrant communities in Tel-Aviv and the labor conditions of migrant agricultural workers, amongst other matters. While the collective have a rich collection of images on their website, an archive which exceeds 20,000 images, they also make public displays of their work in an effort to challenge the dominant visibility of these issues within Israel. Often, the images posted onto the streets are ripped off the walls (Figure 1), while a recent exhibition at an academic conference entitled "*Visual Culture Between Obedience and Resistance*", held at the Shenker College of Engineering and Design in Israel during March 2014, (Figure 2) was taken down, allegedly by students of the college, who also hung a 'counter-exhibition' directly over the original images. In an effort to reposition the political and perceived emotional tone of the original exhibition, the counter images included Israeli soldiers crying and Israeli medics tending to injured children (figure 3).



Figure 1: ActiveStills street exhibition, Tel-Aviv 2007. Image courtesy of Activestills.



Figure 2: Original exhibition content at the Shenker College of Engineering and Design in Israel during March 2014. Image courtesy of Activestills.



Figure 3: Israeli student counter exhibition. Image courtesy of Activestills.

Like Mohr, 30 years earlier, the public exhibition of Palestinian visibilities is still a contested one. While the torn frames were kept on the wall, re-hanging what remained intact, the interactivity of the display reflected the politics of visibility currently at play in Israel. The contested field of vision between the directness of Activestills' political imagery and the general perception of Palestinian culture, like those that Mohr tried to express, are often at odds with popular Israel culture. As such, the photos also become an example of how an image can become an agent within a system of seeing that operates as a counter hegemonic vision of the Palestinian that dominates the Israeli public sphere.

Much like the Israeli students and Activestills, we interpret, create, and use images as a matter of course, often, Sandra Weber notes, without much conscious attention and using whatever social codes and conventions we've picked up along the way.⁷ Conversely, John Grady notes, that visual images, which he refers to, as 'icons', are *deliberate constructions* (emphasis added) that communicate information within a community that can understand that information and for which it must have some importance.⁸ However, Sturken and Cartwright (2008) point out that the 'meanings of each image are multiple, created each time it is viewed'.⁹ With these ideas in mind, the nature of the wall display, their interactivity and what people see is very much determined by the audience for who the image might address and also in how the image is made visible. Thus, as Gillian Rose notes, picturing and seeing, or vision and visibility are the processes by which most come to know the world as it really is for them.¹⁰

But what use is the image as a research tool, and specifically photographs? How can photography help shape and inform a visibility, contributing to our understanding of what, how and why something has been recorded and presented as it has; ultimately, that is where my research interests lie. As a Visual Culture PhD student, the crux of my work is to deal with images. Specifically, my research spotlights visual activism in Israel/Palestine, focusing on video, photographic and web-based practices which are underpinned by interdisciplinary intersections across art, design, the visual with approaches from the humanities and the social sciences. Prior to undertaking my PhD, I dealt with images in a very different way. As a historian, how the image was used, and the values placed upon an image differed greatly from how the image is understood within an art school context. Yet, by asking, 'what do we really mean by visual methods and image research' I want to take the opportunity to explore how I, as an interdisciplinary researcher, use images as and for research.

In what follows in the remainder of this document will discuss 'what an image might be',¹¹ looking at some of the theoretical positions, uses and functions related to images, and more specifically, how we might see them in our daily lives. Such an approach is underlined by my interest in visual sociology as a method for developing theoretical perspectives that use a multiplicity of visual methods in sociology at large, whilst developing theoretical perspectives around the contemporary and historical analysis of the socio-cultural position of the visual. With this in mind, I will conclude by returning to the topic of my PhD by exploring a series of Palestinian family photos, taken during a participatory workshop with the female members of a Bedouin village in the West Bank, held by the photography collective, Activestills. The images highlight close familial relations, but also address issues of structural violence that is omnipresent in the images produced. Through the use of image analysis, namely semiotics, and the connotative analysis of the roles of each subject documented in the images, within the wider 'symbolic universe' of the family home, the image, in this case the photo, helps to generate social knowledge. Thus by employing visual research methods, alongside photo-elicitation during my field work (whereby I interviewed the photographer concerning the nature of these photos) allowed for a 'rich and thick' description of the subjects everyday life¹² which is not overtly addressed in the images or their exhibition online.

Images

Whatever we see enables us to gather information about the world around us, yet while a host of technologies are available for us to gather this information the process of seeing starts long before we can even think about it. While a range of technologies offer up innumerable images to vary our perspectives, seeing comes before words, even before we can see.¹³ Moreover, our sense of sight is entwined with all our other senses, with our eyes shut we can plan, analyse, imagine and think because our thoughts are associated with, and largely informed by images.¹⁴ Even when we sleep, our subconscious speaks to us in images. Yet over time, the image and the distinction between vision and knowledge have become increasingly blurred. Looking, seeing and knowledge have, Gurrieri¹⁵ notes, become perilously intertwined. Thus, once

again, Berger's early observations on the processing of seeing are useful when he suggests that 'what we see and what we know is never settled'.¹⁶

Firmly within the age of new media and digital communications, the ability to distinguish 'unreal' images from reality¹⁷ has become fraught with problems. The hyper-visibility of war, specifically in relation to militarised vision and the images that come from these mediations has become a focus of interest since the First Gulf War, in 1991. The 'surgical' strikes, conducted within the 'theatre of war' have contributed to an increasingly cinematic experience of conflict. In terms of the visuality of war, the capacity to see beyond the remit of sight itself, the drone operator 'who sits in his air conditioned trailer and hunts down another person... for him, the machine becomes a virtual extension of their vision' something that compresses the understanding of *prima facie* and conflict.¹⁸ The multiple optics of war imagery and its mediation, thanks to technologies and censorship, has made conflict more impersonal and less intimate. Yet the adoption of social media by military organisations, whilst trying to limit visibilities and control the flow of information has also proven that images of war can also be sociable, sharable and likeable.¹⁹

Counter to this, citizen journalism and social advocacy supported by the ubiquity of the camera has helped to shift how the visual is used, marking what Meg McLagan noted as a move from 'documentation through photojournalism to a means of strategic communication'.²⁰ This means of producing counter visibilities promotes a widening of the space in which politics can be conceived, performed and seen. Moreover, the emphasis on strategic communication challenges the reliance on capturing and disseminating powerful images which can be deemed to be naive and at times counter-productive. Yet as a researcher, dealing with images, specifically in relation to the construct of political visibilities, citizenship and conflict, the importance of the image lies not in how it might 'look', but what it can 'do'²¹ and how, if at all, it is made visible.

But what is an image? James Elkins asked the very same question during a thirty-five hour-long week of discussions, lectures and seminars, held in Chicago in 2008. The resulting text, of the same title, asks how well we understand what we mean by the term *picture* and *image*. Suggesting that in art production, art history and visual culture, which include the developing field of visual studies, the word image is normally taken for granted. In the later field, visual studies the word image is often 'used as a given term, but with differing consequences, because of the enormous rhetorical weight that visual studies puts on the idea of the visual'.²² As stated, we live in a visual era, where we see many more images in our lives than any time previously, thus the nature of the image in the conception and conceptual possibility of visual studies, more so than the other two categories is boundless in its possibilities. Yet Elkins alludes that what an image actually is, is 'something that is seldom spelt out'.²³ Likewise, we are told that 'there are theories about images, and theories that use images, and images that also produce theories', here I am thinking about WJT Mitchell's seminal text, 'What Do Pictures Want', to which he answered, at a seminar at the University of Manchester, during a visit in 2014, is that 'all they want is to be kissed'.²⁴ Yet, perhaps at its most basic, whether is it asking for anything or not, an

image is used to help distinguish one thing from another, to sort phenomena into categories.²⁵ As metaphors, the image can be a skin,²⁶ however, this embodiment is restrictive to the physical, whereas others, such as Vanessa Joan Muller, argue that some images, specifically photographs can communicate an atmosphere, a sensory experience that is not visible, but redolent in the production, one that channels the focus away from what is being represented, towards the ‘how’ of its perception.²⁷ While methodologically, Clifford Greetz’s anthropological theory of ‘thick descriptions’ holds that as researchers in the field we must present a thick description which is composed not only of facts but also of commentary and interpretation – a process which is now often (but not always) built around the utility of the camera.

Thick & Rich Data

In October 2013, I undertook my fieldwork in Israel/Palestine. The desire to conduct research that produced thick and rich data drove the trajectory of my research methods whereby I opted to use images, produced by the interviewee (in this instance, a photographer from the Activestills group) to elicit further information related to a specific project.

Prior to conducting my interview, I printed the images from the Activestills website and placed them on my office wall. The images appeared on the Activestills website in no specific order, and appear within the archive under the title ‘*Women Documenting their Lives in Susiya*’.²⁸ Once printed, I then divided up the images, based on the basic denotative content within the frame. Following a conventional content analysis approach I categorized the Images as follows, (1) sleeping, (2) family inside (3) landscape (4) farming (5) women/domestic space (6) women/outside (7) children.



Figure 4: Image of my research wall and the categorization of the images as I began to work with them, September 2013

The collection of photos were chosen because their presence on the Activestills website is a departure from their usual photographic practice. The majority of the 20,000 images are images *taken by* the collective, who in an effort to document the occupation, seek to make visible aspects of the Israeli occupation that otherwise go unreported. However, these images are the result of a series of workshops where women of an 'unrecognized'²⁹ Bedouin village took a camera to document their own lives. Supported by members from the collective the women sought to document their lives, living in tents with their families in a remote and highly contested area of the West Bank, close to the Palestinian city of Hebron. Moreover, the images were born from a bigger scheme within the village over a period of months, whereby peace workers developed projects that intended to help those in the region 'live with the conditions of the occupation' through the use of art projects. Thus, by and large, the images avoid any overly obvious acknowledgement of the occupation such as the presence of the Israeli defense force (IDF), house demolitions or settler attacks in the way Activestills or peace activist imagery is often produced in the region when attempting to visualize the Bedouin communities 'everyday' lives.³⁰ Lastly, the images that appear on the Activestills website were chosen by the women of the village, and thus, it is very much their visibility that is being communicated.

However, when I revisited the images, 10 of the 33 images had connotative references to water (carrying, decanting or transfer of) that pointed toward the structural violence that blights the region.³¹ Within the collection there is one specific image that appears on my research wall that is set aside from the rest. The image, which is of a dove flying by a water tank, is anomalous within the collection (figure 5). It can be suggested that the dove is the focus of the photographer's attention for its symbolic weight. Likewise, such a practice appeals to an aesthetic that draws upon the practices of photography as art, a certain 'functional aesthetic', where the clarity of its intent is used as a measure of the evidence of its worth,³² yet the water tank juxtaposes the notion of peace. Other images, categorized within the group 5, 'women and domestic space', as well as category 6, 'women outside' are consistent with vernacular, snapshot photography and while the intent of the photographer and the project is to visualize the everyday lives of the women of the village, the emphasis on water, its preservation and significance is clearly marked by the actions adopted by the women within the frame (figure 6), or by inspecting the surroundings in which the women are framed (figure 7).



Figure 5 – Activestills workshop image – Dove & water tank. Image courtesy of Activestills.



Figure 7: villager-decanting water. Image courtesy of Activestills.



Figure 8: Villager taking water from a well. Images courtesy of Activestills.

My point is, that until I revisited the images anew, the photographer from the photography collective who facilitated the workshops, nor I, really considered what Douglas Harper refers to as a ‘wider symbolic universe’ within an image, or a collection.³³ The photography project was, for the women and the organisers, a way to exclude the occupation, if only momentarily. The project was not about confrontation, settler attackers or IDF patrols, and when they do come into the frame, they are framed from a distance, in a telling way that reiterates the nature of the project. As such, these images are not about producing evidence or testimony, as McLagan suggests the camera might for activists or nongovernmental organisations (NGO). Instead, the project was about documenting family life – a record of what is acceptable to record, like the family albums found world wide, the images bespeak only the positives, family shots, smiling faces, and togetherness in an effort to create their own visual narrative, not one on their behalf. Yet by looking within the image the photographs helped to communicate telling aspects of the occupation that are otherwise less visible and harder to communicate.

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- ¹Rose, G. (2010). *Visual Methodologies: An introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. London: Sage.
- ² The first exhibition as part of the Photographers' Gallery's digital programme and exhibition space, *The Wall* entitled 'Born in 1987: The Animated Gif' on show between the 19th May – 10th July, 2012
- ³ Thompson, J. B. (2005). The New Visibility. *Theory, Culture and Society* , p.36
- ⁴ Exile in this instance is in reference to all Palestinians who became displaced after the 1949, knowing to Palestinians as the Nakaba, however, this could also constitute any displacement post 1967
- ⁵ Said, E. (1986). *After The Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, p.3
- ⁶ Mitchell, W. (1995). *Picture Theory*. Chicago : University of Chicag, p.315
- ⁷Weber, S. (2008). Using Visual Images in Research. In G. K. Cole, *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research* . London: Sage
- ⁸ Grady, J. (2008). The Scope of Visual Sociology. *Visual Studies* , p.14
- ⁹ Cartwright, S. A. (2001). *Practices of Looking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.25
- ¹⁰ Rose, G. (2010) *Op. Cit.*
- ¹¹ In response to the Call For Papers – see <http://blog.soton.ac.uk/wsapgr/call-for-contributions/>
- ¹²Banks, M. (2010). Introduction: Anthropology, Photography and the Archive. *History and Anthropology* , 339-349
- ¹³Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broacasting Corporation and Penguin Books, p.7
- ¹⁴ Weber, S. (2008) *Op. Cit.*
- ¹⁵ Gurrieri, L. (2013). Stocky Bodies: Fat Visual Activism. *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body and Weight in Society* , 197-208
- ¹⁶ Berger, 1972. *Op. Cit.* p.7
- ¹⁷ Baudrillard, J. (1988). Simulacra and Simulations. In Baudrillard, & M. Poster (Ed.), *Selected Writings* (pp. 166-184). Stanford: Stanford University Press
- ¹⁸ Weizman, E. (2012/13, Oct/April). 5000 Feet is the Best: Omer Fast Interviewed by Eyal Weizman. *Photoworks* . London: Photoworks
- ¹⁹ An IDF image from their official Instagram account – this image, like many others have over 7k of likes http://instagram.com/p/q_z3mkjPIP/?modal=true See Huw Lemmy 'Devastation in Metaspac' for an interesting analysis of Israeli military forces and Instagram.
- ²⁰ McLagan, M. (2007).The Architecture of Strategic Communication: A Profile of Wtiness. In M. F. McKee, & M. Feher (Ed.), *Nongovernmental Politics*. New York: Zone
- ²¹ Pinney, C. (2004). *Photos of the Gods*. London: Reaktion Books, p.8
- ²² Elkins, J. (2011). *What Is An Image: Volume Two The Stone Art Theory Institutes Series*. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University. p.4
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ During WJT Mitchell's roundtable discussion at The University of Manchester, May 2014 Mitchell responded to the question 'what do pictures want' by suggestion that all they want is to be kissed! "But What is a kiss he asked? A kiss, he noted, "is a gesture towards something, a gesture of incorporation, to take them in, to consume them, or to be taken in by them. So think of images in a field of desire and affect, but also remember that some images don't want to be kissed, they don't ask for anything – think of goblins, out of sight on church towers"

²⁵ Weber (2008) *Op. Cit.*

²⁶ Elkins (2011) *Op. Cit.*

²⁷ Muller, V. J. (2011). Kratsman: Seeing, Not Looking. In N. Schafhausen, *All About Us*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, p.4

²⁸ The project took place in 2012 – the full archive is available here:
http://activestills.org/node.php?node=exhibition_297

²⁹ 'unrecognised in this instance is the lack of political recognition for the villagers and the village under the Israeli administrative control of Area C of the West Bank. For More information see Neve Gordon *Israel's Occupation* 2008.

³⁰ See John Simons Blog, *Picturing Peace: Israeli Images of Peace* –
<http://israelipeaceimages.com>

³¹ For An explanation of structural violence in Palestine, see David Campbell – *Constructed Visibility: Photographing the Catastrophe in Gaza* (2009)

³² Radley, A. (2010). What People Do With Pictures. *Visual Studies* , 268-279

³³ Harper, D. (2012). *Visual Sociology*. New York: Routledge, p.251