

Gil Z. Hochberg. *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2015. Paperback (\$23.95)/Cloth (\$84.95). ix + 186 pp. ISBN 9780822358879.

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The place of the visual within the destruction, colonization, and subsequent occupation of Palestine has arguably garnered scant attention in scholarly writing; it is a topic more often subsumed within discussions of spatiality, architecture, movement, cultural production, and resistance, never an issue in itself. Taking the relationship between visuality, power, domination, and control as a central focus, Gil Z. Hochberg's *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone* is thus a promising contribution to this literature. This book asks the following: "What does it mean to speak about a conflict in terms of how it appears or how we come to see it?" (5). Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière and her previous book, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of the Separatist Imagination*, Gil Z. Hochberg sets out to explore "who or what can be seen, what or who remains invisible, who can see and whose vision is compromised" to work through the place of the visual within the "conflict." Her contention is that how the "conflict" is made must not only be understood through an attention to the quasi-discursive, but also through a consideration of the "distribution of the visual":

How much one can see, what one can see, and in what way one can see or be seen are all outcomes of specific visual arrangements that are created and sustained through particular configurations of space and various processes of *differentiations* along national, ethnic, racial, religious, gender, and sexual lines. If this is true in general (that is, across societies and times), it is most certainly true for extreme cases of formalized social inequality such as colonialism or military occupation, which sanction and prescribe the right to see and to be seen. (5-6)

At the core of Hochberg's discussion is an emphasis on the unequal distribution of visual rights (cf. Mirzoeff 2006), those specific arrangements that determine who can see and be seen, which have shifted in shape and form since 1948. Following this, two principle arguments intertwine over the course of this book with respect to visual rights: one concerns the invisibility or failure to see the Palestinian, the other those artistic forms of counter-visibility and the redistribution of the visible. Thus, on the one hand, the book is about how the "visible invisibility" of Palestinians – including the destruction, colonization, and occupation of Palestine – has been and continues to be produced and maintained, while, on the other, it is a rich exploration of various artistic forms of counter-visibility, those

“attempts to redistribute the visible by altering, queering, and manipulating hegemonic modes of representation” (6). The overarching aim of Hochberg’s study is a “denaturalization of vision” (5) or what she calls a “slowing down” so as to open “new modes of seeing” such that the unequal distribution of visual rights is replaced with new visual configurations (34). My question, as an anthropologist, is whether this particular focus on the visual offers us something we did not already know. In other words, does Hochberg’s study of the visual occupation of Palestine tell us what we already know differently or does it tell us something different about the destruction, colonization, and occupation of Palestine?

The book is organized around three principles that Hochberg claims configure the visible in Palestine/Israel, and according to which the six chapters of the book are equally divided over three sections. The first of these principles, concealment, is the dominant organizing principle of the visual field of Israeli society, a “vast mechanism of erasure, denial, and obstructions of sight since 1948 and increasingly so throughout the present” (7). Surveillance, the second principle, is the principle that commands the visual field within the Occupied Territories, in particular the mechanisms of military gaze of the Israeli occupation. The third, witnessing, denotes the counter-visual practices that seek to undermine the visual dominance of Israeli settler colonialism. The six chapters are then divided equally between these three principles, with an introduction and a short closing statement.

Chapters 1 and 2 develop the principle of concealment in two directions. Chapter 1 discusses Israeli literary works and visual art and the ways in which each carries with the Nakba. Employing the notion of “visible invisibility” – “an invisibility that calls attention to itself as such” (41) – Hochberg explores Palestinian ruins and their ghostly haunting (presence) within the S. Yizhar’s novella *Khirbet Khizeh* (2008 [1949]), A. B. Yehoshua’s novella *Mul Ha-ye’arot* (1963), Yeshayahu Koren’s novel *Levaya batsohora'im* (1975) and series of paintings of Larry Abramson entitled *Tsōob'ä* (1993-1994), while at the same time noting the failure or “structured blindness” (55) of the Israeli cultural and political imagination to see the Palestinian Nakba (invisibility). Chapter 2 turns to the work of Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman and the image of an enigmatic protagonist (the filmmaker himself) that does not speak and whose visibility is that of an “invisible spectator” (65). Hochberg notes that Suleiman’s films aptly depict the tension between the visibility and invisibility of Palestinians in Israel by presenting an image “free from the tyranny of signification without, however, losing its power (as image) to expand the borders of the seeable and challenge hegemonic distributions of visibility” (75).

Chapters 3 and 4 take up the principle of surveillance through the works of Palestinian artists Sharif Waked, Rula Halawani, and Khaled Jarrar. Through a close reading of Sharif Waked’s *Chic Point*, a video installation of a fashion

runway show for checkpoints, Chapter 3 develops the idea of a “queer aesthetics” (86). With the checkpoint as the quintessential node of Israeli surveillance, *Chic Point*, Hochberg argues, is not affirming that the checkpoint is a “feminizing moment” or a “masculinity in crisis” of the Palestinian man, but, “more akin to a strip show” (88), rather “highlights the queerness of the exchange between the Israeli soldiers and the Palestinian men” (87). The gaze of the checkpoint is further explored in Chapter 4 where the works of Rula Halawani and Khaled Jarrar are the focus. It is also the first chapter to explicitly take up the question of visual rights. Visual rights, Hochberg notes in reference to Nicholas Mirzoeff (2006), are about the “the right to look” and “the right to be seen,” both of which are denied to the Palestinian. Both the photographic work of Rula Halawani, by drawing our attention away from the gaze and to the intimate exchanges or “contact zones” (99) between Palestinian and Israeli bodies, and the photography of Khaled Jarrar, which turns the checkpoint into a series of mirrors of Palestinians and Israeli soldiers looking at themselves looking at each other, counter and undermine this gaze and its determination of the boundaries between seeing and not being allowed to see, between who sees and who can see.

The final section and last chapters of the Hochberg’s book turn to the principle of witnessing. In Chapters 5 and 6, we are provided with an exploration of a series of video and films that consider “the limitations of the global project of rendering Palestinian suffering visible” (115). Chapter 5 focuses specifically on two essay films, *Nervus Rerum* by the Otolith Group and *We Began by Measuring Distance* by Basma Al Sharif. Both of these films are refusals to offer visible evidence of suffering, which, Hochberg argues, presupposes “that the world spends too much time seeing, and that this seeing secures no political intervention” (119). These films are not about hiding or keeping invisible the unabating injustices within which Palestinians live. Rather, they are works that aim to challenge dominant modes by which these injustices are represented, specifically those images of witnessing that have become all too predictable and leave the spectator unaffected and unmoved. These works are, like those artworks discussed in the previous chapters, invitations to read images “otherwise” (130).

Chapter 6 looks at two recent Israeli films that explore the trauma of Israeli soldiers and the possibility of ethical spectatorship they might engender. More specifically, Hochberg looks at *Lebanon* and *Waltz with Bashir* and asks whether the critics of these films (specifically Žižek), who ethically condemn them for humanizing the soldier and failing to show Palestinian suffering, might not have missed a pregnant ethical opening within. As Hochberg states, “I would argue that the question that appears to stand at the center of the critical reception of these films – namely “who is the (real) victim of the war?” – may not be the most productive question for determining these film’s critical potentiality” (145). If indeed

both films are blind to the suffering of Palestinians, there is nonetheless in this failure a demand for the spectator to bear witness, “to reflect on the dangerous outcomes of drifting into gun-sight outlook, and to question our own gaze: seduced, tantalized, distressed, or blinded by the spectacle of violence” (162). Here, Hochberg contends, we might begin to make out the figure of the ethical spectator, “an invitation to look closely at one’s failure to see” (162). Although Hochberg is explicitly directing her argument of an ethical spectator at an Israeli audience, I would offer that this need not be the case, that such an invitation to refuse “to take one’s place in a predetermined visual field” (164) is a challenge to everyone and anyone confronting Palestine/Israel today.

Visual Occupations is an important and provocative book. Hochberg’s discussion of the place of the visual in this “conflict” that is no longer consigned to a secondary or background subject within the scholarship on Palestine/Israel is a most welcome addition. Furthermore, and more provocatively, through revisiting a series of artworks that invite their own politics with new possibilities for contesting and reimagining the destruction, colonization, and occupation of Palestine, Hochberg asks the reader to set aside their assumption of art being a tool of a given political program (art as ancillary to politics). To be sure, it permits Hochberg to offer a new and different way of seeing the Palestinian/Israeli “conflict” that is no longer bound by reading the visual through the discursive (i.e., the rational and structural modes of organization of Israeli settler colonialism and Palestinian resistance). Instead, we are offered a view of the visual culture of Palestine/Israel that shows us not only how the destruction, colonization, and occupation of Palestine is taking place within the sensible or aesthetic fabric of everyday life, but the potential of art to reconfigure this fabric.

References

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