

Review of ARIELLA AZOULAY, *THE CIVIC CONTRACT OF PHOTOGRAPHY*, (NEW YORK: ZONE, 2009).

In an evocative passage in *Memory for Forgetfulness (August, Beirut, 1982)*, Mahmoud Darwish writes that the image which Palestinians have created for themselves is a problematic foothold of vision.¹ Setting the political reality against its own materiality, such image invokes, in his view, a specific kind of representation that becomes reality itself by way of its becoming image –what Jean Baudrillard termed the Hyperreal.² Since the 1980s, Elias Sanbar has posed the problem of *imaging* Palestine and Palestinians as predicated upon an absence: expelled and obliterated from their land and without a state, Palestinians are absent from their own image.³ More recently, within a global politics of visibility, Palestinians represent themselves as demanding recognition and restitution, at times underscoring the universality of their struggle and suffering. Moreover, within the context of the humanitarization of the conflict, Palestinians are represented as victims bearing witness to their own catastrophe, denouncing the violation of their rights.

Through this lens, “traumatic realist” images are always falling short of accounting for catastrophe: ⁴ at best, they may arouse empathy, pity or compassion, and at worst, they

¹ Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness, August, Beirut, 1982*, translated by Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 45-46.

² See: Jean Baudrillard, “No Reprieve for Sarajevo,” translated by Patrice Riemens, *Libération*, January 8, 1994. Available at URL: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-no-reprieve-for-sarajevo.html>. Date consulted: October 20, 2009.

³ Elias Sanbar, *Les Palestiniens, Photographie d'une terre et de son peuple de 1839 à nos jours* (Paris: Hazan, 2004).

⁴ Hamid Dabashi uses the term “traumatic realism,” to discuss recent cinematic images of the occupation. The term also has been used to discuss works of art, literature and cinema that address the Holocaust and other catastrophes. See his introduction in *Dreams of a Nation, On Palestinian Cinema*, Hamid Dabashi, ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2006) and *Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*, David Bathrick, Brad Prager, and Michael D. Richardson, eds. (Rochester and New

become illustrations of a situation towards which spectators have become manifestly tired or apathetic. Is it possible to think of these various ways of *imaging* Palestine, Palestinians and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict differently, or should we consider them as specific to historical and discursive junctures?

In a major contribution both to the field of political theory and the theory of photography, Ariella Azoulay proposes radically new and vital arguments that help us rethink the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the imaging of Palestine. By summoning us as spectators of “The Citizenry of Photography,” she urges us to take responsibility for what is visible. Stressing a shift away from ethics in discourses about war and conflict, and in an effort to bring back politics as a space of speech and action, Azoulay’s placing of photography as potentially such a space is radical and necessary. When the idea that we are all jaded viewers of disaster pornography and catastrophe predominates,⁵ *The Civil Contract of Photography*’s essential contribution is precisely the stress it places on the visual praxis of *watching* images that bear traces of the administered perpetuation of disaster in occupied and besieged Palestine.⁶ In her book, Azoulay focuses on images that were taken by Israeli photographers (artists and journalists) of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Gaza since the beginning of the Second Intifada in order to examine what kind of encounters take place in such photographic acts. Without dismissing the possibility of the act of photography as an appropriation of another’s image—and thus an act of violence—her case studies feature photographs in which the

York: Camden House, 2008).

⁵ The key references here being Thomas Keenan, “Mobilizing Shame,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, nos. 2-3 (Spring/Summer 2004), 435-449 and Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2004).

⁶ Azoulay puts this praxis to work in two exhibitions that she curated: “Everything Could be Seen,” at Um El Fahem Gallery at Um El Fahem in 2004 and “Act of State: 1967-2007 [An Historical Exhibition]” at the Minshar Gallery in Tel Aviv in 2007.

subject stakes a claim by addressing the camera lens directly.⁷ She then explores how these conditions of visibility open up possibilities of political action.

In her first chapter, Azoulay sets out to establish her own working definitions of citizenship and non-citizenship by examining different formulations: From the French Revolution to the 1948 Declaration of the Rights of Man and from Hannah Arendt and François Lyotard to Giorgio Agamben's recent articulation of the figure of the refugee. The second chapter is devoted to a study of the practices of photography since the medium's inception in 1839. Encompassing more than a technical skill, photography in Azoulay's argument serves as a form a civil knowledge, and thus a potential space for political relations. The chapter that follows posits the act of photography as an agreement between the viewer, photographer, and photographed. The fourth chapter addresses the problem that even if we consider the act of photography as an agreement between those involved, the current field of vision of catastrophe (as "images of horror") hinders photographs from making direct "emergency claims" to the viewer. Chapter five is devoted to injury perpetrated to women vis-à-vis the visualization of rape, concluding that subjects vulnerable to rape bear the status of "impaired citizens." This is a status shared by Palestinians as they are always placed on the verge of catastrophe by the actual state that governs them and this is the argument put forth in chapter six. Chapters seven and eight are devoted to the viewership of catastrophe and to a description of Palestine as a Penal Colony respectively. The last chapter addresses the figure of the woman

⁷ Visual artists Sylvie Blocher and Gillian Wearing have explored this aspect of photography. For example, Blocher's series that began in 1992, *Living Pictures*, show images of people wearing T-shirts bearing a message that they themselves wrote, and Gillian Wearing's *Signs that Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say*, (1992-93) feature people carrying signs with their own statements as well, addressing the viewer directly.

collaborator and the sanitation of sexual violence inherent to Israeli torture of Palestinians.

Shifting the current paradigm of analysis of the occupation from the violation of Palestinians' rights, Azoulay demonstrates how Israel governs all Palestinians through a set of mechanisms that deny them citizenship by treating them as exceptions to the rule, maintaining them on the verge of catastrophe.⁸ Azoulay also highlights the discrepancy between considering Palestinians as citizens of a hypothetical Palestinian state and as citizens of the actual state of Israel that governs them. She then argues that to consider Palestinians as refugees is to deny their existence as political agents – unless they have a state of their own. Azoulay thus asks: how can citizenship be rehabilitated to a collective of non-citizens who are *governed as exception to the rule*, in other words, as “impaired citizens”? The notion of citizenship in the Declaration of the 1948 Rights of Man considers citizenship as an inalienable, universal right bestowed by the nation-state. Azoulay insists that such a universal notion of citizenship renders the citizen the only figure capable of struggling against the abuses of power. By establishing the categories of citizenship and non-citizenship, she suggests doing away with the ghost of nationalism and instead, substituting it with a non-universalizing and territorializing notion of citizenship, thereby awarding political status to non-citizens.⁹ Her politization of non-

⁸ A one state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been proposed in academic conferences in 2007 and 2009, and “mulled over” by the Palestinian National Authority. See: <http://onestateforpalestineisrael.com/statements/BostonDeclarationEnglishText.pdf>. and <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2009/09/200997151022233148.html>. Date consulted: August 22 2009.

⁹ For Azoulay, a citizen is defined as an individual who owes allegiance to and is entitled to the protection from a sovereign state. Moreover, what distinguishes a citizen from a non-citizen is political participation and the entitlement of protection. The non-citizen is an individual with no permanent status where he or she resides, and is the bearer of a limited number of rights and obligations.

citizenship is thus necessarily based on a radical separation between state and nation and on the principle that *everyone everywhere* is entitled to citizenship in the territory in which he or she lives. Azoulay's categorization of Palestinians as bearers of *impaired citizenship*, therefore, diverges from a conception of the conflict based on the violation of rights and ethnic cleansing, which poses dispossession and obliteration as moral and ethical problems and Palestinians as dispossessed refugees demanding restitution and recognition. In her account, both the humanitarianization of the conflict and the terms that are currently used to describe the practices of sovereignty over Palestine and Palestinians restrict and circumscribe the field of vision of the conflict.

In her study, Azoulay describes the way in which power is programmatically deployed in the territory in which Palestinians live by creating a state of suspension premised on violence and the threat of violence. Through preventive and punitive aggressions like targeted assassinations, destruction of infrastructure and homes, violent arrests, restrictions on travel, bombings from the air, raids, expropriations and the prohibitions of demonstrations, the existence of Palestinians remains at the threshold of catastrophe, a chronic and prolonged situation known to the locals in the West Bank and in Gaza as "the tyranny of incertitude." This kind of violence, as Azoulay puts it, "prevents, delays, complicates, disrupts priorities, upsets plans, hurts the sick, harpers students, destroys livelihoods, intensifies hunger, creates malnutrition harms family relations, inhibits growth, fosters diseases and drives people out of their minds."¹⁰

Azoulay further argues that the practices of detainment, imprisonment, torture, and the restriction of movement maintain the Occupied Territories and Gaza as a Kafkaesque

¹⁰ Azoulay, 290.

Penal Colony, characterized by the haphazardous inscription of an infringement into the colonized bodies and psyches.

Azoulay also explores how beyond the territory in which they live, the social tissue and the psyche of Palestinians are imprinted with the Israeli ruling apparatus, rendering Palestinians vulnerable through an incriminating machine that produces collaborators by way of coercion and torture. Reading testimonies gathered by B'Tselem,¹¹ alongside examining their use of photographs (that exist or not) of Palestinian men and women naked or having extra-marital sex, Azoulay describes how the *Shabak*¹² instrumentalize photography in order to extort Palestinians into collaboration. Using these photographs as a means of torture, Israeli Authorities, according to Azoulay, reduce images to their denotative existence. The implication is a form of concentrated violence to which women are the most vulnerable.

For Azoulay, the kind of violence and aggression exerted on Palestinians produces non-events whose visibility depends on the viewer's capacity for drawing *énoncés* from them by establishing a referent that exceeds the images' status as documentation. Positing photographs as an exchange of gazes, Azoulay, claims that the *act* of photography, photographer and photographed assume a hypothetical spectator who can potentially interact with them in the space of photography.¹³ Proposing an *ethical viewership* that transcends the passive and desensitized spectator, Azoulay politicizes photography not by considering it as documentation of an event, but as a *politicized*

¹¹ The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.

¹² The Israeli Agency of Security, also known as Shin Bet.

¹³ In this respect, Azoulay recalls Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Mieville's 1974 film about the Palestinian Revolution, *Ici et ailleurs*. Reflecting upon their images of Palestinian training and refugee camps alongside those circulating in the media, the filmmakers state in the voiceover: "An image is a gaze upon another gaze, presented to a third gaze – already represented by the camera's lens."

space that can actualize speech and action. In her formulation, spectatorship is a civil duty and the subjects of the photographs that she examines are non-citizens presenting their injuries. Therefore, those involved in the photographic act are enabled to address the terms by which they are being governed. Moreover, considering photography as a testimony of the photograph's *eventuation*—by the encounter between photographer, photographed and camera—she posits photography as a *mutual* obligation, as a means to organize political relations extrinsic to the sovereign power. In this way, citizenship is both a tool for struggle and as a duty – not to the nation, but between individuals. To participate in the act of photography, especially to produce photographs on the verge of catastrophe, is to refuse to accept the status of Palestinians as non-citizens and instead, to demand their participation and recognition. As opposed to bearing witness, being photographed on the verge of catastrophe is to make a civil address, insofar as it is the presentation of a grievance claiming the spectator's civil gaze. To practice citizenship as a duty means to speak on behalf of the photograph by *watching* it, re-opening it to negotiate what it shows, and reconstructing the event by introducing the dimensions of space and time. Watching, for Azoulay, is not recognizing: also different than visualizing or looking, watching demands reconstructing and examining the circumstances of the photograph's dissemination.

Azoulay's approach to photography highlights what the invention of photography offers to the gaze *as an encounter* and thus potentially a political space, as opposed to a "has been."¹⁴ In this way, her argument brings to mind those of photo historians and

¹⁴ For an extended analysis of the theoretical aspects of Azoulay's conception of photography and her critique of Barthes *punctum* see Gideon Ofrat's review "Citizens of 'The Photography Nation' Unite," *Haaretz* October 11th, 2007. Available at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=912054> . Date Consulted: 15 August 2009.

theorists John Tagg and Allan Sekula who suggest returning photography to its public social and political concerns. Azoulay thereby challenges the kinds of (private) reception-centered, aesthetic and semiotic approaches to photography that have predominated since Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980). A central shift in how photography has been understood as a political tool that Azoulay makes, is to consider the photograph itself (as opposed to the photographer or the viewer) as the mediator for political relations. In this way, she both furthers Walter Benjamin's politization of photography as "a crime scene," and problematizes Susan Sontag's notion of *ethical* responsibility regarding the pain of others.¹⁵ In *The Social Contract of Photography*, Azoulay understands photographs of Palestinians on the verge of catastrophe as *énoncés* of horror, as textual and visual expressions describing catastrophe as it occurs. However, the current conditions of visibility of catastrophic events impend catastrophe to be witnessed, addressing a blinded spectator. Thus, civic spectatorship has the duty to actualize the passage of the photograph from *énoncé* of horror to an *emergency claim*. Insofar as the traces of the injury are imprinted on the surface of the photographic image, they are "awaiting the spectator to assist them."¹⁶ But because photographs are not pure objects of vision and cannot speak for themselves, they are handicapped and thus require additional verbal and textual support. In other words, the visibility of horror remains unseen unless the spectator actively assumes the role of reconstruction of the photographs, understood as moving images that elude a stable gaze. Azoulay's focus on the viewing conditions that are specific to Israelis over Palestinians highlights the problem that further harm occurs

¹⁵ Azoulay undertook this task in her previous book, which focuses on the display of death in visual culture and the act of "looking at death" as an act of citizenship taking place in the gap between the sayable and the visible. See her *Death's Showcase: The Power of the Image in Contemporary Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Azoulay, 143.

when the conditions of discourse distort the meanings that are contained in the photograph. Even though a referent can be established, Israeli-Jews look at Palestinians as the enemy, thus they may miss the position of being addressed and simply regard the statement of horror as a confirmation of what they already know. For Azoulay, *everything can be seen*, but what horror shows can neither be seen in the current tribunals nor translated into emergency claims, thereby evading the real dimension of the emergency. The pressing task she urges the spectator to undertake is not to render horror visible, but to mind the gap between the two. To do this implies to actualize the demands addressed to the spectator-citizen, whose protection and well-being are legitimating the perpetuation of injury of the non-citizens.

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