

Gaza and the Grotesque
Affective Solidarities in the Age of Mediated Violence

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis articulates a novel analytical framework called *grotesque visuality* to interrogate the spread of violent imagery in digital networks. Vis-a-vis the ongoing genocide in the Gaza Strip (2023—), I look into modern networked structures of communication to explore how the grotesque body functions within the co-constitutive relationship between state control and political protest. Specifically, I focus on its *embodied*, or haptic, sensibilities and argue that the visual violations of the body can elicit political solidarity through a collective visceral response.

By analyzing three videos that have circulated on social media platforms—each a vivid depiction of violence from the genocide—I provide some insight into how grotesque media objects serve as a sites of contestation for competing goals and ideologies. However, this thesis focuses on their regenerative capabilities, how they can bridge disparate populations together through the negotiation of attention and representation.

Analyzed for their digital circulation, audience engagement and role in the broader political landscape, my exploration of the case studies in this thesis unravels the layers of the grotesque visual framework that make up this modality of *representing* and *seeing* embodied violence while painting a multidirectional image of the power relations that undergird its visibility. Through an interdisciplinary approach that draws from media studies, discourse analysis, and grassroots activism, my thesis further contextualizes our relationship to political violence and the affective solidarities they may elicit.

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*For Sha'aban al-Dalou, Aaron Bushnell, and all the martyrs who have killed by the israeli war machine. **May Palestine be free within our lifetimes.***

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Our relationship to the mediated image is all-pervasive. The *moving* image, an extension of its still counterpart, is interwoven into the rhythms of daily communication and carries with it a veneer of realism that often renders it unquestioned - perceived as accurate, neutral, or unbiased. However, the video clip is not a passive document but an instrument, appropriated by individuals and institutions alike for differing purposes. It is vulnerable to political exploitation, a relationship in which acts of violence have been widely represented and further incited through the media object's circulative potential. The proliferation of mediated images as a dominant form of representation in the present moment is not incidental; rather, it is structured by the imperatives of racial capitalism.¹ State actors—the government, corporations, media institutions—deploy objects such as the video as a means of power, using its aesthetic and technological affordances to amplify (neo)colonial logics that justify physical and economic violence. But at its core, every pixel is an act of violence. It is inseparable from the precarities of its ontology, subsumed in the economic exploitation of natural resources and labor and assembled through extractive processes that define its material and digital existence.

Though media technologies have long been imbricated in the production and maintenance of violent power structures, rapid advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) over the last twenty years have led to unprecedented methods of

¹ The term “racial capitalism” was first coined by Cedric J. Robinson (1983) to denote how capitalism emerged *through* pre-existing race structures, rather than the inverse. It structures the economic and political domination that maintains colonial hierarchies through its modern imperial formations. Gilmore (2007) calls this a system of “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (pp. 28).

consolidating power. As I explore in further detail later in this chapter, these power structures are contingent on the politics of visibility, or of what is seen and what is hidden. In the former, within the sustenance of imperial hierarchies, the theatrics of prowess manifest in the visual field through representations of dominated, or *disciplined*,² bodies. One of the most striking consequences of this is the normalization of violent imagery, particularly those emerging from situations of war. In contrast to the widespread outrage in response to leaked images of American military torture at the Abu Ghraib Detention Centre in 2004,³ today's wars unfold in real time across social media feeds and have led to a desensitization towards violent acts. This then inspires more violence on the individual and communal level, which then feeds into a continuous, uroboric cycle of horror. Yet, in spite of this, these same technological developments have also enabled new forms of political resistance. The digital sphere is not merely a site of observation but an active battlefield, where individuals and movements can organize, expose state subjugation, and contest dominant narratives. While violent imagery has long played a role in shaping politics, its integration into the rhythms of everyday life—facilitated by digital technology—marks a distinct shift in both its affective impact and political stakes. The artist-researcher Oraib Toukan asks an integral question about its ubiquity in the cybersphere, which I find to be an fitting point of departure for my research:

How do the mechanics of the gaze change when users scroll, hold, tap solitary orphan images of someone being dragged on the ground somewhere, lodged between an

² Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) tracks how the modern maintenance of power is contingent on a society's internalization of mechanisms of control, making them "disciplined" subjects. Visual depictions of violence can be understood as one such mechanism in the pacification and governance of a body politic.

³ This was first reported by journalist Seymour M. Hersh in *The New Yorker*, bringing to light the systemic abuse Iraqi political prisoners faced by members of the U.S. military.

installation shot of a friend's exhibition somewhere else and a portrait of a friend of a friend's imprisonment in another somewhere? (Toukan 2019)

This report explores the spread of *grotesque visuality*, a term I propose based on a synthesis of seminal and contemporary visuocultural frameworks as a new framework for the analysis and representation of mediated violence - specifically in the current media warfare surrounding the heightened bombardment of the Gaza Strip and genocide by Israeli occupation forces from October 7, 2023 to date. Through differing appropriations, this study investigates how such imagery functions within the co-constitutive relationship between hegemonic control and mass political mobilization in online political discourse. By focusing specifically on the role of social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, crucial sites where visual and discursive practices intersect with political power dynamics, I hope to unravel the power of the grotesque in both centralized power streams and decentralized, grassroots movements.

Platforms and their political implications

The advent of the Internet in the 21st century and the development of social networking sites and mobile broadband accessibility in the 2000s created the conditions for enhanced connectivity between disparate populations in the world. The first social media sites were created between 2002 and 2004, which allowed individuals to connect with others through virtual means. The founding of Twitter (now called X) in 2006 birthed a new communication structure called the timeline. With a 140-character limit, users could write posts and share them with peers through updates on their home pages. It was a seamless way of staying connected with people in one's personal networks, but also a newfound way to meet others from all over the world. Facebook adopted the same model in the same year, and three years later it added a 'Like'

button, which measured and publicized the popularity of a post. This was similarly present in Twitter's 'Favorite' button (which functioned more as a digital bookmark) and then incorporated into the photo-sharing platform Instagram created in 2010. Facebook's most radical invention was the incorporation of an algorithmic structure, which forwent its chronological ordering of posts for those measured by user engagement. Other social media platforms followed suit and have since progressed into data-driven, for-profit metrics of vogue. Further technological developments have provided producers of information with significantly more data on their audience practices and has led to more robust targeting strategies (Haidt & Rose-Stockwell). The 2010s, however, is when these systems metastasize into a larger compound of privately owned online services which we now call *platforms*. Tiziana Terranova, in her book *After the Internet*, makes the bold claim that the Internet as we understand it has died. Subsumed into the "Corporate Platform Complex" (CPC), led by the aforementioned platform giants, she writes:

"The shift from the internet to the CPC can be seen at work in the technological, economic and cultural transformations of digital networking that significantly depart from the internet...as a set of inoperable network protocols governed by a series of public and/or voluntary non-profit organizations, to gated digital communities with strong ownership of data, software and infrastructure. [...] These companies have pioneered the use of open-source software heavily invested in cloud computing infrastructure which they use for data mining and processing, with a huge environmental fallout. Today, they rule over a multitude of micro-businesses and secondary markets which depend on them for their livelihood. Sometimes they cooperate with the military and governments to develop and deploy technologies that are used to suppress dissent and target subjugated groups. More often, they try to accommodate their intrinsic drive for ever-rising profits with the increasing calls for regulation—as their expansion threatens to overtake key governmental functions." (pp. 8; 22-23)

This entanglement might be easily understood by active users of these social media platforms, where advertisements are omnipresent and data mining/surveillance practices are openly embraced. We can see how such platforms have developed in tandem with the

acceleration of a transnational, capitalist-imperialist hegemony, though Terranova is quick to acknowledge the parallel presence of protest, which have similarly benefited from the communicative potential of this networked system. For example, while a political actor is able to aggressively target their base through a platform's economic and logistical structures, people themselves can respond and embed themselves more directly in counter-struggle without a necessary physical presence. The ability to organize and communicate within a virtual space is an integral aspect of modern political membership, wherein changes in state policy can be announced on X by an intern and official military accounts post genocidal memes without impunity. Through online engagement, individuals can become part of a larger political movement within a landscape where competing struggles with different goals unfold simultaneously - blurring the line between the digital and the real. These online interactions both influence and are influenced by real-world intersubjective relations, a dynamic that becomes even more complex in the face of increased disinformation and misleading political discourse. Nevertheless, the virtual realm is able to enhance the connectability of individuals across borders for the spread and exchange of information.⁴

In an attempt to theorize the changes in the structure of the Internet in the early 2000s—mainly the development of what he calls “web 2.0/3.0” platforms—Castells (2009) argues that communication is the source of power in our contemporary “network society”. This seminal work emphasizes the inseparability between politics and the virtual realm in its focus on the democratization of sociopolitical relations offered by mass digital communication. He writes:

⁴ Here, “borders” refers not only to physical frontiers, but as methods of racial-capitalist control, as Mezzadra and Nielson propose in *Border as Method* (2013).

“Mass self-communication, which multiplies and diversifies the entry points in the communication process...gives rise to unprecedented autonomy for communicative subjects to communicate at large. Yet, this potential autonomy is shaped, controlled, and curtailed by the growing concentration and interlocking of corporate media and network operators around the world. [...] However, this is not tantamount to one-sided, vertical control of communicative practices [...] The global culture of universal commodification is culturally diversified and ultimately contested by other cultural expressions.” (136).

At the core of his theory is the sustained ability of individuals to engage in cultural discourse, creating spaces autonomous from market interests through loose gatekeeping or access control policies. These spaces enable the exercise of communicative power, which operates through four key mechanisms that influence public opinion: framing, agenda-setting, priming, and indexing - all ultimately appealing to emotional affect (Fuchs).

The affective power of images

Online political discourse inherently relies on images—both still and moving—to convey information and provide visual evidence. In fact, the persuasive force of media representations lies exactly within their image-making processes, which, if we break it down, similarly follows a four-step sequence: this includes “securing access for powerful actors in the media, producing images that serve their interests, delivering these messages across diverse formats and technologies while measuring their impact, and financing these activities” (Fuchs 103). This is not exclusive to the digital realm, as visuals are generally central to contemporary political cultures (advertisements, insignias, revolutionary symbols, artwork); however, the visuo-attentive nature of these platforms amplifies the image’s role further.

There are many aspects to consider when we look at this present media landscape, including the historical and quantitative changes in technologies—the proliferation of mobile

cameras, increased accessibility of image manipulation tools, more channels for media consumption—as well as the cognitive potential for visual representations to quickly and easily support decision-making and well as resonate with the spectator emotionally. This is exactly how the platform becomes a ripe environment for political communication to mushroom, even more so as it allows for direct contact by significant political actors. As such, persuasion and entertainment cannot be viewed discretely when we consider the mediated image. Their emotional resonance and ability to blur the lines between truth and reality enhance their circulation through networks, often as seemingly unbiased representations of truth. While a textual message—such as a tweet, Facebook post, or broadcasted WhatsApp message—is inherently linked to its author or distributor, an image can be presented and subsequently understood as a piece of documentation, saved and then spread with ease.

Furthermore, developments in the platforms' structure greatly enabled communication through audiovisual means. We see this in Instagram's addition of 15-second videos in 2013, followed by *stories*, *reels* and even long-form content; as of now, the platform aggressively promotes the use of moving images over the still through algorithmic and structural benefits. Since then, similar video-sharing formats have been adopted by other social media platforms and standalone video-sharing apps like Vine (now defunct) and TikTok have each gained cultural momentum and widespread popularity. As a result of these changes, one could posit that the moving image has been further democratized, as they permit individuals to document their individual 'realities'. In the context of mediating violence, the *moving* image offers a stronger sense of fidelity than the still image as it structurally unfolds over time, capturing changes and context rather than freezing a single moment. This format allows for causal logic and simulates

the presence of what is depicted, creating a multi-sensory experience often used to assert truth through evidence. However, this is misleading, as mediated images direct us on what to feel and for whom. Controlling these frames ultimately means controlling how events are understood and remembered. Unpacking dominant representations of war violence, Judith Butler writes:

"The frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (rather than simply as threats) are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power. They do not merely represent a state of affairs but contribute to the very production and maintenance of state power and the differential distribution of precarity and grievability." (Butler 2009, p. 63)

When presented with an image that appears to be taken by the user and claims to document reality, we are inclined to accept it as true. We are led to believe that uncut videos, in particular, are harder to falsify than still images, which is why we often privilege this mode of communication. The handheld camera and rough aesthetics of online video do not make it more real; they signal authenticity in ways that viewers expect. As digital media erases the distinction between professional and amateur documentary, the nature of realism itself becomes more unstable - as John Corner suggests in his exploration of documentary filmmaking in *The Art of Record* (1996). This is precisely why the development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) models—designed to meticulously distort reality through digitally constructed images—are proving to be a major issue in contemporary global politics. Whether objective fact or artificially constructed, ultimately, the semiotics of the image “[bear] no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum”, as Baudrillard might suggest in *Simulacra and Simulation* (6). Here he proclaims that digital medias have blurred the distinction between real/simulation, leading to representations that *feel* more real than what might have actually happened itself. Real-world political events are not understood objectively but *presented* to us through the channels in which

we consume our information. We no longer consume reality, we consume its simulation - the carefully staged images of war, suffering, and politics. The overall goal within these parameters is that emotional resonance, or *pathos*, and to do this in the midst of such a saturated visual landscape with competing frames, goals, and aesthetics, has necessitated the maximization of spectacle.

The attention economy

The economist and psychologist Herbert A. Simon first suggested in 1971 that attention is a scarce resource. This laid the foundations for significant works that interrogate developments in ICTs since the 1980s, including the cardinal coinage of the “attention economy” - an economic structure predicated on the exchange of attention (Goldhaber 1997; Davenport and Beck 2001). As more visual information becomes readily available and human attention spans decrease in response, attention as a whole takes on a greater economic value. However, the developments in communication platforms and increased connectivity between disparate populations necessitates a revisitation of the attention-economic model to understand how it works on a transnational, networked society. In her revision, Tiziana Terranova argues:

“[A]ttention does not simply indicate the effort by which the individual brain works, nor can it be reduced to a scarce, and hence tradeable commodity, or to that which exposes the individual to a dramatic cognitive impoverishment. On the contrary, attention is the *process* by which value is produced as inseparable from the technological production of subjectivity such as formed within and by the Common.” (84, emphasis mine).

A central idea in this chapter is the concept of *technosociality*, or the state of being constantly connected to digital media networks. In other words, the attention economy is not only about attention as a scarce resource, but it also affects how ideas, emotions, and perceptions circulate within networks. As such, this is an economic framework driven by automated and technosocial

production and cooperation. “The neuroplastic brain,” Terranova suggests, “not only reconfigures its cognitive architecture in response to new media exposure, but, when seen together with the enactive and involuntary impressions produced by paying attention as an act of potential imitation, turns the self-possessive and rational economic subject into a potentially mimetic node within a logical network,” (76). This highlights that our brains are constantly reshaped by the media we consume, and that our attention does more than just absorb information but influences how we act within the larger social and digital ecosystem. In this way, we become interconnected parts of a network, no longer merely self-contained rational beings, but mimetic nodes shaped by and contributing to the flow of ideas and behaviors. This is relevant here as we begin to as we start to map out the techno-connective bonds that govern communication within the realm of digital politics, where imitation and simulation affects what exactly is awarded attention. Moreover, it places political subjects within a *cybernetic*⁵ framework in which one’s actions affects another, whose actions affect someone else, and so on - ultimately reinforcing shared cultural norms that structure social life.

First compositely argued by French philosopher and social scientist René Girard, mimetic theory states that desire is inherently imitative, that people want what others do. A solid hegemony necessitates its political subjects desiring what those in power want and to identify with its imperatives; and the conflict that might arise between this subject and model must be solved by a *scapegoating* mechanism (Girard). He argues here that a society must resolve its internal conflicts through uniting against an individual who is systematically perceived as guilty and is unable to retaliate, which we can apply to visual representations of subjugated populations

⁵ “Cybernetic” refers to the process of communication and regulation within humans and the machine. I revisit this in further detail in Chapter 4.

such as imperial and racialized subjects. If the racialized Other is culturally understood as dangerous in relation to the Western society, it is then easy to pin issues on this specific individual/group of people with little to no effect. This can help us understand how modern capitalist societies shift economic (and social) instability onto migrant populations, for example, masking the power relations that govern the state and its body politic. Once the ‘problem’ has been violently eradicated, a society accepts this as justice, thus imbricating themselves within a loop of affect and violence. How this is empirically articulated varies in its appeal to “automatic attention”, or subconscious and uncontrolled attentive goals (Vettehen & Schaap 3). These include the presentation of information aligned with the current goals or needs of a person (e.g. algorithmic structures that recommend things to users based on their Internet history); information that appeals to “appetitive motivations”—including survival (e.g. food, sex) or defense (e.g. violence, danger, death); and lastly, the presentation of information that is new or rare (3-4). As a whole these tactics come together in the use of audiovisual means to shock people.

A technopolitical framework

I have so far outlined how certain developments in digital technologies over the last thirty years have led to a web of interlocking parameters that can be thought of as either beneficial or detrimental to urban political struggle. There is a tension between the positive and negative consequences of the evolution of ICTs on communication, strains of thought that can broadly be thought of as techno-optimist or techno-pessimist when unevenly considered. This is why an expansion of the key frameworks of media communications is necessary in research on digital

medias. Once we have established the inextricability of capital from the virtual realm, can we shift our focus on the Commons to interrogate how an enhanced connectivity between populations across communities, classes, and continents allow for meticulous networks of independent information-sharing and mass political organizing? Whilst many of the works in the field are invested in one ‘alignment’ over the other, a more expansive, decentralized system is required to understanding digital politics. This problem is tackled by Kurban et al. (2017) in their conceptualization of the study of *technopolitics*. “The Internet is already becoming a site of contention between these two communicational paradigms: freedom of information vs. secrecy and surveillance,” they begin. Oscillating between the democratic possibilities posed by developments in ICTs and the practices of elite control, technopolitics conceptually synthesizes both aspects into a framework in which both are not mutually exclusive but instead symbiotic. It paints a picture of a co-constitutive relationship between centralized—top down, establishment—and decentralized, grassroots approaches to communication, in which “information is co-produced and shared by the individual through overlapping networks in more transformative use of ICTs for [...] democratic technopolitics” (Kurban 5). The text argues the notion that “we are entering a *technopolitical* age” which, as they dialogue with some of the previously highlighted texts on communicative power, highlights the need of an intervention into the integration(s) of new technologies into political power dynamics and “their respective contestations and negotiations between centralization and decentralization” (6). In short, technopolitics looks at the Janus-faced structure of the appropriation of technology for differing, yet never solitary, political purposes. This can help us understand better the ways in which individuals use these networks to

undermine centralized paths of communication and find communities engaged in now highly interconnected political struggles.

Now more than ever, non-institutional actors are able to assume a significant position in political discourse. Social media networks streamline and enhance the organizational and communication needs of citizen movements, enabling political organizing with low-stake entry barriers, a few online tools and a modest budget. Numerous web platforms and mobile apps accelerate the necessary processes for gathering ideas, facilitating discussions, making decisions, mobilizing for electoral and radical politics, as well as creating and disseminating related media. This has been integral to various strains of mediated political struggle, such as in the Arab Spring,⁶ the *Occupy* movement,⁷ and the Zapatista struggle,⁸ in which digitally proficient, politically active individuals have incorporated themselves into the political (cyber)sphere. “These coalitions are proving to be persistent and there is a degree of political trust building up. Fact-checking, content creation and data visualization all serve to distribute political facts and information so that citizen participation either transforms a particular process or exposes its shortcomings” (Kurban 11). Notably, by utilizing democratic practices, these new political actors problematize the system from within and bring in their own alternative organizational communication structures. The role of the individual holds way more political relevance in the age of ICT-mediated democratic processes.

⁶ The Arab Spring was a series of political protests and uprisings in Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa in the early 2010s. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

⁷ see Gamson and Sifrey (2013)

⁸ see Cleaver (1998)

It is important to note, however, that although communicative networks have become globalized and an online ‘third space’ is now commonplace, the nation-state is still an integral component of the structure and often serves as an arbiter of information based on its national interests. But even so, individuals find novel ways of ‘hacking the system’, such as through the use of encrypted softwares, virtual private networks (VPNs) and electronic SIM cards, appropriating advancements in technologies for their own political purposes. This highlights the need for an approach that forgoes the dichotomy of freedom/control common in studies of information and communication technologies for one that simultaneously negotiates both centralized and decentralized organizational structures. To summarize their argument, in which they believe that further developments in ICTs will favor decentralized communicative model, Kurban et al. write:

[We] understand technopolitics as a *multi-scale way to approach politics that is deeply rooted in the community but which connects with the global agora*, and directed both to the achievement of finalistic goals as well as of intermediate goals affecting the design of protocols and processes. It encompasses the *concurrence of multiple actors*, contributing with their actions - big or small - and knowledge in a gift-economy characterized by a highly granular design of tasks and degrees of participation, and in the end it can be perceived as a synchronization construct *that operates in and through many layers and spaces, (re)connecting actors and communities through shared procedures and converging goals*.

(15, emphasis mine).

I anchor my exploration ICT-mediated politics within this twofold approach to digital citizenship and political membership, as it is important to explore how they are informed by and further inform existing models of communication.

The Gaza genocide (2023–present)

The recent aggressions on Gaza are representative of a larger question of the intersection of technology, ideology, and warfare, and how they function in political struggles. On October 7, 2023, Ḥarakat al-Muqāwamah al-ʿIslāmiyyah (Hamas) militants broke the state of israel's decades-long siege on the Gaza Strip and conducted a historic resistance operation across the settler-colony's frontier. Since then, the Occupation has accelerated its aggression in the Gaza Strip, claiming the lives of over 54,000 Palestinian lives *so far*.⁹ From high intensity surveillance practices and artificial intelligence drone strike softwares on the ground, to social media warfare and propaganda tactics on the web, the state of israel has employed the use of highly advanced ICTs in the targeting of civilians in Gaza. Journalists in occupied Palestine have been long targeted by the state,¹⁰ a phenomenon that has only gotten worse since the renewed war on Gaza. Control over the media is common in settler-colonial or imperialist political projects, which can be seen with the zealous attempts to mythologize a national narrative through the cleansing of Palestinian populations. Amidst this, Palestinians (and their allies) assert their right to existence and maintain their connection to their homelands by highlighting the daily atrocities committed on their bodies. Through these visual representations the body becomes a site for political contestation, which Gayatri Spivak argues is important to analyze in tandem. She suggests that the *subaltern*, or the marginalized, cannot truly be represented through the frames of dominant discourse as their livelihoods threaten and are threatened by the existing power structures.

⁹ This number is derived from the Gaza Health Ministry through *Al Arabiya*; though the statistics are incomplete.

¹⁰ One of the most notable examples being the murder of *Al-Jazeera* journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by the IOF in the West Bank in 2022. This has continued in the Gaza genocide, in addition to the closure of all *Al-Jazeera* media outlets and news in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Building onto foundational theories by Marx, Deleuze and Foucault, Spivak approaches representation through a postcolonial lens:

“For the ‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject’s itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. Foucault is correct in suggesting that to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value.” (Spivak 27).

Placing this question of representational politics beside those of visibility can highlight the political power attached to mediated assertions to life. Nicholas Mirzoeff provides a compelling exploration of the act of *looking* as a form of reciprocity, in contrast opposed to *being seen*, that is essential in challenging dominant realities. By emphasizing mutual recognition, he argues for an individual or community's assertion of the right to the self and existence. This underpins a transformative paradigm, which he calls counter-visibility, that challenges the hidden aspects of colonial and neocolonial domination — which I see representations of violence as being a key component of (Mirzoeff). Additionally, the symbolic meaning and visual rhetoric attached to martyrdom holds a different value in the struggle, which Mahmoud Abu Hashhash highlights “is an everyday event that continues to perpetuate in Palestine and its representation is a frequent visual motif in Palestinian art, media and life” (Hashhash). This text suggests a sacred sociopolitical connotation attached to death as it includes the sacrifice of oneself for God, the homeland, and a greater good, which indicates further how important life—and the right to it—is in the Palestinian cause. As such, the violated body becomes a transformative site of desecration, publicized by those in Gaza to appeal to the global network. How has this become a defining feature of a globalized, anti-imperialist struggle vis-a-vis Palestinian resistance?

Defining grotesque visuality

A key distinction of the proliferation of representations of violence in the current Palestinian struggle is that they hone in on their *grotesque* sensibilities. I borrow this term from literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who conceptualizes it—from its origins in 15th century art theory as visual depictions that transgress norms and reason—as “a depiction of a body in the act of becoming[,] never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin 317). With a focus on the orifices and excrescences of the body, the grotesque body is a regenerative site of transformation and connection to the world, capable of holding both life and death as part of a cycle of continuous renewal. This speaks to the grotesque’s co-constitutive sensibilities - an object of appropriation, contestation and feedback; not solitary, but intertwined between centralized (establishment) and decentralized (grassroots) models. Additionally, he looks at it as a *collective* experience; it is universal, representing not just one individual but the entire people, humanity as a whole. It contains within it the experience and history of the collective and embodies a shared identity, which harkens back to both the collective nature of (networked) attention as well as implications of martyrdom and death in the Palestinian struggle - ultimately indicating how the transgression of bodily norms can become a bridge for collective experience and identities. Going further, I argue that the grotesque image is specifically a representation of *embodied* violence. Its heightened somatic qualities are integral to the shock value of the image as it appeals to instinctual, physical sensoria. Once again, in an expansive visual landscape, one that has led to a desensitization of violence,¹¹ such spectacles are necessary to capture and maintain attention, and galvanize resistance through a collective *abject*

¹¹ see Mrug et al. 2015

response. The concept of the abject—defined as the collapse of boundaries between subject and object, self and other—is rooted in the physical body, manifesting through intense reactions to bodily substances such as vomit, blood, saliva, and excrement (Kristeva). These internal fluids, once expelled, symbolize the breach of the body's borders and provoke a “revolting” response, a term that simultaneously denotes disgust and resistance. In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Julia Kristeva argues that among the most potent symbols of abjection is the corpse, “[S]een without God and outside of science, [it] is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.” (4). The corpse represents the ultimate dissolution of the boundary between self and other, of life and death. To synthesize these theoretical endeavors, I recapitulate my definition of grotesque visuality as a modality of representing and seeing abject depictions of embodied violence.

Shaped up by different philosophical and psychoanalytic thought, this thesis looks at the grotesque’s visceral impact in its capacity to shock, disturb and disrupt conventional narratives of warfare and violence. In the context of the latter, especially as mediated by digital technologies, grotesque visuality becomes a powerful tool for both state control and political resistance; it plays a critical role in desensitizing audiences to violence whilst serving as a catalyst for political mobilization. As social media platforms routinely censor ‘pro-Palestinian’ content, individuals on the ground have co-opted decentralized structures to connect with one another across the globe to show images of the abysmal situation in Gaza. Those affected by bombardments can take pictures, post them online, and shock another person - leading to its subsequent dissemination. The grotesque image then takes on the role of an intercultural, transnational text that bridges disparate populations together through the political negotiation of attention and representation.

“The notions of proximity, distance, immersion, and transmission of the “image of suffering” have markedly shifted in the past few decades,” laments Oraib Toukan, as she reflects on the way in which these images function in the visual sphere of the Internet. She engages with Hito Steyerl’s text “In Defense of the Poor Image”, which I find to be a key component of my conceptualization of grotesque visuality as a grassroots political tool. “While [the network] enables the users’ active participation in the creation and distribution of content, it also drafts them into production. Users become the editors, critics, translators, and (co-)authors of poor images,” she writes. Here, Steyerl discusses how the embrace of high-resolution images overlooks its ideological interests, and that by looking at the *poor* resolution of an image—its degradation, pixelization, compression—as an area to be interrogated, one can map out (albeit never completely) the economies of spread, and how they are nestled in the image-based networks we inhabit. Toukan sees the cruel image as a form of the poor image, having been degraded and “ripped, transferred, compressed and reproduced to its last breath”, taking on a life of its own once it reaches the virtual networks. If we think of the grotesque image as a poor image, we can see how it is appropriated, altered and utilized for differing political purposes as it spreads across digital networks past its inception, highlighting the idea of a body in constant transition/regeneration.

Grotesque visuality will continue to be a significant—and grimly, proliferate into a more insidious—terrain for political contestation as more people gain access to the Internet and participate in online political discourse. But unraveling the ways in which individuals organize around the cruel spectacle can highlight modes of optic resistance in the face of separation policies that fortify imperial, racial-capitalist and nationalist rule. What makes this investigation

particularly pressing is in the dissemination of information *through* violent imagery to a greater audience. The Palestinian struggle has overwhelmingly revolved around the politics of visibility, of being seen in the face of state and media concealment, but what distinguishes the representations of violence around the current struggle is their maximization of abject and haptic sensibilities. Broadly, this research aims to provide some insight into a greater pressing question: how do grotesque images serve as urgent, transnational sites of contestation, and what are their implications in (techno)political discourse?

In the next chapter of this thesis, I analyze three case studies of moving images from the ongoing genocide in Gaza that have circulated on social media networks. The selected videos, each a vivid representation of violence, are analyzed for their digital circulation, audience engagement, and role in the broader political landscape. They are not just passive reflections of violence but are integral in both maintaining state control and mobilizing grassroots political action. To achieve this I deconstruct their textual elements embedded, as well as exploring how these depictions are appropriated and repurposed across different digital spaces. By focusing on the modes of circulation, my research traces the paths through which such images travel, examining their economies of spread, the audiences they engage with, and the narratives they might shape or disrupt. Specifically, aspects that I will interrogate are digital circulation through user engagement, discursive analysis, and ‘real-world’ effects, as well as other platform-specific qualities that enhance their visibility and impact.

Each case study represents a different facet of grotesque visibility and its multidirectional role in the political discourse about Gaza. My first study, in Chapter 2, is of a low-resolution video of the Palestinian civilian Sha’aban al-Dalou as he burned to death from a drone strike on

the Al-Aqsa hospital in the Gaza Strip in October 2024 (Figure 1) to examine the role of representations of extreme violence in decentralized communicative streams and how they function within international solidarity movements. This chapter will build the foundations of grotesque visuality as mode of representation and analysis, before I segue into two key aspects of the framework in the next section: abjection and appropriation. Focusing on the gendered undercurrents of the grotesque, Chapter 3 explores how the figure of the violated, feminized body becomes a terrain of struggle within wartime visuality. I apply this understanding toward an investigation of the video of israeli Occupation Forces (IOF)¹² soldier Naama Levy's capture by Hamas fighters (Figure 2) to explore how the grotesque body has been mobilized within israeli society. By taking a vantage point from the opposing side, I aim to complicate linear narratives of victimhood and agency within wartime representation - thus highlighting the ways in which body becomes a screen in which differing political aspirations are projected onto. Finally, I unpack these dynamics further in the final section, Chapter 4, to consider grotesque visuality within the structure of digital-political communication through an analysis of the live-streamed self-immolation of active American air force member Aaron Bushnell in front of the Zionist consulate in Washington, D.C. in February 2024 (Figure 4). This act resulted in a significant media frenzy, unlike other cases of self-immolation protests that were not publicized thus going largely unnoticed. In this section, I seek to unravel further the spectacle of violence, the asymmetries of representation and infrastructures that determine whose bodies are rendered grievable, and finally, the digital afterlife of the grotesque image.

¹² For this thesis, I will be referring to the israeli military as the IOF, instead of its designated title of the Israeli Defence Forces. Similarly, I will also not be capitalizing israel as I do not believe it is a legitimate state, but a genocidal Occupation.

As this introduction chapter has striven to highlight, the advancement of information and communication technologies since the 20th century has radically altered our relationship with the virtual. These changes in digital communications have mediated bordering practices that consolidate power and quell transnational solidarity, while simultaneously giving way to streamlined communication and robust political organizing. Whilst depictions of violence are not novel in political discourse, their current implications are palpable as an increased visibility makes them almost entirely unavoidable in the quotidian. Grotesque visuality, particularly, hones in on the spectacle through embodied violence, bridging individuals through shared visceral reactions and is proving itself to be an urgent, if not defining, feature of contemporary political discourse.

Chapter 2

A Counter-Visual Framework

"Extraordinarily, a cruel image will ignite love nevertheless."

Oraib Toukan, *Cruel Images* (2019)

"Ya Allah! Ya Allah!" reverberates as orange flames and red embers consume the screen. The fire roars like a living beast, dancing with the anguished screams of men. This is the sound of pure horror, the soundtrack to the most depraved nightmare - but this isn't a nightmare. A hospital complex in Gaza burns, its people running, trying to escape, trying to save their families. Then, the camera catches a man trapped in the inferno as he flails his arms, connected to an intravenous drip. This drone strike has turned the ground beneath him, and everything around him, into hell itself. And then his body ignites before our eyes. His once olive skin darkens, blisters, and blackens. The hair on his scalp vanishes immediately, the fire eating through him.



Figure 1: Screenshot from the video of al-Dalou's immolation

His body crumbles, lost to the flames, as the people around him—and the ones watching through their screens—scream in horror. "*Ya Allah!*" they cry, over and over.

The graphic video(s) of the 19-year old civilian Shaban al-Dalou burning to death from an Israeli drone strike on the Al-Aqsa Martyrs complex in early hours of Monday, the 14th of October, 2024, was widely seen by netizens shortly after it was publicized (Figure 1). Some number of these differently-angled videos were uploaded by those at the complex who were made to helplessly watch al-Dalou's immolation. The videos are incredibly explicit, showing a sick, innocent teenager burning to death so clearly that it quickly circulated in political circles and their social media spaces. The act of seeing a human being die in front of our eyes immediately transcends the digital/real divide, as comes with it the responsibility of the act. I choose this video to begin with in particular for a number of reasons. First, it is one of the most visceral pieces of media I personally have seen coming from the genocide, depicting up-close and *in motion* the death of an innocent human being, which reinforces the embodied, affective and circulative implications of the moving image in depicting the grotesque body. While we have seen many violent images coming out of the genocide, this is one that was particularly disconcerting as we viewers watch him try to escape and fail, and thus are made *witness* to the death of an innocent, incapacitated man. Most individuals seeing a video like this cannot fathom themselves being engulfed by flames; to see it depicted so haptically penetrates the individual on a sensorial level. Secondly, as a result, this video was particularly relevant in anti-genocide discourse and political organizing, and it felt like somewhat of an inflection point in the solidarity movement.¹³ Sha'aban was not immediately identified when the video started

¹³ Being involved personally in pro-Palestinian activism, I find it valuable to draw from my experiences within these digital spaces.

circulating, being referred in many different ways instead - ‘Palestinian man’, ‘child’, ‘martyr’, ‘patient’. As such, the initial uproar surrounding the video was less organized around *his* martyrdom, but more around the sheer fact that a young hospital patient was burnt to death in front of the world to see. The confirmation of al-Dalou’s identity, and the circulation of his personal posts—in which he filmed his daily life during the genocide and verbally expressed his desire for peace and safety¹⁴—led to his humanization, and in turn, more expressions of solidarity.

Counter-visibility

An Instagram account that rose to popularity during the genocide is the ‘news’ page @landpalestine,¹⁵ now one of the bigger sources of information for those in these digital spaces. Irrespective of its independent status and unverifiable origins, the account has been disseminating on-the-ground scenes from the genocide, expressed many statements of solidarity, and spearheaded cultural and economic solidarity campaigns; thus, it is an example of networked protest and requires investigation into its role in political discourse. This page was one of the first few large Instagram accounts to share the video of al-Dalou quickly after his death;¹⁶ in a collaborative post with war journalist Wissam Nassar (@wissamgaza), activist

¹⁴ These are still available on his public Instagram account, <https://www.instagram.com/shabanahmed19/>.

¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/landpalestine/>.

¹⁶ @landpalestine et al. Video of Sha’aban al-Dalou’s immolation. *Instagram*, 24 Oct. 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DBGETJOOJYK/?hl=en>.

Rahma Zein (@zein_rahma) and Celebrities for Palestine (@celebrities4palestine),¹⁷ it was shared with the caption:

“What more do you need to see?? (broken heart emoji)¹⁸
They said NEVER AGAIN but in G A Z A
it’s been AGAIN and AGAIN (broken heart emoji)
When will we act to make this stop??
Humanity do you *see* us?” (emphasis mine).

What strikes me here, and when we see the video itself, is the importance attached to documenting the tragedies in Gaza that have been systematically suppressed by the Occupation and its visual regime. What we know about the genocide has come directly from those on the ground through encrypted direct-communication platforms (such as Signal, Telegram, etc.), before making its way towards our standard platforms (Instagram, X, Facebook, Tiktok). The sustenance of the genocide and the settler-colony as a whole is contingent on the suppression of violent actions and framing their victims as subhuman/dangerous, or more generally rendering their suffering invisible. What is notably different in the modern age is that, despite the widespread documentation of war crimes—often by the perpetrators themselves via social media¹⁹—the genocide continues with total impunity. The violated, Palestinian body is eroticized within the settler-colony’s collective imaginary and paraded for global consumption. When the colonized subject is framed either as inherently dangerous or as an aggressor, their suffering is

¹⁷ A collaborative post allows up to five accounts to co-author a specific post. These are displayed to followers of all accounts, significantly increasing their reach.

¹⁸ A digital ideogram; an emoticon.

¹⁹ see Toler et al. 2024

dismissed and their resistance criminalized.²⁰ For those within the anti-imperialist struggle, then, countering these representations is paramount to their survival.

The influential media critic and sociologist Siegfried Kracauer proclaimed in *Die Photographie* (1927) that, “Never before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense. [...] Never before has a period known so little about itself” (432). All through the video(s), we see every other person in the vicinity of the drone strike, amidst their horror, filming what is happening. Palestinians in Gaza are aware of their position in the international global order. Life under occupation is a life condemned to a lie, where existence in itself is demonized and resistance is terrorism. Any shred of humanity is outwardly suppressed to strip the population of their rights to live in the public eye. So in the face of this, how does one assert their right to live?

In articulating these lines of thought, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that visual representation is a dual means of asserting power and resistance. Marginalized groups, especially those under active occupation, have long been denied the practice of representations on their own terms; Gazans are *looked at*, but denied the possibility to *look*. The *right to look*, he writes, “[requires] the recognition of the other in order to have a place from which to claim a right and to determine what is right. It is the claim to a subjectivity that has the autonomy to arrange the relations of the visible and the sayable” (Mirzoeff 2011; 1). Here, to look goes beyond a passive action, but instead it is a power relation that asserts the right to subjectivity and life. Its inversion is *visuality*, which denotes a perceived visualization of history. He sculpts this out poignantly:

²⁰ This is a key tactic in obscuring the historical reality of occupation and legitimizing the settler state.

This practice must be imaginary, rather than perceptual, because what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas. This ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer. In turn, the authorizing of authority requires permanent renewal in order to win consent as the “normal” or everyday because it is always already contested. The autonomy claimed by the right to look is thus opposed by the authority of visibility. But the right to look came first, and we should not forget it. (2)

The right to look is tied to the access to imagery, image-making, and agency in the midst of a visual culture that can only be described as a terrain of struggle. It resists dominant imagery and reclaims visibility and representation, thus, we must consider it as a tactic of *counter-visibility*. Edward Said famously asserted in the iconic preface to *Dreams of a Nation* (2006) that “[the whole history of the Palestinian struggle has to do with the desire to be visible” (Said 2). This is where grotesque visibility takes its form - as a sub-tactic of the paradigm of counter-visibility. Its contemporary entanglement, or arguably fusion, with digital politics can be traced back to the Syrian Revolution, a series of mass protests in Syria in the early 2010s, which saw all involved utilizing social media to spread awareness in the midst of limited media publicity and competing visual narratives.

The trigger and the lens

Media scholar Donatella Della Ratta argues that, “Syria is in fact the first conflict of our networked age clearly revealing how sharing platforms, and the network of people involved in that very practice of sharing, have become dramatically entangled with modes of producing and reproducing violence.” (9). Her 2018 book *Shooting a Revolution* follows ISIS fighters,²¹ who “embod[y] the anonymous, grassroots, amateur, web 2.0 terrorist as auteur” and the “user-

²¹ The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

generated digital commons” by activists and civilians (7). Della Ratta sets out the parameters out the foundation for this livestreamed revolution, writing:

Victims, as they faced repression with bare hands, at the mercy of the armed killers’ absolute will; heroes, as they bravely turned into first-person narrators of their own history, regaining agency through the self-documentation of the events they participated in, even when they took a violent, dangerous form. [...] Every day, everyone films and is filmed in Syria, a country where the visual form has been turned into a device to perform violence, and the quintessential tool to resist it. The parallel, dramatically intertwined movements of shooting and being shot at, of filming and killing, of filming to kill and killing to film, lie at the core of this book. [...] Shooting while being shot at is the gesture of capturing life events on camera while dying live in front of it and for the sake of it, so as to grant an extension to existence in the immortal form of witnessing and crystallizing the self in the historical document. (2018; 1-2)

Here we see the inextricability of the visual from the political that metamorphosed during the Syrian Revolution, which then inspired waves of mediated protest in the Arab World and beyond. But she also unravels the contrasting appropriations of violent imagery in the conflict that we see evolve over the years across varied, yet interconnected struggles. To *shoot* denotes to film and to kill at the same time; in the spoils of war, shooting to film holds a twofold role, one of which is to reflect the act of shooting to kill. For protesters, filming had been a key way to express their opposition to the oppressive Syrian regimes and to document mass atrocities, connecting people from different areas of the country but also across the world. But on the other hand, the Assad regime (and other rebel groups) used filming as a tool to pacify the population and discourage people from joining the uprising. We see how this has evolved into our current moment, where violence, now embedded in the networked visual lexicon, is not simply normalized but functions as a discursive site of contestation. Filmed violence does not speak for itself; rather its meaning is shaped through competing narratives that determine who is grievable and who is guilty. Social media platforms shape public perception by amplifying or hiding violent content based on which

of it drives engagement. As such, it becomes a battleground of representation, where struggles over visibility and witnessing shape the afterlife of violence.

The body in pain

The documentation of physical horrors must be understood as a political tactic in asserting one's right to live - through the appeal to sensorial, affective, and political registers that dictate its visibility. "It's the hands. The hands reaching out for help as they're turned to ashes. A holocaust in my lifetime. It's the hands reaching out that will forever haunt me and hate the U.S. and Israel with every fiber of my being forever." writes X user Christopher Soriano-Palma (@ChSoriPalma) in a re-post of the video of al-Dalou's death posted by the account @TimesofGaza.²² As I have established earlier in this thesis, grotesque visuality is a key element of our saturated and competing violent landscape. It is a framework that focuses on the corporeal aspects—the vivid depictions of bodily violations—that appeal to the individual's senses. Depictions of the body in pain²³ may transcend sociocultural affiliations to bridge connections between disparate populations who may be systematically divided. As of May 2025, this specific tweet has 65,000 retweets, 81,000 likes, 1,700 comments and 4,000 saves; its interactions are found in multiple languages, with accounts from different countries. One such example is a quote tweet written in Japanese by user @piyocomameco who writes (translated), "Refugees in Gaza burned alive in their tents. Israel is truly a terrorist state. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should impose economic sanctions on Israel immediately!! End military cooperation!! Ministry of

²² Times of Gaza (@timesofgaza). Video of Sha'aban al-Dalou's immolation, originally sourced from journalist Nahed Hajjaj X. 24. Oct 2024. <https://x.com/Timesofgaza/status/1845600669232988190/>.

²³ see Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985)

Foreign Affairs @MofaJapan_jp. Minister for Foreign Affairs Takeshi Iwaya.”²⁴ In another re-post of the video, a user comments in Turkish (translated), "Fuck the state interests that cause you to remain silent in a place where refugee tents are burned alive,"²⁵ followed by yet another re-post, this time captioned in Dutch: "A general arms embargo against Israel must be imposed immediately."²⁶ The replies and re-posts span an even wider range of languages—including Italian, Spanish, Indonesian, and German—underscoring the video’s transnational circulation and reception. Comparisons between al-Dalou’s immolation and scenes from different documented war crimes and droves of crying and broken-hearted emojis fill the comments; the images are retweeted, saved, posted onto Instagram, disseminated further. On Instagram, user @perfectly.fit.styled on @landpalestine’s aforementioned post (which I should mention has 185,227 likes) comments: “We see u and we r soo sorry we can't do anything but repost” (sic). A short comment with only 9 likes, the last example is an unusual one to focus on, but it is in the user’s admission that ‘*we see you*’ and ‘*we can’t do anything but repost*’ that expresses the mutual recognition of life - even through death. The individual who watches the video truly *sees* the victim and acknowledges their (perceived) inability to do much beyond circulating the image further. Even though the horrors cannot be directly intervened in, the netizen can involve themselves in the struggle by raising awareness in their networks about the atrocities that have been captured.

²⁴ ひよめ; @piyocomameco. *X*, 15 Oct. 2024, <https://x.com/piyocomameco/status/1846137773386068089>.

²⁵ Akbey, Aslan; @vekilakbey. *X*, 31 March 2025, <https://x.com/vekilakbey/status/1906852517939478561>.

²⁶ Brodie, Lewis; @iamlewisbrodie. *X*, 15 Oct. 2024. “A general arms embargo against Israel[...],” <https://x.com/iamlewisbrodie/status/1846135086623654332>

Further, a significant aspect that merits close discussion is that the videos are created with self-awareness of their circulative potential and their commodification within the superstructure of capital and networked communications. “Suddenly, the performance of violence has become visible, shareable, reproducible, remixable, likeable [...] without taking into consideration the technological and human infrastructure of the networked environment, *where the ‘visuality’ of the conflict gets produced and reproduced as labor,*” writes Della Ratta (3-4; emphasis mine). We see here the commodification of suffering in the networked society, where it is privy to contrasting appropriations and the subsumption of individualized accounts into greater organizational/institutional narratives. And although the grotesque’s commodification has led to mass desensitization, voyeurism and complicity, and even fetishistic eroticism, the structures in which they have been placed into become conduits for communal activism through the remix cultures of social media platforms. We can understand this as an intersubjective labor relation that deserves attention, echoing Hito Steyerl’s reflections on the labor embedded in the digital circulation of low-quality media. These images, whose aesthetic qualities have been degraded through its circulation and re-manipulation across the network, becomes “a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution” (Steyerl). The cruel image, its counterpart, echoes this participatory culture through a process that Della Ratta calls expansion - which “thrives on networked subjects who are both the anonymous, grassroots users celebrated by cultural convergence and remix cultures, and the political and armed subjectivities active in the conflict — *each probably overlapping with the other*” (5; emphasis mine). Once uploaded, these images

are subject to contrasting appropriations, and their spreadability is contingent on the interactions of the networked society and violence. In our *spectacular* economy,²⁷ the contemporary visual regime concerns itself less with meaning or representation, nor does it seek semantic or factual truth but is instead used by to incite fear. At the same time, it grants the captured horrors a digital afterlife.

Amidst the struggle for visibility as a result of israel's control of the Palestinian visual domain, the images that do come out of Palestine are those that are ultimately brutal. Gil Hochberg argues in *Visual Occupations* (2015) that this leads to the framing of Palestinians as inherently violent or permanently entangled with violence, thus "[becoming] recognised as political agents only insofar as they are seen through a fetishised visual frame of destruction, violence, and loss" and desensitizing individuals to further violence itself (6-7). If the masses cannot, or will not, physically mobilize against the horrors of one image, the occupier can 'push it' with the next atrocity in their overall goal to condemn Palestinians to a life of desecration and invisibility.

This stands in contrast to israel's public façade of normality through its self-representation as a peaceful, cosmopolitan bastion of Western democracy in a (constructed) nightmarish field of terrorists and murderous enemies. The israeli state's existence is fundamentally tied to being perceived visually as more normal in opposition to a dangerous Arab society of the 'absent' land of Palestine. But even though images of extreme violence and death

²⁷ In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord theorizes the *spectacle* as a power relation mediated by the image. Here we can see that images of violence are transformed from mere documentation into consumable content, abstracted from their context and stripped of political meaning. Thus, the suffering of others becomes aestheticized, where spectatorship replaces solidarity and witnessing becomes a passive, commodified act.

are oft hijacked by the perpetrators and eroticized by many, it again serves as a space for protest through the fact that the event has been archived, and cyclically regenerated and circulated. In fact, for networked images, their social existence is key. These representations are beyond static representations of violence, but instead shaped by the junction of human interaction and the underlying technical infrastructure that facilitates this interaction, including the user interface, databases, and algorithms within networked communications. Paradoxically, the violence of the *shooting* is both sustained through and reliant on its commodification in networked communication. Platforms algorithmically privilege content that generates high engagement; violent imagery, through its capacity to provoke visceral reactions, then becomes an economically viable source of attention. As such, violence is rendered financially productive not only for digital platforms, but also for other actors such as media outlets, content creators, NGOs, and even activists who rely on visibility and circulation to sustain their work. Grotesque visuality, as a networked representation of embodied violence, contains with it all of these aspects that sustain its circulative potential in the contemporary visual economy - providing us a glimpse into how al-Dalou's immolation has led to solidarity and resistance.

From this we can understand better the sheer amount of people with their cellphones within this specific video, as well as why there are countless examples of maimed and mutilated bodies circulating on the Internet. Palestinians who have been living under the genocide are not passive victims recording their annihilation but actively understand their role in the globalized structure of networked politics and neocolonial hegemony. This is the precise reason why so many individuals in Gaza—Sha'aban al-Dalou included—livestream their daily routines, the horrors they see and their hopes and dreams. Living under a decades-long occupation and a

campaign for ethnic cleansing does not allow for a livelihood free from, or even understanding of, politics. When existence is truly resistance, whether this is physically in Palestine, in the diaspora, or even in cultural and archival memories, the individual becomes aware of the importance of their lives, but also their deaths in the greater struggle.

Martyrdom in Palestine

The idea of martyrdom itself is an integral concept in the Palestinian lexicon. The term *shahid* (Arabic: شهيد, meaning 'martyr') is used by Palestinians to refer to any of theirs who is killed, whether a civilian or fighter, irrespective of their faith or the circumstances of their death. Originally, the idea of self-sacrifice for a cause gained popularity among Palestinian *fedayeen* (military groups), who were actively involved in resistance actions against the occupation during the 1960s. Over time, this concept took on a more Islamic significance and became more widespread after the First Intifada in 1987, and appropriated into the systematic operations of suicide bombing.²⁸ The etymology of *shahid* unravels a fundamental connection between martyrdom and witnessing, as it shares the same root word as the verb 'to witness': *sh-h-d* (شهد). It is also related to the word *mashhad*, which can be understood as the spectacle or scene, and *itishhad*, to be martyred or to die for a cause.²⁹ Death in this context is attached to a revered idea, one in which the individual's death is an integral part of the larger cause. A death *for* something righteous and not in vain; thus, in the act of witnessing the telegenic violation of their bodies, Palestinians become venerated in their deaths. Deprez (2023) expands on this idea,

²⁸ Whitehead & Abufarha 2008

²⁹ "In Arabic, the root of the verb, to witness, is sh-h-d. Roots are important in Arabic. [...] From the three-letter root verb, you make the subject and the object, but also adjectives, adverbs and a whole host of other, more complex verbs, subjects and objects related to the first," writes Lina Mounzer (2016).

arguing that by reclaiming visual production and reimagining the aesthetics of witnessing through counter-narratives, images can be mobilized against the visual “necropolitics of occupation”.³⁰ Drawing on Pantti (2019)’s study of the Russian incursion into Ukraine—who argues that “bearing witness serves as a platform for the ‘transmission of moral responsibility’”—Deprez articulates that shared witnessing elicits affective solidarity, and that “the assaults on Palestinian bodies have resulted in countervisual imagemaking” (18).

Applying grotesque visuality

If we take a further look into the reactions in response to the video of al-Dalou’s death, we might be able to unravel further the process of shared witnessing that leads to solidarity. An X post that caught my attention in particular was one by American political strategist Waleed Shahid posted a side-by-side comparison of a screenshot from the video and the infamous *Napalm Girl* image from the Vietnam War³¹ on the 13th of October with the caption, “The image of hospital patients, tethered to IVs as American-supplied Israeli bombs ignite fires around them in Gaza, may well stand as the *defining image of this horror*” (emphasis mine).³² With 1.3 million views, 44 thousand likes and 15 thousand retweets on this post, Shahid’s tweet gained momentum within his political base in the United States but also led to further circulation with

³⁰ Deprez (2023) coins *visual necropolitics* as “a novel analytic that illuminates how visual violence and ways of seeing are employed to reinforce necropolitical environments in the context of colonial occupations”(6). This serves as an extension of Achille Mbembe’s necropolitics as the relationship between sovereignty and power over life and death - who called the Israeli occupation of Palestine “the most accomplished form of necropower” (Mbembe 18).

³¹ Officially titled *The Terror of War*, the image was taken by Associated Press (AP) photographer Nick Ut on June 8, 1972, depicting a group of children (including a 9-year-old girl) fleeing a napalm bombing during the Vietnam War.

³² Shahid, Waleed; @_waleedshahid. X, 15 Oct. 2024. https://x.com/_waleedshahid/status/1845653894359036250.

the understanding that this grotesque image of a body in flames has become an all-encompassing symbol of the genocide. Side-by-side, this tweet highlights the common aggressor in both the events depicted - the United States of America. An image so entrenched in the public imaginary of the Vietnam War, the framing of al-Dalou's death beside *Napalm Girl* appeals to the audience's understanding of the spoils of war and who causes them. It galvanizes solidarity against the occupying states and the political relationships behind them that undergird the bombardment on Gaza. While the replies to this tweet are varied, with many echoing his opinion but also many attacking it, blaming Hamas, or claiming that the video is staged, I am more interested in the former as the celebration of Palestinian death is already a mainstream ideal in Israeli society and imperial right-wing politics. In a response to the tweet, a user writes "I feel like the difference between the Vietnam War and the genocide in Gaza is the image on the right was the first time American citizens were exposed to the crimes enabled by their government. Today, dead Arabs is the norm. To Americans, when isn't there a war in the [Middle East]?"³³ This poignantly captures the contemporary visual landscape in the United States since the War on Terror in 2001, where the countless imperial wars waged by the state on sovereign nations in the Middle East have revolved around the eroticization of Arab death. The Arab is framed as inherently dangerous and their deaths in the dominant imaginary signifies the neutralization of a threat to Western freedom - the zenith of Israeli visual necropolitics. If we think about these media representations of Palestinians and Arabs, and their dehumanization and broadcasted deaths with, once again, the conditions of a networked society structured on attention,

³³ @unmother_1y. X, 14 Oct. 2024. https://x.com/unmother_1y/status/1845787105076637760.

sensationalism, and violence, we can understand how the political impact of the image such as here in the video(s) of al-Dalou is contingent on its visuo-attentive, and embodied, sensibilities.

In discussing the grotesque as a mobilizing tactic in antiabortion campaigns in the U.S., Halfmann and Young (2010) argue that it provokes strong and contradictory emotions, and challenges natural and social categories that ultimately lead to feelings of confusion and ambiguity. This is akin to the overarching transgression of norms and muddling of self/object that ultimately leads to solidarity and mobilization. They expand:

“The grotesque may evoke mixed emotional reactions of repulsion and attraction, disgust and pleasure, fear and/or fascination that may cause observers to flounder as they are held in suspension by the visceral push and pull of the image. [B]uilding on this suspension in emotional ambivalence, the grotesque may create category problems through the admixture of contrary elements [and] challenge the established schemas of a social order. In this way, the grotesque may denaturalize this order, destabilize what was taken for granted, and open it to change. [...] On the one hand, images of the distorted bodies of slaves or fetuses may make those bodies seem less human. But on the other hand, by provoking feelings of disgust, empathy, confusion, and ambiguity, such images raise questions: What is a human? What is a person? And the “discovery” that these questions are not settled, that categories are flexible, may inspire observers to challenge existing categories and create new ones.” (5-6)

The grotesque repels, but compels; it is subject to contrasting appropriations with varying goals. As a counter-visual framework nested on the intersection of networked communications, the desensitization of violence and evolving forms of protest, we can see how on-the-ground media coming out of Gaza becomes commodified within the larger structure of a global political order. Through this commodification, however, is where we can locate the love elicited from the cruel image, or the appeal to humanity through the politics of witnessing. The Palestinian individual is self-aware of their position within the visual necropolitics governing their existence, and so they

shoot videos to document the horrors that are either systematically suppressed or fetishized as victory.

As we have seen with the livestreamed killing of Sha'aban al-Dalou by the Occupation, to witness the most gruesome assaults on the body-grabs the netizen's attention through shock and sensoria, deeply unsettling the individual and leading to further circulation within their networks. This is then re-circulated, remixed with comments or edits, sent to other people, and thus the horrific event is then witnessed by more people. The more it is seen, the more it appeals to the masses, as the discourse on social media surrounding the video(s) of al-Dalou has suggested in this chapter. The duality of violence and the visual in the homonym 'shoot' highlights its inextricability in times of war since the development of networked structures, highlighting the co-constitutive structure of digital protest itself that I have established in the beginning of this thesis. To see a violent abstraction of the most personal thing, the body, in the moving image—a causal account of reality—leads to the loss of the distinction between the self/other. It leads to the a breakdown of semantic attachments and a loss of subjectivity, holding with it a mimetic assault on the collective body - ultimately leading to the impetus for change. Grotesque visuality then can be understood as a framework in which we understand the complex ways in which extreme violence in Palestine is filmed, disseminated and appropriated in the networked structure of global communications. In spaces in which contrasting ideas can exist at the same time, where political control and activism are deeply entangled with regimes of necropower, grotesque visuality focuses on the latter - an agential method of protest that asserts humanity *through* the violated body.

Sha'aban al-Dalou will be remembered in varied ways by different people, but many in his home and in the diaspora, and troves of people throughout the world, will know him as a martyr for the righteous cause of Palestinian sovereignty. The horrors he was subject to will forever be remembered by many, and is permanently archived for justice to be brought to its perpetrators. To exist under occupation is truly to resist.

Glory be to the martyr Sha'aban al-Dalou.

Chapter 3

Abjection and Appropriation

Is there an antidote to the perennial seductiveness of war? And is this a question a woman is more likely to pose than a man? (Probably yes.)

Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)

The grotesque body is a body in collapse - leaking, broken, cast out from the social order, yet made visible and consumable in a visual economy that uneasily oscillates between witnessing and voyeurism. Its gendered dimensions are hard to ignore: wartime imagery often turns to the feminized body—women, colonized populations, racialized Others—as a site of grotesque exposure, where violence becomes not just seen, but *felt*. Femininity here becomes the surface onto which horror is projected and through which affect is organized. This logic is inflected by Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, which, while sharing the grotesque's interest in bodily excess and breakdown, centers on the psychic need to eject what threatens the boundaries of the self. The abject—represented by things like blood, decay and the maternal body—are not just disturbing, but foundational to how subjectivity is formed; we are drawn to it even as we recoil from it.

The violation of the body, particularly through rape, has become a focal point in the political discourse surrounding the Palestinian genocide. This is the case within Israeli society, often framed through the figure of the raped woman, and in Palestinian solidarity circles, who criticize the Zionist entity's systemic sexual violence and colonial-feminist logics. While I

dedicate this chapter to interrogating the visual and systemic violations of the Woman's body, the Occupation itself exerts different gendered forms of violence, affecting Palestinian men, women, and gender minorities in distinct and unequal ways. Even when directed at men, sexual violence as a colonial tactic is not exempt from gendered logics; rather, it is deeply structured by them. Such acts draw on feminizing, emasculating, and dehumanizing codes that weaponize gender as a tool of domination.³⁴ Therefore, it is not enough to simply address victims by sex, but we must interrogate the underlying logics that shape how sexual violence functions as a gendered and colonial mechanism of control. In this section, I examine the discourse of Gaza specifically within Israeli society and its national narrative to interrogate the gendered elements of the grotesque. In doing so, I aim to contribute a foundational layer to the operational structure of grotesque visibility, while also exploring another key aspect of my argument: its contrasting appropriations (and representation) on opposing 'sides' of the conflict.

The capture of Naama Levy

On October 7, 2023, resistance fighters launched historic incursions into the occupied Palestinian territories and took a number of hostages into the Gaza Strip, one of them being the IOF soldier Naama Levy who was seized from a surveillance base near the Gaza border. Later in the day, a video of her detainment appeared on resistance networks on Telegram, becoming one of the first significant videos from the ongoing war on Gaza. This video became *proof* of the

³⁴ A significant example of this was the leak of a graphic video of a male Palestinian detainee being gang-raped by a group of IOF soldiers in July 2024; this triggered a global outcry within solidarity circles. See Joseph Massad's article "Why raping Palestinians is legitimate Israeli military practice" for the news site *Middle East Eye*.

claim of widespread systemic sexual violence and rape committed by Hamas militants, simply due to Levy in the video having bloodied pants and bound hands (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Screenshots from the video of Levy's capture

The video inspired solidarity in (colonial) feminist circles and was quickly subsumed into a broader narrative that ultimately served to justify the aggression against Gaza. Although no actual depiction of sexual violence was present—highlighting instead the uneven 'standards' of representation and violence between occupier/occupied—it proved irrelevant as she became a *simulacrum* of sexual assault. Visual details such as the bloodied trousers and tied hands became focal points, circulating as visual evidence of the alleged sexual violence and torture. Bolstered by the cultural trope of the Jewish woman violated by the dangerous Arab male, it was subsumed

into a broader narrative that manufactured consent for bombarding Gaza. An article on CNN from December 20, 2023 profiling Levy's mother starts off:

It was one of the first, and most searing, viral videos to emerge as the October 7 attack unfolded. A cell phone video released by Hamas shows 19-year-old Naama Levy being dragged by her hair at gunpoint by a terrorist in Gaza. Her hands are bound, her ankles cut. Her pants are soaked in blood. Her mother, Dr. Ayelet Levy Shachar, describes the video as "beyond upsetting" and says she "can't watch it in continuity." But she thinks it's important for the world to see. (Golodryga)

We see here an immediate focus on the grotesque - that which repels, but compels. It is an appeal to the visuo-affective sensibilities of the networked citizen and its circulative potential to cultivate and then crystallize a narrative. To frame the video as depicting the *signs* of sexual assault quickly confirms a bias already held within Israeli society, one that structures the settler-colony through the dehumanization and vilification of the Palestinian. This social character finds its fulcrum within the resistance fighters in Gaza, whose barbarities are what the framing of this abduction video seeks to confirm. According to Levy's mother in the article, "Her daughter's gender and age make her particularly vulnerable, she says, noting the *markings of assault* that were *visible* in the video" (Golodryga; emphasis mine). The article then discusses the risks posed to the female hostages, including further sexual violence, pregnancies and ensuing health issues, before discussing Shachar's disappointment at the lack of provisions by international organizations and women's groups surrounding the sexual violence on October 7 "despite mounting evidence".³⁵ The CNN article is an example of many that make use of graphic vernacular and affirmative framing techniques, namely the violation of the Woman's body her victimization in the grander narrative.

³⁵ Golodryga 2023; false claim.

The abject-grotesque body

In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva builds on the idea of the abject as that which must be expelled for the subject to define itself, finding its visual counterpart in bodily fluids and excrescences. It signifies the human reaction to the collapse of meaning and threat to the boundary of subject/object, self/other, and life/death. Here the body becomes the site where social anxieties are projected and managed through horror and the spectacle. She writes:

“A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, *I am at the border of my condition as a living being.*” (3).

When mapped onto wartime visibility, particularly in the networked circulation of images, abjection becomes somewhat of a structuring logic - one that is deeply tied to the feminine. Kristeva argues that the maternal-feminine is the first abject in the formation of the subject; it is violently expelled, repressed and then casted out as the Other. This foundational expulsion repeats itself in the symbolic power of the images of wartime rape and sexual violence. These deeply gendered bodily violations mark the breakdown of borders, both individual and national; the raped woman becomes a metonym for conquered territory, for humiliation, and for the collapse of moral or civilizational order. She is not just a victim of violence but a screen onto which political affect is projected, whether it is horror and outrage, or/and justification for retaliation. This is where abjection and the grotesque converge most viscerally: the woman's violated body is both a horror to be expelled *and* a spectacle to be seen, producing a highly charged affective response that anchors political narratives. Ultimately, it problematizes pre-

existing categories and makes room for new ones—liberatory realities—echoing the grotesque’s (contrasting, yet) regenerative capabilities. Expanding on this, Kristeva poignantly articulates:

“Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: *a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles* [...] It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject *does not cease challenging its master*.” (2-4, emphasis mine).

The visual regimes governing Palestine are attuned to the Woman’s body, whose politics have been central to the Occupation as a whole in its weaponization of feminist ideals. This has been understood as *purplewashing*, which denotes “a state or organization[’s] appeal to women’s rights and feminism in order to deflect attention from its harmful practices”.³⁶ It is a neoliberal political and marketing strategy that utilizes gender equality to justify conquest and violence, and has been co-opted in the sustenance of the settler-colony of Israel. However, regardless of its political appropriations (which will be discussed later on in this section), the feminine body becomes a conduit for political solidarity. The signs of Levy’s rape quickly became political symbols, inspiring protests within the country and abroad with women donning bloodied sweatpants and ziptied hands. In an article by the Times of Israel, an actor reenacting Levy’s dramatized abduction was interviewed in a protest in São Paulo, Brazil, in December 2023. It writes, “The video haunted me,” [the actor] Dayan admitted. As she walked the street during the reenactment, some Jewish activists followed closely behind, holding banners with alternating images of Naama’s smiling face and a frame from the kidnapping video. The banners bore a powerful message: Where are you, feminists? Free the hostages.” (Toueg). We see the incorporation of sexual violence—vis-a-vis the symbolic grotesque feminine body—into the

³⁶ “Purplewashing.” *Decolonize Palestine*, decolonizepalestine.com/rainbow-washing/purplewashing/.

historical narrative of the ‘conflict’ between the Israeli state and Palestinian terrorists. It does not matter whether these claims are true, with many of those detailing sexual violence being refuted or sources discredited³⁷ as it confirms an inherent characterization that undergirds the colonization and occupation of Palestine. Or to put it differently, even though systematic sexual violence has been verifiably attributed to the Occupation against its ‘prisoners’,³⁸ the simulacra of rape and the language that accompanies it is awarded more credibility due to the confirmation of a pre-existing Orientalist trope of the dangerous masculine Arab threat. The claims of mass rape—without evidence, but still believed as true—became a significant topic of discourse and created the justification towards a public bombardment of Gaza, highlighting the interconnected nature of digital and on-the-ground politics. We can see here the mechanics of a technopolitical framework at play, one in which ICTs, namely its modern rendition of the networked platform, are incorporated into the manufacturing of consent for mass violence.

The gendering of war

As a whole, war, and more specifically, settler-colonial genocide, is gendered. To understand this notion in its full depth, I find it helpful to turn to key feminist scholars to understand better the ideological roots of the centrality of the Woman’s body in times of war. Cynthia Enloe, in the revolutionary *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1990), writes “Nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope.” (44). This formative book interrogates the quotidian experiences of women throughout

³⁷ The United Nations’ investigation into the claims of mass rape resulted in no clear evidence of systematic sexual violence; see the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, (including) East Jerusalem, and Israel from 12 June 2024.

³⁸ see the Independent International Commission of Inquiry from 13 March 2025.

military conflict, looking into the lives of women in and around topographies of war. She elucidates here how the woman ultimately symbolizes a land in conquest: she is not merely a body violated, but a representation of the nation who requires (masculine) protection. We see this throughout history in colloquially denominated breaches of state sovereignty, such as the *Rape of Nanjing* in 1937-1938,³⁹ the *rape of Kuwait* in 1990-1,⁴⁰ and even the “*rape of Palestine*”.⁴¹ This also structures the use of sexual violence as an ideological weapon of war in imperial conquest, which Banwell (2020) (expanding on previous works by other theorists) elaborates:

[W]artime rape can be used to destroy the opponent’s centre of gravity: their women. Thus, ‘the rape of the women in a community can be regarded as the symbolic rape of the body of this community’ (Seifert, 1994 as cited in Fein, 1999, p. 43). Indeed, in times of war/armed conflict, female bodies are regarded as the vessels through which national, ethnic, racial and religious identities are reproduced (Cohn, 2013, p. 14; see also Sharlach, 2000; Takševa, 2015). Rape in this context is used not only as an attack upon the individual female, but also as attack upon the nation (Alison, 2007; Baaz & Stern, 2009; Leiby, 2009). It is also, as Sjoberg (2013) notes, an attack against men and the masculine, specifically men belonging to the enemy group who have failed to protect women belonging to their group. (Banwell 19, emphasis mine)

In Palestine-israel, women’s rights used by settler state to justify its atrocities, through the guise of protecting israeli (and Palestinian) women against the inherent terror of Arab masculinity - a code for sovereignty. Furthermore, the Occupation and genocide itself is directly gendered not only through sexual violence, but also the deliberate extermination of women and children in

³⁹ The Rape of Nanjing is a term used to describe the mass murder of Chinese civilians and prisoners-of-war by Imperial Japanese forces in December 1937 - January 1938.

⁴⁰ In October 1990, American president George H. W. Bush used the phrase “the rape of Kuwait” to describe the Iraqi invasion and its atrocities, a term that was quickly adopted by major media outlets. The phrase gained further traction with the publication of Jean Sasson’s *The Rape of Kuwait* (1991).

⁴¹ see Ziff, William B. *The Rape of Palestine*, 1991. Longmans, Green & Co.

Gaza as part of the strategic method of ethnic cleansing.⁴² To desacralize a woman is to violate the nation, and to exterminate her is to destroy its future. As such, the abject-grotesque representation of the woman's body must be understood a formative sociological trope used to advance political goals.

It is important to note, however, that my argument does not discount the violence committed to Palestinian men. In fact, Palestinian men, particularly young men, are disproportionately targeted by Israeli soldiers exactly due to the deep-rooted stereotype of the Arab man as dangerous and militant and its reinforcing through state security narratives. Moreover, men are also privy to gendered logics albeit differently, as they must be feminized and pacified by the masculine sovereign apparatus and conquered through subjugation, whether through torture, violence, and/or sexual assault. Palestinian women are stereotyped in a different way: they are the ones that create these “terrorists” and therefore need to be killed as well. In the independent e-zine *Jadaliyya*, anthropologist Sarah Ihmoud writes:

In war and military conflict, women's bodies are always situated as symbolic national peripheries; in genocide, Indigenous women's bodies and sexualities are targeted because of what they represent: land, Indigenous reproduction, sovereignty, and the possibility of Indigenous futures. While rape or sexual violence might be inflicted on the bodies of women, its broader purpose is often to humiliate and punish the collective to which they belong. The gendered logics of the militarized performance that is unfolding in Gaza today is precisely to force us, through mass violence and psychological terror, to recognize and accept our defeat. (Ihmoud)

This article critically examines the nuances of Western feminism, particularly how it overlooks the “pervasive gendered logics that animate Israeli settler colonialism” by opposing Palestinians and their allies who challenged its narratives of mass sexual violence. This subsequently

⁴² “Since 1967, Israel has systematically targeted Palestinians including children” – HRC 28th session, uploaded 27 February 2015. *Palestine Independent Commission for Human Rights; United Nations*, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-179791/>.

highlights how feminist concerns, particularly around sexual violence and women's suffering, are positioned as central moral imperatives and instrumentalized to justify violence or claim ethical superiority. As a whole, the violated body—especially that of the Woman's—is an integral aspect of both maintaining hegemonic power and mobilizing individual resistance. This shines a light onto the gendered layer of grotesque visuality that we see at play here in quite a complex form: as a mode of protest that is appropriated and subsumed within a greater oppressive narrative.

Framing violence

In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2019, revised), key feminist scholar Judith Butler looks into wartime visuality to interrogate the “cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence”,⁴³ dialoguing with Susan Sontag's argument⁴⁴ that visual representations of violence/suffering require contextualization, instead suggesting that the way in which an image *is already framed* can help us understand what is depicted, what exactly is left out and why. She does not disagree with Sontag here per se, but instead highlights that the pre-existing frame itself is not neutral, but meticulously visually dictates who lives and who dies. In the video of Levy's detainment, its contextual framing is important to understanding its place as a site of contestation, which I have established prior as a key characteristic of networked depictions of violence.

Another layer that complicates our understanding of Levy's simulated rape as a reproduction of the violated woman-as-nation trope is her selective framing as a victim. As we have established, the Occupation's survival is fortified through its control of the visual regime by

⁴³ Butler 1

⁴⁴ specifically within *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003)

concealing its crimes. Its narrative as a sovereign nation, itself a constructed idea based on the invisibilization of its original inhabitants,⁴⁵ under attack by terrorists is reliant on fragmenting itself from its own history. In other words, its status as a settler-colony and its crimes against Palestinians must be suppressed to be accepted by a general populace that is increasingly more aware through the visibilities offered by the structure of the platform. In the dominant narrative, Naama Levy had also been transformed into a social character: an innocent 19-year-old girl, or an ‘observer’, which deliberately obfuscates her role as an IOF soldier stationed on the border of the colony and the Gaza Strip through its verbiage. This was intentional to downplay her active role in the violence against Palestinians—directly implicated within the violent colonial system—to complete her marketing as a pure, innocent victim in need of saving. This reaffirms the inherent good of the Israeli state and its people in opposition to the Palestinian, which is why we see Levy referred to in such a sanitized manner in opposition to civilian children in Gaza who are routinely labeled as terrorists and targeted by the Occupation. What we see with this video is the juxtaposition of perceived signifiers of sexual assault, based on mythological cultural tropes and ideological frameworks, with the textual assertions of rape. The netizen, in a world of competing ideas, fake news, and unverifiable information, has their cultural biases confirmed and their emotions appealed to; finally, the story is taken as true. What we see and what we don’t within the frame, as Butler might point us towards, can help us unravel further the systems at play that govern the livelihoods of the body politic. The *lack of* visual evidence of Levy’s rape, and its subsumption into the conflict’s teleology, can tell us more about the asymmetries of who is deemed grievable and whose suffering is ignored. Looking into what is left out as the very object

⁴⁵ see Muir, Diana. "*A Land without a People for a People without a Land*", *Middle Eastern Quarterly*, Spring 2008, Vol. 15, No. 2.

of analysis, itself as a frame, can unravel the visual regimes that highlight uneven power relations between the colonizer, colonized, and spectator. Framing is key to communication power, and in the digital age, it is arguably the most important aspect of eliciting emotion and propagating political goals.

In the overall framing of the ‘abduction’ video, we see the appeal to appetitive goals alongside a sheen of credibility offered by the involvement of institutional actors in promulgating these narratives - the media, the state, and the corporation. And it is precisely because the grotesque is concentrated to the corporeal that such depictions bypass rational analysis and instead targets quick, affective responses. The operative logic of the politics of affect is preemption—as social theorist and philosopher Brian Massumi argues in his 2015 books *The Politics of Affect* and *Ontopower*—a becoming-fear that incites actions before rational calculation. It is not the actual threat that acts, but its potential, looming emergence, and the body's response to that threat. Fear is no longer about reacting to what is happening; it is about acting upon what could happen in a field of uncertainty. Rather than persuading individuals through ideology or reason, power now operates by modulating emotional and bodily states, using the spectacle of potential violence to manage public feeling and extract consent for state violence.

Contrasting appropriations

Through framing affect, we can see exactly how the grotesque body is understood and appropriated differently depending on its context. In an essay included in the book *Their*

Borders, Our World: Building New Solidarities with Palestine (2024), Tareq Baconi writes about the structural abjection of Gaza:

“In the Israeli collective psyche (but not just), Gaza is a dark place, full of terrorists, of angry hordes, a place where—in the words of a minister of justice no less—Palestinian mothers give birth to snakes, not babies. Gaza is a nuisance that persistently clings to Israel, demanding attention, disrupting the lives of Israelis, seeking recognition. None will be forthcoming because deep within, in some shrouded corner, is a resounding truth that can never be fully banished even as it remains unspoken: The Gaza Strip is Israel’s creation. In its present abject manifestation, Gaza is a colonial construct, territorially and demographically engineered to enable the emergence of a Zionist entity in Palestine. Through and against its very survival, Israel has fashioned itself as an Other that is better, more refined, that values life rather than death, unlike the wretched inhabitants of Gaza. Israel and Gaza exist in a dialectic whereby the existence of the Israeli collective is predicated on the abjection of Palestinians generally, and Gaza to a particular extreme.”⁴⁶

While the video of Levy’s abduction is a depiction of the most abject terror in the collective Israeli psyche, it can also be simultaneously understood to Palestinians and their allies as a heroic act, a byproduct of longstanding colonial tropes and evolution of neoliberal imperialism all at once. Firstly, it is a historic and revolutionary act to capture an occupying soldier, which merits celebration; simultaneously, Palestinians and their allies have been highly vocal against the claims of sexual violence through this video because they are aware of the colonial proto-feminist tactics that have governed their livelihoods. On the day it was announced that Levy would be released as part of a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, a series of posts on X by the political account Zei Squirrel (@zei_squirrel; with 281.3 thousand followers) discusses the fabrication of the mass rape hoax through Levy’s image to manufacture consent the Gaza genocide. The user writes:

“Not only was [the mass rape] exposed as a lie, it was shown that the Israelis and her family knew all along that the pants had been bloodied/soiled by her hands that were tied behind her back, on which she had been sitting before the widely circulated video of her move to the car. They had the full video showing her inside the building all along, and

⁴⁶ Baconi, Tareq. “Confronting the Abject: What Gaza Can Teach Us about the Struggles That Shape Our World.” *Literary Hub*, 4 June 2024.

intentionally didn't release it to manufacture a fake symbol for their "mass rape" hoax. They all started wearing bloodied pants, performing rape-hoax plays with it across the world, making posters and paintings and drawings using it. [...] It was all fabricated, a deranged rape-fantasy from the minds of genocidal Zionist actual mass rapists, who have raped countless Palestinian babies, children, girls, boys, women and men."⁴⁷

Here we see the ways in which different groups of people co-opt the grotesque body for their own political goals, and how the framework of grotesque visuality might allow us to look into the visual tactics that personify as a site of contestation.

I find it valuable to briefly touch on another significant-example that I find depicts clearly (and very significantly) the contrasting appropriations of the body violated - the video of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar's assassination by the IOF.



Figure 3: Screenshot from the video of Sinwar's death

In this video, the 62 year-old Sinwar is covered in dust, sitting on a lone chair in the concrete ruins of a building; he has a *keffiyeh* covering his face and an amputated, bloody arm. A mythic man fabulated to be hiding in dense civilian areas and tunnels, using hostages as human shields;

⁴⁷ @zei_squirrel. X, 25 Jan. 2024. https://x.com/zei_squirrel/status/1883055675841929267

a man who took on the role of the ultimate villain was found in their periphery, being with his people until his very end. This video, a trophy kill by the Israeli forces, was widely circulated and celebrated to assert the state's dominance and power. At the same time the video discredited many of the government's own credible claims of its intel regarding Sinwar and the movements of the militants; and yet, this proved insignificant. Like Levy's abduction, this video took on a greater symbolic role that elided rationality, being celebrated by many whilst mourned by others. Confronted with a drone and his ultimate death, Sinwar throws a stick at the machine with his remaining hand. Then, he is killed. A deeply revered man in the resistance movement, his death became to Palestinians a clear depiction of unwavering martyrdom and his commitment to the cause until the very end of his life. Ironically, a video that was meant to assert the state's dominance had the complete opposite effect by visually immortalizing Sinwar's martyrdom.

In a quote tweet by user Philip Proudfoot (@philipproudfoot), in response to the video posted by the official account of IOF member LTC Nadav Shoshani on X, he writes: "It's crazy they shared this, surely they realised that, in many parts of the world, and not just Palestine, what people will see is a resistance fighter on the front lines, staring at an asymmetric enemy behind their drone, limb lost, still managing a final act of defiance."⁴⁸ Another user @morris_que14 shared the video with the caption "Is this supposed to make him look bad? You just showed he went out with a warrior's death. How many American generals in the War in Afghanistan fought in the frontlines and died fighting the Taliban? I don't get how this is humiliating. This actually makes him look brave."⁴⁹ Through this example, we can see the layers that intersect—in tandem and tension—within the grotesque body and its how it is contrastingly appropriated, presented

⁴⁸ Proudfoot, Philip (@philipproudfoot). X, 18. Oct 2024, <https://x.com/PhilipProudfoot/status/1847219279201968582>.

⁴⁹ @morris_que14. X, 17. Oct 2024, https://x.com/morris_que14/status/1847105466339398011.

and perceived.⁵⁰ What stands out from the videos of Levy and Sinwar are the pre-existing cultural understandings and moral norms within different groups of people and how they dictate the spaces in which they inhabit online, and how that in turn effects the perception of the body violated. One person's torture may be another's liberation.

In this section, I have peeled the skin off grotesque visuality to reveal its gendered implications, in order understand better how it informs the visuality and on-the-ground events of the war and genocide. Deeply informed by the intricacies of abjection, the Woman's body—a metonym for the nation—is a domain in which war is enacted upon. Representations of the violations of Her body, through sexual assault and rape, are central to the ideological undercurrents of land and human conquest. By looking into the framing of the video of Naama Levy's abduction, we can glean the uneven visual regimes and Orientalist tropes within her social characterization that undergird Israeli society, and understand better how they converge to justify the violence towards Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. But at the same time, we can see how in differing contexts the video is understood as its inverse. Ultimately, I find it less valuable to objectively place the video of Levy's abduction in one 'camp' over the other or quantify the ways in which grotesque visuality must function on opposing sides of the political spectrum; instead, it is of interest to me that regardless of political affiliation, the grotesque(-abject) body becomes a conduit for solidarity, whether in the case of Israeli feminists fighting for women's rights or anti-imperialist discourses of purplewashing. It reminds us that even though the grotesque-abject

⁵⁰ This is similarly present in the reverse too, as we've seen in the widespread glorification of Palestinian deaths in the settler-colony such as in 'torture porn' social media groups in which groups of Israelis and their allies share images of mutilated and dead Palestinian bodies to celebrate them, or the images of soldiers raiding civilian homes and posing for pictures violating women's personal items (again a symptom of *Woman-as-nation*).

body is used to consolidate power and divide individuals, it is fundamentally boundary-breaking and world-making. On this, Tareq Barconi writes:

“Rather than succumbing to abjection, we must reclaim it. Instead of the abject annihilating us, it can transform us, help us overcome our learned helplessness. [...] For our colonizers, confronting the abject entails a journey of deconstruction, one that is violent and disruptive. For us, Palestinians and allies seeking justice, confronting our abjection as a source of strength entails its own transformation, one that is ultimately cathartic. There is no choice otherwise.”⁵¹

It will ultimately, even if it is unintended, cause its *revolt*.⁵²

⁵¹ Baconi 2024

⁵² see page 18

Chapter 4

Digital Afterlives

Like a marvelous madwoman, death unceasingly opened or closed the gates of the possible.

Georges Bataille, preface to *Inner Experience* (1943)

On February 25, 2024, active US Air Force serviceman Aaron Bushnell self-immolated as an act of protest in front of the embassy of israel in Washington, D.C. He broadcasted the entire act on his Twitch channel,⁵³ which stayed up for a few hours before being removed by the platform for violating their terms of service. However, the stream was archived and gained widespread attention once it was carefully reported on by independent journalist Talia Jane on X with the consent of his family.⁵⁴ The video starts off with Bushnell talking to the camera, stating:

Hi. My name is Aaron Bushnell, I am an active duty member of the United States Air Force and I will no longer be complicit in genocide. I am about to engage in an extreme act of protest, but compared to what people have been experiencing in Palestine at the hands of their colonizers it's not extreme at all. This is what our ruling class has decided will be normal.

He places the phone down, douses a canteen of flammable liquid onto his body, and takes out a lighter from his pocket. “Free Palestine!” Bushnell screams as he sets himself on fire; ablaze, he keeps going, “Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Free Palestine!”. The 25 year-old man wails in agony as the flames take over his entire body. One last time, Bushnell weakly asserts, “Free Palestine,” and falls to the ground. The video continues as a

⁵³ Twitch is a video live-streaming platform launched in 2011.

⁵⁴ Jane, Talia; (@taliaoatg). X, 25 Feb. 2024. <https://x.com/taliaotg/status/1761944158636331247>

group of policemen and first responders appear in the frame, one of the former with his handgun drawn at the dying Bushnell. An officer (who we can sartorially infer as being of a superior status) reprimands him, “I don’t need a handgun, I need an extinguisher!” - a stark reminder of the violence that structures the American state and society as much as it does in their imperialist projects abroad.



Figure 4: Screenshots from the video of Bushnell’s self-immolation

Suicide and inscrutability

The harrowing video of Bushnell’s self-immolation (Figure 4) provides us with a robust look into the mechanics of grotesque through its depiction of one of the the most unimaginable assaults on one’s body: one of self-infliction. Harkening back to the undercurrents of Kristeva’s abjection,⁵⁵ the suicide represents an ultimate loss of distinction between life/death and subject/

⁵⁵ “[A]s in true theater, without makeup or masks, *refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live*. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. [...] *How can I be without border?* It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 3-4, emphasis mine).

object as it depicts an agential violation against the sacrality of the self. The body is the most intimate thing a human being *knows*, which is why depictions of violence against it become points of confrontation with the boundaries of our knowledge. Suicide is unthinkable for most as it represents an agential choice to walk the tightrope of knowability, one that reaches its apex in death. To philosopher Georges Bataille, whose works greatly inform Kristeva's, the corporeal represents a fundamental opposition to the normative constraints that constitute subjectivity within social structures. The body, imbued with excess and waste,⁵⁶ reminds us of the limitations of contemporary capitalist society due to its incongruences with the ethic of profit maximization. The human body is a means of production within this system, and the surplus of waste it produces is thus unfavorable and something to be minimized. But to Bataille, the body is unquantifiable. It is instead perplexing, unknowable, and defies all logic, and thus poses a challenge to the systematic order by pointing to the limits of our collective knowledge. Throughout his oeuvre,⁵⁷ we see him specifically focus on the unknowable, though in his pivotal treatise *Inner Experience* (1943) he writes:

It is by dying, without possible evasion, that I will perceive the rupture which constitutes my nature and in which I have transcended "what exists". As long as I live, I am content with a coming and going, with a compromise. No matter what I say, I know myself to be the member of a species and I remain in harmony, roughly speaking, with a common reality; I take part in what, by all necessity, exists-in what nothing can withdraw. The self-that-dies abandons this harmony: it truly perceives what surrounds it to be a void and itself to be a challenge to this void; the self-that-dies restricts itself to intuiting the vertigo in which every thing will end (much later). [...] Death is in one sense the common inevitable, but in another sense profound, inaccessible. The animal is unaware of death although it throws man back into animality. [...] Disgust, feverish seduction become united,

⁵⁶ Bataille; Kristeva

⁵⁷ namely in *Inner Experience* (1943), *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957) and *The Tears of Eros* (1961)

exasperated in death: it is no longer a question of banal annulment, but of the very point itself where eagerness runs up against extreme horror. (Bataille 71)

I find it helpful to use Bataille as a starting point, as his eclectic ideas highlight the challenge to what we know as true *through* death. It invites abjection, which here revolves around the revolutionary politics of dying that sees it as an interstitial space for the ultimate collapse of meaning. Within this we see two interlocking ideas surrounding death in our society—the sacralization of life and the obscurity of death—that makes the suicide an ultimate confrontation of the limits to our existence, and threatens to destabilize what one knows as true. Here I propose that the representation of self-inflicted death can be understood as an extreme form of abjection, making the act completely inscrutable to knowledge systems organized around the unknowability of death. Thus, suicide for a political cause further defies comprehension because it unsettles the instinct for self-preservation and disrupts socially-constructed frameworks of meaning by exposing the hermeneutic thresholds through which we make sense of suffering. In a ‘mystical-political’ exploration of Tibetan self-immolation, Downey (2015) writes:

“The tactic [of self-immolation] itself seems so horrifying and apparently nihilistic that it may facilitate incomprehension or impulsive psychological withdrawal which undermines its communicability. [...] Even in the contemporary society of the spectacle that is hypersaturated with brutal imagery, the grisly reality of aut cremation appears to exceed the bounds of comprehensibility in a manner that marginalizes the acts themselves to a Bermuda Triangle of the popular imagination that obscures whatever communication may be intended, and facilitates a reflexive psychological erasure of the bodies that burn—an aversion to the gaze itself.” (Downey 235)

The self-immolation, unlike other forms of political protest, is a careful act ‘suffused with pathos and strategic acumen’ that allows the bodies of the dead to become a space for the communal projection of political aspirations, even as it is simultaneously derided as a product of mental illnesses by the “mouthpieces of biopower” (218). But this self-inflicted death itself is radical

precisely in its confrontation with the limits of our knowledge, and in turn, the defiance of prescriptive boundaries placed onto society. Ultimately, the ways in which we view suicide or death as a whole are culturally constructed and cannot be flattened into a moral wrong or a right. But if we fully consider the context accompanying the self-immolation, we can locate the power of the act in Bushnell's confrontation of the unknowable, the most terrifying thing, to call attention to a righteous cause. Through this, his body—a sacrifice to expose the United States' complicity in the Gaza—becomes a conduit for intersubjective solidarity, as we will explore more as we progress through this chapter.

Self-immolation as political protest

The act of self-immolation has a longstanding role in (anti)war visuality, and can be understood as iconographic in modern political protest against state-sanctioned atrocities. We can trace the 'origins' of its contemporary form with the 1963 aut cremation of the Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh city), Vietnam, in protest of the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government. The monk's self-immolation was witnessed and later publicized by American journalist David Halberstam, who wrote of the act in his book *The Making of a Quagmire*: "Flames were coming from a human being; his body was slowly withering and shriveling up, his head blackening and charring. In the air was the smell of burning flesh. ... Behind me I could hear the sobbing of the Vietnamese who were now gathering. I was too shocked to cry, too confused to take notes or ask questions, too bewildered to even think" (211). Before going further, I want to note the vivid depiction here of the grotesque body, as we see the journalist's own memory being concentrated to the haptic horrors witnessed—the acidity of the air, a body in flames—as he depicts the inability to understand the

act itself. The image of Đức won a Pulitzer Prize, became a significant representation of war in the (Western) visual lexicon, and was followed by many following cases of political self-immolation - including in Vietnam, but also in Czechoslovakia—during the Prague Spring,⁵⁸ the Tibetan struggle for autonomy, and even within the United States of America in the last 50 years. Self-immolation is the ultimate act of ‘communicative suffering’, which scholar Michael Biggs identifies as “the self-immolating subjects insert[ing] themselves into a discourse—or, more radically, inaugurat[ing] a suppressed discourse—by circumventing the narrative control of the state,” (Downey 225). These acts become symbols of widespread, systemic suffering, highlighting the injustices that have been suppressed, as the act itself is so shocking that it is able to circumvent dominant state narratives. We see this especially play out in Bushnell’s case, being an active serviceman in the American Air Force. His self-immolation was highly significant as it was the first time a member of the military, an active, internal ‘belligerent’, had confirmed the state’s involvement in the genocide in Gaza. The United States, like Israel, has relied on the sanitization of its active role within the public imaginary, so an extreme act of protest such as this by an individual *within* the imperial core greatly challenged that narrative. Although Bushnell’s self-immolation was influenced by the act’s historico-political significance, it is specifically unique from its predecessors (and thus, especially worthy of investigation) in the way it was entirely self-publicized onto the digital network.

Bushnell and the image

Aaron Bushnell joined the US Air Force as an active member May of 2020, where he was stationed at the Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas. He worked in information

⁵⁸ The 20-year old student Jan Palach self-immolated in Prague in protest of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops on January 16, 1969.

technology and development operations, specifically as a cyber-defense operations specialist with the 531st Intelligence Support Squadron. In the morning of the self-immolation, Bushnell posted a link to a Twitch stream on his Facebook page with the caption, “Many of us like to ask ourselves, “What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide? The answer is, you’re doing it. Right now.”⁵⁹ It was brought to light that around then Bushnell had also emailed a number of journalists and left-leaning news sites, alerting them that he was about to commit a ‘highly disturbing’ form of protest. Just before 1 PM, he began his livestream and committed the act. The video was taken down on Twitch shortly after, though edited versions (e.g. blurring out his burning body) instantly circulated through social media platforms once they were reported on by journalist Talia Jane on X. Quickly, keywords such as ‘RIP Aaron Bushnell’, ‘Israeli Embassy’, ‘Free Palestine’, and ‘US Air Force’ became trending topics on X on whole day it was published. It is imperative to highlight, though, that while Bushnell’s was the first mediated self-immolation in protest against the Gaza genocide, it was not the first. Months prior a woman draped with a Palestinian flag set herself on fire at the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia, where she sustained life-threatening burns but did not die.⁶⁰ This act did not receive much public attention and was severely underreported on by news sources, which highlights the importance of visual documentation, especially when it comes to the body in pain, in digital politics. Through this we can infer Bushnell’s self-awareness over the implications of this grotesque form of protest, and how its representation is key within the networked structure of communications.

⁵⁹ @Breaking7Newss. X, 26 Feb 2024. <https://x.com/Breaking7Newss/status/1762030904279441752>.

⁶⁰ “Protester Critically Injured after Setting Self on Fire Outside Israeli Consulate in Atlanta.” *AP News*, 2 Dec. 2023, apnews.com/article/israeli-consulate-self-immolation-atlanta-protester-8f17dd72592f86797a45cda9b60605a5.

Within this context, much of the centralized protest discourse worked to construct a figure marked by mental illness, revealing deeper asymmetries in who is grievable and whose suffering is dismissed. This narrative, propelled by the political and media establishment, emphasized instead the ‘symbols’ of mental instability - particularly the act of suicide itself, and especially one carried out for a cause deemed incomprehensible to the average person. This framing is particularly effective when the audience might lack awareness of how power structures shape discourse and how ideological biases influence public perception. For instance, in their report of Bushnell’s protest, *Time Magazine* points out that U.S. Department of Defense policy states that active-duty military personnel must avoid “partisan political activity”, further highlighting that military guidelines forbid service members from wearing their uniforms during “unauthorized public speeches, interviews,” and other similar appearances. Furthermore, as the article ends readers are provided a mental health disclaimer: “If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental-health crisis or thinking about suicide, call or text 988” (Guzman). The framing of the act alongside this vocabulary, in addition to its second-person tone strips the act of its context and communicates to the audience that Bushnell was a tragic case of mental instability. This is important, as in reality, any attention offered to his political motivation would confirm the entrenchment of the American state in the genocide. In an article for *The Nation*, scholar Riad Alarain writes:

“As we continue to debate whether “truth” exists or matters on the sidelines, the ruling class will continue to weaponize, recontextualize, and reframe truth in ways that align with their interests and enable them to maintain or enhance their power behind a pretext of moral concern. Consider how the establishment responded to Bushnell’s self-immolation versus Mohamed Bouazizi’s, the Tunisian street vendor who set off the Arab Spring in 2010. [...] The reason Aaron Bushnell’s self-immolation did not spark the same concern as Bouazizi’s among the establishment has nothing to do with knowing the truth in one case and missing it in the other. The truth of Bouazizi’s protest was instrumentalized to justify “benevolent” American involvement in the Arab Spring. Bushnell’s protest didn’t serve US

interests. He thus had to be made into a symbol of self-centered psychological despair and illness.” (Alarain)

Amidst the political and media establishment’s “patronizing, mawkish, and bereft of serious reflection” positioning of Bushnell, the inverse response arose, one of *love*,⁶¹ of political solidarity, one that would call attention to the severities of the genocide. It is within Bushnell’s use of Twitch to livestream his self-immolation that we can see how contemporary digital platforms can be repurposed as stages for radical political expression, enabling individuals to elide state suppression. The visceral shock and emotional intensity of witnessing such an act not only disrupts traditional narratives but also amplifies its spreadability across digital networks, as we can evidently see in the 8.6 million views of the journalist Talia Jane’s initial post on X. Though behind this, she saw a difficult process of contending with the grotesque nature of the act and how to report it in the most respectful way. In an op-ed for *Rolling Stone*, Jane writes:

“There are plenty of media guides and examinations about best practices for reporting graphic content. There is nothing about how to navigate the scrambled fog your brain becomes after witnessing a man burn himself alive. To watch him choke on the smoke of his own flesh to scream “Free Palestine” until he no longer can, to watch him stand at attention, silent, before finally collapsing, only his charred leg visible onscreen — and then to try to ethically and comprehensively report what is clearly a major breaking story, absent institutional support to help gather, process, and publish information.”⁶²

Through this all we can see the inner workings of the video, how it was self-broadcasted, suppressed, and then re-uploaded onto the network to be shared and re-shared. Each circulation adds new layers of meaning to the original act of witnessing.

Here, I want to focus on one more case of self-immolation that took place in protest of the genocide six months after. On September 11, 2024, U.S. citizen Matt Nelson lit himself on

⁶¹ see Barthes (1977)

⁶² Jane, Talia. “Aaron Bushnell’s Self-Immolation Protest Needed to Be Seen. but That Didn’t Make It Easy to Report.” *Rolling Stone*, 29 Feb. 2024.

fire outside the Israeli consulate in Boston; like Bushnell, he released a video statement of himself onto BlueSky (a relatively new alternative to X) in which he echoes Bushnell's message as he states he "is about to engage in an extreme act of protest."⁶³ Nelson was pronounced dead four days later. In his newsletter *Humanities in Revolt*, Jeffrey Nall uncovers additional context surrounding this particular case of self-immolation that I find important to consider fully. He discusses a series of posts on Nelson's BlueSky account in which he converses with a fellow platform user about recent and historical cases of aut cremation. In this post, he discusses the pathologization of Aaron Bushnell: "calling a person you've never [met] who's [sic] job was literally to understand the thing they acted over mentally ill and uninformed is real cool edgelord stuff." When the other user responded that if Bushnell "understood the situation, he would know that burning himself alive does nothing to affect Israel's behavior,"; Nelson replied, "tell that to Thích Quảng Đức" (Nall). What stands out here is that Nelson was fully aware of the iconicity of self-immolation, which reinforces the charged symbolism of bearing witness to (political) suicide. However, the act itself was not recorded or live-streamed like Bushnell's, which saw his death going widely underreported. As I write this thesis in 2025, a Google search of 'Aaron Bushnell' yields a large amount of results, including images, institutional statements, news reports, a Wikipedia article, a Google AI overview, whilst a search for 'Matt Nelson' leads to an American football player with the same name, and a scarce reports of the self-immolation.⁶⁴ If we think about the differences in the awareness and reactions in response to Bushnell, as opposed to Nelson and the woman who self-immolated prior, we can see once more that it is the act of visually capturing extreme suffering that leads to the networked visibility of the political

⁶³ BDS Boston (@BDSBoston). X, 13 Sept. 2024, <https://x.com/BDSBoston/status/1834621714795200765>

⁶⁴ "Matt Nelson." *Google Search*, Google, <https://www.google.com/search?q=matt+nelson>.

protest. This is not to say that the other cases of self-immolation were not effective, but that the circumvention of visuo-political suppression *through* the digital network might result in the most persuasive impact of awareness.

By using a grotesque-visual framework to analyze the video of Bushnell's self-immolation, we can look into the space allied protest and solidarity occupies within the struggle and how this might interact and effect with the visual regimes undergirding the violence. Through this we are able to unravel the asymmetries of whose suffering becomes visible and galvanizing, while exploring ultimately how the grotesque body becomes an interface in a loop between affective shock and political mobilization. In this thesis, I have established how bodily extremities are not only witnessed, but circulated, amplified and reconstituted through networked circulation. As we move forward, we will see that the grotesque nature of the moving images at the centre of our analysis does not simply lie in the act of violence itself, but in its mediated afterlife.

Immortalizing the grotesque body

Once it is uploaded to the digital network, the grotesque image outlives the body. It is archived, remixed, and manipulated—embalming the body in pain within the digital realm. It is 'a representation of the degraded subject'⁶⁵ that lives on through the participatory culture of digital politics. The very degradation of the image through its circulation and reformatting, which Hito Steyerl calls "a reminder of its former visual self"⁶⁶ is evident in the aesthetic degradation of the image. We see this with Bushnell as different versions of the video can be found online,

⁶⁵ "Cruel images represent a degraded subject, become materially degraded with time and travel, and degrade a subject further by virtue of being seen," writes Toukan in *Cruel Images* (2019).

⁶⁶ Steyerl (2009)

whether it is the censored or unedited version, alterations of it as political art or memes; nevertheless, the image of his self-immolation became a symbol of solidarity, sacrifice and martyrdom. Moreover, what is striking is that the iconography of the act has become as a frozen still from the video - a moment suspended, yet suffused with meaning. For example, in the official Wikipedia page of the ‘Self-immolation of Aaron Bushnell’, the image used is an uncensored screenshot of Bushnell ablaze.⁶⁷ It is unclear and blurry, and is the result of continuously losing more aesthetic quality as it is circulated and re-purposed. But as Steyerl reminds us, this can show us the markers of collective resistance and grassroots distribution outside of the centralized, state-sanctioned communication structures. In fact, its poor quality is where the power of the image may lie; she expands:

The poor image thus constructs anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history. It builds alliances as it travels, provokes translation or mistranslation, and creates new publics and debates. [...] Its optical connections—collective editing, file sharing, or grassroots distribution circuits—reveal coincidental links between producers everywhere, which simultaneously constitute dispersed audiences. The circulation of poor images feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies. The poor image is no longer about the real thing - the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation. (Steyerl)

And thus, the image becomes a “leftover trace that now fits the required frame of the many scavengers of [the] image”, as we return back to Oraib Toukan, who continues this conversation.⁶⁸ Through this we can see that although grotesque visuality serves different purposes based on its appropriations and context, its very circulation (and parallel degradation) on the network catalyzes the collective bonds that arise from viewing the cruel image. Perhaps

⁶⁷ “Self-Immolation of Aaron Bushnell.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-immolation_of_Aaron_Bushnell.

⁶⁸ Toukan (2019)

Aaron Bushnell was aware that a frozen still of his act would become one of the iconographic images within the Palestinian struggle, venerated as a martyr but also besmirched as a mentally ill social figure at the same time, or perhaps he did not. Regardless what we see is how self-sacrifice goes beyond the physical act of destroying one's body, but in its visual traces on the digital platform. It is a deep form of protest for a cause, as we see with Bushnell whose body became a channel for collective solidarity long after his physical death.

If we take a step back and consider the mechanics virtual network once again, we can understand this form of protest falling under what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls 'visual activism', where a different visual vocabulary emerges; one that is collective and collaborative, involving archiving, networking, researching, and mapping, all in the service of envisioning change. The emphasis here is on the collective nature of networked protest, which he then goes on to summarize: "Visual activism is the interaction of pixels and actions to make change." (Mirzoeff 2016; 297). He accompanies this with a visual diagram that places *pixels*, broadly representing the word/image/sound/video, and *actions*, coming to denote direct/perform/converse/material, in a feedback loop (Figure 5).

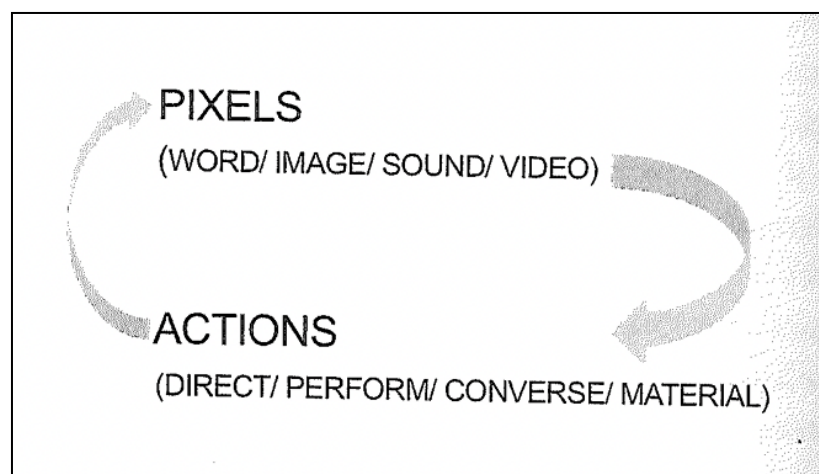


Figure 5: The pixel-action loop (Mirzoeff 2016)

This framework can be utilized to understand to the co-constitutive nature of digital politics as a large, specifically as to how they are *constantly* affecting the other. In the digital afterlife, the pixel/action loop does not stop, as the pixel allows the dead to linger. It is more than just a unit of display, but instead works as an trace of a presence that *haunts* the network.⁶⁹ If we consider this cycle through a *cybernetic* lens, which Norbert Wiener first introduced in 1948 as a process of understanding systems of regulation, communication and feedback,⁷⁰ we can map out how the grotesque image might be understood in relation to the technological structures of communication. In addition to the concept itself denoting processes within human and the machine, whose intertwined nature I have sought to articulate within this thesis, I find this to be a good theoretical anchor into understanding how affect and political action are constantly shaping one another. Earlier on in this chapter, I stated that every circulation of the grotesque image leads to new layers of meaning, both resistance and contestation, to the original act. We see this propagated by the cybernetic structure of the pixel/action, which enables haunting, or the loop in which the dead can be revived through every click, like or repost. It further muddles the line between living and dead, and transforms one's fleeting suffering into a lasting reminder that forces political and existential confrontations.

As such, the grotesque media object becomes a node within the recursive loop of cognition and behavior, in turn implicating the viewer within the field of action. Or to put it more directly, as the user @ecomarxi highlights in an X post from February 27, 2024 “[Bushnell’s] words will forever be immortalised in the history of protest and struggles for liberation, and *he will now live forever*.”⁷¹ With close to three thousand reposts and nine thousand likes, we can see

⁶⁹ see Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (2006)

⁷⁰ in *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1961)

⁷¹ @ecomarxi. X, 27 Feb. 2024. <https://x.com/ecomarxi/status/1762655069554507824>

exactly how Aaron Bushnell's sacrificed the corporeal ownership of his body for the cause. And through this lens, we may be able to understand how the grotesque body becomes a spectral simulacrum caught in the cycle of affect and mobilization, whose discordant voice reverberates throughout the digisphere.

Chapter 3

Conclusion: We Are the Bandwidth

"The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence."

Donna Haraway, The Cyborg Manifesto (1985)

In this thesis, I have proposed a novel framework into thoroughly understanding the role of violent imagery in digital protest, vis-a-vis the Gaza genocide. I began my Introduction chapter with an overview of the technological developments in the last twenty years, culminating in a networked structure of communication—through the *platform*—guided by profit-driven ethics. However, platforms simultaneously enhance the connectability of disparate people for the rapid spread and exchange of information, allowing for political subjects to engage in digital protest with low entry barriers. Visuality nestled at the heart of its design and user engagement, which has led to an impenetrable relationship between modern political discourse and the image—still and *especially* moving—to highlight the horrific spoils of war. The spread of these representations are deeply informed by the ways in which they are consumed, or more specifically, their *affect*. Within a saturated media landscape and scarce attention resources, the maximization of spectacle is essential in securing audience engagement between competing frames and ideas; The spectacle finds its fulcrum in the representation of violence, a central driver of engagement on social media. With all of this in consideration, I move to building the framework of grotesque visuality as a mode of representing and seeing *embodied* violence. Deeply informed by the inscrutability of death, the depictions of violence from Gaza emphasize

its abject and haptic sensibilities, utilizing affective shock to elicit solidarity. Finally, I end my chapter by setting out the rest of my thesis, with the overall goal to apply a grotesque visual framework in different contexts to get a fuller picture of its contesting appropriations and implications, as well as the political, philosophical and social undercurrents that inform it. In particular, my case studies depict the violated body through three different vantage points: a Palestinian civilian, Israeli soldier and American activist; this was done to unpack the ways in which grotesque visuality is used in contrasting visuopolitical contexts, while also unthreading the economies of death that decide whose whose suffering is seen. Through this, I try to paint a multidirectional image of the ways the virtual, visual and violent intersect in the framing of the grotesque body.

The first of these layers that I explore in Chapter 2 are the ways in which we understand the grotesque body. By unpacking the video(s) of the martyr Sha'aban al-Dalou's immolation by Israeli bombardment, I begin by arguing that grotesque visuality must be understood as a *counter-visual* framework, or a way to subvert dominant imagery to reclaim visibility and representation. Violence is everywhere for us to see and cannot be understood separately from the ways in which we interact with technologies; it is used as a mechanism of control in pacifying the body politic, but also inversely to expose suppressed, state-sanctioned atrocities. Palestinians as image-creators are aware of their role in the global hegemony, as colonial subjects under occupation, and how their bodies symbolically function in visual regimes of power. By documenting the violent assaults on their bodies, the spectator is then made witness to the horrors and thus confronted about their complicity in the superstructure of violence. Through its ability to shock, the maimed and killed sparks resonance and circulation; as such, it can be co-opted as a political tool in the assertion of life. I end this chapter by arguing that the grotesque

both repels, and compels. It becomes commodified within the larger structure of a global political order, though it is through this commodification that the grotesque image becomes an active agent within the crisis of occupation.

I then move on to my next section, Chapter 3, where I delve deeper into the philosophical, machinic and existential undercurrents of the grotesque body through an analysis of the capture video of IOF soldier Naama Levy, and specifically the mirage of sexual assault—contingent on longstanding, colonial tropes of dangerous Arab masculinity—that manufactured public consent for the genocide of Gaza. Here, I specifically focus on the grotesque's entanglement with abjection, before segueing into the visual violations of the feminized body. By critically examining this from an Israeli standpoint, I unravel how the grotesque body—particularly through the figure of the raped Woman—becomes a screen for competing political aspirations and how it is appropriated by different actors. I chose to deconstruct this video in particular precisely because of the multiplex roles it holds within these different spheres and the precarious position it assumes within the context of (gendered) wartime violence, to further shed a light on the complex, interlocking web of networked relations and visual appropriations.

And lastly, in Chapter 4, I move onto an analysis of Aaron Bushnell's self-immolation to interrogate further the cybernetic structures of communication that made him choose to broadcast his defiant act of to the masses. Compared to other cases of self-immolation protests in the United States that were not captured and thus received little to no attention, we can see how the depiction of extreme violence in its entirety is the paramount to its outreach. I also focus on the grotesque's digital afterlife, in which the body in pain is immortalized, but degraded as it is circulated and remixed throughout the digital network. Every click, like, and share of the grotesque image adds new layers of meaning—both of resistance and contestation—to the

original act. Thus, the embalmed body becomes a spectre, be revived through every click, like or repost. It further muddles the line between living and dead, and transforms one's ephemeral suffering into a lasting reminder that forces political and existential confrontations.

This thesis was conceived during a period of deep involvement in the Palestinian solidarity movement, much of unfolded across digital networks. I came to understand how integral platforms have become to the development of contemporary information and communication technologies, not just as technical infrastructures, but as political actors that mediate public discourse and influence policy. Its algorithmic structures dictate what images are seen and what are suppressed, becoming arbiters of political information that serve to influence public opinion and policy. Amidst this, the formations of digital protest—with its low barriers to entry and thus potential to spark political awakening—are contingent on the decentralized structures of communication platforms. I truly saw these online spaces becoming terrains of struggle within the genocide, sites where differently ideologies unfolded and individuals discursively engaged in the movement. During these reflections, I started to to think about the inseparability of the corporeal and the digital, how on-the-ground violence is increasingly informed by the ways in which bodies are captured, consumed and circulated online. However, it was uncanny to encounter so many lurid depictions of violence on social media platforms embedded between everyday content and the kaleidoscope of advertisements and algorithms. While this juxtaposition often renders violence both hyper-visible and overwhelmingly banal, I found that these same media objects became organizing tools within the solidarity struggle, as entryways into the movement through the appeal to shared humanity. In the discourse of violent imagery, a common concern raised is the risk of desensitization of viewers to such violence - something I fully share. However, my curiosity was drawn more toward its inverse function, how

the violated body, caught in a loop of circulating images and responses, elicits a love charged with the urgency to act.

As I complete this thesis, the genocide in Gaza is going, and in its most devastating form yet. The death toll is colossal, and the suffering is loud. Violent imagery continues to circulate across digital platforms, rendering the scale and severity of the atrocities almost unimaginable. It is important to reflect on this, as to why we pay more attention to violated and killed Palestinian bodies and not their livelihoods. But it is even more important to remember that death is an everyday part of living under occupation and genocide, and we cannot understand its resonance without confronting why itself we as spectators are so attuned to violence. We must look into the grotesque image and consider its implications, focusing on the ways in which it compels us to it; we are drawn to it, even as we are horrified by it. Grotesque visuality allows us to interrogate the ways in which the violated body can be co-opted to galvanize solidarity. Once we establish this as a tool of digital protest, we might be more attuned to the tactics in which physical violence must be framed for maximum reach. Or, to put it plainly, we must accept the eroticization and commodification of violence in our societies if we want to use it as a tool in the greater struggle. Only when we start to look into the mechanics of embodied violence can we focus on its regenerative capabilities. It is important to be cognizant of the ambiguous feelings we have towards brutality, so that we ourselves do not contribute to its desensitization; although, we have to contend with the fact that extreme violence is routinely happening and widely seen, and that it is important that we question the intended purpose and outcome of ourselves spreading these atrocities. Violence sells, and violence works. Grotesque visuality allows us to focus on how to navigate the affective, economic power it holds while being deeply respectful to the victims. But

to suppress their suffering, even under the guise of desensitization, is to further bury the horrors they were subjected to throughout their lives and in death.

I do not want to make an objective argument here as to whether violence is detrimental *or* beneficial to counter-visual modalities of representation, nor of the moral/ethical concerns surrounding the different appropriations of the violated body. Rather than placing my ideas in one ‘camp’ or the other, I think it is more important to be in accord with our visual cultures and understand the ways in which violence organizes them. Grotesque visuality is structured around this ambivalence, recognizing that nothing exists in absolute terms; human life and the ways we come to make sense of it are irreducibly complex and contradictory. As things are constantly changing, my framework of grotesque visuality will require revisions that track the evolving ways in which we interact with violence online. Like the collective corpus, I see this research as part of an ongoing and collaborative effort, and I hope others will build on it in future work.

To wrap up this thesis, I want to turn to Donna Haraway’s resonating proclamation in *The Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) that, “By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism”.⁷² I propose that we should embrace the dissolution between these binaries—man/machine, subject/object, life/death—to more effectively navigate its complexities within our political practices. In its most regenerative form, embracing our fusion with the machine can help us better understand ourselves and the socio-technical landscape of the present we inhabit. The cyborg teaches us to read our reflections in shattered screens, and to find within it a new vernacular of understanding our intimacies with the image and the network. In the cacophony of pixels, the grotesque body lingers as a ghost of

⁷² The cyborg metaphor proposes a non-essentialist framework to understanding how political coalitions are built based on affinity rather than fixed identities; Haraway pp. 70.

resistance, reminding us that even in the most mediated of realities, there remains the possibility of reprogramming the code.

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Figure 2

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Figure 5

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