

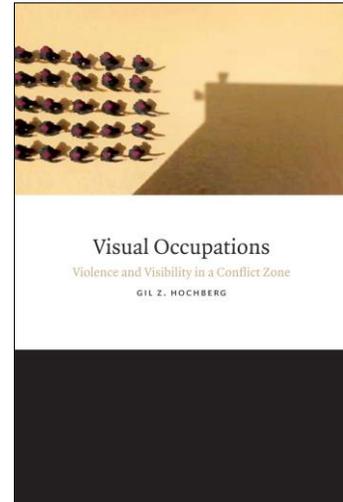
Gil V. Hochberg, **Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 212 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

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Gil V. Hochberg's **Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone** approaches the subject of surveillance from a personal and nuanced perspective. Overall, it appears that the book is more focused on representation and creative reinterpretations of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, but there are moments when the theoretical rigor of the argument and Hochberg's insight into the social nuances of the situation add a noticeable thickness to the uninitiated's understanding of the politics. The book then might not be the best introduction to the specifics of the conflict, but it certainly adds a cultural depth to existing understanding and popular interpretations (e.g., Ari Folman's 2008 feature-length animated film *Waltz With Bashir*) of the relationship among representation, exposure, surveillance, and the Occupied Territories.



The primary issue for the book is the connection between occupation and visibility. The setting for the discussion is Israel and Palestine. Despite the evident geopolitical element to the text, the argument revolves around a handful of films, art installations, and photography projects that either focus on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict or were produced by artists personally connected to the conflict. The ideal audience would be students and researchers of film, art, and visual representation before it would be useful to those interested in a political interpretation.

Apart from the emphasis on checkpoints in chapter 3, the primary type of visibility that this text is concerned with is representation rather than the kind of visibility linked to programs of state surveillance. The book is about how the different sides in the conflict are represented by their own communities and by observers on the other side. Hochberg opens the book by citing Rancière's comprehension of politics as "a question of aesthetics and a matter of appearances" (p. 6) and follows through on this to the extent that aesthetics is the primary concern. Hochberg clearly sees the production of art as a window into something that cannot be observed via typical political interpretations. In that light, this book is a compelling exercise in trying to find broader meaning through closer attention to aesthetics and appearances.

Hochberg engages with prose and visual (still, video, and cinematic) representations of living conditions in Israel and the Occupied Territories. The argument attempts to cover a variety of perspectives and folds those interpretations into a larger impression of the systems of representation and reflection that make up the cultures of visibility and exposure in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Hochberg attempts to formulate what is seeable in the conflict and the different power relations and actors that

determine the possibilities for that visibility. Through three categories—concealment, surveillance, and witnessing—she attempts to illustrate the way in which both the internal (i.e. directly involved) and the external (i.e., peripheral) actors fit into these three categories and to determine the possibilities related to seeing in this specific sociopolitical context.

By moving through these different contextualizations, the disparities and similarities between the varying perspectives are used as a means of illustrating the pliability of visibility in the Occupied Territories. The result is a nuanced overview of a variety of attempts to represent life and the politics of Israel and Palestine. There is a personal element to it—Hochberg has clearly selected texts that speak to her interpretation of the conflict—and depending on the perspective that the reader brings to reading this text, this will be a strength or a hindrance. From a humanities perspective, the analysis raises some interesting points and drives the reader toward a more aesthetic appreciation of the topic of visibility and how it relates to the conflict. From a sociopolitical perspective, the analysis seems to spend too much time away from the substantive theoretical arguments related to power and conflict and emphasizes more fluid questions related to barriers to interpretation and choices of representation.

This is perhaps the reason why it is as ambitious to try to produce a text like this on a topic like the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The expectations are so heavily directed toward a geopolitical interpretation that the idea of artistic representations being a significant element of the overall social shape of the circumstances is initially difficult to comprehend. The use of creative presentations of the circumstances allows for a window into the experience of living in, working in, or remembering the Occupied Territories. Hochberg’s understanding of how these representations fit in is apparent early in the text:

In the presence of an official army and state, Israel is capable of maintaining its *facade of normalcy* by successfully presenting an image of separation between its civil order and its militarized one, thus obscuring the impact militarism has on every single aspect of Israeli life. (pp. 9–10 emphasis in original)

The interest in representations that come from outside the official channels is a natural consequence of Hochberg’s realization of this “facade of normalcy.” Her description of the importance of the visual field in the understanding and communication of conditions in the Occupied Territories is evident from her description of the positions of the two sides directly involved:

Belonging to an occupied society without a sovereign government or army, Palestinians, unlike Israelis, depend on the circulation of images of armed civilians and victims as perhaps one of the *only* symbolic means of promoting a communal sense of empowerment, resistance, and collective mourning. (p. 11)

Further, “The most important factor, at least as far as Israel’s public relations efforts are concerned, is the management and distribution of violent images” (p. 13). The desire to get at something that is not available through traditional channels is clear from the start. The pervasiveness of politically sanitized narratives is obvious after reading Hochberg’s book—the degree to which the chosen examples differ from typical Western descriptions of life in the Occupied Territories is significant. There is a search for deeper

meaning here, as there is in all art really, and it is one that attempts to look at expressions of the lived experience rather than determinations of the conditions of existence that come from more abstract and impersonal analyses.

Hochberg's book uses the personal as a means of illustrating the abstract. Analyses of surveillance like Stephen Graham's *Cities Under Siege* (2011), Zygmunt Bauman and David Lyon's *Liquid Surveillance* (2013), Kelly Gates's *Our Biometric Future* (2011), or Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson's *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility* (2006) emphasize the more impersonal aspects of cultures of control. The writing drifts in the direction of the technology and the political cultures that determine its use. Hochberg's text clearly comes from an embodied interpretation, but it is personal in a way that tries to inform the negotiated conditions of specification and exposure, memory and forgetting, and expression and interpretation in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

The emphasis on creative works in this book may rub some readers the wrong way. With the exception of chapter 6, I was aware of a desire for a bit more direct work with critical theory relative to the subject matter, but I am aware that this may be due to my own biases and expectations regarding narratives of exposure and surveillance. Hochberg's approach is to bridge the gap between cultural and political impressions, and it is necessary that the case studies and examples come from more subjective sources than other books on the subject of surveillance.

This book will be rewarding to those interested in film studies and literary appreciation of the social and cultural contours of Israel and the Occupied Territories. The text is specific to that conflict, however, and those who are looking for a more general, abstract assessment of visuality and surveillance might not find what they are looking for here. The text is more about expression and description than it is about the application of surveillance or control, and this really is the book's key strength. The reluctance to generalize or force abstractions into the discussion helps convey the significance Hochberg gives to her research and the urgency with which she describes the visual occupations under way.

References

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