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## The Dialogical Imperative in The Digital Age: From Trans-National Specularity to Post-National Imaginary in Israel/Palestine

### Keywords

multidirectional memory, dialogical imaginations, trans-national specularity,  
post-national imaginary, Israel/Palestine, biopolitics, necropolitics

### Abstract

This article argues for the urgency of positing visual forms as sites through which to further develop the framework of dialogical and multi-directional memory in narrating the histories of Israel/Palestine as well as other spaces where a contest for a national homeland has been circumscribed within limited notions of identity. First, it revisits the writings of scholars who have laid the theoretical groundwork through which to challenge the orthodoxy of the nation-centric positions in Israel/Palestine and who embed them within the larger project of decolonization. Second, it points to the necessity of incorporating the theories of biopolitics and necropolitics to understand how power operates in producing the archive of memory. Third, it analyzes contemporary aesthetic strategies through which muted archives of memory have been activated and builds upon them to articulate the concept of “trans-national specularity,” forging comparisons across national borders and potentially beyond national imaginaries.

## Dialoški imperativ v digitalni dobi: od nadnacionalne spekularnosti do postnacionalnega imaginarija v Izraelu/ Palestini

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### Ključne besede

večsmerni spomin, dialoške imaginacije, nadnacionalna spekularnost, postnacionalni  
imaginarij, Izrael/Palestina, biopolitika, nekropolitika

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### Povzetek

Članek zagovarja nujnost postavitve vizualnih oblik kot mest, s katerimi je mogoče nadalje razvijati okvir dialoškega in večsmernega spomina v pripovedovanju zgodovine Izraela/Palestine kot tudi drugih prostorov, kjer je bil boj za nacionalno domovino opredeljen v okviru omejenega števila pojmov identitete. Prvič, članek ponovno obravnava spise avtorjev, ki so postavili teoretično osnovo za izpodbijanje ortodoksnih, na nacijo osredotočenih stališč v Izraelu/Palestini, in so te spise vgradili v širši projekt dekolonizacije. Drugič, članek izpostavlja nujnost vključevanja teorij biopolitike in nekropolitike za razumevanje delovanja oblasti pri ustvarjanju arhiva spomina. Tretjič, članek analizira sodobne estetske strategije, s pomočjo katerih so bili aktivirani utišani arhivi spomina, in jih nadgrajuje v smeri artikulacije koncepta »nacionalne spekularnosti«, s pomočjo katerega je mogoče skovati primerjavo, ki bo segala čez nacionalne meje in, potencialno, onkraj nacionalnih imaginarijev.



### Introduction

In the current public sphere, which has made it ever more difficult to think, write, and speak about Israel/Palestine without succumbing to polarized identitarian claims or fears of being “cancelled,” *this article argues for the urgency of positing visual forms as sites through which to further develop the framework of dialogical and multi-directional memory in narrating the histories of Israel/Palestine as well as other spaces where a contest for a national homeland has been circumscribed within limited notions of identity.*

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Indeed, faced with the increasing ideological contraction of the epistemological bandwidth, which reduces and essentializes entangled bodies of knowledge, this article elaborates on current theories and proposes the concept of “trans-national specularity” as a pathway toward a post-national imaginary.

As the scholarship on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is extensive, this article solely focuses on selected theories and case studies that engage with the competition for a national homeland in Israel/Palestine and the current memory debates that surround them. To develop my argument, the first part of this article revisits the writings of Ella Shohat, Michael Rothberg, and Ariella Aïsha

Azoulay, scholars who have laid the theoretical groundwork for challenges to nation-centric orthodoxies in discourses in and surrounding Palestine/Israel; they moreover embed these challenges in the larger project of decolonization.

With Shohat, Rothberg, and Azoulay, I suggest that contemporary art and visual culture can expand the dialogical spectrum of multi-directionality beyond the two main protagonists to a trans-national constellation of actors in the *longue durée*. Building on their seminal contributions, the second part of the article points to the necessity of incorporating the theories of biopolitics and necropolitics, as conceived by Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe, to understand how power operates in producing the archive of memory. In this section, I demonstrate that biopolitical/necropolitical conditions, structures, and techniques not only manufacture racialized differences as the basis for modern governmentality and the nation state but are also implicated with animating or silencing the genealogies of memory that are crucial to the constitution of entangled multidirectional communities; In the third part, I analyze recent examples of artistic and cultural practices that confront the conflict in Israel/Palestine and evaluate the ways in which they have tried to restore memories that have been erased or muted through nation-state formation. Finally, by reflecting on how global media systems and networked technologies in the digital age might fabricate new sensorial iterations of multidirectional memory, I offer a concept that I have termed trans-national specularity. It describes aesthetic strategies in and through which dialogical histories and memories could be made visible and open to comparison across national borders. With trans-national specularity as a conceptual foundation, I argue for the necessity of developing a theory of a post-national imaginary, one that moves beyond the orthodoxies of any nation-state and supports communities of belonging that organize themselves through other types of bonds.

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### **A Lexicon of “Dialogical Imaginations” and “Multidirectional Memory”**

Many scholars have argued for the urgency of expanding the range of protagonists, chronologies, and geographies that shape the narratives of history and memory in conditions of globalization and counter-globalization and countless others who have analyzed the complex underpinnings and iterations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This section, however, limits itself to the writings of Shohat, Rothberg, and Azoulay, three of the most prominent thinkers to posit memory cultures as a bulwark against monolithic essentialism. Since the 1980s,

Shohat has combined her personal and intellectual biography as an Arab Jew of Baghdadi origin with the close-reading of diverse cultural artifacts to advance the debates on the plurality and intersectionality of Muslim-Jewish histories and memories. Situating her analyses within “a relational network” that considers “imperial history, partition, remapping, and post/colonial dislocations,” Shohat has been among the first to dispute the teleological narrative that traces the Arab-Jewish experience directly to the Zionist construction of the State of Israel and, in her analysis, imposes a Eurocentric representation of the region and, specifically, a European paradigm of antisemitism onto the Muslim world. A master narrative of perpetual victimhood, oppression, and displacement was ideologically grafted onto the history of Arab Jews despite millennia of relatively untroubled co-habitation and dialogical entanglement within Islamic societies. “Sephardi Jews,” she writes, “experienced an utterly different history within the Arab world than that which haunts the European memories of Ashkenazi Jews; the conflation of the Muslim-Arab with the archetypal European oppressors of Jews strategically understates Israel’s colonial-settler dispossession of Palestinian people.”<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the schism between the constructed categories of “Arab,” “Jew,” and “Arab-Jew,” occurred “even prior to the emergence of Zionism, in the wake of colonial modernity, with its discursive correlatives in the form of racialized tropes, Orientalist fantasies, and Eurocentric epistemologies.”<sup>3</sup> Already under severe duress with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, there was an irrevocable fissure in the post-World War Two/post-Holocaust context with the U.N. resolution to partition Palestine in 1947 and establish the State of Israel in 1948 and, simultaneously, the *Nakba* (Arabic for “catastrophe” or “disaster”), a term used to describe the eviction and mass displacement of Palestinians between 1947 and 1949 by Zionist paramilitaries and, after the official establishment of the State of Israel, the Israeli military. In a moment marked by the dissolution of empires, geopolitical reconfigurations, and insurgent processes of decolonization, which included the creation of new nation states such as India and Pakistan and the independence of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, a “novel nationalist lexicon of Jews and Arabs” came to the fore. Merged into a new nationhood with Ashkena-

<sup>1</sup> Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ella Shohat, “Rethinking Jews and Muslims: Quincentennial Reflections,” *Middle East Report* 178 (September–October 1992): 28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012984>.

<sup>3</sup> Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew*, 2.

zi Jews, “Arab Jews woke up to a new world order that could not accommodate their simultaneous Jewishness and Arabness”<sup>4</sup> while, concurrently, approximately 750,000 Palestinians from a population of 1.9 million became refugees.<sup>5</sup>

Shohat’s scholarship is constitutive because it has presciently argued for understanding cultural practices and collective identities within complex interconnected histories and geographies that extend within a *longue durée*—even as single, univocal national narratives have become the ideological norm—and for identifying the nationalization and racialization processes that have been instrumental in creating the narrow identitarian, ethno-nationalist typologies of the post-war. This framework has informed her analyses of shared sites of self-representation and memory, i.e., films, food, music, languages, syntaxes, accents, etc., and networks of “dialogical imagination” that affectively connected populations of various denominations living in the Middle East and North Africa before the emergence of modern, racialized nation states violently bifurcated their coextensive genealogy. It has also shaped her approach to transnational analysis of the experience of departure, dispossession, and articulations of homeland of both “Arab-Jews” and “Palestinians” as the consequence of colonial and national practices. Crucially, according to Shohat, “the two displacements are not equivalent or symmetrical or identical, yet they are closely related.”<sup>6</sup> Since these two forms of exodus occurred in a temporal and spatial proximity, the challenge “has been to relationalize and transnationalize the comparison itself.”<sup>7</sup> As Shohat writes,

“the Arab-Jew” and “Palestine” function as tropes not only for loss of time/place and the absence left in their wake, but also for struggles to persist and remain amidst the absurdities of disappearing, or disappeared, worlds. Both the “Arab-Jew” and “Palestine” come to form tropes of dis/placement. The respective exiling of both communities gave way to the shock of arrival. And the black and white photos of dislocated Arab Jews in tents echo images of Palestinian refugees in a kind of a haunting specularity . . .<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Shohat, 3.

<sup>5</sup> “The *Nakba* did not start or end in 1948.”

<sup>6</sup> Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Shohat, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Shohat, 8.

Though the world-picturing of “Jew-versus-Arab” is a greatly impoverished one, its hegemonic grammar continues to be reproduced by the various stakeholders of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via an aggressive erasure and policing of entangled histories, memories, and identities. What this fracturing has achieved is a “competition for victim-status, with winners and losers, rather than [a] compassionate narrative for many groups: for Jews enduring Judeo-phobia in Europe, for dispossessed Palestinians, for dislocated Arab Jews, for Muslims suffering Islamophobia, and for the victims of the ongoing devastation in the Middle East.”<sup>9</sup> Without the dialogical imaginary or an empathetic disposition towards its (re)construction, the “facts on the ground” point to wars without end.

In parallel, Rothberg’s examination of the rift between contemporary memories of the Nazi genocide of Jews in the Holocaust and traumas linked to colonial conflicts marks an attempt to also move beyond the competition for victim status. Developing the term “multidirectional memory,” Rothberg’s writings have become significant as the “memory industry” has grown in amplitude and the historical traumas of diverse ethnic and religious communities have become increasingly politicized in the present. Rothberg’s contribution to the conceptualization of collective remembrance is hinged on the claim that

multidirectional memory encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction.<sup>10</sup>

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By underscoring the dialogical dynamic of memory production against models of competitive memory, Rothberg moves the conversation away from the notion that memory is singular or static and lays the foundation for “remembrance [that] both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and culture sites.”<sup>11</sup> In Rothberg’s constellation of dialogical encounters, the memory of the Holocaust is interwoven with cultural histories that span Europe, North

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<sup>9</sup> Shohat, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Rothberg, 11.

America, the Caribbean, and North Africa. The Nazi genocide and writings on totalitarianism by European Jewish philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, he shows, became a central preoccupation for intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Aimé Césaire who were active in anti-racist, anti-imperialist struggles. Later, the centrality of Holocaust testimony entered into dialogue with decolonial struggles in Algeria and Vietnam, for example, as victims of torture and massacre began to share their experiences in public. Rothberg traces such conjunctions as they became articulated in diverse material artifacts to support his claim that “the experience of Jewish difference within modern Europe [. . .] foreshadows many of the debates and problems faced by postcolonial societies and postcolonial migrants in contemporary Europe.”<sup>12</sup> Maintaining the exclusivity of memory, he claims, blocks the recognition of the shared struggles that persist in the post-Holocaust and post-colonial worlds. Indeed, like Shohat, Rothberg multiplies the agents and protagonists who are implicated in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by reconstituting the plural historical intersections between the memories of the Holocaust and colonialism. Concurring with Shohat, Rothberg identifies a fundamental violence that has been enacted on diverse populations through what Anibal Quijano<sup>13</sup> and Walter D. Mignolo have termed the concept of modernity/coloniality.<sup>14</sup>

To advance their capitalist ambitions and complete their colonial occupations, Quijano argues that European powers classified hierarchies of human life—and differentiated between conquerors and conquered—around a “racial axis” of power.<sup>15</sup> The colonization of America by the Spanish and Portuguese crowns served as the primary testing ground, but the concept of racial difference, articulated as a fundamental biological difference, also became the fundamental tool through which Europe distributed labor and organized exploitation within capitalist modernity. Rothberg frames his call for multidirectional memory as “a polemical thrust [. . .] to reject the reductionism of the nation-centered

<sup>12</sup> Rothberg, 22–23.

<sup>13</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>.

<sup>14</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.

<sup>15</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/23906>.

[. . .] model in favor of a more open-ended sense of the possibilities of memory and counter-memory that might allow the ‘revisiting’ and rewriting of hegemonic sites of memory.”<sup>16</sup> Moving from a hegemony to a plurality of identifications and sites for their (re)imaginings, multidirectional memory supports an amplified public sphere in which diverse actors not only have the right to enter the frame of historical and political representation but make visible the nation-state-based rules that manage those rights in the first place.

Azoulay, meanwhile, offers a pathway towards “unlearning imperialism” *not* by writing a counter-history to the present but, rather, by acknowledging the imperial temporality of progress that has brought us to this moment, excavating the “pre-imperial” temporalities that preceded it, and asserting their potentiality in the present.<sup>17</sup> Enacting a methodology of unlearning, Azoulay examines the vocabulary that guides contemporary identifications of people, ie, “refugee,” “infiltrator,” “undocumented,” “citizen,” “illegal worker,” and suggests that they are the outcome of imperial archives and the frameworks of history, memory, citizenship, and human rights that they support. She also foregrounds the role of museums and other cultural institutions as a constitutive part of the imperial structure and argues that they must first acknowledge this reality in order to be transformed. Most important for my argument, Azoulay claims that the photographic document has played a fundamental role in enacting violence within the apparatus of the imperial archive. In the simple click of the shutter, photography frames, illuminates, collects, and reproduces only what is necessary for those who are in power. In keeping with the logic of imperialism, it thus performs “dividing lines” that have subsequently become naturalized. There was, however, a shared world that preceded the conceptual conversion of human beings into raw materials and resources for colonization and imperial domination. She writes, “potential history is a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present, colonized peoples from their worlds and possessions, and history from politics.”<sup>18</sup> Every image, then, offers the possibility for new encounters among civilians—who may or may not hold the right to citizenship within a nation state—and who

<sup>16</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 310.

<sup>17</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Azoulay, 43.

enter the spectatorial encounter from within different constellations of power.<sup>19</sup> For Azoulay, the “civil discourse” that can emerge from encounters with borderless images is precisely one that “suspends the point of view of governmental power and the nationalist characteristics that enable it to divide the governed from one another and to set its factions against one another.”<sup>20</sup> A shared imaginary emanating from the civil realm, she claims, is the basis for a new political imagination. Yet, as I elucidate in the next section, contemporary techniques of biopower and necropower also impede the emergence of a multidimensional archive of memory that could articulate a shared imaginary.

### Biopower / Necropower and the Regulation of Memory

Shohat, Rothberg, and Azoulay situate their essays within postcolonial and decolonial frameworks and methods that challenge the primacy of Eurocentric paradigms and mine the historical archives to uncover moments of dialogical, relational, and multidirectional memories that foster cultural heterogeneity. Moreover, these scholars identify processes of racialization as constitutive to the formulation of identity and its hierarchies within modernity/coloniality and recognize the racial axis of power that underpins traumatic violence and its transformation into history and memory. Yet a thorny issue remains unexplored, namely: *How does biopower/necropower organize the production of the archive of memory?*

### Michel Foucault: The Archive as a Biopolitical Apparatus

As Foucault makes clear in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, our cultural memory, which is related to the consolidation of history, is not simply produced by an unmediated accumulation of events, texts, objects, and images, but is organized and accessed by the rules of a discursive regime that regulates what can be thought and said at any given historical moment. In other words, our contemporary archive—or what Foucault termed the *dispositif*—is an apparatus or a historical “system of functioning” makes certain ideas and enunciations “thinkable” and “sayable” while other orders and genealogies of knowl-

<sup>19</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bettleheim (London: Verso, 2015), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Azoulay, 2.

edge may be repressed, only survive in parts or, in fact, entirely disappear. If we agree that history and memory are the products of an archive with a particular historicity, our aim is thus to understand the forms of power that impede certain aspects of knowledge from becoming thinkable or sayable and, simultaneously, to reposition the silences as enunciating specific power structures. This additional dimension of analysis is vital if we are to assess how the contemporary, globally entwined, media-fused nation states—which are still epistemologically entrenched in a Euro-centric Westphalian model—diminish or willfully excise the possibilities of imagining and telling conjoined, multidirectional narratives while visual practitioners and other advocates try to articulate or bolster them.

As is well established, Foucault also offers us the concept of biopolitics, which he formulated while studying the forms of governmentality in liberal and neo-liberal nation states as they developed from the eighteenth century onwards. Biopolitics, according to Foucault, is the way in which the state manages “the living beings forming a population” via specific practices and, in so doing, articulates the limits of civil society and maintains control over it.<sup>21</sup> Biopolitics is activated via biopower, which Foucault describes as “a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”<sup>22</sup> Ordering life through biopower extends to all aspects of civil society, again through what Foucault calls a *dispositif*—a network of power “that presupposed a closely meshed grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign.”<sup>23</sup> The replacement of the sovereign by biopower, which supports the governmentality of the liberal and neoliberal nation state, goes hand-in-hand with a shift from the sovereign’s right to “decide life and death”<sup>24</sup> to the nation state’s power to “foster life or disallow it to the point of death.”<sup>25</sup> With this turning point, it is no longer the sovereign who is defended but the state and its population. And

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 317.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1; An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 137.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lecture Series at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 135.

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, 138.

it is racialization and racism that become the key processes through which the state defines the norm of inclusion within exclusion from its protection. Racism, moreover, is not only projected outward, i.e., between races, but is also internally divided, i.e., within races. This is an important qualification as biopower creates divisions between populations but also fosters hierarchies and differentiations within them to justify the state's disciplinary behavior. Racism, Foucault writes, is "primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die."<sup>26</sup>

### Achille Mbembe: The Necropolitical Archive and the Proliferation of Death Worlds

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe developed Foucault's concept by pointing to the latter's failure in analyzing the role of biopolitics in the management of systems of violence, dispossession, and death. Necropolitics, the concept he coined in 2003, helps us analyze how "contemporary forms of subjugation of life" are managed in relation "to the power of death" within neoliberal global capitalism and its new state and para-state model of the "war machine."<sup>27</sup> With a "state of exception" and a "state of siege," concepts that Mbembe develops from the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, constantly operating to create crises, enemies, and fear, necropolitical governmentality is reproduced within civil society.<sup>28</sup> "Necropolitics and necropower," he writes, "account for the various ways in which [. . .] weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."<sup>29</sup> These living dead, who exist in a state of "permanent condition of 'being in pain,'"<sup>30</sup> inhabit paradigmatic spaces i.e., plantations, colonies, occupied territories, and camps, in which racial distinctions reinforce necropower that is exercised through a social, economic, and cultural apparatus. Yet, with necropower replacing biopower as the dominant form of contemporary gov-

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 257.

<sup>27</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

<sup>28</sup> Mbembe, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Mbembe, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Mbembe, 39.

ernmentality within neoliberal global capitalism, Mbembe claims that we are faced with both vast “necro-death-scapes” of physical impoverishment as well as symbolic death through the near-total privatization and atomization of contemporary life.

Taken together, Foucault’s and Mbembe’s theories help elucidate the contemporary archival regime and its maintenance of the nation state as a model of governmentality organized around racialized hierarchies of life. Yet, beyond the management of populations and their social existence, I argue that biopolitics/necropolitics also sanctions which memories might live and which are made to die. From these theoretical underpinnings, the next section examines a selection of contemporary image-based practices that intervene in the archival apparatus in various ways.

### Artistic, Cultural and Visual Interventions: Making Archives Speak

Writing an article on “The Dialogical Imperative” between the summers of 2023 and of 2024 may seem like a romantically futile or escapist endeavor in the face of current situation in Israel/Palestine: the “attack on democracy”<sup>31</sup> precipitated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s far-right government, the Israel-Gaza war triggered by the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians on October 7, and an ongoing occupation of Palestinian territory and terrorization of Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza. As I began drafting these reflections in July 2023, the coalition of religious and nationalist parties, the most hardline in Israel’s seventy-five-year history, set in motion the overhaul of the judiciary system in a country that is typically referred to by Israel and its allies as “the only democracy in the Middle East.”<sup>32</sup> While the Supreme Court struck down this bill in January 2024, those who have been watching Israeli-Palestinian relations unfold since the country’s establishment in 1948, understand that the “democracy” in question is only the purview of the Jewish majority and, according to the scholar of human rights law, Neve Gordon, those that “criticize the new

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Bazelon, “How Israel’s Supreme Court Might React to the Challenge to Its Power,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/25/world/middleeast/israel-supreme-court-judicial-overhaul-netanyahu.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Shibley Telhami, “Is Israel a Democracy? Here’s What Americans Think,” Brookings, April 25, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-israel-a-democracy-heres-what-americans-think/>.

Netanyahu government as ‘undemocratic’ are actually serving to whitewash the inherently undemocratic nature of Israel and its leading institutions, including its Supreme Court.”<sup>33</sup> For Israelis, Netanyahu’s latest mandate became an existential crisis that prompted mass-demonstrations and analyses of the country’s internal conflicts, namely between Jews of diverse political, religious, and ethnic identifications; yet the unprecedented attacks of October 7, 2023 and the ensuing Israel-Gaza war that has now cost thousands of lives in an asymmetrical deployment of military power rendered those judicial concerns peripheral and bolstered national unity. For the Palestinians, who have been dispersed in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel, and a global diaspora since the *Nakba*, the heavy price of this latest military salvo is another episode of the enduring Israeli occupation; paradoxically, the death, suffering, and displacement of Gaza’s civilians as well as the near-total destruction of its infrastructure has only strengthened the Palestinian narrative on the world stage. To echo historian Rashid Khalidi’s analysis of the transformations in global discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the Second Intifada (2002), we have entered a new phase in which Palestinian claims to peoplehood, nationhood, and self-governance have been increasingly amplified and legitimated.<sup>34</sup>

In this moment of ultra-violence, as both Israel’s right-wing government and Hamas vie for a unilateral military victory and dominance of the global narrative, the necropolitical operations of silencing accomplish their task in plain sight and make it ever more difficult to consider the intertwined memory cultures of Israel/Palestine. How might we make muted dialogical archives speak through the analysis of cultural and visual production? In the last twenty years, several scholars and practitioners have engaged with this task. For example, Eyal Weizman, founder and director of the research agency Forensic Architecture (FA), an interdisciplinary collective based at Goldsmiths, University of London, who has been employing various investigative tools to reveal the abuses of various nation states, including Israel. FA uses physical as well as digital modeling to

<sup>33</sup> Neve Gordon, “The Problem with Israel’s So-Called ‘Crisis of Democracy,’” Al Jazeera, February 22, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/2/22/the-problem-with-israels-so-called-crisis-of-democracy>.

<sup>34</sup> Rashid I. Khalidi, “The *Journal of Palestine Studies* in the Twenty-First Century: An Editor’s Reflections,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 3 (2021): 5–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2021.1933101>.

study the violence enacted upon the built environment, the people who inhabit it, and their representation/erasure. “The agency,” Weizman writes,

produces evidence files that include building survey, models, animations, video analyses, and interactive cartographies, and presents them in forums such as international courts, truth commissions, citizen tribunals, human rights and environmental reports . . . We use the term “forensics,” but we seek, in fact, to reverse the forensic gaze and to investigate the same state agencies—such as the police or the military—that usually monopolize it.”<sup>35</sup>

In their investigations, FA highlight the way in which the Israeli nation state—via its army, police, and government—has systematically destroyed the infrastructure, agricultural land, built environment, and human life of Palestinians and Bedouins. FA makes evident that architecture, media, and violence are all part of broader constellation of governmentality through which the Israeli state maintains its hegemony over both people and archives of knowledge. Crucially, because of the FA’s goal of destroying “the monopoly of the state over the narrative and [composing], using multiple sources a new picture,”<sup>36</sup> it has not investigated acts of violence performed by individual actors or military militias who are not representatives of the (Israeli) nation-state. In serving a specific agenda, namely creating the possibilities of aesthetic and judicial representation to those who have been racialized as “other” and, thus excluded, dispossessed, or suppressed, FA act from *within* what Azoulay has termed the “dividing lines” of Imperialism. At the same time, they expand our understanding of visuality/aesthetics to include two mutually constitutive notions of sensing, namely “as the capacity to register or be affected by material, and sense-making, the synthesis of sense-perceptions into knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, while they only explicitly engage on behalf of a single stakeholder in their forensic analysis of asymmetrical power relations, they nevertheless multiply the potential communities and collec-

<sup>35</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Fahim, “‘A Gunshot, a Speech, a Whisper’: The Art Detectives Exposing Middle East Crimes,” *Middle East Eye*, January 6, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/gunshot-speech-whisper-art-detectives-exposing-middle-east-crimes>.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Eby, “Mapping the Social in Theory and Practice,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 3, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mapping-the-social-in-theory-and-practice/>.

tive forms of knowledge by extending the purview of the sensorial in the combination of the physical and digital realms under neoliberal digital conditions. As Jacques Rancière reminds us, the political division of the sensible may be historically organized,<sup>38</sup> yet sensing and sense-making are relational and contingent and can thus exceed essentialist identitarian positions or finite models of community. Here, it is useful to reiterate Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of sense, one that is not owned or possessed by any one group but is always shared, plural, and in perpetual process of *undoing* an idealized common ground.<sup>39</sup> If we reframe the sensorial as constituted by internal difference and intersubjective multiplicity, it becomes a field of possibility for multidirectional and dialogical communities of sense.

The art historian T. J. Demos also contributes to the contemporary debates about the structures and systems representations of Israel/Palestine in "Disappearance and Precarity: On the Photographs of Ahlam Shibli." In this essay, he foregrounds the series *Death* (2011–2012), sixty-eight photographs in which Shibli documents the culture of Palestinian martyrdom in and around the West Bank city of Nablus, while also broaching an extensive *œuvre* dedicated to the material and social conditions of Palestinians living elsewhere. Her "photographic practice," Demos argues, "pledged to recognize the unrecognized, challenging the visual regimes that would otherwise consign those subjects to erasure."<sup>40</sup> Like Forensic Architecture, Shibli has dedicated herself to representing those who are unrecognized or marginalized by the Israeli nation state and whose culture—and archive of cultural memory—has been devastated by it. Shibli's photographic project functions as a counter-archive by making that which is invisible visible, yet Demos recognizes that its particularist identification is "complicated by her photography's sensitivity to documentary's aesthetics of indeterminacy."<sup>41</sup> Demos interprets Shibli's relationship to the contingency of the photographic document and its ability to evoke multiple connotations as one that respects that the unrepresentability of human life, especially those of the politically unrepresented, who

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> T. J. Demos, "Disappearance and Precarity: On the Photographs of Ahlam Shibli," in *Ahlam Shibli: Phantom Home*, ed. Ester Capdevila (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013), 10.

<sup>41</sup> Demos, 12.

should not be reified. Extending this point further, I suggest that the contingency of Shibli's photographic images also makes it possible for them to function as agents of multidirectional memory in ways that may be unexpected, unintended, and un-enforceable. While her *œuvre* certainly "challenges oppression and dispossession in different geopolitical contexts, by placing the Palestinian struggle in relation to political struggles elsewhere"<sup>42</sup> it may also create complex relational archives of inter-subjective memory between "perpetrators" and "victims" in the Israeli and Palestinian communities and beyond.

Such a reading is made possible if we return to a passage quoted earlier from Shohat in which she describes "the black and white photos of dislocated Arab Jews in tents echo images of Palestinian refugees in a kind of a *haunting specularity*."<sup>43</sup> In this conjunction, Shohat evokes the provisional tents that predominantly housed Arab Jews on their arrival to Israel in the early 1950s, and the refugee camps, which have been an enduring symbol of the Palestinian experience of exile. These historical images carry with them kernels of personal, familial, and cultural remembrance. For both populations, coming home and being displaced are intertwined affective and political experiences that continue to resonate in the present. Indeed, these images do not only point to disappeared worlds or fading pasts but continue to be operative as both Israeli and Gazan populations are being internally displaced by war and their individual and collective pain has been framed as one of competing claims in a zero-sum political rhetoric. What we observe, then, is that such historical photographs enter the civil imaginary in plural ways because the circulation and signification of images cannot be circumscribed by the limits of the nation state or any other form of authority<sup>44</sup> and because subjectivities are not monolithic or predetermined but continuously take shape through a process of negotiating multiple internal divisions.<sup>45</sup> As Rothberg argues, such memories do not "belong" exclusively to Jews or Palestinians—in the same way that memories of the Holocaust or slavery do

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<sup>42</sup> Demos, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Demos, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Sharing Voices," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 211–59.

not solely appertain to the descendants of these histories.<sup>46</sup> Rather, if we agree that “the public articulation of collective memory by marginalized and oppositional social groups provides resources for other groups to articulate their own claims for recognition and justice,”<sup>47</sup> then such images become foundational for a non-state-sanctioned community of multidirectional memories.

One step towards this endeavor is provided by the artist Dani Gal, whose visual and sonic production, I have argued, proposes “a *hallucinatory cinema* that raises questions about its own role as an instrument for the production and reproduction of the effects and affects of the real.”<sup>48</sup> In films such as *White City* (2018), *As From Afar* (2013), *Night and Fog* (2011), Gal engages with the apparatus of memory by developing a critical cinema that works “through an idiom of realism and the medium’s own techniques, conventions and histories,” and “transforms the complex zones of indeterminacy between fact and fiction into an unsettling corporal and visual experience.”<sup>49</sup> His cinema complicates (1) the status of the image as an autonomous visual element of film; (2) framing techniques as delineations of what and who merits representation; (3) the screen as an establishing infrastructural element of the medium; and (4) sound as a secondary variable in the cinematic lexicon. Not only contingent, but also dialogical and, thus, mutually entangled with multiple-yet-incomplete subject positions, Gal’s cinema frequently jumbles the public’s sense of temporality and point of view and disrupts the visual and auditory immersion required to preserve a semblance of the real.

In this effort, Gal’s cinema rejects an understanding of mimesis and alterity as two oppositional forces through which the sphere of appearance is constructed. While his cinema “[emerges] from the mimetic order that has long organised the facticity and historicity of the real, [it] makes images and bodies vibrate from within and causes nervous systems to tremble.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Gal makes visible the modernist epistemology of mimesis *versus* alterity as undergirding the

<sup>46</sup> Michael Rothberg, “From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory,” *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 523–48.

<sup>47</sup> Rothberg, 526.

<sup>48</sup> Noit Banai, “Hallucinatory Cinema and The Dialogical Politics of Framing,” in *An Elaborate Gesture of Pastness: Three Films by Dani Gal*, ed. Dani Gal (Berlin: Motto Books, 2021), 13.

<sup>49</sup> Banai, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Banai, 32.

articulation of self *versus* other within the Westphalian model of the nation-state while also sensorially disrupting it. Thus, his films narrate seemingly familiar national histories while, at the same time, creating intersubjective entanglements between different images, discourses, objects, and protagonists etc., in ways that trigger new networks of memory and post-memory. What comes to the fore is what Rancière terms a “repartitioning of the sensible”<sup>51</sup>; Gal’s cinema functions like a biopolitical/necropolitical nervous system that sensorially disrupts the organization of social roles—and hence, collective memories—as they have been configured by the nation state.<sup>52</sup> From these case studies of artistic practices that foreground as-yet-untold and unseen narratives and memories of Israel/Palestine, the next section proposes the concept of trans-national specularity and posits its importance for developing shared imaginaries beyond the nation state.

### Discussion and Conclusion: From Trans-National Specularity to Post-National Imaginary

In this article, I have argued that in the current context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the histories of trauma and oppression that both populations have experienced in the *longue durée* are “subsumed [. . .] under a logic of equation that set victims against each other in an antagonistic logic of competition.”<sup>53</sup> This is primarily achieved through operations of biopolitics and necropolitics, which play a formative role in organizing what is sayable, thinkable, and knowable in the contemporary interpretation of media images around which calls to support opposing social movements are consolidated. These images are parsed around competing claims of greater moral rectitude and victimization that are linked to ever-narrowing paradigms of national identity and essentialized models of collectivity. Through the concept of dialogical imagination and multidirectional memory, developed by Shohat and Rothberg, the foundation of the State of Israel and the *Nakba* as well as their aftermaths and permutations become embedded in much broader and more complex geopolitical configurations of modernity. These include the residues of the Spanish Inquisition, Ottoman Empire and British and French colonial projects; as well as the agendas of the geopolitical

<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

<sup>52</sup> Banai, “Hallucinatory Cinema and The Dialogical Politics of Framing,” 32.

<sup>53</sup> Rothberg, “From Gaza to Warsaw,” 526.

actors of the Cold War along with the sectarian, religious, and ethnic conflicts, and wars by proxy that have shaped what we now refer to as the Middle East. Undoing the binary opposition in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been presented while also unbinding the mimesis/alterity dyad that produces hardened boundaries between “self” and “other,” we are able to insert its various chapters and episodes into a much longer history of modernity/colonialism and the techniques of nation state formation that accompanied it.

While images from Israel/Palestine have been communicating news and constructing narratives for decades, the new digital technologies and platforms of global connectivity, i.e., social media and artificial intelligence among them, have emerged as both the preeminent instruments for grassroots mobilization and as tools that erode historical contexts and multidirectional solidarity. Due to their connectivity, codependency, and quasi-instantaneous transmission via global media platforms, digital images have the capacity to challenge the narratives propagated by nation states and their administrative mechanisms in real time. As Weizman and Forensic Architecture have shown, anyone linked to mobile devices, television, cable, satellite, or the internet can become a *de facto* member of the community of global post-memory with the regime-made violence of modernity/coloniality shared instantaneously in memes, gifs, jpps, and other types of “poor images.” The image’s elasticity, speed at which it travels, and variable formats of encounter means that it moves virally beyond (national) territories and is delivered directly to the mobile devices of billions of “networked publics” who play an active role in articulating personal and collective spectatorial encounters and, possibly, using the information for judicial purposes.

Though I concur with Azoulay that the potentiality of shaping a new “public/civil” political space is linked to the potency of images, it is also evident that under current conditions of techno-modernity and algorithmic capitalism, we have lost a collective sense of deep time through which divergent archives of memory can inspire alternative futures. As I have argued, the image’s capacity to enact a trans-national politics under a different ontological and epistemological regime is regulated by the biopolitical and necropolitical disciplining of archives and the prohibitions they create on the production of memory and intercession into the political frame. This has at least two implications:

First, power's capture of the archive of history and memory and the regulation of rules around which subject positions of self/other and normativity/delinquency are consolidated and entwined with the production of a physical space in which living beings negotiate a daily reality. In the case of Israel/Palestine, necropower promotes the death or negation of mutually entangled histories that once coexisted and, if rearticulated, may offer conditions of possibility for a shared future. As Shohat reminds us, the operations of necropower have primarily been enacted by applying a European epistemological paradigm of Zionism and antisemitism to the historical constitution of Israel. Yet these operations are not one sided and have been sustained by the denial tactics of the leaders of the Palestinian people (PLO) and the armed terrorist/radical groups such as Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Moreover, they have been entrenched through an interpretive approach to the analysis of artworks that accepts the "imperial dividing lines" and, thus paradoxically, tries to rectify the existent power asymmetry between Israel and Palestine by only representing or advocating for one siloed community or by creating a counter-archive based on a monological perspective. Moreover, monological archives are being promoted today, under neoliberal global capitalism, by the many state powers, industries, and cartels that have invested in supporting either Israel or Palestine for financial speculation and gain. The contemporary archive is thus a complex technology of reproduction through which racially constructed communities that have been essentialized, atomized, and emptied of difference and intersubjective relations, pass on effects of belonging/unbelonging to future generations.

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Second, the images flowing out of Israel/Palestine, which have been transformed into privatized objects of consumption and corporate data mining; a marketplace of ready-made affects and techniques of self-administration; and a source of propaganda from state and non-state actors, incite a modality of outrage that privileges the temporal present. This is a matrix devoted to the scan, scroll, click, like, hashtag, and repost: it robs images of the multifarious textures and temporalities of history, maintains a scarcity/adversarial model, contributes to the fabrication of disinformation and conspiracy theories, and to quote Jean-Paul Sartre, acts as "an inversion of praxis into practico-inert activity."<sup>54</sup> It is difficult to "make live" the dialogical archives of Israel/Palestine in the *longue*

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume One; Theory of Practical Ensembles*, ed. Jonathan Rée, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 1976), 271.

*durée* when the very condition of encountering images in digital spaces is invested in maintaining an ever-shallower recursive present. In that respect, I argue that it is contemporary artistic practices that habitually make their debut on various art circuits before having a second life on digital storage sites that may be better poised to re-animate dialogical implications. It is such practices that create the latitude to sensorially experience the discomfort that frequently accompanies dialogical experiences of time and space and multidirectional configuration of bodies, feelings and ideas so that they might become the substance of analysis and deliberation rather than being transformed into populist animus or a politics of separation.

From this groundwork, these practices establish the possibility for a *trans-national specularity* that expands a post-national imaginary. With this term, I bring to relief the potency of practices that represent historical events and their (post)memories while making their publics highly conscious of the insecurity of the referent through which their appearance has been consolidated; They also bring to the fore the archival competition for delineating the frame of the real, the right to representation within it, and the experience of belonging and unbelonging that it generates; and—importantly—they impel us to reflect on the poverty of alliances and modes of being-in-common made possible by the nation state's biopolitical/necropolitical model of governmentality. These practices actively generate sensorial disturbances in the armature of the nation state, here conceived as a porous nervous system consisting of layers, sediments, and textures of history, rather than a rigid administrative mechanism. They situate themselves, moreover, vis-à-vis the paradoxes of the twenty-first century, among them, the contingency of the digital condition in a global world, hegemony of temporal presentism, and monologism of identity politics. Such practices, of which there are still too few, open pathways towards relational communities in which the nation state does not determine or regulate the individual's identity by linking it to citizenship, territorial homeland, or a unitary history.

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While this has been a study that has foregrounded the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a paradigmatic case, there are implications that extend to other disputes throughout the past two centuries that have crystallized around allegiances to a single national identity, i.e., Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Ukraine just to name a few. For artists who wish to think beyond the current horizon of possibility offered by contracted archives, the challenge is clear. It is to invent artistic practic-

es that are part-and-parcel of the nervous system of our time while reconfiguring the field of the sensible to shape visual forms and subject positions beyond those stipulated by the nation state and its biopolitical/necropolitical archives.

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