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'Telegenically dead Palestinians': Cinema, news media and perception management of the Gaza conflicts

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In the animated film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) about the director Ari Folman's attempts to recover his and other ex-soldiers' memories of the 1982 Lebanon War, we hear the story of an amateur photographer. He coped by picturing everything through an imaginary camera, which protected him from the horrors. With still images, the film tries to show us how a traumatised soldier sees the war as distanced 'snapshots'. When his imaginary camera 'breaks', still frames jam in the shutter gate, then become moving images of a derelict landscape, where injured 'Arabian horses' pitifully collapse and die.

As Karen Lury writes, 'Tears and emotion erupt when the innocent – dumb animals, little children – are seen to suffer'; their blamelessness magnifies the harms of war.¹ Yet, there is something disingenuous about this scene of pity in *Waltz with Bashir*. Why are they *Arabian* horses? Could those horses, revealed by the broken camera, actually be Arabs? As in its anecdote of another soldier who could only shoot dogs, and now suffers nightmares of being chased by them, the film's use of animal imagery makes it easier to discount that people are suffering and dying. It is a kind of 'perception management' – a term that I draw from the journalist Mark Curtis – that leads us into an inward, affective engagement through the soldiers' perspective: what the war did to *them*, not what *they* did to others.²

In a previous publication, I drew parallels between this film and mainstream Western news media, which routinely prioritises the Israeli viewpoint.³ Now I would like to show what occurs when humanitarian images of Palestinian casualties take centre stage, as they did during the 2014 Israeli bombardment of Gaza. Here, I will argue that a media outcome that *appears* to be favourable to the Palestinians, in that it focuses on their suffering, can actually have the opposite effect. To illustrate my argument about the framing of humanitarian images, I will refer to a range of media texts related to the Gaza conflicts: UK, US and Israeli news coverage, including UK journalist Jon Snow's video blog upon his return from Gaza in 2014; *Waltz with Bashir*, which was released around the time of the 2008–9 conflict; and the Palestinian film *Where Should the Birds Fly* (Fida Qishta, 2013), which focuses on the 2008–9 conflict and its aftermath.

In a CNN interview, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, in response to a perceived shift in international coverage of the conflict, accused Hamas of using ‘telegenically dead Palestinians’ for their cause:

We’re sad for every civilian casualty. They’re not intended. This is the difference between us. Hamas deliberately targets civilians and deliberately hides behind civilians. They embed their rocketeers, their rocket caches, their other weaponry, which they use to fire on us, in civilian areas. What choice do we have? We have to protect ourselves. We try to target the rocketeers – we do. And all civilian casualties are unintended by us but actually intended by Hamas. They want to pile up as many civilian dead as they can, because somebody said they use – it’s gruesome – they use telegenically dead Palestinians for their cause. They want the more dead, the better.⁴

Netanyahu’s statement gives renewed significance to what Paul Virilio calls the ‘logistics of perception’ – that a ‘war of pictures and sounds’ rages alongside conflicts and shapes our attitudes towards them as just or unjust.⁵ Ostensibly highlighting that images of destruction in Gaza spelled a public relations disaster for Israel, Netanyahu’s statement contains the Israeli public relations narrative, through which public perceptions of Israel’s actions against Palestinians are managed. For Curtis, perception management is a tool used by the powerful to disseminate rhetoric about noble intentions and moral purpose, ensuring that what is friendly to their interests is reported and that what is unfriendly is discredited: it promotes and normalises a way of seeing the world.⁶ In no way unique to the Gaza conflicts, perception management can serve to divorce the public from realities of state violence through a kind of cinematic derealisation that enables states to reduce perceptions of blame for their atrocities and act with impunity.

Why the 2014 conflict seemed different

There have been three major military conflicts in the Gaza Strip in the last decade, widely known by their Israeli codenames ‘Operation Cast Lead’ (2008–9), ‘Operation Pillar of Defence’ (2012) and ‘Operation Protective Edge’ (2014). During the twenty-two-day ‘Operation Cast Lead’, in which around 1,400 Palestinians and thirteen Israelis were killed, Israel banned foreign journalists from entering the Gaza Strip. Therefore, the conflict was reported by Palestinian journalists inside Gaza and foreign reporters stationed on a hill outside – a strategy designed to avert public reaction to pictures of dead Palestinians, although it did not stop the flow of images from Gaza.⁷ However, for the eight-day ‘Operation Pillar of Defence’ and fifty-day ‘Operation Protective Edge’ – the most devastating of these conflicts, resulting in the deaths of over 2,000 Palestinians, seventy-two Israelis (sixty-six of them soldiers) and 1 Thai – the ban was lifted, enabling images of Palestinian deaths and injuries to gain centre stage.

As one user commented in 2014 on the news website Mondoweiss, 'There is not one Phan Thi Kim Phuc photo (the little naked girl fleeing a napalm strike in Viet Nam) but the combined photos and stories from Gaza this time have indeed changed the imagery of this conflict in the American mindset.'⁸ These words recall the widely held, though inaccurate, view that a critical news media shifted public opinion from a 'just war' to a 'dirty war' in Vietnam.⁹ One of the Vietnam-like moments was the killing of four boys, Ismail, Mohammad, Zakariya and Ahed, all aged 9–11, playing on a Gaza beach; they were caught on CCTV when shells started falling.¹⁰ NBC journalist Ayman Mohyeldin, who was at the scene, instantly tweeted the story. In the UK, the incident became the focus of testy interviews with Israeli officials – for example, the Channel 4 anchor Jon Snow interrogated the Israeli Prime Minister's Chief Spokesperson Mark Regev on how killing children squared with the stated aim of 'Operation Protective Edge' to protect Israeli people.¹¹

A major part of what made the 2014 conflict seem different was widespread use of social media as a tool for exposure of violence against Palestinians, without the usual editorial filters. Social media filled in some of the gaps of mainstream coverage, often from the perspectives of Palestinians within warzones, live-tweeting updates – including video clips of bombardment and pictures of devastation and injured children. This made, Ben White claims, 'the lived experience of the colonised accessible in new ways and by new audiences.'¹² For journalist and broadcaster Paul Mason, social media has wrought a huge shift in the balance of power towards people and away from governments. Whilst Western mainstream media, especially in the United States, is 'traditionally heavily skewed towards the pro-Israeli view ... now, for the first time, in a major Arab-Israeli conflict, the American public has other sources of reality', namely endless pictures of dead Palestinian children:

Netanyahu complained that the Hamas strategy was to provide 'telegenically dead' people but where Israel is losing the hearts and minds of the world is not via 'tele' anything: it is in the JPEGs that stream into millions of people's mobile phones.¹³

However, social media is also subject to perception management, and considered a battleground for public opinion by both parties to the conflict and their international supporters. As during the 2012 conflict, described as 'the first social media war', ordinary citizens claimed the hashtags #GazaUnderAttack and #IsraelUnderFire to exchange 'reports, opinions, and challenges to mainstream news reports and to each other.'¹⁴

In their book *Digital Militarism*, Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein offer a counter-argument to optimism about social media's ability to override official narratives, by showing how it can be mobilised for repressive state ends.¹⁵ In this light, let us return to Netanyahu's phrase 'telegenically dead', which he appears to be quoting from somewhere. He reduces the materiality of Palestinian deaths to the production of pixels on a screen, hinting that the images were faked. Suspicion of images of dead

or injured Palestinians circulating in international media (but not in Israeli national media, which mostly focuses on Israeli suffering) is commonplace on pro-Israeli social media. For Kuntsman and Stein, this 'digital suspicion', which deflects issues of Israeli violence onto alleged fraudulence and attempts to defame Israel, functions as 'a surrogate media ban, enforced not by state censorship but by everyday readers and social media consumers themselves'.¹⁶

In 2012 and 2014, therefore, images of dead and injured Palestinians gained centre stage amidst a form of perception management to which digital suspicion belonged. Concomitant with charges of fakery was the accusation that Palestinian deaths were caused by Palestinians themselves, mainly by Hamas's disregard for its own people, rather than by Israel – a narrative equally exemplified by Netanyahu's statement and visually embodied in the infographics of Israel Defence Forces (IDF) tweets about the housing of Hamas's weapons cachés in civilian areas.

While social media participate in and extend perception management, the more open climate they have fostered has allowed 'establishment journalists ... to be more forthcoming' about what is happening on the ground.¹⁷ In the UK, one of the most outspoken journalists was Jon Snow, who made a heartfelt emotional appeal in a video blog upon his return from Gaza.¹⁸ Though filmed in the Channel 4 studio, it was intended for online distribution and posted on YouTube. The video recounts what Snow witnessed in Gaza, images that are 'etched' in his mind, particularly his visit to al-Shifa hospital and his encounter with a two-and-a-half-year-old girl with panda-like eyes due to bruises from her broken skull. One of the definitive images of Palestinian suffering that summer, Snow's video went viral, gaining over one million views 'across multiple platforms' within five days.¹⁹

As Susan Sontag has remarked, 'so far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering'.²⁰ Standard humanitarian images position viewers as benevolent helpers, letting us off the hook regarding our own implication in that suffering. Snow's video breaks this convention by using the humanitarian image to highlight UK complicity in the suffering of Palestinian children. Citing official statistics of child deaths in the conflict to date, he states: 'We have to know that, in some way, we share some responsibility for those deaths.' The video even prompted an eight-year-old girl to write to the British Foreign Secretary. 'We are killing the people of Gaza by giving Israel weapons. We need to take our part in it and stop giving Israel weapons.'²¹ The video invites UK citizens to make links between themselves and the suffering, through their own government's culpability.

Yet, Snow's emotive appeal is anchored in the iconography of the passive, suffering child in need of rescue. In this respect, it is similar to conventional humanitarian images, such as the Disasters Emergency Committee Gaza crisis appeal poster of a lone boy, surrounded by rubble. Separated from their wider societal context, pictures of children with imploring eyes are usually used to raise funds for their basic needs. According to Wendy Hesford, in order to generate sympathy, such humanitarian images deploy a visual rhetoric that reproduces repressive Western ideologies,

depriving endangered children of any agency.²² A generic victim, the injured girl in Snow's video is not even given a name.²³ Didier Fassin writes that 'the prolixity of humanitarianism increases in parallel to the silence of the survivor'.²⁴ The humanitarian speaks in the child's name, becoming a spokesperson 'for the supposedly voiceless'.²⁵

Susan Moeller has observed that the prevalent focus on children as 'innocent victims' elicits sympathy on an 'apolitical or suprapolitical' level.²⁶ The killing and injuring of children, who are unable to protect themselves and who do not pose any threat to soldiers, was therefore considered safe territory for UK journalists when interrogating Israeli officials. However, Palestinian teenagers and children are regularly shot and killed by Israeli forces – a violence so routine it is generally not considered newsworthy. Furthermore, a vulnerable child killed or injured while playing in a park or the beach elicits instant public sympathy, unlike a teenager involved in resistance or unrest. The Palestinian child, however, is a long-standing icon of Palestinian resistance, as in the cartoon character Handala created by the artist Naji al-Ali. Appearing as graffiti in Palestine, Handala is a boy with his back turned, symbolising the Palestinian refugee who will not look forward until he returns home: a very different image of the child from humanitarian ones.

How the structure of mainstream reporting endorses the Israeli perspective despite focus on Palestinian casualties

Analysing media coverage of the 2008–9 conflict, the Glasgow Media Group found that humanitarian focus on Palestinian suffering can be allied to a structure of news reporting that prioritises the official Israeli perspective. I contend that this structure of news reporting applies to the 2014 conflict. Even when journalists were critical of civilian casualties, they tended to endorse the Israeli narrative – for example, that the kidnap and murder of three Israeli teens in June 2014 formed the 'backdrop' to the conflict. The Palestinian perspective on these events – or indeed, any perspective other than the official Israeli one – tended to be missing.²⁷ As the Glasgow Media Group discovered, much of what the public takes to be true are 'exactly the points ... highlighted in Israeli public relations and reported uncritically on the news. Crucially, this can affect how audiences apportion blame and responsibility and also influence how ... images of civilian casualties [are] interpreted'.²⁸

UK news media often try to 'balance' the Israeli and Palestinian perspectives in a way that is thought to be objective. For example, the BBC's *News at Ten* combined an elegiac slideshow of life in the Gaza rubble, highlighting the humanitarian disaster, with a feature on Gaza's 'terror tunnels' and reports confirming that Israel was hitting Hamas targets.²⁹ Such 'balancing' presents a skewed picture of the conflict and fails to convey the fundamental power asymmetry underlying it.

NGO images suffer from similar problems. Gaza is frequently rehearsed in terms of humanitarian statistics, described as one of the most densely inhabited

places in the world, with around 1.8 million residents, 80 per cent of whom are dependent on humanitarian aid.³⁰ Such images can make Palestinians in Gaza seem only a humanitarian problem, thereby eliding the political context of their oppression and struggle for justice. The majority of Gaza's population are refugees, descendants of those displaced from historic Palestine when the Israeli state was created there in 1948. They were expelled across what was then an imaginary boundary, which later became fenced to prevent them from returning to their homes, turning into the hard border of a new geographical entity called the Gaza Strip. Since then, further political factors have exacerbated their situation – amongst them, Israel's expansionist policies of expropriating more land and resources.

As Jihad Abu Salim asserts, 'because the current Gaza Strip is a product of political history, humanitarian discourse contributes to normalizing Gaza's current reality, transforming it into another case ... of hunger and poverty that the international community has to deal with through aid and expertise.'³¹ Moreover, humanitarian agencies address only the symptoms, not the causes, of crises. Many of them seek to avoid politicising the situation. However, the refusal to deal with politics can never work because the situation that the Palestinians face is thoroughly political. While, on the one hand, Israeli suspicion towards bodies of Palestinian victims disavows their humanitarian claims, on the other, exclusive focus on their humanitarian status disavows their political claims, as a people colonised by Israel.

On the news, the Gaza conflicts are typically described as 'wars' between Israel and Hamas, disconnected from a history of colonisation and occupation. We are repeatedly told that Israel is under terrorist attack by Hamas rockets, fired into Israeli territory from Gaza, and is simply 'responding.' A huge part of Israel's perception management during the 2014 conflict was to conflate Hamas with the global threat of radical Islam, whilst presenting Israel as part of the democratic world from which Hamas is excluded, although Hamas itself was democratically elected. As John Berger remarks in another context, a sure-fire way to discredit and eradicate your opposition is 'by calling it *terrorist*.'³²

The emphasis on Hamas, not Israel, as a terror organisation that causes suffering to civilians also enables a shift of responsibility for the killing, as can be seen in an account given by an Israeli history student, Sophie Tal, featured on the BBC website, in which the killing of Palestinian civilians is justified as a response to terrorism:

This is about us defending ourselves from terrorists ... I feel very sorry for the people in Gaza too, but what can we do when they have fighters shooting at us from hospitals, from the roof of UN schools and using these places to launch terror attacks? We have to stop the terrorists who are using their own people as human shields. In this case targeting those buildings is *the moral and right thing to do* ... Israel had the firepower to finish this a lot quicker. We could have bombed Gaza completely but we didn't because *we are more humane* than Hamas.³³

The message that Hamas is a terrorist organisation makes it easier to blame casualties on them or, if not, to blame Israel and Hamas equally, as indeed many onlookers did, as testified by a CBS News Poll, taken in the United States at the height of the 2014 conflict.³⁴ Asked who they thought was mostly to blame for the fighting, 6 per cent of respondents replied 'Israel', 34 per cent named Hamas, 47 per cent answered 'Both sides equally' and 12 per cent were unsure or gave no answer.

In the UK, Channel 4 News explained the Palestinian view of the conflict more clearly than the BBC. It featured interviews with Hamas spokespeople in Gaza which referred to effects of the Israeli blockade, otherwise given a low priority in the hierarchy of storytelling about the conflict, due to the predominant narrative that Israel 'gave back' Gaza in 2005, which helped sell 'the war as a defensive campaign' against terrorists who will not leave Israel in peace.³⁵ Despite so-called withdrawal in 2005, Israel still occupies Gaza, controlling its airspace, land and sea borders, along with the flow of goods, electricity, water, medicine and building materials; the only border Palestinians are permitted to cross is on the Egyptian side, and that is frequently shut. The blockade was tightened shortly after Hamas took power in 2006. During 'Protective Edge', BBC journalists were told to downplay the blockade.³⁶ Even its objective reality was questioned by phrases such as 'What Hamas is *calling* a blockade', used by Edward Stourton on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme.

Israel regards the blockade as an economic sanction on a problematic regime. Dov Weisglass, adviser to the then Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, said that 'the idea is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger'.³⁷ The blockade works by calculating the level of calories, electric current and other necessities required to sustain the population at 'the limit of bare physical existence'.³⁸ Israel aims to reduce Gazans to what the philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life' – a people with purely biological needs, making them liable to be killed with impunity but not sacrificed.³⁹ This is one point where the Israeli state and humanitarian viewpoints mirror each other for, as Agamben points out, 'humanitarian organizations ... can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight'.⁴⁰

The conditions that the blockade is intended to induce would have been far worse without the hundreds of tunnels dug underneath the Gaza–Egypt border to bring supplies of food, fuel, livestock and appliances as well as weapons. Along with Hamas firing rockets, tunnels rose to the top of the hierarchy of mainstream media storytelling about 'Protective Edge'; this time, the spotlight was on the 'discovery' of 'terror tunnels' between Gaza and Israel, so called to inspire fears about Israelis being abducted by Palestinian fighters and provide the pretext for further Israeli violence. Rockets and tunnels were presented as an existential threat to Israel and Israelis. For example, BBC coverage emphasised the need for security and stopping the smuggling of weapons through tunnels. Embedded with the IDF, the correspondent, Orla Guerin, took us into tunnels constructed by 'Palestinian militants'

in order to 'infiltrate' Israel.⁴¹ This long presentation on the tunnels, with extended commentary on their engineering, how dangerous they are, and the need for Israel to do something about them, became one of the 'most watched' videos on the BBC website at the time.

Historically, 'infiltrators' is the term for Palestinians who attempted to cross the Gaza Strip boundary (which became the 1949 armistice line) in order to return home, and who, when apprehended, were often killed.⁴² This provides a context for understanding the anxiety provoked by the underground tunnels. The news portrayal of Palestinians as 'infiltrators' taps into the colonial imagery of the 'civilised' and 'barbarian', similar to the Hollywood Western, which, as Robert Stam and Louise Spence have remarked, 'turn[s] history on its head, by making the Native Americans appear [as] intruders on what was originally their [home]land'.⁴³ In the Western genre, white settlers are shown as being encircled by primitive attackers, whose hostility is inexplicable. Mainstream news coverage reproduces this colonial perspective through this image of encirclement, presenting for our sympathy Israel as a besieged nation, surrounded by inexplicably hostile assailants.

When the BBC drama *The Honourable Woman*, another fictional counterpart to these news media representations, aired during the 2014 conflict, its timing was described as 'serendipity'.⁴⁴ In the series, Nessa Stein, an Anglo-Israeli daughter of an Israeli arms-dealer, makes amends for her father's past by turning the family company to humanitarian ends: creating telecommunications in the West Bank. Similar to news coverage, it appears to have a favourable outcome for Palestinians, including US endorsement of a Palestinian state, but its subtext and imagery express the Israeli line. The drama draws on the iconography of tunnels when Nessa and her Palestinian translator Atika enter Gaza to trace some funds that have been directed there. A Gazan herself, Atika arranges for them to be smuggled in via a tunnel. Inside Gaza, they are taken captive – the scene of an Israeli citizen abducted by Palestinian militants encapsulating the fearful image presented on news media. The synopsis of this episode refers to Nessa and Atika's witnessing of atrocities in Gaza, but the atrocities they encounter are only by Palestinian militants, including Nessa's rape at their hands.⁴⁵ The drama portrays the destruction and dereliction of Gaza as exclusively Hamas's fault, since there is no mention of the bombings or blockade by Israel. As in news coverage, our attention is directed away from the violence of Israel and other state parties to the conflict, and focused on the Palestinians, who carry out the most visible violence.

The appeal to and manipulation of International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

In UK reportage, any criticism of Israel, either from politicians or NGOs, tends to be couched in the rhetoric of 'disproportionate response', a language of condemnation that derives from a branch of international law known as International Humanitarian

Law (IHL) or the 'laws of war'. IHL places restraints on warfare methods to limit human suffering. Its rules and principles of proportionality, distinction between civilians and military targets, and precaution against excessive harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure focus on playing by the fair rules of war, not why there is a war in the first place. For example, Amnesty International, whose report on 'Protective Edge' focuses on breaches of IHL, tells Israel it should find other ways of waging its conflicts in Gaza:

[The] Israeli military should learn the lessons of this and previous conflicts and change its military doctrine and tactics for fighting in densely populated areas such as Gaza so as to ensure strict compliance with international humanitarian law, in particular the principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution.⁴⁶

Amnesty's solution is to revise the weapons deployed and rules of engagement, not to halt policies that lead to atrocity. Framed in this way, humanitarian images showing the rising Palestinian death toll and destruction of Gaza's civilian infrastructure invite us to consider Israel's violence as excessive, even to call it a 'war crime', but not to question the Israeli narrative that it is responding to Hamas rockets and acting in self-defence. It endorses the aggressor, which merely has to moderate its 'response'.

As Nimer Sultany argues, 'International law does not prevent the powerful from crushing the weak, if it is done legally, that is.'⁴⁷ Neither does it stop civilians from being killed, as long as it can be presented as 'unintentional' or 'proportional'. It simply codifies what kinds of violence can be permitted and regarded as legitimate. For this reason, manipulation of IHL, or 'lawfare', has become a key strategy for Israel.⁴⁸ Similar to the Bush administration, which employed lawyers to give legal cover to torture, IDF operations are aided by IHL experts. As George Bisharat has observed, Israel has established itself as a 'legal entrepreneur' taking advantage of the elasticity of international law, which is capable of being stretched and altered through practice, in order to lend legitimacy to its violence and establish new norms.⁴⁹ To this end, Israel has developed 'knock on the roof', a tactic of firing a warning missile before destroying a building in order to prompt residents to evacuate – a procedure that supposedly embodies the IHL principle of precaution (warning civilians of attacks) and the IDF's 'humanitarian approach to war'.⁵⁰ But many have been killed in homes by the warning shots themselves, and just offering a warning does not justify an attack on a building, especially as some may be unable or too frightened to leave or, misunderstanding the instruction, they may take cover at home.

Along with dropping leaflets and making phone calls before attacks, 'knock on the roof' forms part of Israel's claim to have 'the most moral army in the world', a mantra repeated in news coverage. On *Newsnight*, Kirsty Wark interviewed Netanyahu's adviser Dore Gold who stressed that these warnings made the IDF a compassionate institution, even though the Palestinian death toll had by then already mounted

to over 1,000.⁵¹ In displaying compassion for the people they were bombing, Israeli spokespeople were acting on a recommendation in a manual written by Republican political strategist Frank Luntz to help Israelis influence Western public opinion: 'Show Empathy for BOTH sides!'⁵² Together with the strategy of blaming Hamas analysed earlier in this chapter, these measures are calculated to lend the impression that Israel is acting within a legal framework and doing all it can to alleviate Palestinian suffering.

The laws of war reconcile us to war as the norm; they form an aspect of perception management. As Weizman points out, moderating violence is just another kind of violence. It belongs to the logic of 'the lesser evil' illuminated by Hannah Arendt: 'Acceptance of lesser evils is consciously used in conditioning the government officials as well as the population at large to the acceptance of evil as such.'⁵³ Appeal to and manipulation of IHL, including in news coverage, thus becomes a way of perpetuating intolerable injustice. It enables Israel to carry on its policies with international support, normalising the violence. It leads to acceptance of the 'lesser evil', so that, Weizman says, a 'greater evil' may be gradually imposed on the Palestinian people.⁵⁴

From this discussion of the state's compassionate, humanitarian façade as a mask for its violence, I want to return to *Waltz with Bashir*, which exemplifies these elements in its cinematic treatment of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre, when Lebanese Christian Phalangists killed thousands of Palestinians with the IDF's complicity. As mentioned in my opening, the film is constructed as victim trauma. It revolves around the unknown nature of Folman's involvement in the massacre. While recovering his memories, he realises that he and other IDF soldiers illuminated the night sky with flares to facilitate it. Lurid amber flares form a leitmotif of his guilt, staining much of the film's colour palette. The verdict of the narrative, however, is reduced culpability: as his therapist tells us, Folman merely shone the flares; he did not carry out the massacre itself, and his excess guilt is a product of inherited Holocaust trauma, unrelated to Sabra and Shatila.

In its final scene, the film imagines an encounter between Folman and Palestinian women from the refugee camps. Folman's eyes enlarge, implying alarm or sympathy with the suffering before him. The sounds overlaid on their animated forms are real women's actual cries of grief, as the film segues into live-action archival news footage. As I have previously written,

The live footage is intended to confront audiences with an uncomfortable reality – it is the moment when, in the film's own analogy, 'the camera' breaks, preventing the possibility of dissociation or denial. The use of archive footage, with its indexical properties, imparts a revelation of 'truth'. But, as we know ... news media do not signify unmediated 'truth'.⁵⁵

The Palestinian women speak but, at least in the international print, their Arabic is not subtitled, which creates the perception that they are lost in their grief: a passive

backdrop for an Israeli soldier's trauma. Without speech, the women are turned into classic icons of suffering, evoking a Christian tradition of suffering motherhood (*pietà*) frequently used in humanitarian images to invite pity.⁵⁶ But these women do not want our pity; they want exposure and action. One of them advances towards the camera, demanding in Arabic: 'Film, film and deliver it to foreign countries.'

The ending replaces justice with compassion, which masks the Israeli army's violence, providing what is effectively an image of impunity, as the film surveys the bodies of innocents on the ground, closing into a little girl's head in the rubble, before fading to black. This call for compassion dehistoricises Palestinians' collective political claims and turns them into pathetic victims. It exemplifies a form of perception management that I have been tracing through news coverage: acknowledge the tragedy, express sympathy and remorse, but blame others. This narrative of absolution of responsibility is as much about Israel's continuing actions against the Palestinians as it is about the past.

The different perspective offered by *Where Should the Birds Fly*

Palestinians have challenged the perception management of mainstream media by creating their own images of both the destruction and everyday life in Gaza, in which they feature as agents and actors in their own narratives. *Where Should the Birds Fly* (2013) is a documentary by a Gazan citizen journalist, Fida Qishta, about the 2008–9 conflict. In her director's statement, she expresses her desire to narrate it from her own perspective:

In 2009, when Gaza was attacked, most internationals left. There were no journalists. The only people filming were from Gaza, myself included. But, because they weren't English speakers, others talked about their footage. I thought this wasn't fair. I wanted to tell my own story.⁵⁷

Where Should the Birds Fly confronts the official Israeli narrative about the war through its video testimony. During the film, Qishta describes her camera as a weapon, the only weapon she has against the attacks on the people of Gaza. She sent her footage to a US production company, Deep Dish TV, which used crowdfunding to finance the film. Unlike *Waltz with Bashir*, *Where Should the Birds Fly* has not benefited from exposure at the most prestigious film festivals and a general theatrical release; however, it has become well-known by Palestine solidarity groups and human rights campaigners via its circulation in documentary and other specialist film festivals, community and university screenings, and online distribution.

At a time when Gaza is becoming increasingly inaccessible to the outside world – hidden behind fortified fences as well as a media veil – metaphors about it have proliferated, as Helga Tawil-Souri and Dina Matar remark in their anthology *Gaza as Metaphor*.⁵⁸ *Where Should the Birds Fly* takes its title from a line in a poem by the

Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish.⁵⁹ Poetically rendering the experience of siege, the title breathes new life into the now familiar metaphor of Gaza as an ‘open-air prison’, conveying (in the film’s context) that people are unable to flee from the bombardment, despite the IDF’s ‘humanitarian’ warnings, since they lack any safe place to flee, surrounded as they are by heavily guarded land and sea borders. The birds metaphor in its title is emblematic of the film’s different use of animal imagery from *Waltz with Bashir*, where it serves to dehumanise the enemy, whether it be through the dogs, whose indefatigable chase and hellishly glowing amber eyes suggest a threatening and demonic aspect, or the majestic and pitiful ‘Arabian horses’. *Where Should the Birds Fly* evokes smaller animals (birds, chickens, mice), using them, first, to express the vulnerability of Palestinians in the face of the oppressor and, second, to draw attention to how Palestinians are dehumanised in both news coverage and military practice.

Both Qishta’s choices and those of her production company shape the film, which may be regarded as the result of their complex negotiation:

We had a lot of footage from the destruction caused by the Israeli attack. Both Brian [Drolet, the producer] and Gladys [Joujou, the editor] initially focused more on the war as a major part of the movie. For me, people’s lives are more important than showing just destruction ... There are so many parts of our lives that go unrecorded. And I had footage to document many of these invisible struggles.⁶⁰

In contrast to news reports, where humanitarian concern about Palestinians declines once a fragile ceasefire is declared, the film charts what happened before ‘Cast Lead’ and after. It captures the everyday violence that Gaza experiences at Israel’s hands, along with Gazans’ efforts to live a normal life – what Qishta calls their ‘invisible struggles’. Criticising Hamas’s tactics, she declares, in voiceover, ‘All weapons strike fear into the hearts of people living under them. It doesn’t matter if they are the relatively simple and ineffective rockets from Gaza into ... Israel or Israel’s sophisticated US-made missiles launched from F-16s or Apache helicopters’. Her film imparts the bigger picture (missing from mainstream coverage) through its focus on the blockade and routine attacks by Israel of which the full-scale ‘wars’ are magnifications.

We follow Qishta as she films farmers and fishermen trying to earn a living, accompanied by international observers, although the latter’s presence is not always a safeguard. The militarised ‘buffer zone’, which penetrates three kilometres into the Gaza Strip in some places and absorbs 30 per cent of its arable land, prevents farmers from cultivating their fields; when they approach the buffer zone they are shot at by IDF patrols. In one scene, fishermen are shown under fire, as the Palestinian territorial waters in which they fish are policed by Israeli gunboats. The clatter of gunshots comes over the choppy sea. The picture of injustice – the Israeli navy shooting at unarmed Palestinians – is unmistakable. ‘Why?’ cries the international observer

accompanying the fishermen. The reply from the gunboat's loudhailer is merely that they are in 'a closed military area' and therefore must retreat. While threatening to shoot at the fishermen, the Israeli soldiers aim at the cables that attach the fishing nets to the boat; the cables eventually break, resulting in loss of the fishermen's catch.

The film intimates the ubiquitous Israeli presence in Gaza, not just in moments of spectacular violence during military operations. Do the Israeli soldiers 'consciously intend' to deprive the fishermen of 'the ability to make a living and feed their families' asks Qishta in voiceover. Her film suggests the blockade purposefully creates unliveable conditions for Palestinians in Gaza, providing a striking contrast to news footage where Israel is portrayed as under siege and encircled by hostile attackers, threatened by 'infiltrators' and tunnels. It presents the opposite scenario: the colonised who are threatened and encircled by tanks on land and gunboats at sea, and with whose predicament we are urged to identify. We may be reminded of the parallels with the Native Americans as well as their ultimate fate.

In addition, *Where Should the Birds Fly* gives voice to a child survivor, a ten-year-old girl, Mona, in a way that partly differs from standard news and humanitarian images, such as the mute, unnamed girl with panda-like bruises on her eyes in Snow's 2014 video blog who, as discussed earlier, appears as a generic victim, lacking any agency of her own, instead becoming a means for Snow to express his own impassioned appeal. We first encounter Mona walking through the rubble in the aftermath of 'Cast Lead', pursued by Qishta with her camera. With her bold gaze at the camera and precocious responses to Qishta's questions, Mona seems to be endowed with the power to express herself, rather than having others speak on her behalf. At the same time, her quiet voice, slightly diffident demeanour and bandage over one eye designate her as a victim, fragile and weak. When asked how many people in her family died, she replies, 'not many, just my mother, my father, both my sisters-in-law and my nephew'. We observe her delicate face as a register of her pain and studied indifference, as she self-consciously drains her testimony of emotion. As Lury writes, we often interpret a child's 'unreadable face' to fit our own agendas.⁶¹ In her pursuit of Mona, Qishta makes the child a vehicle for both her humanitarian and political concerns.

In the film, Mona is framed within a narrative of 'lost' or 'denied' childhood.⁶² She shows us her drawings of the attack on her family home. In these moments, the film pulls us into the child's perspective. Although Mona is capable of elucidating her drawings with astonishing verbal articulacy, the pictures remind us that she is a child, who sees the world differently from adults, interpreting it through shapes and colours, rather than through linguistic means. In one drawing, a huge heart encompasses her 'precious ones', her father and mother, now dead as a result of the attack. In another, a helicopter drops bombs on a house which catches fire and is reduced to rubble. Two Israeli soldiers carrying machine guns stand nearby, while the dead lie on the ground. Mona remarks, 'The Israeli soldiers were shooting at the people as if they were not human, as if they were chickens or mice. For the

Israeli army this is without meaning. But the victims were very precious to us, even if they didn't consider them human'. Seeing through the child's perspective, the scene invites us to reflect not only on the cruelty of the Gaza 'wars', but also the perception management that facilitates them. Colonial violence operates by dehumanisation, as one can see in the Arabian horses and dogs of *Waltz with Bashir*. The effect of this is that Palestinian lives can be disregarded in the pursuit of power, both by those perpetrating the violence and by those who support them. Caught up in the conflict, the child Mona figures in *Where Should the Birds Fly* not only as a traumatised victim and witness, but also as an agent and spokesperson for social justice.

Conclusion

Humanitarian images can limit our understanding by cultivating sympathy for Palestinians in Gaza as victims in need of international aid, separated from their political context. As I hope to have conveyed in this chapter, it is not enough to have sympathy but to reflect on what makes such oppression possible, acceptable and 'normal', including the international community's accommodation to an unjust political reality. This chapter has framed these issues through the notion of perception management, which influences how images of Palestinian suffering are viewed and how blame is allocated. Perception management serves to prolong the conflict. As a result, the dispossession of Palestinians can be continued. This is why it is crucial to reflect on the images and narratives that support the status quo; it may be a step towards changing it.

Notes

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- 15 A. Kuntsman and R. Stein, *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). Alongside this, Kuntsman and Stein criticise the discourse of 'the first time', which conceals a longer history of the militarisation of online communities – developments that they track from 2000, including the IDF's use of YouTube and Twitter during the 2008–9 conflict.
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- 21 Cited in Deans, 'Jon Snow Video Backed by Channel 4'.
- 22 W. Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 23 In another Channel 4 video posted on YouTube, recounting Snow's return journey to Gaza a year later, the girl – now physically recovered, though mentally traumatised – is named as Nema. See J. Snow, 'Children of Gaza: Jon Snow Meets the Victims', 9 July 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSiwskipVBI. Accessed 10 September 2016.
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- 28 G. Philo and M. Berry, *More Bad News from Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), pp. 379–80.
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- 32 J. Berger, 'Introduction: Where Are We?' in D. Lévi-Strauss, *Between the Eye: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003), p. xiii.

- 33 S. Tal, Profile in 'Gaza Conflict: Contrasting Views on Targeting', 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-28630442, emphasis mine. Accessed 10 September 2016.
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- 39 Compared to other international conflicts, the number of direct or violent deaths in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not especially high. However, as Eyal Weizman writes, 'another, rather more subtle form of killing has become commonplace'. A calculated Israeli policy regarding Gaza, this takes place 'through degrading environmental conditions to affect the quality of water, hygiene, nutrition and healthcare; by restricting the flow of life-sustaining infrastructure, forbidding the importation of water purifiers and much-needed vitamins (mainly B12), by restrictions on planning and by making it difficult for patients to travel'. *The Least of All Possible Evils*, p. 86.
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- 55 Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side*, p. 156.
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- 60 Qishta, 'Interview with Director Fida Qishta', p. 5.
- 61 Lury, *The Child in Film*, p. 109.
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