Editorial

Pamela Martínez Rod* and W. J. T. Mitchell

"Every war is a war of words and images": an interview about Gaza with W.J.T. Mitchell

Abstract: W.J.T. Mitchell is Gaylord Donnelley Distinguished Service Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago and editor of the journal *Critical Inquiry*. He is an iconology and cultural studies expert, and his works include *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986), *Cloning Terror* (2011) and the collection of influent essays *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), awarded the 2006 James Russell Lowell Prize from the Modern Language Association. He has been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. This conversation with W.J.T. Mitchell focuses on the image media representation of the ongoing Israeli attacks in Gaza to develop an approach to the visual particularities of this event. This interview aims to gain insight from cultural and visual studies about how conflict is represented and perceived in society, the media or contemporary culture. In light of his previous works *Cloning Terror* and "Eyeless in Gaza," we explore and contrast the role and typology of the actual spreading of war images and how these can affect and even turn our perception of the events.

Keywords: visual culture; iconology; photography; war; media

Pamela Martínez Rod (hereafter P.M): In the context of the ongoing Israeli attacks in Gaza, we are exposed to an endless fragmented flow of media images. What kind of typologies or aesthetics of images do you perceive?

W.J.T. Mitchell (hereafter W.J.T.M): The most striking images coming from Gaza are of total urban destruction, landscapes of devastation that remind one of the ruins of Dresden in World War II, which were the product of total war between

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heavily armed nations. The urban ruins of Gaza are the product of overwhelming violence inflicted on a defenseless civilian population that has no airforce or anti-aircraft capability. The other striking images are the up close and personal portraits of suffering individuals, especially the faces of fleeing refugees with children. Almost completely absent are images of actual conflict between soldiers. The Hamas fighters are invisible, hiding beneath the ruins in underground tunnels from which they emerge to ambush Israeli soldiers. There are no "fronts" to show or see, no trenches or fortresses. This is an asymmetrical war between a highly visible show of over-whelming force by Israel and an invisible enemy. The images of urban destruction reveal a bombing campaign featuring enormous explosive power that leaves entire neighborhoods devastated. The real horror of these images cannot be seen directly, but only inferred. Thousands of people were buried, alive or dead, under the collapsed buildings, and when the images are first released they are generally populated with crowds of young men digging among the ruins for survivors and corpses. The photographs of dozens of bodies wrapped in white sheets reveal only a fraction of the actual casualties, and the current count of 27,000 deaths is probably an underestimate. Most of the dead are women and children.

P.M: Following the analysis of your book *Cloning Terror* (2011), I would like to reformulate the questions you raised in the preface (XIX) to contrast the images of the U.S. war in Iraq to the Israeli siege of Gaza. How have these images of the war moved, evolved and mutated, and what sorts of needs, desires, and demands do they embody?

W.J.T.M: In many ways, Israel is echoing in miniature the images of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but at a more intense level. "Shock and awe" was the official name given to the air assault by the U.S. military in the 2003 invasion. It was followed by a ground invasion and military occupation that lasted until 2011. Benjamin Netanyahu has echoed the U.S. strategy in his insistence that this will be a long war that will not be finished until "total victory" and the annihilation of Hamas is accomplished. Evidently no one has learned any lessons from the Iraq disaster.

Another similarity between the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Israel's siege of Gaza is the image of the enemy and the cause of the war. Both wars involve the fetishization of a date as the unique origin of the conflict: September 11, 2011 (condensed to the number "911" associated with emergency) and October 7, 2023, which has frequently been called "Israel's 911." One important contrast: Iraq had nothing to do with 911, nor did it have weapons of mass destruction. October 7 clearly involved a military incursion into Israel, with a massacre of both civilians and IDF soldiers, accompanied by hostage taking. Israel has mounted a relentless propaganda campaign to exag-gerate the brutality of the Hamas incursions, making charges of rape, dismember-ment, and other atrocities, notable for their lack of independently verified visual or forensic evidence. It has repeatedly compared the October 7 event to the Holocaust,

and attempted to foster a climate of moral outrage that justifies everything that Israel does.

P.M: In *Cloning Terror* you researched the power of images to influence public opinion. Currently, we are perplexingly attending the most documented and mediatized attack in history, a social media massacre in streaming. How do you think these representations are impacting, affecting, influencing or constructing our actual comprehension of the events? Or furthermore, changing our comprehension of images itself?

W.J.T.M: Every war is a war of words and images, verbal and visual representations designed to mobilize populations, justify actions, and portray the enemy as subhuman and worthy of annihilation. Propaganda is the media counterpart to bullets, rockets, and bombs. It rarely leads to comprehension, but trades chiefly on disinformation and isolated half-truths. The siege of Gaza is an asymmetrical conflict at the level of propaganda as well as actual violence. Israel enjoys an enormous advantage in the media war. It rigorously censors its own journalists, and depends on the mainly supportive American media system to circulate its version of events. When, for instance, the Secretary General of the United Nations declared that the October 7 attack "did not occur in a vacuum," he was immediately denounced by Western media as attempting to justify Hamas's actions. Every official report of civilian deaths in Gaza is framed by the warning, "according to the Gaza Health Ministry," as a way of putting the facts in doubt.

Israel has also systematically forbidden independent journalists from entering Gaza to report on what is happening. It has closed Gaza's borders completely, preventing food, water, and power from getting into the enclave, and information from getting out. The only source of first-hand information about the situation in Gaza comes from Palestinian journalists who live there, and it appears that they have been specifically targeted for assassination by Israel. "Light Shed by Reporters on Gaza War Is Fading" was the front-page story of the *New York Times* on January 31, 2024. "At least 76 Palestinian journalists have been killed in Gaza since October 7" (Yee et al. 2024), according to the *Times*, and their words and images can only reach the outside world through social media such as Instagram. The blue vests marked "PRESS" worn by journalists seem mainly to have been effective in putting targets on their back.

As you note, however, social media have been effective in penetrating the Gaza blackout; they are the main reason that a large number of viewers world-wide has been able to see the images coming from Gaza, producing a widespread revulsion at the humanitarian catastrophe that is occurring there.

P.M: How does this streaming attack impact your ongoing research on images, media, and iconology?

W.J.T.M: It has reinforced my sense that iconology, the study of words, images, and media, can play a crucial role in understanding war. In fact, without a grasp of the role of metaphors, rhetorical tropes, photographs, and narratives we cannot understand why wars happen, how they are conducted, and how they might be prevented or terminated.

P.M: In *Cloning Terror* you analyzed the Abu Ghraib images, specifically the photography of the "Hooded man" as iconic evidence of the torture inflicted by the U.S. soldiers. Now, we have realized that, for the official media and Western political leaders, images of this sort have lost their power to represent the fact of Gaza's humanitarian catastrophe. Are the images of destruction and suffering being neutralized by verbal representations? Do these deliberate denials of the evidence provided by the image have a more general impact on our age? Are we witnessing a new turn where the supremacy of verbal rhetoric gains over the image?

W.J.T.M: Yes, I think this is one of the specific features of Israel's war on Gaza that distinguishes it from many previous wars. The visual evidence of mass destruction and suffering in Gaza is irrefutable. One feels drawn into an almost visceral witnessing of one of the great humanitarian disasters of our time, verging on genocide and ethnic cleansing, as South Africa has now argued to the United Nations. Israel responds to the visual spectacle of its actions with something like the old saying attributed to Groucho Marx: "are you going to believe me or your lying eyes?" Israel invites us to engage in acts of visual re-coding and occlusion. The re-coding is a strategy of "seeing as" that transforms the suffering civilian population into a military armament – "human shields" – that are being wielded by Hamas in a cowardly tactic of self-defense. That way, regret can be expressed for the destruction one sees at the same time it can all be blamed on Hamas, as if they were bombing their own people. The occlusion is a strategy of distraction, admonitions to "pay no attention to the massacre of innocent civilians"; concentrate instead on the atrocities of October 7. So far this attempt to obfuscate and re-code the visual evidence has been only partly successful, and the increasing global condemnation of Israel's behavior suggests that time may be running out for this tactic.

There is also the conspicuous reluctance of Israel to provide actual visual evidence that can be verified by independent observers about its own claims that spectacular atrocities were committed by Hamas. Similarly, the recent charge that some 12 members of UNRWA, the one United Nations agency that can deliver humanitarian aid to Gazans, were involved in the events of October 7th is mounted in a dossier provided by Israeli intelligence. "Take my word for it" seems to be the implied declaration, which is notably short on visual evidence. It would be astonishing, of course, if some UNRWA employees had *not* been involved in October 7, given that they are embedded with the population of Gaza and may have relatives or friends in Hamas. The quick decision of the Biden administration to suspend funding

for UNRWA on the basis of mere allegations suggests that the U.S. will take Israel's word for just about anything.

Perhaps most important, however, is a kind of blurred vision or myopia that Israel exposes when it declares total war on Hamas and promises its complete annihilation. This ignores the fact that Hamas is not just a few thousand fighters, but an international political movement that was elected democratically to provide the civil governance of Gaza. The Health Ministry, garbage collectors, and police are instruments of Hamas governance. Hamas fighters are not some foreign body within Gaza; they are the sons and daughters, nephews and nieces and spouses of the Palestinian population. The fighters are mostly young men who have never experienced any life outside of the long-lasting state of siege and imprisonment that is life in Gaza. Israel continuously denies that it is engaged in "indiscriminate" bombing of civilians in Gaza, at the same time that it refuses to discriminate civil and military actors within Hamas.

P.M.: In the article "Eyeless in Gaza" (Mitchell 2023) you have described as blindness a series of actions and policies enforced by Israel on the Palestinian people. What sort of vision is being circulated in Israeli propaganda that helps to drive perceptions and perpetuate myths?

W.J.T.M: The most egregious blindness is actually quite similar to the American myopia that enabled the invasion of Iraq. That war was justified by Colin Powell's notorious presentation of false images of weapons of mass destruction at the United Nations, but it was more deeply enabled by the image of an invisible, ubiquitous enemy known as "Terror" or "Terrorism." Bush and Netanyahu share the fantasy that a "War on Terror" can be conducted and won with military force. The phrase is completely incoherent, suggesting that guns and bombs can quell, defeat, and achieve final victory over an emotion and a tactic. One can fight a war against a nation-state or a people, usually one with a proper name. But what could it possibly mean to declare a war on terror? Actually, we have seen what it means in the ongoing futility of this phrase to provide any guide to actual war aims, productive strategies, or permissible tactics. It has produced nothing but an endless succession of unwinnable wars, mainly asymmetrical conflicts with insurgencies and resistance movements. Its whole tendency is, as I suggested in my book *Cloning Terror*, to proliferate and propagate the spread of these movements. Even the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, could have been quoting from my book when he declared that Israel's siege of Gaza will produce numerous tactical successes accompanied by strategic failure. Israel is creating generational hatred all over the Middle East. Does this bode well for its security, as a fortress against its neighbors?

P.M.: Given your wide experience in iconology, can you identify specific images, aesthetic dimensions, symbols or visual strategies in constructing of some of the war

media images you have observed? What insights or impact on your study do they have?

W.J.T.M: One notable continuity between the U.S. War on Terror and the Israeli war on Gaza is between the master-metaphors that inform the discourse around these wars. The period around 9–11 featured a widespread anxiety about biotechnology and the prospect of cloning human beings. I entitled my book about the U.S. invasion of Iraq *Cloning Terror* because the anxiety about new forms of biotechnology was, while seemingly unrelated to the war, a parallel fear that often turned into a metaphor for "self-generating cells" of faceless, anonymous terrorists. American Tabloids were full of stories about "toddler terrorists" being cloned from the DNA of Nazi SS men (Mitchell 2011: 77); George Lucas's 2002 Star Wars episode was entitled "Attack of the Clones," featuring a cloned army of suicidal stormtroopers; point and shoot video games with masked terrorists mingling among a civilian population propagated themselves tenfold when killed. And the realization that the War on Terror (which should have a copyright symbol next to it) was having the effect of cloning terror – of proliferating it and throwing fuel on the fire.

In fact, one tactic of asymmetrical terrorism is to produce a sudden spectacle of violence when and where least expected. Hamas was not trying to invade Israel on October 7. It was trying to stage a spectacle of brutal violence that would traumatize Israel and produce a violent over-reaction, and at this it succeeded beyond its wildest expectations. Israel actually cooperates in this strategy when it compares October 7 to the Holocaust. The events could not be more different: a systematic campaign of a powerful nation-state to exterminate its minorities in the name of racial purity; a violent incursion by the militias of a tiny enclave of refugees that lasted less than a day, killing 1200 people and taking over 200 hostages. By collapsing the two events into a single image of evil and horror, Israel blinds itself with a rage for vengeance, exploited by its deluded and desperate leader. It makes someone like me, who sympathizes with Israel, who has grown up knowing many of its people and participating in its intellectual and artistic communities, incredibly sad to witness all this.

If the siege of Gaza is a miniature of the War on Terror, we should learn a lesson from the failures of that war. Not only will it never be won, it threatens to metastasize into a larger regional conflict, in which political messages between major military powers will be conducted with assassinations, rockets, and bombs. In the midst of this horror, a new technology has arisen, its iconic gadget an uncanny echo of the clone. I am thinking, of course, of the drone, which is not merely a devastating new machine for delivering death, but the avatar of all the new robotic weapon systems driven by Artificial Intelligence. AI is also an incredibly useful tool in the war of images, with its ability to disseminate disinformation at lightning speed across global networks of communication.

P.M.: Do wars recreate what previous images have already represented, or does art reimagine war and provide a way of exposing and opposing it? Do you believe that if other images and social imaginaries were created, it might be possible to reframe and resolve conflicts differently? Can you provide examples of images that might undermine social imaginaries of war and victory?

W.J.T.M: Artists have always found ways to represent the horrors and disasters of war. Goya and Picasso are the first that come to mind. The photographers and video artists inside Gaza are making terrible sacrifices and taking great risks to provide images that appall and shock the moral conscience of the world. Israel is losing the image war, and its verbal denials of the visual evidence are ringing hollow. At the same time, the "total victory" over Hamas becomes increasingly unlikely. In fact, this war will have no victors, only losers. Israel has been traumatized and lost its sense of invulnerability while turning most of the Arab world against it. Gaza has lost thousands of innocent human lives. But in remaining undefeated, Hamas has achieved the equivalent of a victory at the cost of thousands of martyrs. Their war aims were clear: to stop the Abraham Accords with Saudi Arabia, and most important, to bring the Palestinian question back to the world's attention.

I don't know that any singular image has emerged as the iconic symbol of this conflict. With the Iraq invasion, it took over a year for the Abu Ghraib torture photographs to emerge, with the iconic image of the hooded man to become public and go viral. Certainly there is an abundance of candidates, from the photos of dismembered children to the devastated neighborhoods of Gaza. Something is likely to emerge, and we should watch for it. Israel would prefer to condense the entire war to the provocation of October 7, which they continue to reproduce in the most lurid rhetorical colors, while concealing the powerful evidence that a significant amount of the destruction and death that day was perpetrated by the "friendly fire" of the Israeli Defence Force. The so-called "Hannibal protocol" was in force, which allows Israel to kill its own people rather than allow them to become captives. The comparison to the Holocaust begins to seem increasingly implausible. Sometimes the more we know about a manufactured "iconic image," the less effect it has.

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