Portraits of Absence: Listening to the Kidnapped Posters

Alyson Cole

Abstract Images are sites and key media of struggle. This essay shows how such conflicts play out—both via form and through use—and why that matters for the study of politics. Analyzing the visual politics of #KidnappedFromIsrael provides a critical yet undertheorized perspective on the hostilities that erupted in American cities over Israel/Palestine after October 7. Through this case study I endeavor to make four contributions: 1. define a visual genre, "portraits of absence," which publicizes suffering in distinct ways; 2. extend critical phenomenologists' conceptualization of "perceptual habits" to the not-Other; 3. explicate and trouble binaries undergirding empathic visual practices; 4. reassess the relationship between virtual and physical sites of political contestation.

Keywords Visual politics; perceptual habits; October 7 hostages; politics of victimhood; digital politics

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 1958

Expressions such as the eye that listens to the resonance of silence are not monstrosities, for they speak of the way one approaches the temporality of the true, and in temporality being deployed its essence.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, 1998

While the hostages were held captive in Gaza (2023–25)[1] their images were kidnapped to perform incongruous political work. In Israel, representations of the hostages were used to foster national consensus, to compel Prime Minister Netanyahu to agree to a ceasefire deal for their release, and as an emblem of opposition to the Israeli government.[2]

In the US, posters of the hostages functioned as the totem with which diasporic Jews pressured their leaders to support Israel—politically, financially, and militarily—and to discredit pro-Palestine activism. But they were also appropriated for purposes inimical to their creators' goals, namely for expressions of anti-Zionism and/or antisemitism. From the moment they were posted the flyers became a contested object: the first salvo in a battle over competing claims of victimization, the Palestinian cause, and the legitimacy of the state of Israel. Examining the role of visuality in the case of the Kidnapped posters will enable us to better understand the hostilities that took place in the streets of American cities over the war in/on Gaza.

Mark Reinhardt observes that political scientists have not adequately considered the visual elements of politics[3] and thus neglect how "political structures and struggles create or constrain ways of seeing and depicting, even as images and visual practices. . . help produce the subjects, objects, activities, and contours of political life."[4] This essay contributes to addressing that lacuna by examining a case that illustrates how such struggles play out—both via form and through use—and why that matters for understanding politics. Scenes of devastation and anguish saturate the news and social media, but I will not compare visual representations of Palestinians' and Israelis' suffering, quantitatively or qualitatively. Instead, I analyze the affective registers of what was projected upon and taken up both by those who were moved to embrace images of the hostages and those who were compelled to deface and/or remove them. I ask why certain forms of imagery engender affective connectivity with a victim, or conversely, lead to rejecting the presupposition of victimhood altogether.

We can discern two genres of portraying suffering that historically have been used to capture attention and forge structures of co-feeling. The first I will call, following John Berger, *photographs of agony*. Vivid displays of the impact of violence on the human body can incite spectators' emotional receptivity in a variety of ways, evoking sympathy, pity, shock, even disgust. America's national photo album is replete with iconic examples: from the photograph of an escaped slave's back scarred and disfigured by his master's whip, to Vietnamese children screaming in panic as they run from US-produced napalm bombs destroying their village, to pictures of prisoners tortured in Abu Ghraib. Such images document the depths of human brutality, and much has been written about the ethical quandaries they raise:[5] Do they reenact violence through their representation and dissemination? Are some photographs aestheticizing abjection? And, most importantly, does exposure to these scenes of victimization catalyze political action to end the atrocities they depict?[6]

But there is another genre of representing suffering that does not entail explicitly exhibiting the act or effects of victimization. Unlike

photographs of agony, these pictures appear quite ordinary, photos taken prior to the violence they aim to publicize. The design, framing, captioning, and placement of the image is what establishes the pictured individual's status as a victim. Used to magnify the plight of missing persons, typically individual faces constitute the focal point of what I will refer to as *portraits of absence*. Here too there is an extensive archive: from las Madres de Plaza de Mayo's placards for *los desaparecidos*, to the 1980s American campaign for missing children coordinated with the dairy industry, to flyers posted in Manhattan after 9/11 or more recently in Los Angeles for those "abducted by ICE,"[7] and, of course, the #KidnappedFromIsrael posters. The empathic imagination summoned by this second genre raises different concerns, as I will show.

All photographs are "both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence"[8] requiring contextualization and interpretation. But the gap between what the picture displays and what the image is meant to signify is especially great in portraits of absence. Mitigating that disjuncture necessitates a range of approaches. Some scholars refer to a picture's *voice* to describe how a "relationship develop[s] between the spectator and the image...and to those aspects of the image that help the spectator develop that relationship."[9] Or, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, voice "points to a gap in the field of the visual, toward the dimension of what eludes our gaze...[W]e hear things because we cannot see everything."[10] Fittingly, the creators of #KidnappedFromIsrael describe their project in terms of utilizing their "expertise to echo the hostages' voice."[11]

Probing beyond voice, Tina Campt "listens" to images to uncover additional ways that pictures can touch viewers through other senses, such as their "haptic" qualities. "[S]ound need not be heard to be perceived," she explains; it "can be felt."[12] Her dissonant method—listening to the visual, feeling instead of hearing sound—seems appropriate for our examination of portraits of absence, since clearly more than sight is involved; spectators do not confront graphic representations of the body-in-pain and they know more than what they see pictured. Inspired by these approaches, I listen to the Kidnapped posters to explore what can be detected in these representations of the hostages. I investigate not only what the images show or say, but how and why they move viewers. Whether by reference to voice or other resonances, all these interventions blend visuality and aurality, reminiscent of Emmanuel Levinas's account of the "face-of-the-Other."

The Kidnapped posters became a discourse object in ways that elude familiar frameworks of visual politics (e.g., spectacle and surveillance), and thus invite us to consider visual practices through a different heuristic. I find *perceptual habits* to be most generative in this context. Here I am drawing on phenomenologists' conception of *habits*

as sedimented orientations and corporeal comportments (rather than simply repetitive actions, reflexes, or compulsions),[13] and of *perception* as entwined with (rather than prior to) physical gestures.[14] Critical phenomenologists apply Maurice Merleau-Ponty's approach to "intercorporeality" and the "habitual body" to explicate the lived experience of racialization. "Race is constitutive of bodily experience, subjectivity, judgment, and epistemic relationships," Linda Alcoff writes, forming "the realm of the visible" which is "the product of a specific kind of perceptual practice" that has "congealed into habit."[15] More than ideas or mental processes, racial schemas reside in the movements and feelings of bodies thereby configuring perceptual and expressive possibilities.[16] Put simply, perceptual habits work to shape how we view others, even if we are unaware of these habits at work.

These *a prioris* have been used to illuminate undercurrents of cross-racial encounters, from Frantz Fanon's portrayal of his corporeal malediction to George Yancy's delineation of the "white bodily repertoire" when entering an enclosed space alone with a Black man, in what he calls the "elevator effect."[17] I contend that perceptual habits not only turn us away from the racialized Other; they also orient us towards the not-Other. If the iterative logics of perceptual habits undermine empathic receptivity to those misrecognized and derogated as different (Helen Ngo uses the term "dis-empathy"[18]); they likewise enhance affective synchronization with those with whom we perceive a family resemblance—i.e., those we identify as "like us." While most critical phenomenologists focus on physical, face-to-face encounters, I offer evidence of these intersubjective dynamics in engagements with representations mediated by technologies as well.

This is an essay about visual practices and protest in the United States, not geopolitics in Israel/Palestine before, on, or after October 7. I hope to keep readers' focus on the politics of images and how they are trafficked. Exploring these questions about visuality through the case of the Kidnapped posters might strike some as obtuse, especially after almost three years of an unrelenting assault on life in Gaza:[19] at best an equivocating "bothsidesism," at worst occluding Palestinians' suffering by "centering" Israelis. But it is precisely the premise that we can be attuned to only one set of images and one group of victims, as if we were afflicted with a collective form of tunnel vision or more accurately *political simultanagnosia*,[20] that I hope to trouble in this essay.

In what follows I analyze the politics of #KidnappedFromIsrael's reception in the US, beginning with an overview of the project's creation. I then examine the aesthetic premises of the poster's design and mode of address. Focusing on the photographs, I identify the perceptual habits the placards presumed and served to enhance, and how those habits undergird a particular empathic response, which

I contrast with Levinas's conception of "Being-for-the-Other." The essay then turns to the poster-takers to consider how the perceptual habits targeted by the poster-makers mobilized some viewers in unintended ways. The imbrication of social media and street protest is also addressed. I conclude by sketching the outlines of an alternative approach to visuality and affective solidarity: what I call *palimpsestic listening*.



Figure 1. An enormous milk carton adorned with images of Kidnapped posters and the Statue of Liberty in the background. Source: Kidnapped From Israel, "The Milk Carton Project," accessed July 04, 2026, https://www.kidnapped-fromisrael.com/milk.

Designing #KidnappedFromIsrael

Tal Huber (a graphic designer who owns a marketing firm in Israel) along with Nitzan Mintz and Dede Bandaid (two Israeli street artists who were visiting New York City in early October 2023) devised the #KidnappedFromIsrael project. Considering that a team of professionals created the posters, the design is rather conventional, even prosaic, though intentionally so. Each flyer has sparse text in a simple font cast in a palette of just three colors, with a bright red KIDNAPPED banner on top and another on the bottom with the imperative "Bring them home NOW," the hashtag for the social media campaign, and a QR code to scan to "join the global efforts." A color photograph of a hostage, their name, age, nationality, and an abbreviated account of the events precipitating their capture occupy the center of the placard. More information about October 7 and the poster campaign itself appear on the #KidnappedFromIsrael website. In addition to commemorative items for sale and a place to donate to support the project, there are downloadable PDFs in nearly forty languages with instructions for disseminating them in public spaces. The directions include a warning—"Be safe—don't provoke or instigate any conflicts with people or officials"—suggesting that the team anticipated their flyers could become a flashpoint.

#KidnappedFromIsrael reportedly began as a private initiative. Huber explains that they undertook the project presuming their government would not, quipping that Israel is "a nation of lions with a government of mice."[21] "[T]he challenge was to elevate the hostages' plight to global awareness, influencing leaders and decision-makers through a grassroots movement."[22] The team also maintains that their campaign transcends politics: their only purpose was to keep public attention on the hostages' plight, not to advocate for a specific policy. "Nobody here is a politician or supported by any institution. This is only a humanitarian effort and an act of art. . . ," Bandaid insists.[23] The sentiment that concern for the hostages had been wrongly politicized was expressed by others. As one of the organizers of the "March to Free the Hostages" in Washington, DC in November 2023 admonished, "This is about humanity. . . This is no place for politics."[24] Similarly, the CEO of Artists 4 Israel incredulously asked how anyone could "make a political statement out of saying someone should not be held captive, that kidnapping and murder is wrong."[25]

In designing the posters, Huber, Mintz, and Bandaid aimed to create "something visual in a language Americans can understand."[26] For inspiration they researched previous canvassing in the US for missing persons including the 1980s milk-carton drive for abducted children and flyers hung after 9/11. The milk-carton idea had to be put aside for a format that could be produced more swiftly, since getting

the posters into circulation immediately was paramount.[27] Eventually they created milk cartons adorned with their template. Nine-foot-tall, 300-pound faux milk cartons were displayed throughout Miami, Florida in December 2023, later becoming a traveling exhibit. These cartons in a variety of sizes can also be downloaded from their website for personal use.

Less than a day after uploading the digital files of their posters online, Kidnapped flyers were being plastered on lampposts, mailboxes, and buildings, and reproduced in the form of billboards and truck advertisements in urban centers across the US.[28] The placards quickly became a regular feature at rallies and in other public settings to express support for releasing the hostages, demonstrate approval of the operations of the IDF, and pressure the Biden administration to continue robustly backing the Israeli government. Pennsylvania Senator John Fetterman, to give one example, covered the walls of his congressional office with about 200 Kidnapped posters. On college campuses placards were brandished and positioned adjacent to pro-Palestinian encampments to counter-protest.

Some uses of the Kidnapped posters and hostage images were more inventive. "Empty Shabbat Tables" (elaborately set long banquet tables with more than 200 vacant chairs, including children's high chairs, each with a different Kidnapped flyer tapped to the back) were staged in various public settings such as in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and in the center of Times Square.[29] On Governors Island, a performance artist draped in a mylar rescue blanket covered with Kidnapped posters stood silently with others who had red tape placed over their mouths to protest "the world's silence" about the hostages.[30] At the 2024 national conventions for both major political parties, parents of American citizens held in Gaza were featured as official speakers. The same images of the eight American hostages used in the Kidnapped posters were broadcast on a jumbotron behind the Polins as they spoke from the stage at the DNC. As the television cameras panned across the audience during the Neutras' speech at the RNC, kidnapped posters were visible.



Figure 2. Several Kidnapped posters taped to the wall of a New York City subway station. Source: Anna Watts, "The Fliers Show Infants and Children, Teenagers and Grandparents," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/nyregion/israeli-gaza-kidnapped-posters.html.



Figure 3. Images of the eight American hostages on the jumbotron at the 2024 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois. Source: "Jon Polin and Rachel Goldberg, Parents of Hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin, Speaks during the Democratic National Convention Wednesday, August 21, 2024, in Chicago," photograph, ABC7 News, August 21, 2024, https://abc7news.com/live-updates/dnc-2024-day-3-gov-tim-walz-bill-clinton-nancy-pelosi-speak-wednesday/15212599/entry/15215492/.

Kidnapped flyers were also deployed to provoke and intimidate. Surveying the locations of posters hung in Park Slope Brooklyn, one observer noted that rather than being dispersed widely, more than half a dozen flyers were clustered in front of the sole Palestinian restaurant in the neighborhood.[31] Flyers also appeared outside mosques and other Muslim sites.[32] When Kidnapped posters were found pasted to trees near a mosque in San Diego, California, the local police launched an investigation into a "possible hate incident."[33]

Placards for the missing generally adhere to a functionalist template to transmit information concisely, but Greg Grandin detects in the Kidnapped posters' unvarying design "a martial aesthetic." Unlike the handmade flyers for the disappeared in Latin America, or those posted in Manhattan after 9/11, he finds "[t]he generic sameness of the posters. . . most striking."[34] To my mind, the formulaic format and homogeneity belong instead to corporate aesthetics, more marketing than martiality. That there are numerous "printable assets" to adorn t-shirts and automobiles, and items for sale memorializing #KidnappedFromIsrael on their website, only enhances this effect. Mintz and Bandaid may characterize their project as "guerilla art," but the only aspect of the campaign that qualifies as grassroots is that individuals are encouraged to print and post flyers in public venues. Otherwise, #KidnappedFromIsrael capitalized on commercial techniques of branding and merchandising.

To some extent, this is "a language Americans can understand," the visual lingua franca that the poster-makers specified they wanted to communicate through their placards. After all, commodifying suffering is routine in the US. Both the 9/11 and US Holocaust Museums have gift shops that sell souvenirs, for instance. Blending advocacy with advertising, moreover, might even be innate to the missing poster form. Recall that "The Shem of Papyrus" (3000 BCE), the earliest recorded public posting for a missing person (an escaped slave), also contained an advertisement for the slave owner's business. In her essay "1970 Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity," Susan Sontag differentiates public notices from political and commercial posters based on their forms of address: "A notice informs, while a poster seduces, exhorts, sells, educates, convinces, and appeals," serving "the purpose of aggressively pushing consumption or, in politics, of selling national identities."[35] The Kidnapped posters, and placards for the missing in general (which Sontag does not discuss), fall somewhere between these categories, much like the papyrus fragment.

It is less the mode of address than the ostensible global scope of addressees that ultimately separates #KidnappedFromIsrael from most other public postings for missing persons. Those who created and

hung flyers after 9/11, for instance, did so in the hopes that their loved ones had somehow survived the fall of the Twin Towers. Placards were distributed locally to recruit assistance from residents who might have seen the unaccounted-for wandering the streets. The only Kidnapped flyers posted in geographic proximity to the hostages were those that were translated into Arabic and distributed in Gaza by Israeli soldiers. Disseminating posters there, however, was not so much to appeal to locals for help, as Huber clarified, as to "show the Gazans why we were there and that we're not going to leave until the hostages come home."[36]

There were other affinities with 9/11 notices beyond their genre, design, or location. The poster creators, and likely many of those who posted them in the street, conceived of "10/7" as an event comparable to 9/11 or worse in terms of the magnitude of devastation and death (as did President Biden, who compared October 7 to "fifteen 9/11s").[37] Such analogizing additionally functioned to substantiate an unambiguous distinction between victims and victimizers: "The aim is to. . . establish Israel as a victim of a larger-scale terror attack than 9/11 and to identify Hamas for the brutal terror organization it is," Omri Gal, a media expert who joined the campaign, told *Haaretz*, "and as the one that brought the impending disaster to Gaza."[38]

The posters' written text is significant in this regard. The team opted for *kidnapped* to capture public attention in the visually dense streets of New York: "In a city full of images. . . we needed something bold. Kidnapped was impossible to ignore."[39] The term is not inaccurate in this context. But unlike the more common heading of MISSING, which conveys the double meaning of disappearance and feelings of loss, KIDNAPPED accentuates the crime. Placards for the missing also typically include identifying personal information. In place of such details every Kidnapped poster repeats the same horrific story of what happened that fateful Saturday, with some words printed in boldface for extra emphasis:

> On October 7, **over 240 innocent civilians were abducted** from Israel into the Gaza Strip. Their whereabouts remain unknown. **More than 3,000 women, men, and children**, ranging in age from 3 months to 85 years old, were **wounded, murdered, beaten, raped**, and brutally separated from loved ones **by Hamas**. Take a photo of this poster and share it. Please help bring them home alive.

In foregrounding criminality, the Kidnapped posters resemble placards for wanted offenders more than those for missing persons, though both forms share a lineage. Wanted and Missing flyers are visually similar in composition—a large, typically capitalized, single-word message at the top, followed by information about the pictured

individual (either victim or criminal)—and both have roots in criminal portraiture, specifically the *portrait parlé*.[40] (This common heritage of "talking portraits" resonates with the idea that listening has a role in our relationship to such images.)

The word *kidnapped* also underscores the hostages' innocence by implicitly associating them with seized children.[41] There were at least thirty-three children among those abducted, but the trope of innocent children may be why Huber, Mintz, and Bandaid were drawn to the 1980s missing children milk-carton campaign in the first place. The pure, defenseless child is a familiar symbol employed across the political spectrum, especially when presented visually. Nonetheless, we should remember that equating childhood with innocence is a historically located cultural construct that often uses the figure of the child "to make political projects appear innocuous, natural, and therefore justified."[42] By advertising the plight of the hostages and amplifying their innocence as kid-napped, the team sought to secure Israel's position as an irreproachable victim, while also assigning blame for future events on Hamas. The urgency to circulate posters, Gal concedes, was an attempt to preempt the images of devastation they expected would be coming from Gaza: "[T]he moment the people start seeing the pictures from Gaza, world public opinion will change."[43]

Fac(e)ing the hostages

Placards for the missing customarily feature a photograph of the individual's face to help passersby recognize them. In the case of #KidnappedFromIsrael, issuing a separate flyer for each hostage served to augment their individuality and, when assembled as a group (as they were typically displayed), also accentuated the great number of abducted people. A few of the Kidnapped posters have photos of couples or entire families, and one has a pair of three-year-old twins. Adding these different configurations of the family form into the mix provided supplementary details about hostages pictured in the posters and served to visually amplify the message of the many lives that had been cruelly shattered. Most of the photos were culled from social media platforms, but the ones used for the Kidnapped posters were limited to those approved by the hostages' families in the haste to launch the campaign.[44]

The images themselves are markedly commonplace—snapshots of young children, family gatherings, a selfie or two taken at home, at work, or in nature. There are no official or formal pictures; even the soldiers among the hostages wear civilian attire. All the individuals appear to be posing, with many smiling and most looking directly into the camera. Regardless of who is shown, where, or their facial expression, there is something uncannily familiar about the portraits and the

photographic situation: These images document mundane moments of life like those most viewers have stored on their own smartphones. They are not the standard visual fare of the humanitarian repertoire. There are no scorched or razed landscapes; no emaciated, injured, or disfigured bodies; no sobbing children or brutalized women on display. Indeed, all signs of anguish and sorrow are entirely absent.



Figure 4. The Kidnapped poster created for hostage Noa Argamani. Source: Kidnapped From Israel,"Noa Argamani, 26 years old Israeli" poster, kidnappedfromisrael.com, accessed July 4, 2025, https://www.kidnappedfromisrael.com/.

The disjuncture between the violence and torment the posters aim to publicize and the quotidian quality of the portraits is the foundation of their pathos; their power to incite and capitalize on perceptual habits. Because the posters do not show disturbing scenes, there is little risk that spectators will turn away in horror, disgust, or overwhelm with pity. Quite the opposite: The conventional, formulaic layout combined with the recognizable aesthetics of the photos draws them in for a closer look, enabling the posters to hail viewers to feel *with* the victims rather than only *for* them. They beckon spectators to reciprocate the hostages' gaze; to see their faces—healthy, vital, some strikingly beautiful—and to learn their names, and in doing so to insinuate that were it not for geographic arbitrariness, it could have been them, their partner, sibling, child, or parent.

When discussing her selection criteria, Huber explained that she purposefully chose photographs devoid of any signs that might mark the hostages as Israeli. "To engage and connect with people in the street, I had to give them something familiar. Something from everyday life to make them realize that a terrible thing had happened. . . [and] could happen anywhere in the world."[45] Put differently, spectators are not being asked to bear witness to the pain of the Other as much as to acknowledge their potential interchangeability. If pictures of atrocity haunt us, as Sontag held, what is meant to be unsettling about the Kidnapped posters is the specter of "this might have happened to us," not "how did this happen to them over there."

Those abducted on October 7 included Americans, Argentines, Britons, Chileans, Chinese, Danes, Dutch, French, Germans, Filipinos, Mexicans, Nepalese, Russians, Spaniards, Sri Lankans, Tanzanians, and Thais; Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims. Almost all the posters specify the individual hostage's nationality. Most were Israeli (with the notable exception of foreign workers), but many held dual citizenship, and both nationalities were recorded on the posters in hyphenated form. Specifying the hostages' national hybridity was likely intended to influence public opinion in many countries and provided another reason to cast the campaign as a "global effort." The posters were subsequently translated into more than three dozen languages. As importantly, the diversity of national identities helped de-Israelize the hostages. They may have been "kidnapped from Israel," but they constituted an international group.

This professed diversity, however, is undercut by the aesthetic uniformity of the images the creative team selected, a choice that ultimately erases and subsumes difference. The interchangeability the posters promoted is predicated upon—and limited by—bodily comportment, attire, and setting. Recall that the word *habit* comes from the Latin for appearance, dress, and condition.[46] These cues in the photographs render the hostages recognizable—they are "like us"—coded as middle-class, Western, and white, regardless of their actual heterogeneity. As race scholars maintain, whiteness cannot be reduced to skin pigmentation;[47] it manifests in solipsistic appeals to a universalism emptied of ethnicity, religion, race, and class.[48]

Listening closely, we can hear these messages embedded in the original posters' mode of address. Subsequent renditions abandon any subtlety by intensifying the petition for spectators to identify with a victim who could have been them. Among the downloadable materials later added to kidnappedfromisrael.com is a poster template with the space for the photograph left empty. Directions instruct visitors to place their own photo within the frame. Then, to mark the passage of the hostages' first year in captivity, life-sized renderings of the posters

were created with full-length mirrors in the picture frame and placed in public spaces. To see your image reflected from within a Kidnapped poster goes beyond recognizing the not-Other's suffering to literally viewing yourself in their place. Much like the October 7 dark tourism and other immersive exhibits that Naomi Klein characterized as promoting "a kind of identity merger, as if visitors themselves have been violated," this version of the Kidnapped posters fosters a transferring of trauma through the device of a mirror.[49] In these mirrored placards the initial connection based on perceptual habits mutates from feeling *with* to feeling *as*.



Figure 5. The frame of a Kidnapped poster with a full-length mirror in lieu of a hostage photograph. Source: Aditi (@aditilrao), "Nah They Have a Literal Selfie Corner, You Could Not Conjure Up a More Delusional Movement," post on X (formerly Twitter), October 9, 2024, https://x.com/aditilrao/status/1844110076715626669.

Interpellation moves forward and back in time by also linking the violence of October 7 to the Shoah. Examples abound: Shortly after October 7, Israel's delegation to the United Nations appeared with yellow stars on their lapels with the words "Never Again";[50] Artists 4 Israel expanded their HealingInkProject by offering tattoos of the tragic date inscribed like Nazi concentration camp prisoners' numbers;[51] a murdered hostage was likened to Anne Frank,[52] while the "desecration" of the posters was equated with Kristallnacht.[53] To augment this association, the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation helped arrange for a portrait of 238 Shoah survivors, each holding a Kidnapped poster.[54] Since the European Shoah often functions as a yardstick which, in its rarely matched extremes, dulls other forms of victimization and mutes

contemporary victims' claims,[55] this staging served to further whiten and Westernize the hostages (though in a way it did so by making the hostages more Jewish). In the context of comparative suffering and moralized violence, the image also underscores that October 7 is the only proper analogy to the Shoah.



Figure 6. A large group of Shoah survivors holding Kidnapped posters at the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. Source: Julia Gergely," A Group of Holocaust Survivors Pose with Posters of the Hostages [...]," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 1, 2023, https://www.jta.org/2023/11/01/ny/hundreds-of-holocaust-survivors-pose-with-posters-of-hamas-hostages-in-a-statement-of-solidarity.

To keep attention on the hostages remaining in Gaza, #KidnappedFromIsrael crafted additional adaptations of their posters. Newer ones remove the longer narrative about October 7 and center a larger photo of the hostage's face. Some iterations delete references to the perpetrators; in others, the red kidnapped banner reads simply "by Hamas." While they were initially distinct initiatives, #KidnappedFromIsrael seems to have joined forces with the Israel-based #BringThemHomeNow, if only through reposting on social media. Their respective posters use the same photos and remarkedly similar layouts. When images of death and destruction in Gaza began to overwhelm the visual landscape, both campaigns also began to include images that depict victimhood more explicitly, i.e., photographs of agony exhibiting the hostages' physical and emotional torment. Special attention was given to young women pictured beaten, bloody, crying, and in a state of shock, with the directive, "WE MUST ALL BE. . . ".[56]



Figure 7. Posters with photos of beaten female hostages, Karina & Naama. Source: Bring Them Home Now (@bringthemhomenow), "Ayelet, Naama's Mother: 'The Whole World Saw the Horror, the Cruelty [...],'" Instagram, May 27, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C7d7U32N7Q7/?img_index=5.

In depictions of suffering, especially those of imminent death, Barbie Zelizer discerns a "subjunctive voice" that "creates a space of possibility, hope, and liminality through which spectators might relate to images." In contrast to "as-is" photos, "as-if" ones invite viewers to recognize elements of contingency, including alternative outcomes to those pictured, so they ask "not 'what are we looking at' but. . . 'what possibilities does this raise'."[57] Portraits of absence more clearly inhabit the space between optimism and despair, since typically the photographs show happy faces of individuals living life fully, and the purpose of their display is publicizing that person's absence in the hope they will return. While the visual grammar of the genre presupposes the viewer's concern about the pictured person's condition, #KidnappedFromIsrael urges spectators to assume the subject position of the victim, to become the not-Other.

Being-the-not-Other should be juxtaposed to the Levinasian imperative of Being-for-the-Other. In Levinas's formulation, the Other's radical alterity is insurmountable; our connection to the victim is based on their precarity, not our identification with them. This is the ethical force of his philosophy—imagining bonds engendered across absolute difference: "The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics."[58]

Let's linger with Levinas a moment longer. He postulates that the face-of-the-Other compels us to respond to their suffering. Immediately felt and irrecusable, neither consciously processed nor chosen, an encounter with the Other is a phenomenologically embodied and affective experience that "commands me before any

decision, any deliberation."[59] Levinas's use of "face" is more metaphoric than literal, more aural than visual: "The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face. This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image."[60] At the same time, he prioritizes the face as the locus of expression, assigning it vocal capacity: the face-of-the-Other "speaks" rather than simply appears, prompting our need to listen and "hear" their cry.[61] Roy Brand and Amit Pinchevski reconcile Levinas's ocular metaphor and allusions to visuality with his references to aurality by reading the face as a site of "two incompatible yet necessary dimensions—images and address..."[62] "The face calls for a seeing rather than looking. . . [S]eeing is always conscious of its action, seeing itself in seeing; looking . . . is a passive visual encounter, a gaze that is forgetful about itself."[63]

Levinas goes so far as to propose a dynamic of capture in this intersubjective encounter, that we are held "hostage" by our unchosen receptivity, susceptibility, and responsibility to the Other.[64] Whereas Sontag proffered that images of suffering others inure us and motivate neither identification, empathy, nor action, Levinas and the Kidnapped poster-makers share the contrary presumption: The face of a sufferer will and should put the spectator into a transformed state and mobilize them, though in divergent ways.

Defacing & refacing

The Kidnapped posters' design may be conventional and the photographs ordinary, but their reception was not. As soon as the flyers went up, they were vandalized—defaced, torn, burned, and/or ripped down. Images of toddlers and young children were decorated with horns, Hitler-style mustaches, and swastikas; some were smeared with feces. On other posters the hostage's eyes, mouth, or entire face were vehemently scratched out. Questions disputing the truth of reports about the events of October 7 or invoking conspiracy theories about Jews' alleged involvement in 9/11 were posed on several placards. More plainly, "LIES. FAKE." was written across a flyer translated into Arabic for Bedouin hostage Farhan al-Qadi.

Precisely how many posters were defiled or confiscated is difficult to measure, but these acts received extensive publicity. For some, marring the simulacrum was tantamount to violence against the hostages themselves, and they denounced the defacers for "denying the basic humanity of these victims."[65] In much of the criticism, the targeting of images of children was a repeated theme, taken as evidence of the "complete callousness toward human life and suffering."[66] "[I]f this was a campaign of dogs or cats that got lost," Mintz remarked, "no






Figure 8. Two examples of defaced Kidnapped posters. Source: L-R: Eyal Bau Cohen, "A Scratched-Out and Defaced KIDNAPPED Poster," photograph, *The Times of Israel*, January 7, 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/how-posters-of-hamas-hostages-became-targets-in-the-war-for-public-opinion-in-ny/; Jordan Ercit, "Police Probing Vile Graffiti Scrawled on Kidnap Victim Posters in Cedarvale Park," *Toronto Sun*, April 10, 2024, https://torontosun.com/news/local-news/police-probing-vile-graffiti-scrawled-on-kidnap-victim-posters-in-cedarvale-park.

one would dare to tear down their pictures; But Jews? No problem."[67] Even the White House press secretary condemned these acts on social media as "wrong and hurtful."[68]

The proliferation of Nazi symbols and other allusions to the Third Reich was regarded as especially portentous. "Intrinsically we know . . . dehumanization has begun," cautioned the director general of New York's Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation.[69] That these reactions, whether viewed as acts of denial, erasure, or celebration, were so immediate and reflexive (beginning on October 8), visceral and brazen, left some to conclude that they revealed deep-seated loathing. For the poster-creators, this flaunting of "pure antisemitism"[70] was an unintended contribution of their project: "By accident, this campaign did more than bring an awareness of the kidnapped people," Mintz reflected. "It brought awareness of how hated we are as a community."[71] Journalist Batya Ungar-Sargon expressed this idea more starkly: "There is no such thing as an innocent Jew."[72] At a minimum, these blunt, antagonistic reactions to the hostages' pictures suggest that portraits of absence (i.e., images of pre-suffering) are more susceptible to this form of contestation; it is unlikely that photographs of agony would have been similarly defiled and destroyed, or at least not as swiftly and as widely. This might explain why representations of the hostages soon reverted to include the visual grammar of atrocity photos.[73]

Once the post-October 7 ruination of Gaza commenced and the toll of displaced, injured, and dead swelled exponentially, new messages appeared on the posters. In several cases, including an eight-year-old girl's flyer, red stickers with OCCUPIER replaced KIDNAPPED.

Graffiti denouncing Israel's military operations was also common; in one instance, "Does this justify genocide?" was written across a wall of posters. On the poster of hostage Hersch Goldberg-Polin (who lost part of his left forearm during the deadly attack at the Nova music festival) a note asks, "What if he's in a hospital that was bombed?"[74]

In response, a second campaign was launched to save the Kidnapped posters themselves. Flyers were hung fortified with packing tape, coated with petroleum jelly, or placed in plastic folders to make them harder to deface and remove.[75] The team also created a new series, "Torn Families"—posters with images of the ripped Kidnapped posters. A few individuals collected remnants of tattered flyers to preserve what they considered sacred artifacts or to repurpose them as art honoring those killed on October 7.[76] Most others used the posters to talk back to the defacers. On a flyer for 84-year-old hostage Amiram Cooper, for example, they asked: "What if this was your grandfather?" Small notes were also pasted to posters to mark the hostages' number of days in captivity and milestones such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays. Videos and photographs of the flyers with these messages were then uploaded to social media.[77] The Kidnapped posters became a palimpsest of opposing inscriptions.



Figure 9. Two examples of the Kidnapped posters as palimpsests. Source: L-R: Sofia Rubin, "Israeli Hostage Posters Were Recently Torn Down and Defaced at CMU and Pitt," photograph, *The Jewish Chronicle*, November 7, 2023, https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/posters-featuring-israeli-hostages-torn-down-defaced-at-cmu-and-pitt/; Notes for the hostages (@notesforthehostage), Instagram, n.d., https://www.instagram.com/notesforthehostages/.

Displaying, defacing, removing, replacing, protecting, and preserving the hostage posters soon became an endless loop. Recording and disseminating images of those destroying the flyers online was ubiquitous. Sometimes poster-takers publicized their own activities with selfies and posts online.[78] At other times, anti-antisemitism groups surveilled, filmed, and broadcast footage and stills documenting those engaging in defacement or, more often, destruction. Many of these videos went viral. Physicians and public defenders, teachers, students, and even dogsitters were subsequently doxed for their misbehavior. Several individuals lost their jobs.[79] Doxing also moved offline as trucks with digital sidings displaying culprits' faces and personal information gleaned from the internet drove through cities such as New York and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Victims of their own success

In several exchanges with individuals captured on camera destroying posters, they offer little to no defense of or explanation for their actions. The few who do speak tend to reiterate what was scrawled on the placards: The visual representations and accompanying "narrative of the victimization of the Israelis" are "completely false" or "fake."[80] Others did not question the veracity of the content of the posters but considered the campaign itself to be nothing more than an instrument to manufacture consent for Israel's "right to self-defense," a retaliation they expected would be grossly disproportionate. "In Israel the posters might pressure the government to make a deal they wouldn't otherwise consider," reasons one. "But here in the US, our role is mostly about deciding whether to send more military aid to Israel."[81] "This is part of a concentrated propaganda effort to rile up support for the genocide of Palestinian people," another asserts.[82] Some defaced pictures of the hostages' faces to protest how Palestinians remain faceless, anonymous, or entirely absent in America's scopic regime. Palestinians "are killed all the time by the Israeli army and settlers, and their deaths aren't even registered in the press," a poster-taker remarked in November 2023. "10,000 dead in Gaza—more than 4,000 of them children—the focus is still only on these Israelis."[83]

In order to encourage spectators' affective synchronization with the hostages, the poster designers created what they considered an inclusive, humanitarian campaign, and thus chose to universalize the hostages' plight. But by relying on visual motifs and genres associated with Western normativity, such as the "selfie," they (perhaps unwittingly) rendered the hostages white. As a result, they were both successful and arguably a victim of their own success. For some, the posters summoned empathy and a sense of kinship—Manhattan

Borough President Mark Levine conveyed this concisely when he declared, "We feel this viscerally…as if these children are our children."[84] For others, the same visual idioms only served to link the hostages to all the historical crimes of the West, from global capitalism to settler colonialism, in turn inciting a similarly visceral and unequivocal rejection of the premise that the hostages qualified as victims. With all their efforts to curate and foreground universalized images of the hostages, the paper flyers, as material objects, became a synecdochic representation of the entire Zionist project both for those who took up the Kidnapped posters, and especially for those who tore them down.

David Freedberg points to rich evidence that, much like effigies, publicly displayed portraits—such as those of despised rulers—are often subjected to defacement, frequently targeting the eyes and mouth.[85] The impulse to disfigure representations of the face, he contends, is a transhistorical and transcultural spectral phenomenon, as is consternation at seeing their destruction. "They are assaults on our own sense of embodiment, assaults that shock us in seemingly inexplicable ways. . . so great a sense of shock at the insult to [the image] that one almost wants to clap one's own hand across one's eyes, as if to protect them from a similar fate."[86] It is hardly surprising, therefore, that some regarded the defacement of the hostage posters as a personal assault.

Also bear in mind that the destruction and removal of the posters occurred on the heels of a cultural conjuncture when monuments to disavowed pasts were toppled throughout the US; statues of confederate soldiers were confiscated and buildings carrying slaveowners' names renamed, to give two examples. The Kidnapped posters were judged by the defacers to be a similarly honorific spectacle that elevated the value of some lives over others. "It was never about what was on the posters," explained one college student suspended for removing posters. "It was about the message the posters sent."[87] For her and others #KidnappedFromIsrael constituted another means to "reduce October 7 to a list of horrors[,]. . . to block from view the history and reality of colonialism, occupation, and siege."[88] The tactility and materiality of the posters made such deeds more enticing. Indeed, Hasan Piker (a popular Twitch streamer) surmises that this was the poster campaign's real purpose. Posting images of the hostages' faces was not an effort to rouse concern for "all these children that are lost," purports Piker. It was a ploy to tempt others into tearing the flyers down so that Jews could demonstrate "how scary the Arabs are and deflect attention from the. . . 3,000 murdered children with our tax dollars and our missiles."[89]

Sontag advises that when posters designed to mobilize viewers take over public spaces through their inescapable presence, they can

kindle antagonistic reactions.[90] Equally adversarial exchanges are a prominent feature of social media, which has a seemingly infinite capacity to circulate images. The case of #KidnappedFromIsrael makes evident, first, that even in the digital age physical public space remains essential for political expression and assembly; and second, that the relationship between cyberspace and physical space as sites of contestation is dialectical. Hanging posters in the street could be understood as taking a stab at piercing those so-called "social media bubbles" that create echo chambers and spread disinformation. It certainly allowed for a range of performances, from giant milk cartons adorned with reproductions of the Kidnapped placards to mustache vandalism and poster mutilation, because the paper postings could be physically destroyed. At the same time, #KidnappedFromIsrael and other poster campaigns relied heavily on social media to publicize and amplify their message, and all their placards feature QR codes that invite street viewers to continue engaging online.

Social media can replicate corporeal behavior in virtual form, but the inverse is also evident. Consider how the defacement of the Kidnapped posters reproduces—indeed, literalizes—the tone and content of exchanges on social media platforms, where snark reigns and tempers fly high. Calling out disingenuousness by posting an emoji of a smiling pile of poop is routine on social media. There is salient continuity between declaring "bullshit" online and putting excrement on the image of a child who was brutally abducted. Democracy is demandingly agonistic, allowing for political disagreement and contestation that is "inflammatory, uncivil, [and] outrageous." But might this form of defacement exceed the "right to be hostile"?[91] That recordings of such actions were uploaded to social media—in some cases performed with the aim of producing digital content; in others to expose actors to doxing—is another manifestation of the blurring of online and offline, indicating that street politics and social media are now entirely marbled.[92]

The traffic of images

There were other fronts in the post-October 7 struggle over visual representations. Mere weeks after #KidnappedFromIsrael disseminated their flyers, posters of Palestinian victims began appearing on social media and in public spaces across the US. To give one example, #MurderedByIsrael, launched November 4, 2023 by an anonymous group in Sydney, Australia and hung in cities throughout the US, mimics the template and language of the Kidnapped posters, though their red banner, emblazoned with a blue Jewish star at the top, bleeds into the flyer to accentuate the adjectival use of "bloody" to depict Israel's "apartheid regime" and reads "MURDERED by Israel."

The great majority of #MurderedByIsrael's images are of children, all using the genre of portraits of absence, and covering a period of more than two decades because, as the placards state,

> Since its creation in **1948**, Israel has committed the most **atrocious crimes** on the Palestinian population. Murders and brutalities that extend far beyond October 7th. As the world silently watches a **systematic genocide**, we will continue to raise our voices and our stories—of **murder**, **mutilation, targeted attacks of civilians**, and the grim reality of a **ruthless and bloody apartheid**. **Spread the truth. Change the narrative. Take a photo.** Palestinians have *every* right to their land. Palestinians have *every* right to resist.

#MurderedByIsrael also has a QR code and the same instructions for disseminating their flyers, including a warning about being careful when posting them. Like #MurderedByIsrael, the proliferation of posters, billboards, stickers, digital signage, and social media posts for Israeli and Palestinian victims competed to command the public's gaze—a contest that often took the form of imitating design elements, appropriating language from each another (e.g., "Bring Them Home to Europe"), and translating the rallying cries of other movements (e.g., "Say Their Names" for the hostages, and "Palestinian Lives Matter").[93]

Another illustration of image transmission and the production of meaning can be observed by turning momentarily to Israel/Palestine. For nearly two years pictures documenting the devastation of Gaza and deaths of Palestinians were suppressed on Israeli media. There had been internal opposition to the military campaign from the start, but most calls for peace were framed in terms of returning the hostages. After the Israeli government unilaterally ended the cease-fire agreement in mid-March 2025, new forms of protest arose in Israel that visually foregrounded the human toll in Gaza. One was a poster campaign that placed images of Palestinian children in various public settings throughout the country.[94] The great majority of the images on these flyers were color photos in the mode of portraits of absence, with the child's name and the date and place where they were killed in both Hebrew and Arabic. Photographs of deceased and ailing children in Gaza also became props at the weekly Saturday night protests.[95] The images on display during these marches partook in both genres of representing victimhood: Activists held large pictures of emaciated babies to oppose the starvation of Gaza; others carried signs in the portraits of absence mode, i.e., ordinary photos of children who had been killed by the IDF.

Then, in a reciprocal gesture, Palestinian peace activists in Gaza posted photos online of themselves standing amidst the wreckage holding pictures of Israeli children killed on October 7 or kidnapped

then and later murdered. When asked what prompted the postings on social media, Rami Aman, founder of the Gaza Youth Committee, explained, "It came from a desire to show Israelis that Palestinians, despite their suffering, still recognize the humanity of the 'other'."[96] The photographs they hold in these pictures from Gaza are the same images used in the #KidnappedFromIsrael placards. Unlike the poster wars in the US, where trafficked images vied to direct public attention toward only one set of sufferers, these actions in Israel and Gaza attest to alternative possibilities. Through an exchange of pictures, Israeli and Palestinian peace activists acknowledged both the entwinement and the difference of their suffering.



Figure 10. Israelis in Tel Aviv protesting starvation and death in Gaza. Source: Ruth Margalit, "Israelis Are Starting to Talk about Famine in Gaza," *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/israelis-are-starting-to-talk-about-famine-in-gaza.



Figure 11. Palestinians in Gaza holding images of Israeli children killed on or after October 7. Source: Standing Together (@standing.together.english),"A Few Days Ago, Standing Together Received a Message from Ramez, a Protest Organizer in Gaza," Instagram, July 2, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DLmzvOOqDgq/?img_index=2.

A final look

The Kidnapped posters, their composition, affective registers, and multiple uses illustrate fundamental ambiguities in the politics of seeing as both a perceptual practice and a mode of recognition. Ultimately, the placards became a flashpoint over who deserves victim status; where victimhood is conceived of as all-or-nothing, premised on absolute innocence, and trapped in a zero-sum calculus. The poster-makers claimed their project was nonpolitical.[97] #KidnappedFromIsrael simply put a face on, and gave a name and voice to innocent victims, including children, the elderly, and the infirm, who were taken from their homes during an extraordinarily brutal attack. While the team's urgency in getting their posters out, in turning and keeping all eyes on the hostages, was driven by their concern for the wellbeing of those who had been abducted, they were also attempting to preempt an influx of photographs of agony from Gaza.

For the poster-takers the placards were inherently political, since anyone in Israel on October 7, 2023 was *de facto* complicit; all were "occupiers." They wanted to avert the possibility that these representations of vulnerable Israelis might dilute the public's perception of Israelis as the victimizers of Palestinians, and that evidence of Palestinians

having victimized Israelis would make Palestinians somehow "imperfect" victims. They presumed, moreover, that the dissemination of the hostages' pictures would displace images of Palestinians' current and past oppression. Both the poster-makers and the poster-takers sought to occupy the visual landscape that they believed could accommodate only one victimized group.

The struggle over the Kidnapped posters exhibits the slippage between the either/or logic of victim discourse and the binarism of the gaze. We take for granted that in foregrounding one image, others must fall out of focus; that *seeing*, literally and figuratively, necessarily involves a kind of not seeing.[98] The limits of ocular perception have been the topic of experimentation and reflection in psychology and philosophy. To demonstrate figure-ground perception, Edgar Rubin famously designed a picture in which viewers can observe either a vase or the silhouettes of opposing human faces. In Ludwig Wittgenstein's also well-known analysis of the duck/rabbit drawing, the image can be interpreted as representing either of these animals. Both optical illusions, Rubin's vase and Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit, illustrate how a single picture can be composed of opposing figures, but also how those figures are not visible concurrently.

What visual practices might enable us to hold contending images together and overcome the perceptual habits of empathizing with X (implicitly at the expense of erasing Y), while also confounding the Other/not-Other difference? Must perceiving the suffering of the victims of "the victims of victims" (to invoke Edward Said's formulation[99]) require overlooking radical asymmetries of power? Nim Shapira, who directed *Torn*, a documentary about the reception of the Kidnapped posters in New York City, reminds us that, "There is room on the pole for both posters."[100] This is most certainly true. But the display of images in either Shapira's proposal or the example of the picture exchange between peace activists in Gaza and Israel might not be sufficient. With social media the availability or even the placement of images is not the problem. What needs reconsideration are our perceptual habits.

Perceptual habits lead us to be captured by the picture. To cease being held hostage by routine and familiar visual grammars, spectators need to learn that there is more to observe in a representation, and then refocus to find another image. This, as Linda Zerilli reminds us, is what Wittgenstein calls "seeing an aspect." Conceding that their perspective is neither exhaustive nor definitive enables spectators to see differently. The process is not about attempting to adopt another's subject position or point of view (the proverbial "stepping into someone else's shoes"); it requires granting that no perspective can be all-encompassing. Only accepting both the partiality of their

own perspective and the plurality of others' perspectives can enable observers to see anew rather than simply from habit.[101]

Habituating new forms of attunement might require moving beyond the visual field and its constraints. There may be limits on how many images we can visually process at the same time, but we can hear assorted, even discordant voices simultaneously. Furthermore, as Campt proffers, we can also listen for nonauditory sound and different affective frequencies. Just as the Kidnapped posters became layered with opposing inscriptions, we should aspire to cultivate a sort of attentiveness that is similarly palimpsestic. Instead of reinstalling the victim/victimizer binary, we would be alert to the deeper histories that form images of suffering, competing narratives of the present, multiple voices, frequencies, and imaginaries of a solidaristic future. Affective solidarity could then reach beyond the empathic connectivity of Being-the-not-Other. Palimpsestic listening demands that we "reeducate our eyes"[102] or at least "the eye that listens,"[103] and thus reorient our sensory experiences to disrupt perceptual habits that foreclose present possibilities and those not yet realized.

Acknowledgments

Early versions of this project were presented at the AIS & EAIS conference in Prague, the Czech Republic (July 2024) and "The Life & Death of Habits" workshop organized in the framework of the IRN NOVI with the support of the IUF in Amiens, France (March 2025). I benefited from smart and challenging questions raised by audiences in those settings. I have also had the support of several thoughtful readers. I want to express my gratitude to Oz Frankel, George Shulman, Mark Reinhardt, Glenn Burger, Wendy Luttrell, Be Stone, Sumru Atuk, and Daniel Boyarin for their engagement with this work at various stages. Thanks also to the anonymous *T&E* reviewers and editors, Keally McBride & Hagar Kotef. Finally, I want to acknowledge and formally thank Ren Moreau and especially Aline Van Neutgam for assisting me with numerous bibliographic and tediously technical tasks such as tracking down images on various social media platforms and formatting them for publication, and Leslie Castro-Woodhouse for copyediting this text. Support for this project was provided by a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by The Professional Staff Congress and The City University of New York.

Notes

1. The last living hostages in Gaza returned to Israel on October 13, 2025. On January 26, 2026, the bodies of the remaining hostages were recovered (Alexander Cornwell, "Israel Retrieves Remains of Last Gaza Hostage,

Military Says," *Reuters*, January 26, 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-retrieves-remains-last-gaza-hostage-military-says-2026-01-26/).

2. In Israel, posters of the hostages also served a memorializing function, but increasingly became primarily anti-government props. By 2024, most hostage families opposed how the government was using the hostages to justify their siege on Gaza (Ilana Curiel, "More Southern Kibbutzim Say They Will Skip October 7 State Ceremony: 'We Will Not Be Extras at a Political Event,'" *Ynetnews*, August 21, 2024, https://www.ynetnews.com/article/bk11erdxja; Jessica Steinberg, "Parents of Several Hostages Demand Government Stop 'Exploiting Our Children's Images' in PR Campaigns," *Times of Israel*, May 20, 2025, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/parents-of-several-hostages-demand-government-stop-exploiting-our-childrens-images-in-pr-campaigns/). But note that the range of public art in Israel in the aftermath of October 7—documenting the attack, commemorating the victims, and expressing concern for the hostages—was incredibly rich and varied and extended far beyond posters of the kidnapped (cf. Leora Eren Frucht, "Painful and Piercing Public Art as Therapy," *Hadassah Magazine*, January 2024, https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2023/12/26/painful-and-piercing-public-art-as-therapy/).
3. Mark Reinhardt, "The Cave of Images: Understanding Visual Politics in and through Plato's Republic," *Theory & Event* 25, no. 2 (2022): 238–74, 239.
4. Mark Reinhardt, "Spectacle, Surveillance, and the Ironies of Visual Politics in the Age of Autonomous Images," *Political Theory* 51, no. 5 (2023): 814–42, 815–6.
5. E.g., Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Dugganne, eds., *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain* (Williams College Museum of Art in association with the University of Chicago Press, 2007); Mark Reinhardt, "Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique," in *Beautiful Suffering*, ed. Mark Reinhardt, Holly Edwards, and Erina Dugganne (Williams College Museum of Art in association with the University of Chicago Press, 2007); Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).
6. Both Berger and Sontag's answers to the last question was an unambiguous no. For Berger, such images depoliticize and depress action because they "accuse nobody and everybody" (John Berger, "Photographs of Agony," in *About Looking* [Pantheon Books, 1980], 33). Sontag maintained that even as they raise crucial questions about responsibility, inevitability, and whether common understandings demand radical revision, atrocity photos neither provide answers nor "dictate a course of action." Visual depictions of others' pain serve only as an "invitation," encouraging spectators "to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, [and] to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers" (Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977], 87).
7. Matthew Cantor, "'Abducted by Ice:' The Haunting Missing-Person Posters Plastered Across LA," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/18/los-angeles-missing-posters-ice.

8. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 5.
9. Barbie Zelizer, "The Voice of the Visual in Memory," in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (University of Alabama Press, 2004), 157–86, 162.
10. Slavoj Žižek, *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Duke University Press, 1996), 93.
11. Nim Shapira, dir., *Torn: The Israel-Palestine Poster War on New York City Streets* (Metallux Studio, 2024).
12. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017), 6.
13. Edward S. Casey, "Habitual Body and Memory in Merleau-Ponty," in *A History of Habit: From Aristotle to Bourdieu*, ed. Tom Sparrow and Adam Hutchinson (Lexington Books, 2013), 214.
14. Helen Ngo, "Racist Habits: A Phenomenological Analysis of Racism and the Habitual Body," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 42, no. 9 (2016): 847–72, 849.
15. Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 183, 126, 189.
16. Ngo, "Racist Habits," 854.
17. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967); George Yancy, "Elevators, Social Spaces, and Racism: A Philosophical Analysis," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34, no. 8 (2008): 843–76.
18. Ngo, "Racist Habits," 854.
19. At the time of revising this essay for publication, the most recent UNRWA report estimates the death toll in Gaza since October 7, 2023 to be more than 73,231 and the number of injured upward of 173,686 (UNRWA, "UNRWA Situation Report 230: Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza Strip and Occupied West Bank, Including Jerusalem" July 16 2026, https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-230-humanitarian-crisis-gaza-strip-and-occupied-west-bank).
20. *Simultanagnosia* is a neurological disorder in which an individual can identify only a single visual object at a time. I suggest that the inability to perceive more than one aspect of a political conflict or more than one set of actors should be understood as symptoms of what I term *political simultanagnosia*.
21. Naama Riba, "Israeli 'Kidnapped' by Hamas Posters: Where to Download and Who Is Behind Them," *Haaretz*, October 12, 2023, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-10-12/ty-article-magazine/.premium/in-london-and-new-york-guerrilla-campaigns-to-spread-israels-message/0000018b-208e-d010-a59f-b9ef1bd30000.
22. Tal Huber, "Kidnapped Project," https://giraff.co.il/projects/kidnapped/.
23. Anna Rahmanan, "The Artists Behind the Israeli Hostage Posters Around the World," *Observer*, October 23, 2023, https://observer.com/2023/10/the-artists-behind-the-missing-posters-plastered-around-the-world/.

24. Suzanne Pollak, "'Bring Them Home Now': DC March to Free the Hostages Draws Large Crowd," *Washington Jewish Week*, April 10, 2024, https://www.washingtonjewishweek.com/bring-them-home-now-dc-march-to-free-the-hostages-draws-large-crowd/.
25. Conan Nolan, "'Kidnapped by Hamas:' Graffiti Activists Cover Culver City Building with Images of Hostages," *NBC Los Angeles*, December 18, 2023, https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/kidnapped-by-hamas-graffiti-activists-cover-culver-city-building-with-images-of-hostages/3293879/.
26. Riba, "Israeli 'Kidnapped' by Hamas Posters."
27. Anna Rahmanan, "The Artists Behind the Israeli Hostage Posters Around the World."
28. Chris Kenning, "'Kidnapped from Israel' Flyers Reflect Anguish over Hostages Even as They Draw Controversy," *USA Today*, October 25, 2023, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2023/10/25/kidnapped-from-israel-posters-artist/71304720007/.
29. E.g., "Empty Shabbat Tables Symbolize Hostages Held Captive by Hamas," *Pix11 News*, October 27, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@pix11ny/video/7294660191373528366.
30. Miranda Lapides, "Meet Ronit, Israel Artivist," The Shabbat Drop, December 22, 2023, https://theshabbatdrop.com/p/meet-ronit-israeli-artivist.
31. Katherine Rosman, "How Posters of Kidnapped Israelis Ignited a Firestorm on American Sidewalks," *New York Times*, October 31, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/31/nyregion/israel-gaza-kidnapped-poster-fight.html.
32. Chris McGreal, "'It's like a Fire in the World': How the Israeli 'Kidnapped' Posters Set off a Phenomenon and a Backlash," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/10/israel-red-white-kidnapped-posters-flyers-palestine-conflict.
33. Caleb Lunetta, "Flyers of Kidnapped Israelis Pasted to Trees Outside Clairemont Mesa Mosque," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, October 14, 2023, https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2023/10/13/flyers-of-kidnapped-israelis-pasted-to-trees-outside-clairemont-mesa-mosque/.
34. Greg Grandin, "How to Read the Israeli 'Kidnapped' Posters," *The Intercept*, November 28, 2023, 12, https://theintercept.com/2023/11/28/kidnapped-posters-israel-latin-america/.
35. Susan Sontag, "1970 Posters: Advertisement, Art, Political Artifact, Commodity," in *Looking Closer 3*, ed. Michael Bierut (Allworth Press, 1999), 196.
36. Dave Gordon, "A Million Posters, One Mission: Tal Huber's Fight for Israeli Hostages," *Community M*, February 1, 2025, https://communitym.com/2025/02/01/a-million-posters-one-mission-tal-hubers-fight-for-israeli-hostages/.
37. Brett Samuels, "Biden warns Israel not to repeat mistakes of US response after 9/11," *The Hill*, October 18, 2023, https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/4262626-biden-warns-israel-mistakes-after-9-11/.

38. Riba, "Israeli 'Kidnapped' by Hamas Posters."
39. Shapira, *Torn*.
40. Cf. Eric Freedman, *Transient Images: Personal Media in Public Frameworks* (Temple University Press, 2010).
41. *Kidnapped* is a compound of two slang words, child (*kid*) and thief (*napper*). The term was coined by those who performed the crime (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "kidnap (v.)," https://www.oed.com/dictionary/kidnap_v?tab=meaning_and_use).
42. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York University Press, 2011), 33.
43. Riba, "Israeli 'Kidnapped' by Hamas Posters."
44. Adi Shacham, "'No One Will Dare to Tear Down a Poster of a Dog, but of Jews? No Problem,'" *Ynetnews*, November 18, 2023, https://www.ynetnews.com/magazine/article/rke4egu46.
45. Kidnapped From Israel (@kidnappedfromisrael and @talhuber), "Watch Tal Huber, our art director [...]," Instagram, November 19, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/DCjLpCDM8q/.
46. Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 149–68, 165.
47. Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," 159.
48. Lewis R. Gordon, "Fanon, Philosophy, Racism," in *Racism and Philosophy*, ed. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell (Cornell University Press, 1999), 34.
49. Naomi Klein, "How Israel Has Made Trauma a Weapon of War," *The Guardian*, October 5, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/oct/05/israel-gaza-october-7-memorials.
50. Estelle Shirbon, "Israel's UN Delegates Criticized for Wearing Yellow Stars as 'Symbol of Pride,'" *Reuters*, October 31, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/israels-un-delegates-criticised-wearing-yellow-stars-symbol-pride-2023-10-31/.
51. Yaël Bizouati-Kennedy, "Commemorating October 7 With Tattoos," *Hadassah Magazine*, May 16, 2024, https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2024/05/16/commemorating-october-7-with-tattoos/.
52. Jacki Alexander and Gil Hoffman, "Why Hamas Victim Hersh Goldberg-Polin's Name Will Live Forever," *New York Post*, September 6, 2024, https://nypost.com/2024/09/06/opinion/why-hamas-victim-hersh-goldberg-polins-name-will-live-forever/.
53. Yiddish Feminist (@yiddishfeminist), "It's a few days from Pesach, we are still in Egypt," Instagram, April 24, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/reels/DI1zTm3xcOr/.
54. Julia Gergely, "Hundreds of Holocaust survivors pose with posters of Hamas hostages in a statement of solidarity," *NY Jewish Week*, November 1, 2023, https://www.jta.org/2023/11/01/ny/hundreds-of-holocaust-survivors-pose-with-posters-of-hamas-hostages-in-a-statement-of-solidarity; cf. also, Shosh Bedrosian, "Holocaust survivors in New York City honor hostages taken into Gaza by Hamas," *CBS News*, November

1, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/holocaust-survivors-hamas-hostages-museum-of-jewish-heritage/.

55. Cf. Alyson Cole, "(Re)Made in America: Survivorship After the Shoah," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2021): 28–44; Alyson Cole, *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford University Press, 2007): 93-106. The Holocaust-framing also works in reverse. For example, Gabor Maté compared viewing the images from Gaza to "watching Auschwitz on TikTok." (*Middle East Eye*, "Gabor Maté: 'It's like we're watching Auschwitz on TikTok,'" October 16, 2024, video interview, 5:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFOTBAiTHZA) and Mobashra Tazamal retweeted: "Israel has been recreating Auschwitz in Gaza for two years" (Ryan Quinn, "Conservatives Denounce Professor for 'Symbolic Strike' Post," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 18, 2025, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/academic-freedom/2025/07/18/republicans-denounce-georgetown-professor-post-iran).
56. Bring Them Home Now (@bringthemhomenow), "Ayelet, Naama's mother: 'The whole world saw the horror, the cruelty [...]'," Instagram, May 27, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/p/C7d7U32N7Q7/?hl=am-et.
57. Zelizer, "The Voice of the Visual in Memory," 163.
58. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1969), 43.
59. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1998), 166.
60. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.
61. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66, 198, 215.
62. Roy Brand and Amit Pinchevski, "Facing the Image: Towards an Ethics of Seeing," in *Ethics of Media*, ed. Nick Couldry, Mirca Madianou, and Amit Pinchevski (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 108.
63. Brand and Pinchevski, "Facing the Image," 112; cf. also, Hagi Kenaan's thoughtful account of how an image is constituted by "turning toward" viewers, in "Facing Images: After Levinas," *Angelaki* 16, no. 1 (2011): 143–59.
64. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 112, 117, 197.
65. Sasha Abramsky, "There's Nothing Progressive About Tearing Down Posters of Israeli Hostages," *The Nation*, October 27, 2023, https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/theres-nothing-progressive-about-tearing-down-posters-of-israeli-hostages/.
66. McGreal, "'It's like a Fire in the World.'"
67. Shacham, "'No One Will Dare to Tear Down a Poster of a Dog'."
68. Peter Alexander and Megan Lebowitz, "White House Condemns Demonstrators Ripping Down Posters of Israeli Hostages," *NBC News*, November 7, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/white-house-condemns-removal-posters-showing-israeli-hostages-rcna124086.
69. Heather Bellow, "A Video of a Woman Tearing Down Israeli Hostage Flyers in Great Barrington Has Gone Viral," *Berkshire Eagle*, November 21, 2023,

https://www.berkshireeagle.com/news/southern_berkshires/great-barrington-israeli-hostage-posters-removing-war-hamas-railroad-street-antisemitism-berkshires/article_a8d51bbc-87f0-11ee-93ce-ffa796c9c96f.html.

70. McGreal, "'It's like a Fire in the World'."
71. Rosman, "How Posters of Kidnapped Israelis Ignited a Firestorm."
72. Dagen McDowell and Sean Duffy, hosts, *The Bottom Line*, featuring Batya Ungar-Sargon, Fox Business Network, October 26, 2023, https://www.foxbusiness.com/video/6339933585112.
73. Sometimes both images were presented in a "before-and-after" layout, e.g., Yehuda Dov, "Daily Mail Highlights Pics of 4 Girls Before and After Hamas Kidnapped Them," *VINnews*, January 8, 2024, https://vinnews.com/2024/01/08/daily-mail-highlights-pics-of-4-girls-before-and-after-hamas-kidnapped-them/; for a dramatic version of this format staged in Berlin with flying drones, cf. Belaaz News (@thebelaaz), Avrohom Rapoport (@rabbiraps), and Jewish Motivation/Meaningful Minute (@meaningfulminute), "Drones carrying posters . . . ," Instagram reel, May 30, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reels/C7mThOUOwCg/.
74. David Rullo, "'Posters featuring Israeli hostages torn down, defaced at CMU and Pitt," *Jewish Chronicle*, November 7, 2023, https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/posters-featuring-israeli-hostages-torn-down-defaced-at-cmu-and-pitt/.
75. Hauser, "She Puts 'Kidnapped' Fliers up Again and Again."
76. Shapira, *Torn*.
77. Notes for the Hostages (@notesforthehostages), Instagram, n.d., https://www.instagram.com/notesforthehostages/.
78. Shacham, "'No One Will Dare to Tear Down a Poster of a Dog.'"
79. Kenning, "'Kidnapped from Israel' Flyers."
80. Avi Mayer, "Why They Tear Down Hostage Posters," *Jerusalem Post*, November 10, 2023, https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-772581.
81. Shapira, *Torn*, 35:50.
82. StopAntisemitism (@StopAntisemites), "This Woman Tearing Down Posters of Kidnapped Israelis Has Been Identified as Francesca Martinez-Greenberg, a Graphic and UX Designer in NYC," X (formerly Twitter), November 8, 2023, https://x.com/StopAntisemites/status/1722271698714861818.
83. McGreal, "'It's like a Fire in the World.'"
84. Luke Tress, "Outside UN, families of hostages and Jewish leaders plead to bring home Hamas captives," *NY Jewish Week*, October 18, 2023, https://www.jta.org/2023/10/18/ny/families-of-hostages-jewish-leaders-plead-to-put-politics-aside-and-bring-home-hamas-captives.
85. Relatedly, Eric Kandel reports that "[o]ur brain devotes more space to reading the details of faces than to any other object." See Kandel, "What the Brain Can Tell Us About Art," *New York Times*, April 12, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/opinion/sunday/what-the-brain-can-tell-us-about-art.html.

86. David Freedberg, "The Fear of Art: How Censorship Becomes Iconoclasm," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2016): 67–99, 75.
87. BreakThrough News, "NYU Suspends Student, Ends Her Scholarship for Tearing Down Israeli Poster," December 6, 2023, video, 5:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLNTQPNRPZw.
88. Jodi Dean, "Palestine Speaks for Everyone," *Verso* (blog), April 9, 2024, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/palestine-speaks-for-everyone.
89. Shapira, *Torn*, 55:24.
90. Sontag, *On Photography*, 203.
91. Alex Gourevitch, "The Right to Be Hostile," *Boston Review*, July 22, 2025, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/the-right-to-be-hostile/.
92. Sumru Atuk and Alyson Cole, "Bodies on the Line vs. Bodies Online: A Feminist Phenomenology of Digitally-Mediated Political Action," *Women's Studies in Communication* 47, no. 1 (2024): 63–86.
93. Despite the abundance and velocity of the circulation of flyers and postings for Israeli and Palestinian victims, I was unable to find evidence that any posters were consistently defiled and destroyed other than those for the October 7 hostages.
94. Standing Together, "About," Standing Together, September 19, 2025, https://www.standing-together.org/en/about-en/.
95. Daniel Estrin, "Israeli Protesters against War Draw Attention to Children Killed in Gaza," *NPR*, May 7, 2025, https://www.npr.org/2025/05/07/nx-s1-5383047/israeli-protesters-against-war-draw-attention-to-children-killed-in-gaza.
96. Linda Dayan and Nagham Zbeedat, "'We Live and Die Together': Gazans Protest with Photos of Israeli Children Killed by Hamas," *Haaretz*, July 6, 2025, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2025-07-06/ty-article-magazine/.premium/we-live-and-die-together-gazans-protest-with-photos-of-israeli-children-killed-by-hamas/00000197-df47-da1d-a5ff-ff4777e50000.
97. They also adamantly reject the charge that the Kidnapped placards were anti-Palestinian. "Where does it say in the posters that we are against Palestinians?...We have nothing against Palestinians. The opposite," Mintz asserts. McGreal, "'It's like a Fire in the World.'"
98. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009).
99. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (Times Books, 1979).
100. Adrian Hennigan, "'It Wasn't Just the Hostage Posters. The Social Fabric of New York Was Also Torn,'" *Haaretz*, May 18, 2025, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/movies/2025-05-18/ty-article-magazine/.premium/it-wasnt-just-the-hostage-posters-the-social-fabric-of-new-york-was-also-torn/00000196-d2e1-dab2-a5f6-f3f188b10000.
101. Linda Zerilli, "The Problem of Democratic Persuasion," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 58, no. 1 (2025): 13–24; cf. also Linda Zerilli, "Seeing Aspects and the Sexed Body," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Wittgensteinian Feminism*, ed. Jasmin Trachter (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025), 249–67.
102. Reinhardt, "Spectacle, Surveillance, and the Ironies of Visual Politics," 838.
103. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 31.