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Documentary and the Visual Culture of Late-Capitalism
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Response 3: *Death in Gaza*
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Seeing Death in *Death in Gaza*

Its signature resonates through every sequence, but not its image. Titled not *Life*, but *Death in Gaza*, and filmed also in the West Bank and in Israel proper, the documentary promises precisely what it cannot deliver. That elision does not diminish its emotional, affective, and political impacts. Rather, it raises the question of how we see violent death, without seeing killing. The film answers that question by deploying peripheral visuality, a strategy that includes both visual and non-visual techniques. This strategy works through individual, familial, and national experiences of death. In short, *Death in Gaza* presents a central theme that it does not represent.

At the individual level, the film shows and does not show the shooting and immediate consequent death of the filmmaker, James Miller. Because it was filmed at night, without the aid of artificial lighting from the house in which the camera rested (since it did not reach that far), or the Israeli armed personnel carrier (since it had turned off its lights), or the flashlight that Miller carried at the time (since it was aimed at the white flag the group of three reporters carried), the footage cannot capture the impact of the bullet to the neck that killed Miller. Instead, the viewer sees the camera jolt, and the flashlight drop and roll away. The most important element of this shot is not visual at all, but acoustic. The combination of Saira Shah's narration, the sound of gunfire that corresponds to the flashlight's jerk and fall, and the cameraman's immediate verbal explanation of the events, as he takes cover, rationalizes the ambiguous footage. Miller's death raises the stakes of the project, and turns its incompleteness and partiality as journalism into trenchant critique.

The film also takes up the deaths of many members of the young woman Nadja's family. These sequences highlight the use of semi- and non-visual techniques that give meaning to visual content throughout the film. Again, narration and other auditory cues allow the viewer to make sense of ambiguity in the footage. Well-chosen shots of grieving family members and ruined houses alone cannot provide the historical and political specificity of whose death and whose houses appear. They require visual corroboration in the form of written Arabic and Palestinian flags; the interviews, translated subtitles, title cards, soundtrack, and careful editing all work together to emphasize the local and familial scope of these losses.

The film situates its journalists in Gaza and the West Bank during the second Palestinian uprising, also known as the Al Aqsa intifada. Thousands now lie dead as a result of this conflict, and the film must establish a Western viewer's identification with these deaths, on a comprehensible scale, rather than as an abstraction. To that end, the film includes shots of fighting, including stonethrowing, gunfire, tanks, bulldozers, and both improvised and mass-produced bombs. It also shows the posters and graffiti produced by Palestinian groups to represent the slain. Towards the end, the posters include that of James Miller ("Jeams Milar") himself, as well as of young children, and other civilians and bystanders. Taken together with sequences that show militants training, and children playing war, but ending there, the viewer would still be left with an uneven

and unclear description of the conflict as such. This problematic description would remain inadequate precisely because it does not, or cannot, show the killings that turn disagreement into existential struggle.

However, two other strategies of peripheral visuality allow the viewer to experience a more affective and incisive representation of the deaths incurred during the intifada. Sequences that show the funerals of slain Palestinians form one such strategy, by including the ceremonies and improvisations of mourning for the dead. Another, earlier and more wrenching, establishing sequence includes people out on the street, cleaning up blood - and collecting scattered bits of flesh - after a 'targeted assassination,' a car bombing, that kills at least one person. The images of blood spreading over and staining concrete streets, and of body parts gathered in a plastic bag, come closer than any other part of the film to explicit visual representation of death. The juxtaposition of blood and flesh with the dirt of graves, or of dynamite powder on the hands of children, goes still further in evoking emotional response. But, taken by themselves, the images could well represent other violence in the conflict, for example, the effects of a suicide bombing in Israel proper. And so, Shah's narration and the Arabic spoken throughout the scene provide the required auditory context by which the viewer can make sense of the images. They contrast, for example, with the reports of contemporaneous Israeli deaths, that only occur in the film through audio recordings of other, English-language, media. These strategies connote and concretize the explicit images, closing off and directing the possible avenues of interpretation that a viewer might bring to the film.

Death in Gaza largely ignores the potential depth and context that continuing the project by filming Israeli children affected by the conflict would have provided. However, its focus on Palestinian lives and deaths, and on Miller's own death, constitute a direct reaction to the uneven death toll exacted during the conflict, in which Palestinians suffered nearly three times as many deaths as did Israelis. Statistical evidence for this justifiable reaction exists, but its analysis remains beyond the scopes of both the film and this response. Therefore, this essay has attempted to unpack the particular representational strategy employed by the movie, on its own terms. In the context of continuing violence and hatred in the Middle East, peripheral visuality becomes trenchant critique.