The Dis/Appeared
25 Notes on Colonial Regimes of Perception

Ian Alan Paul, 2018
“The Dis/Appeared” (2018) is an experimental video essay that examines the totalizing imposition of colonial perception in contemporary Palestine. The project theorizes the Israeli state’s establishment of perceptual regimes that confine the colonized to the liminal thresholds of view, never allowing Palestinians to entirely appear or disappear but instead perpetually rendering them dis/appeared. Through narration and a montage of images that are at once ordinary and unsettling, the video essay gives an account of settler-colonial instantiations of power while also proposing a tactical repertoire to be taken up against colonial rule. The project was produced over the course of 2017 while the artist was living and teaching in the West Bank of Palestine, and is the first part of a series of films, installations, and texts that examine the conjuncture of coloniality, governmentality, and memory in global contexts. What follows is the script of the video essay, which can be viewed in its entirety on the artist’s website.
01. To appear is to come into view. For anyone to possibly appear at all, they require a view into which they can arrive.

Views are visual territories, perspectives that are actualized from fields of possible vision, optical enclosures into which things appear and from which things disappear. Views render particular aspects of the world visual, and visuality is simply another word for the accumulated aggregate of many distinct views. Views can have their edges refashioned, their focus shifted, their sensitivities calibrated, their positions translated, and their ranges adjusted. These are among the many different thresholds that constitute the limits of any particular view, the spectral boundaries that trace the phenomenological, ontological, and political distance between appearance and disappearance.
02. When someone is appearing or disappearing they aren’t entirely in or out of view, but rather are passing through one of a view’s many thresholds.

At the seamless precipices of visuality, the perceptible and imperceptible bleed together. Within the thresholds that constitute the perceptual, spectral, and optical limits of view, things only exist in states of lucid undecidability. To be in the thresholds of view is to have definition yet escape resolution, to be blindingly bright and swallowing dim, to be in the infinite passage between definitive states and as a result to be definitively stateless. To be in the thresholds is to find oneself on the liminal battlefields of perspective and perception, to be caught along the phantom shorelines between totalizing recognition and vanishing invisibility, to inhabit the indeterminate discord between figure and ground. Life in the thresholds is simultaneously in and out of view, seen and unseen, noticed and overlooked, recorded in the finest detail and yet absolutely indiscernible from its surroundings.
03. Colonial power weaponizes the thresholds of view in order to police, control, and manage the lives of the colonized.

The view of the colony produces visual territories, boundaried zones of perception that delimit ranges of possible appearance and disappearance. The colony’s territorialization of visuality inaugurates a colonial regime of perception where practices of perceiving become subjected to colonial rule. While sovereign power is predicated upon the view’s capacity to establish and subsequently police the limits of appearance and disappearance, the consequential innovation of colonial power is its weaponization of the view’s thresholds. The birth of the colony, the historical elaboration of sovereignty’s expansion, relied upon its capacity to arrest bodies within the expansive thresholds of the colonial view, superposing bodies as concurrently present and absent, existent and null, perceptible and imperceptible, apprehended in and out of view.
04. Captured within the thresholds of the colonial view, Palestinians find themselves indefinitely suspended within the carceral liminalities of forced dis/appearances. 

*Never entirely in or out of view but perpetually detained in the spectral thresholds between the two, Palestinians are made to be both apparent and transparent, signal and noise, conspicuous and concealed, evident and obscure, appeared and disappeared. Because Palestinians cannot decidedly and finally appear within view, Palestine can be perceived as a pristine landscape, a blank slate, an untouched surface, entirely vacant of Palestinians and inviting of ever-expanding Israeli settlements and colonization. Because Palestinians cannot decidedly and finally disappear from view, they remain perpetually available for increasing intensities of Israeli oversight, management, surveillance, policing, and control. If Palestinians manage to escape from the thresholds of Israel’s colonial regime of perception, the subsequent recognizability or clandestinity, transparency or secrecy, are all perceived by Israel as pure hostility.*
05. Refused both publicity and privacy, visibility and obscurity, Palestinians are only apprehended in the terms of their simultaneous fugitivity and invasivity.

To escape from view as a Palestinian is to be viewed as a fugitive threat. The proliferous destruction of civilian architecture in Gaza is preemptively and retroactively justified with claims that enemy combatants and weapon caches are being hidden inside of them, every bomb destroying the conditions for life and the conditions of concealment with the blinding exposure of its blast. Inversely, to enter into view as a Palestinian is to be viewed as an invasive enemy. In the West Bank, Palestinian demonstrations filled with cameras, banners, portraits of martyrs, and flags are made to vanish within toxic obfuscating clouds of tear gas. Attempting an escape from the view of Israel is to be marked as a hostis and fugitive in need of surveillance, capture, and elimination, while entering into Israel’s view is to be marked as an invader and as an infiltrator in need of exclusion, eviction, and expulsion.
On Israel’s colonial horizons of visuality, every appearance and disappearance is paired, coupled, and superposed with its inverse. Israel makes use of a diverse repertoire of techniques to dis/appear Palestinians in the thresholds of view in order to maintain their colonial spectrality. In the middle of the night, an Israeli soldier arrives at a Palestinian home with an order demanding that someone inside appear in front of an Israeli judge, the first step towards their eventual disappearance in indefinite administrative detention. A drone circles overhead while recording, encrypting, and transmitting its aerial view to a nearby operations center, and then deploys a missile to erase what it has just observed. Along the separation wall in Bethlehem, in refugee camps outside of Ramallah, at checkpoints at the edges of Jerusalem, and beside army outposts across the West Bank, a watchtower is also a sniper’s perch. Israel often accomplishes its aims by taking aim, and the shot of the surveillance camera is always interchangeable with the shot of the rifle.
07. Dis/Appeared by Israel’s colonial regime of perception, Palestinians are fundamentally dispossessed of their own spectacular relations.

In an important sense, to be colonized is to exist only on the perceptual horizons of the colony, to become dis/appeared as a body phantasmatically suspended between the heavens and earth. This perceptual superposing of appearance and disappearance is a colonial technique of power that scrutinizes, surveys, and examines as it conceals, dissimulates, and obscures. Assemblages of visual technologies cultivate and impose the colonial view, subjecting Palestinians to the spectral in-between of the thresholds, refusing them any place of their own in the spectacular relations of the colony while denying them any definite flight from it. The enclosure of the colony’s interior and the ceaseless assault on its exterior means that the colonial partition impinges upon all life everywhere. Palestinians are entirely captured from within the surround of Israel’s colonial regime of perception.
08. As a consequence of Israel’s colonial regime of perception, Palestine ultimately never appears within or disappears from view; Palestine is the threshold.

Satellite imagery is used to map the Palestinian landscape in sophisticated detail, and then Israel lowers the imagery’s resolution so Palestinian bodies cannot be differentiated from the surrounding geography, digitally vanishing an entire people within the abstracting space of the pixel. Proliferous checkpoints appear across the landscape in permanent and makeshift installations in order to disappear Palestinians in interrogation rooms. Israel cuts the electricity to Gaza, shrouding the entire territory in a thick blanket of darkness, and then deploys brightly burning aerial flares over entire neighborhoods when illumination is needed for periodic military incursions. The thresholds of Israel’s colonial view expand to encompass all of Palestine, immersing it entirely within the turbulent depths of an indefinite perceptual indeterminacy.
09. As a means of surviving Israel’s colonial violence, Palestinians learn how to improvise their lives within the liminal spaces of the colonial view’s thresholds.

In the spectral landscapes of Palestine, survival depends upon an ability to differentially appear and disappear in diverse and shifting contexts. Any failure to follow the densely policed choreography of the colony’s spectacular relations is met with unrestrained and unaccountable violence, and to endure means to remain endlessly flexible, agile, and responsive to the always shifting thresholds of the colonial view. Over the course of any given day, Palestinian survival depends on being able to adapt without notice as a shifting constellation of Israeli checkpoints, patrols, and raids blink in and out of existence across Palestine, a feat which is as indispensable as it is impossible. To appear or disappear too fully in any context is to risk being subjected to the abundant violence of colonial forces that expectantly lay in wait.
10. As the colony’s repertoire of visual operations extensively and intensively multiply, Palestinians’ views also come to be affectively colonized.

Within an inverted panopticon, Palestinians are haunted not only by their dis/appearance but also by the possibility of Israeli soldiers forcefully appearing within view. As part of a strategy that the Israeli military refers to as “making their presence felt,” specialized units raid groups of homes in the dark of night in order to photograph their inhabitants and sketch architectural layouts, projecting the violence of colonization onto Palestinian perception. These incursions intimately, unpredictably, and repeatedly enact a form of spectacular and sensual violence, leaving behind affective residua that haunt Palestinian vision with the always potential reappearance of Israeli soldiers. Unable to view the lands from which they were displaced, refused a view of anything other than the colonizers, the perceptions of the colonized are, in turn, colonized.
11. Colonial regimes of perception territorialize vision, producing stages for the militarized choreography of organized viewing and organized violence.

In occupied Palestine, Israel establishes visual territories in order to prepare them for the enactment of diverse combinations of actions, formations, deployments, maneuvers, exercises, operations, and campaigns. Visual territories, most prominent among them the theater of war and the agora of politics, are the products of organized acts of viewing that parse and delimit the world into views and their accompanying thresholds. Both actual and virtual, the power that is established within any particular visual territory emerges as a result of its perceptual singularity, its totalizing enclosure bound on all sides by an infinite proscenium that must be defended and reproduced, and so the colony must not only continuously territorialize all vision but also must perpetually smother every emergent potential to view differently.
12. Israel systematically extinguishes any possibility of viewing that deviates or drifts away from the totalizing views of Israel’s colonial regime of perception.

Whenever a Palestinian is detained at a checkpoint, is shot at a demonstration, or is attacked by a settler, the optics of the situation are dismantled, disassembled, and destroyed by whatever means necessary. Camera lenses are shot through by live bullets at demonstrations, footage from nearby surveillance cameras is seized, curfews are imposed, entrances to villages are sealed off, and social media is purged of “inciteful material.” To view the violence of colonization is to possibly set into motion the emergence of different practices of viewing, and so the act of witnessing itself becomes another target for colonial forces. In order for Israel to maintain its monopoly of violence it must also maintain a monopoly of vision, and so it represses, extinguishes, blinds, and destroys whatever or whomever views differently.
13. The colonial administration of dis/appearance extends to a range of archival practices, strategically remembering and forgetting as a means of dis/appearing.

The use of identification cards fragments Palestine into a colonial archipelago structured by complex regulatory and security measures, and to be identified as Palestinian is to be managed, documented, and excluded in various forms and to varying degrees. Palestinian identity is endlessly documented and archived only so it can be better subjected to the power of the police. As Palestinians are reduced to another digit in the vast calculations of biometric governmentality within Israel’s colonial administration, they simultaneously are expunged from archival memory as historical records of Palestinian land use, habitation, and ownership are made to be lost, misplaced, or illegible. The permanent and perpetual policing of Palestinian identity coupled with the permanent and perpetual erasure of Palestinian history means that Palestine and Palestinians are both excavated and buried, remembered and forgotten, dis/appeared within an ever-expanding colonial archive.
The archival dis/appearance of Palestinians obliterates their past and future in order to bound them within the minute finitude of the present tense.

The foundation of the Israeli state in 1948 was premised on the erasure of multiple and plural pasts in the interest of producing and maintaining the appearance of a singular Israeli history and future. Israel must continuously attempt to extinguish other histories in order for it to maintain the spectacle of its singularity, and the potential appearance and disappearance of Palestinians is so threatening to the Israeli state first and foremost because appearing and disappearing take time. To appear or disappear is to have duration, to pass through the threshold, to have grammar, and thus necessarily to have historicity and futurity. As a consequence, simply appearing or disappearing as a Palestinian is enough to bring total ruin to Israel's historical singularity. In an attempt to annihilate the unannihilatable multiplicity of the past and future and their accompanying forms of difference, Palestinian and otherwise, the colonial regime indefinitely attempts to halt the passage of time itself.
15. Colonial regimes of perception culminate in the dis/appearance of death, as corpses are both displayed as trophies and repressed as repositories of evidence.

The perceptual warfare waged by Israel reaches its apogee when Israeli soldiers photograph themselves with Palestinian corpses, capturing souvenirs to bring home with them after they’ve completed their time in the military. These necrotic images circulate within and between various soldiers and units, a visual confirmation and celebration of their enduring ability to view the dead body that can view no longer. On the other extreme, when a Palestinian body lays dying in the streets, cameras are pushed away and kept at a distance, and when that body dies it is often abducted from Palestinian hospitals and morgues by Israeli soldiers before it can be examined or given a funeral and burial. Even in death, Palestinian bodies are dis/appeared in the thresholds, denied the possibility of finally appearing as evidence or as a life to be mourned, and refused the chance of finally disappearing from the colonial necroexhibitionist view.
16. Politics and War, like twins, do not take place within a singular visual totality, but within contested series of totalizing visualities.

As particular modalities of colonial power, politics and war produce visual territories that are structured primarily by their luminosity, the degree to which they can be flooded with or drained of light. They visually parse the world into regions, landscapes, frontiers, horizons, surfaces, and targets and operate as if they each were their own universal totality. In one modality, politics establishes and defends the limits and thresholds of a view in order to determine what can and cannot appear or disappear within its delimited, illuminated, and policed spaces that render particular forms of recognizability, legibility, and publicity possible. In another modality, war produces its battlefields by redefining the limits of various views, expanding, contracting, and reshaping the contours of fields of vision in order to expand, contract, and reshape the luminous scope of its violence. While formally distinct, both politics and war are primarily concerned with entirely determining the conditions of possibility for appearance and disappearance as such.
17. Within the colonial regime of perception, the initial instinct may be to attempt to escape from or violently sabotage the colonial perceptual apparatus.

Escaping visually, disappearing within dense fogs of obscurity and clandestinity and becoming imperceptible, has been a vital resource within the tactical repertoire of those who desire to live outside of and beyond the reach of sovereignty and coloniality. The perceptual fugitivity of the ruled, the governed, and the colonized has also at times taken on a more insurrectionary character, as flight has been coupled with improvised attacks on the perceptual infrastructures of power. As part of the experimental choreography of resistance, surveillance cameras are smashed, identification cards are shredded, computers are hacked, security forces’ windshields are smeared with paint, fingerprints are erased, and archives are burnt to ash. While individual evasion may remain fleetingly possible within colonial regimes of perception, disappearance is always already anticipated and disarmed within the thresholds of the colonial view, preemptively rendering it insufficient for the collective project of escape.
18. To be dis/appeared is also to be tempted by the prospect of appearing fully as political subjects on the illuminated battlefields of representation.

Representative politics are curtailed to the perceptual spaces of politics as they are already delimited, to what was already made to be recognizable and thus representable within any particular regime of perception. In such circumstances, to become political or to coercively become a subject of politics, a body must appear or disappear or, alternatively, be forced to within the structures of representation as they are constituted in advance. The fantasy of being recognized in the form of representation, of being grasped fully as something-in-particular, as something radiant, is pursued in hopes of inhabiting the social and political power of that position. In colonial regimes of perception, representative politics are political only insofar as they preclude and exclude the dis/appeared who have been made to be unrecognizable and thus ultimately unrepresentable.
19. The possibility of a political end to the colony is maintained yet endlessly deferred, perpetually reconstructed as an alluring yet illusory simulation.

As Israeli settlements populate the tops of valleys across the West Bank in ever-greater numbers and Palestinians continue to be systematically expelled from their homes in Jerusalem, the vision of a two state solution imperceptibly evaporates into a mirage. As the Palestinian population grows at a proportionally faster rate, a one state solution becomes buried beneath the rubble of a permanent apartheid. In such a conjuncture, any politics that seem to arise within the colony are in actuality only simulated by it. While Israel’s colonial regime of perception organizes for a future that resembles only the perpetual present of the colony, it must also perpetuate the fantasy that the colonial situation is merely provisional. Ultimately, the simulated movement towards a political solution is reproduced ad infinitum as another means of indefinitely detaining Palestinian life within the colonial world.
Colonial regimes of perception establish order over all forms of perception as a means of ordering the entirety of the world as a colony.

Standing guard at the thresholds of appearance, digging the spectral trenches of perceptual warfare, the colonial regime of perception strives to define and rule over all of what is phenomenal and spectacular about the world. Being organized by the colonial regime of perception in this way is to have the present battlefield determined for you in advance, to be captured within an occupied optics, to be composed and interpolated entirely within the colonial order of spectacular relations. If the colonial regime of perception and the colonial project more generally are ultimately defined by the enforcement and management of order, it follows that the decolonial project is necessarily a project of disorder, an undoing and unsettling and unraveling of the colonial world. Revolt cannot take shape within the world as it already is ordered by the colony, but only within the improvised art of relentlessly disordering the colonial world.
21. As the order of the colony and the order of the world become increasingly indistinguishable, the end of the colony entails the end of the world.

The world in which we live, the one we were all born into, is the world of sovereignty, the world of capital, and consequently, the world of the colony. Everything of and within our world is entangled with these shared histories, an inheritance structured by a colonial interiority that continues to capture and wage war upon what it makes exterior. Between the inside and outside, white and black, civilized and savage, good and evil, across gender, class, sexuality, and nationality, the colony splits the world in order to subject it entirely to the singularity of its order. As a result, there is no outside of the colony because the colony is the world. To call for the abolition of the colony is to call for the abolition of its world, our world, the world, because only then could other worlds ever possibly find ground.
22. The first step towards the abolition of the colonial regime of perception and the colonial world itself can be taken in the search for whatever refuses its order.

*What is the colony’s otherwise? What threatens to transform the colony’s necessity into its contingency? What is radically irreconcilable with the world as long as it is ordered by the colony? While the real foundations for new forms of revolt cannot be predicted or perceived in advance of their arrival precisely because prediction and perception have already been organized in advance by the world which is the object of that revolt, the looming dusk of this world nonetheless persists in the teeming accumulation of its exception, of that which is always in the process of being eradicated but is ultimately ineradicable, of the recurring arrival of the remainder, of all that precedes and exceeds the organizing and ordering potential of the colony, the inextinguishable and ever-growing past and future reservoir of what the colony is not and cannot be.*
The colonial regime of perception offers no escape routes, and consequently the only possible way out of the colonial situation rests in its total imminent negation.

The only virtue of the colonial situation is that it makes clear that no reform and no superficial compromise is possible. In place of the seduction of obscurity or the clamor for visibility, the cultivation of negativity, disorder, and refusal could serve as a tactical orientation for the colonized. Whether finding expression in boycotts, divestment, sanctions, blockades, sabotage, disobedience, strikes, or a multitude of other forms, the fuel of negation can be accumulated in whatever interrupts, refuses, cancels, nullifies, or disorganizes the order of the colony. From within the colonial world, the uncompromising and the ungovernable can coalesce into negative collectivities that become a growing exception to it. To be negative together is to be for nothing and against everything, because only when everything is over can the nothing that follows threaten to become something else, something otherwise.
24. Becoming negative together doesn’t require a shared political program, but only a contagious willingness to refuse the present.

The memory of a time before and the dream of a time after the colony, the felt possibility of what lingers just beyond what is already actual, can be one of the catalysts for the making-impossible of the colonial present. Far from a naive nostalgia for an unsullied past or a feverish vision of a perfected future, an understanding that everything is perpetually unfinished, most importantly the colonial world which tries to extend its present infinitely, can be a subtractive and negative force that produces new antagonistic distances and, as a consequence of the creation of those distances, new loving intimacies with those that have traversed those distances with you. The latent impossibility of the colony can be found in the otherwise of a difference that has been deferred but not totally defused, the intransigent differential memory and dream of another world than this one. To refuse the present is to insist upon its enfoldment with inexhaustible pasts and futures, to attempt to cancel out and negate the now in the interest of making room for what could otherwise arrive again or anew.
25. For the dis/appeared, the only thing worth beginning in the colonial world is its end.

The infinite distance between I and We is not contracted by the formation of a set of political principles as much as it is by the concerted experimentation with what can only be done collectively in concert. For the colonized, the colonial world offers no homes for rest and no escape routes on which to flee. As long as the interiority of the colony entraps its other in its exterior, the dis/appeared will remain perpetually within the all encompassing thresholds of the colonial order. For Palestinians, who have been radically dispossessed of their future and past in the perpetual present of Israel’s colonial order, only uncompromising ungovernability presents itself as a means of negating the world that ensures only their perpetual suspension. Beyond the radiant glow of representation, elusive escape of obfuscation, and dis/appearances of the colonial regime of perception, only total refusal, only unmediated negation, in every and any form, can threaten to bring an end to the totality of the colony, an end where something otherwise might finally be glimpsed.