Visual Testimony Under Occupation: Aesthetic and Ethical Dimensions of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Rula Halawani's "Negative Incursion"

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes Rula Halawani's photo series "Negative Incursion" using the framework suggested by Terry Barrett for critiquing photography, including description, interpretation, and moral analysis. The analysis highlights photography's dual nature—documentary evidence as well as a socio-political tool—specifically applied here in the context of Palestinian life under occupation. Halawani's stark black-and-white photos, characterized by visual reversal, provoke viewers to consider how widespread military occupation has influenced everyday life for regular citizens. According to Barrett's model, analysis begins with a close visual reading of the images, highlighting their formal and aesthetic details. In the interpretation, Halawani's inversion method is presented as a conscious reversal of standard war imagery, challenging viewers to re-examine prevailing war narratives. Lastly, the ethical aspect examines how, with no graphic violence depicted in these photos, the viewer's reaction is redirected from shock towards contemplation, posing a greater political understanding within the visual portrayal.

Keywords: Theory of Photography, Palestinian Israeli struggle, Aesthetic analysis, Terry Barrett, Rula Halawani

1. Introduction

Photography is a part of everyday existence, conditioning visual culture and how we perceive the world. This affects the physical and psychological aspects of human existence. In the current project, the author aims to analyze the nature and character of Palestinian political Photography in the context of Rula Halawani's series "Negative Incursion." As art historians, we will use Terry Barrett's photography method as a systematic approach to analyze and critique photographic images. Halawani's Negative Incursion is a poignant visual portrait of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, documenting the realities of life in a state of occupation. Its aesthetics are uniquely inverted, using black-and-white and inverted photography valuable data. It is both visually striking and symbolic (Razek, 2018). "Negative Incursion" serves not only as a documentary testimony to personal and communal anguish but also as a conceptual inquiry into the function of memorialization in photography. The series uses negative reversals to engage viewers with uncomfortable socio-political truths and to redefine traditional narratives. Negative reversal stands apart from other analyses of Halawani's work by invoking Barrett's method as a critical tool for the first time. It first analyzes the work's formal elements, followed by the possible meanings it holds, and then analyzes its aesthetic and cultural significance. Furthermore, this study identifies the important characteristics of Palestinian political photography, adding to a greater understanding of how it fits into the artistic and historical context.

2. Theoretical Overview of the Main Concepts

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3. Methodology

For this Study, Barrett's procedure was employed in photography as a systematic process to guide the description and analysis of photographic images. The center of this procedure is a triadic model that involves description, interpretation, and evaluation. In application, this procedure leads analysts to undertake a detailed description of the formal qualities of a photograph, delve into its possible meaning, and finally examine its aesthetic and cultural references. This systematic route aims not only to deconstruct the visual language inherent in the image but also to dig beneath the surface for the possible existence of more underlying meanings that could be hidden in the cultural and historical environments of the piece. (Barrett, 2000)

Barrett's strategy focuses on selectivity, instantaneity, and credibility. The selectivity principle involves purposefully making decisions from the point of view, subject, and visual aspects of an image, such as its color and composition, as well as the medium used (Nabilah & Putri, 2021). Instantaneity emphasizes capturing transient moments, as seen in the image, providing insight into unrepeatable moments. Finally, the credibility principle focuses on the credibility of an image, making photography a medium that can capture what exists while still providing possibilities for interpretation. These principles help keep the analysis anchored in the artistic and documentary strengths of photography, making it possible to thoroughly assess photographs as cultural objects (Nabilah and Putri, 2021).

Barrett's model has been used extensively across various scholarly disciplines. Researchers have applied this model in visual anthropology to analyze images as cultural messages and formulate explanations beyond visual appreciation, capturing a richer societal narrative (Alwi et al., 2022). In art criticism in classroom environments, Barrett's model stages are a key tool for building students' critical visual literacy and developing their capacity for making richer arguments concerning the aesthetic and contextual frames of images ((Tahalea, 2019). The flexibility of his method enables it to cross the boundaries between critical scholarly pursuits and practical visual examinations, highlighting its relevance across disciplines, including cultural analysis and historical documentation.

4. Study tool

This Study primarily employed Barrett's analytical model as the principal framework for engaging with Rula Halawani's negative intention series. Barrett's methodology, which unfolds in three pivotal phases—description, interpretation, and ethical evaluation— provides a structured yet adaptable approach to analyzing images intricately layered visually and politically. Rather than perceiving photographs as mere documents, Barrett's method facilitates an approach that considers them complex visual texts, necessitating meticulous attention to their formal composition and a profound interpretation of what they evoke and conceal. During the descriptive phase, we focused on the visual structure, including the use of negative imagery, absence of color, and spatial arrangement of figures and architecture. In the interpretive phase, we examined the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the images, such as the suggestion of absence, displacement, and the burden of collective memory. Finally, in the ethical phase, we contemplated the implications of representing a scene of military occupation without sensationalism, as Halawani's decision to refrain from depicting explicit violence constitutes a political and moral stance. This tool was selected not only because of its established status in visual culture studies but also because it enabled us to navigate between what is seen and what is felt, allowing for an analysis of not only what the images are but also what they convey. This approach proved valuable in engaging with work that communicated as much through silence and inversion as through explicit representation.

Barrett's approach to Photography emphasizes the importance of context, interpretation, and critical analysis. Using this lens, we can examine the role of photography in various fields and its impact on perception and representation.

Photography plays a crucial role in tourism by shaping destination images and experiences. The "closed circle of representation" theory suggests that tourist photographs reflect and inform destination images (Garrod, 2008). This concept aligns with Barrett's emphasis on the contextual nature of photographic interpretation, as tourist photographs are influenced by and contribute to the broader cultural understanding of a place.

Interestingly, Photography extends beyond tourism to scientific and medical fields. In Barrett's esophagus research, endoscopic photography is essential for diagnosis and surveillance (Anaparthy & Sharma, 2014; Spechler, 2013). This application demonstrates Barrett's notion that photographs can serve as evidence and documentation, while requiring careful interpretation within a specific context.

Barrett explicitly articulates this model:

The key operations are describing, interpreting, evaluating, and theorizing. Each plays a distinct role in understanding and appreciating photographic image.

1. Describing: An observation process to reveal the aesthetic values of photography.
2. Interpretation: Gathering visible details and factual information from images.
3. Evaluating: Analyzing potential meanings, emotional tones, and symbolic content.
4. Theorizing: Assessing image quality and significance based on reasoned criteria.
5. Engaging with broader issues surrounding the image, such as defining art, understanding photographic representation, and considering the role of context in interpretation.

5. Literature Review

First Study: Handbook of Visual Communication

The Handbook discusses the following:

Introduction. S. Moriarty and G. Barbatsis comprehensively explore visual communication theory through a rhizome analysis in "From an Oak to a Stand of Aspen." Part I focuses on aesthetics, with contributions from D. Dake to aesthetic theory and creative visualization. Part II addresses perception, featuring Barry's perception theory, Josephson's eye-tracking methodology in the context of the Internet, and Smith's critical analysis of newspaper page perception. Part III delves into representation, using K. Kenney's representation theory, S. Moriarty and L. Rohe's research design on cultural palettes in print advertising, and K. Smith and C. Price's content analysis of the photographic representation of blacks in non-daily newspapers. Part IV examines visual rhetoric, including S.K.. Foss's theory of visual rhetoric, K. Kenney's Study of a virtual university's promotional efforts, S. Kaplan's analysis of visual metaphors in fashion advertising, and T. Goodnow's exploration of empowerment through the Clothesline Project. Part V explores cognition using Williams' cognition theory and G. Comuntzis Page's study on children's comprehension of television visual images. Part VI investigates semiotics, featuring S. Moriarty's visual semiotics theory, S. Moriarty and S. Sayre's intended-perceived Study using visual semiotics, and D. Dunleavy's semiotic approach to the image and archive. Part VII covers reception theory, G. Barbatsis's reception theory and textual analysis of political television ads, and M. Brown's phenomenology and historical research. Part VIII focuses on narrative, using Barbatsis's narrative theory and Goodnow's application of narrative theory to news photographs. Part IX addresses media aesthetics, including H. Zettl's aesthetics theory, R. Tiemens's content analysis of political speeches on television, and C. Denton's examination of documentary Photography using creative methods. Part X discusses ethics in J.H. Newton's visual ethics theory, Reaves's survey of reactions to photographic manipulation, and J. H. Newton's Study of visual ethics based on the typology of visual behavior. Part XI explored visual literacy concerning Messaris and Moriarty's visual literacy theory and Burch's examination of media literacy, aesthetics, and culture. Part XII concludes with the cultural studies of V. O'Donnell's Cultural Studies Theory, J. C. Harry's Burkean analysis of a television promotional advertisement, V. O'Donnell's cultural analysis of the Unisys Monitor Head television commercial, and G. Davey's historical approach to understanding documentary photographs through dialogue, interpretation, and methods. (Kelly, 2020)

Second Study: Capturing Transient Events in Series: A Review of Framing Photography

Observing transient events is crucial for comprehending fundamental principles and controlling associated processes. To overcome the limitations of human vision, specialized tools are necessary to detect and record these transient events. Among the existing methodologies, framing Photography is distinguished by its high spatiotemporal resolution, two-dimensional field of view, and minimal crosstalk between adjacent frames. This review summarizes the technical methodologies of framing photography and guides the selection of appropriate tools for observing transient phenomena. The basic principles of framing photography are introduced, followed by an overview of the main categories through an analysis of system configurations and working principles. Subsequently, existing devices were classified into mechanical, electrical, and optical framing photography. The representative techniques and applications of each

category were also discussed. Finally, a prospect for the future of framing photography is presented. (Yao et al., 2024)

The third Study: Visual Approaches and Photography for the Study of Immediate Information Space

This method-oriented paper introduces visual methodologies, focusing on Photography, to examine immediate information spaces (Lee, 2003), such as information-rich environments like offices or homes. It draws upon the authors' first ethnographic field experience, reviewing pertinent theoretical and methodological literature and analyzing cases within information studies employing visual and photographic techniques. Initially, the traditions of visual research in anthropology and sociology were traced, and primary epistemological, methodological, and disciplinary debates associated with visual scholarship were presented. Subsequently, investigations of immediate information spaces utilizing Photography were analyzed, including examples from personal information management, health informatics, information behavior, and computer-supported cooperative work. Furthermore, a section entitled 'Applying Photographic Techniques...' provides guidelines for incorporating Photography into research design, a question-based research framework, and recommendations for photographing information phenomena.(Hartel & Thomson, 2011)

6. Results

What is Rula Halawani's "Negative Incursion"?

"It began on the March 28, 2002. "I was in Ramallah during the big Israeli Incursion. I was shocked, and everything around me appeared very different. Every street and square that I visited was dark and deserted; no one was on the street that day except the Israeli army and tanks. I felt down and cold." (Halawani 2018)

Rula Halawani's "Negative Incursion" photography series provides rich consideration of the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, employing Photography as a way to represent the compounded realities of living in a state of occupation. With a striking visual aesthetic based on reversal and inversion, the series employs black-and-white imagery that holds both literal and emblematic power. Presenting images in a way that resists habitual viewing modes and challenges the viewer to reimagine how they might be read, Halawani not only records the experience of the affected but also challenges the underlying socio-political culture in which the realities unfold.

In "Negative Incursion," Halawani employs reversed negatives to produce a disturbing visual experience that intellectually and emotionally appeals. Through reversed negatives, the artist creates a visual dislocation and fragmentation that are part of the occupation narratives. The series places the viewer into a space where the familiar becomes strange and invites the re-evaluation of the given images (Razek, 2018). Hence, the series operates on two planes: raw visual testimonies and a conceptual reflection of conflict areas' visible and invisible conditions.

Their responses have been a subject of great interest in psychological art-reception studies. Aesthetic encounters with such photographic series tend to provoke multifaceted emotive responses, wherein viewers might struggle with feelings of repugnance or compassion (. 2024). Consistent with the data noted in psychological literature, the aesthetic appreciation of art can create a cathartic experience of negative emotions, further enriching the discourse around the work of Halawani (Menninghaus et al., 2017). Accordingly, the "Negative Incursion" series not only encourages consideration of the details of Palestinian existence as living under occupation but also promotes larger discussions concerning the visual representation of trauma and the power structures involved in image creation.

Critically, Halawani's work can be placed into a broader discourse on the role of art and Photography in responding to and documenting social issues. As contemporary viewers often approach such works with a lens of emotional and societal awareness, Halawani's series stands out as an evocative instance of how photographic narratives can challenge preconceived notions and generate dialogue about contentious realities (Razek, 2018) (Vissers, N. and Wagemans, J 2023).

Figure 1: Negative Incursion. Rula Halawani. 2002. (digital print 100x150 cm). Focale Gallery.

This photograph, "Negative Incursion," is part of a series realized by Rula Halawani in 2002. This series is also called "Negative Incursions."

Viewers may have problems perceiving some content of this image; it resembles an X-ray or negative photo, requiring more effort. Although it would be difficult for the photo to be read, some viewers could perceive a soldier above a colossal military tank with a large image of the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and long buildings in the background. The background of this image indicates a night-raid event. However, as per Rula Halawani herself, the invasion took place in the daytime, at the heart of the city of Ramallah, as part of a massive invasion into all Palestinian cities, villages, and camps in April 2002 (Halawani, 2018).

Rula Halawani took many pictures from some Palestinian quarters during the invasion mentioned above and began developing this series, "Negative Incursion." All images in this series were black and white. They present an incursion and impact on the Palestinian regions. This series later appeared in many international exhibitions concerning the Israeli invasion of West Bank quarters.

There are no images of victims, blood, atrocities, or genocides. However, she raised a significant question concerning the existence of such a large military tank at the heart of a civilian town. It makes sense that no one knows anything concerning a positive invasion. However, Rula Halawani wished to practice exaggeration in the "Negative Incursion" series because she believes the Israelis exaggerated the abuse of power in the above-mentioned invasion.

Rula Halawani is one of the longest-working photographers in Palestine and heads the Photography Department at the University of Birzeit, Palestine (Halawani, 2018). She obtained a bachelor's degree in Photography at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1989. She later received a master's degree in photographic studies at the University of Westminster, London, in 2001.

What is Rula Halawani's "Negative Incursion" through Barrett's method in Photography?

Barrett's photographic analysis consists of four significant approaches: descriptive, interpretative, ethically evaluative, and theoretical. Below, we have analyzed the image as academic researchers using Barrett's method.

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Terry Barrett's photographic analysis consists of four significant approaches: descriptive, interpretative, ethically evaluative, and theoretical. As academic researchers, we analyzed the above image using Barrett's method, which is provided below.

Descriptive Analysis

The image presents a military tank with a soldier positioned on top, equipped with a helmet, and aimed at a firearm or camera. The background reveals an urban setting characterized by buildings with windows, balconies, and satellite dishes. In the upper-right corner, a billboard is visible, although the text is illegible. On the left side is a portrait or propaganda photograph depicting an individual, presumably a political or military leader, accompanied by another figure gesturing towards the viewer. The negative inversion of the black and white photographs imparts superior quality. Although "Negative Incursion" resembles an X-ray photograph, it lacks the scientific details necessary for classification as descriptive. Unlike conventional negatives, which reverse light and dark, this photograph does not accurately represent reality. It lacks medical or forensic details, precluding comparisons with scientific imagery. Consequently, "Negative Incursions" do not constitute a descriptive photographic genre; negative inversion suggests a cognitive manipulation of reality, encompassing distortion, memory alteration, or the re-evaluation of historical events. The presence of a tank and soldier in the foreground indicates warfare, occupation, or military presence in civilian settings. The juxtaposition of soldiers with propaganda imagery implies themes of power, surveillance, or ideological dominance. Given the Middle Eastern architectural elements and signage, this photograph evokes conflicts in that region. The notion of reversal entails an alternative

perspective on warfare, occupation, and documentation of historical narratives. This photograph necessitates critical questioning and interpretation rather than passive observation. Questions arise regarding this context: Why are military tanks present in cities? Where is this location? Which events led to the capture of this image? Unlike scientific photographs, which are empirically tested, this photograph is grounded in subjective and philosophical interpretations akin to poetry rather than scientific reports. The expressive and evocative style of the photograph renders it a compelling representation of interpretive Photography.

Ethically Evaluative Analysis

This image is striking for its high contrast and unusual negative presentation, which forces viewers to reinterpret the scene beyond the literal. Aesthetic decisions heighten dramatic impacts and evoke a sense of unease. It defies conventional war photography by shifting its focus from documentation to conceptual thinking. With the angularity from the structures and the tank's cannon, the company creates a feeling of dynamism, and the person in the poster adds an aspect of political or ideological judgment. "Negative Incursion" has an ethical view expressed about the Incursion it depicts, namely about the asymmetry between military might and civilian populations. Through this image, Rula Halawani visually criticizes the aftermath of the conflict, laying bare its disastrous impact on civilian spaces and populations. The image of a Palestinian leader, in combination with the damage depicted in the composition, accentuates the larger socio-political aspects of the Incursion. The photographer's involvement is not merely artistic but also political and humanitarian, reaffirming the ethical meaning of the photograph. Thus, this photograph can be regarded as ethically evaluative.

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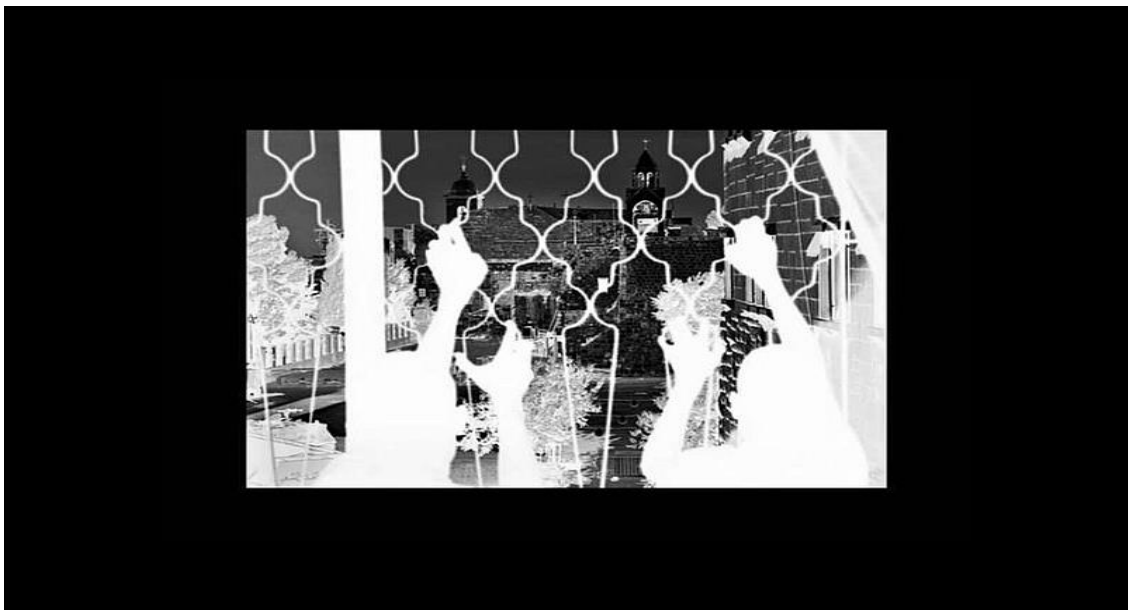
Theoretical Analysis

This photograph belongs to postmodern war photography, in which reality is distorted to subvert the master narratives. It also belongs to critical theory because it subverts power structures and the representation of war-torn regions. The artwork may be drawn from semiotics, in which negative inversion symbolically reverses the dominant narratives of war, occupation, and media depiction.

This photo does not primarily address the theoretical debate on art and photography. It does not refer to other images directly or include textual or visual quotations from other images or texts. Despite being strongly culturally and politically laden, they are not interested in analyzing or commenting on the photographic media. Thus, "Negative Incursion" is not a theoretical photograph.

The "Negative Incursion" series by Rula Halawani consists of 15 photographs. The series uniquely addresses Israeli-Palestinian conflict issues through a distinctive photographic process of working with reversed negatives. Each photograph captures the complexity of life under occupation and the psychological weight borne by the participants (Razek, 2018).

The following two photographs were not examined in detail because the entire series shared the same themes, goals, and technical approaches. Analyzing the first image is sufficient to convey the significance of the series, in alignment with Barrett's methodology.

Figure 2: Untitled VI, from the series "Negative Incursions," 2002. (Chromogenic print 90x 124 cm). Ayyam Gallery.

Figure 3: Untitled XII, Rula Halawani. Negative Incursion series, 2002. (archival print 90x124 cm). Ayyam Gallery.

Discussion

Applying Terry Barrett's method to Rula Halawani's "Negative Incursion" reveals the intricate layers of meaning embedded in the series. By systematically analyzing the series through Barrett's descriptive, interpretative, ethically evaluative, and theoretical frameworks, it becomes evident that Halawani's work extends beyond mere documentation. It serves as both a socio-political critique and a conceptual exploration of the visual language of conflict. This discussion elaborates on the significance of Halawani's photographic choices and their broader implications in art, politics, and visual culture.

The Role of Selectivity in "Negative Incursion"

Barrett's concept of selectivity—how an artist chooses what to include or exclude—plays a crucial role in "Negative Incursion." Halawani deliberately avoided direct representations of physical violence, bloodshed, or explicit suffering, instead focusing on the broader atmosphere of destruction and occupation. This selective framing provides additional psychological and emotional depth to the work, making observers go through a more interpretative and self-reflective exercise (Nabilah, I. and Putri, K., 2021). Her application of negative inversions also affirms the selective nature of perception, wherein what is traditionally perceived as light turns dark, and vice versa. This inversion symbolically suggests a reversal of hegemonic discourses, turning conventional representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict upside down.

Conceptual Manipulation and Viewer Engagement

The interpretative aspect of Barrett's method highlights how Halawani's work demands active engagement from the viewers. Unlike traditional war photography, which often provides an explicit narrative, "Negative Incursion" disrupts conventional understanding through visual distortion. This approach aligns with the broader themes of memory, trauma, and historical reconstruction, urging the audience to question the reliability of photographic representations and the politics of visual storytelling (Razek, 2018).

Furthermore, this technique resonates with postmodern photographic practices wherein artists use alterations and visual ambiguities to critique hegemonic perspectives (Alwi et al., 2022). Halawani's series does not merely document an incursion; it reconstructs and reimagines it, positioning the viewer within the uncertainty and disorientation experienced by those living there.

Ethical Considerations in Political Photography

Barrett's ethically analytical model particularly comes into play when one speaks of "Negative Incursion" because the series has tremendous ethical and humanitarian gravity. Photographic blindness to violence is not assuaging in the force of such a vision but instead goads one to confronting broader questions of moral engagement with war photography. The stereotypical war photograph has the value of dramatizing the ordeal, in this instance, minimizing suffering human beings into spectacle things. However, Halawani avoids this issue by considering the mental cartography of occupation and not pictorially illustrating violence (Vissers, N. and Wagemans, J 2023). This ethical position belongs to the widening discourse on ethical photography practice, in which the goal is to be a witness without moving toward exploitation or voyeurism.

Moreover, the title "Negative Incursion" is an ethical pronouncement highlighting power disparity and the military's abuses of power. The title's linguistic irony denounces euphemistic language often used to justify acts of aggression, again highlighting the work as a sociopolitical intervention (Razek, 2018).

Theoretical Implications and Art Historical Context

Theoretically, "Negative Incursion" fits into the postcolonial photography discourse, where visual representation as a form of resistance to overarching historical narratives becomes a site of struggle. Halawani's choice to invert traditional photography aesthetics can be seen as a symbolic visual sovereignty reclamation over Palestinian narratives (Alwi et al., 2022). This idea agrees with critical theory that seeks to explore the power of images to construct collective memory and national identity.

Furthermore, the series employs semiotics in which the reversal of tonal values metaphorically reverses the typical victim/perpetrator, light/dark, and presence/absence dichotomies. By reversing typical visual cues, Halawani disrupts the viewer's familiar ways of seeing, requiring additional critical labor with the socio-political issues.

The work also positions itself in the tradition of conceptual Photography, which blurs the distinction between documentary realism and artistic abstraction. Similar to photographer Alfredo Jaar 1 and Susan

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1 Alfredo Jaar, born in 1956 in Santiago, Chile, is a renowned multidisciplinary artist, architect, and filmmaker. He studied architecture at the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile and later pursued further studies in Photography and visual arts. Jaar gained international recognition with projects such as "The Rwanda Project,"

Meiselas 2, Halawani employed photographic intervention to disrupt the media representation of conflict, illustrating how political discourse is constructed through artistic decisions (Menninghaus et al., 2017). Thus, "Negative Incursion" is not just a photograph but an intellectual and emotional argument in a visual medium.

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which critically examined the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the role of the media in shaping public perception. His work consistently challenges the viewer to confront complex themes such as trauma, war, and the ethics of representation.

2 Susan Meiselas was an American documentary photographer born in 1948 in Baltimore, Maryland. She studied at Sarah Lawrence College and later trained at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York. Meiselas gained prominence in the 1970s and the 1980s for her robust documentation of social and political issues, particularly in Latin America, where her work focused on the Salvadoran Civil War.

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