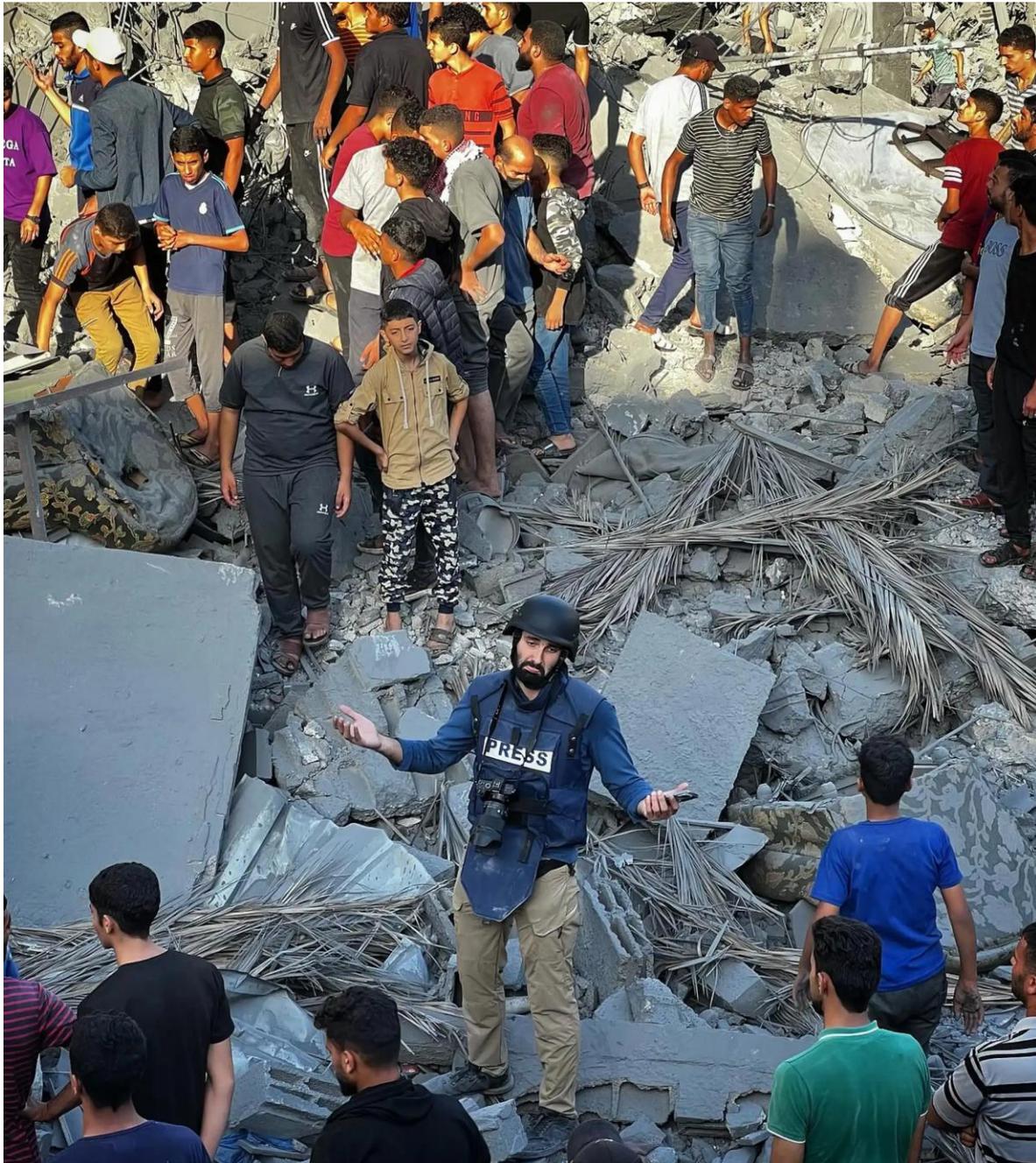


Monetising Genocide

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'Monétiser le génocide', *Transbordeur photographie: histoire, société*, no. 10, 2026, pp. 56-61.



Mustafa Musallam, image of Motaz Azaiza in the Gaza Strip, November 2023

In an image of the famous Palestinian photojournalist, Motaz Azaiza, he stands amid the ruins of homes in which concrete slabs, armchairs and amputated palm fronds are strewn in chaos. Around him, a group of boys and young men climb over the debris, searching perhaps for signs of life, while the photographer stands alone, raising his arms in a despairing shrug.

When he first posted this photograph, taken by Mustafa Musallam, to his Instagram stream in November 2023, Azaiza wrote:

I just don't know..

What to do more, what to lose more or what to show more ?

We all will be killed and the terror will destroy us from inside and no one will stop this genocide.

Stop giving advices you (The whole world)

It's been a MONTH!

Revisiting the image in another post in March 2025, during which time the sustained annihilation of Gaza had proceeded with the support, active or tacit, of Western governments, Azaiza commented:

I don't usually use emojis to express about what I feel, I leave it to my face expressions and I feel you will get what I feel through this picture..

Just like everyone in Gaza, I don't know 🙄

I don't know what to say more or what to show more!¹

Before the attack on the territory that followed the Hamas massacre in October 2023, Azaiza had made scenes of everyday life in Gaza in which he sought to show that beauty could be found there, in spite of the long blockade and the effective imprisonment of its people.²

When the Israeli Defence Force invaded, Azaiza worked with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees to document the plight of people as they fled the bombing and the ground attacks, as the means for sustenance, medical care and education were systematically destroyed, and many thousands were slaughtered. He did so at great personal risk for over 100 days before leaving Gaza to become an advocate for peace and the Palestinian cause. Once he started to cover the attacks, and despite interruptions to his uploads as the IDF intermittently took down the Internet, and his images were regularly censored, Azaiza's Instagram following grew precipitately from thousands into the tens of millions, and he became (whether he liked it or not) a celebrity.

¹ https://www.instagram.com/motaz_azaiza/

² Thaslima Begum, 'Photojournalist Motaz Azaiza: "The Ghosts of Gaza Follow Me Everywhere"', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2024.

Azaiza understood what appealed on the platform, and particularly that documentary scenes of suffering were much more effective when presented through an influencer-style personality. A young, photogenic man with good English, he often put himself inside the scene so that its horrors were seen alongside his reactions. That mode of presentation also made it easier to talk about what could be seen and what was suppressed or invisible, about the difficulties of showing the colossal scale of the destruction, about the deliberate killing of journalists and the cutting of Internet access, and about how, after a certain stage in the assault, using a drone to make photographs would surely get you killed.

There are a few wars, which the aggressors present as virtuous demonstrations of power, to which the media are invited—Vietnam and Iraq are examples—and many others from which the media are violently excluded.³ In a very new media environment, the extermination campaign in Gaza is a hybrid case. While the IDF sets out to kill Palestinian journalists, it has been unable to suppress a flow of images out of the occupied territory. The IDF also celebrates its destructive force in its own image flows, which include those sanctioned by the state and those made by the many amateurs among the armed forces who often glory in ability to wield death and demolition. Further, machine images, such as the recent release of satellite images of the devastation across the territory, provide another type of evidence.

The interest of Azaiza and of this image is that he and it encapsulate this wider development. Other Palestinian journalists, photographers and videographers—such as Plestia Alaqad and Bisan Owda—have taken similar paths, becoming famous not just for what they show but by putting themselves in the centre of the situation, using their distinct personalities to frame the dreadful scenes that they present. Equally, in many of the photographs and videos on Azaiza's Instagram feed, he appears in and reacts to the devastation wrought around him. Yet there is a quality to his particular gesture here, I think, that arrests the attention in our situation of widespread but powerless revulsion against an extermination carried out openly, before a multitude of lenses.

All of Azaiza's work—before and during the IDF demolition of Gaza—emphasised the humanity of those forced to live under blockade and attack. As he puts it:

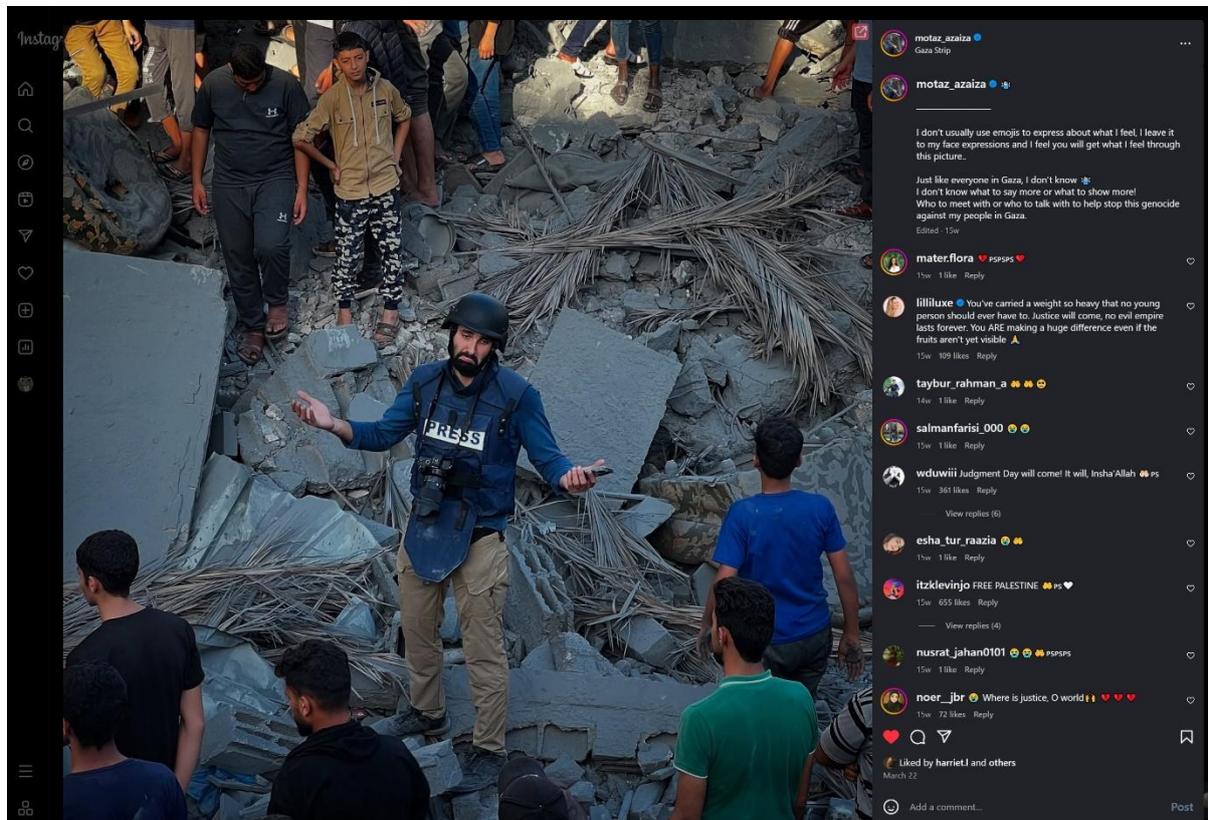
I tried my best to show the world our reality, now the world needs to show where it stands. It is ordinary people, men and women, who have the power to save what remains of Palestine. Our plea is simple—we just want to live.⁴

In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay argued that when imagery shows people whose rights are being violated, it allows them to make a claim for the full and meaningful citizenship that they are being denied. Fully aware of the powers of photography, people assert their rights to life and to representation, as they make images, consent to be pictured and perform while being photographed. While the results may have their origin in a particular network of image-

³ See my book, *Killing for Show: Photography, War and the Media in Vietnam and Iraq*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2020.

⁴ Ibid.

makers and their equipment, subjects, editors, publications and viewers, as those images circulate beyond the control of copyright lawyers, they become common property.⁵



Desktop view of Azaiza's repost, March 2025.

Much of this media apparatus has changed since Azoulay's book appeared in 2008 but even so, in this image as with others, Azaiza makes both the claims and the network mechanisms explicit and transparent. We see his flak jacket, labelled 'Press', his camera, and in one hand a phone. The claim to citizenship is made clear in the figures around him, at least one of whom looks at the photographer, and in those who in our mind's eye we see are buried under the concrete. And, of course, the image is seen on Instagram, where it is displayed alongside the reactions of its viewers.

Yet on Instagram it is also thrown into a multitude of algorithmically tailored feeds, juxtaposed with a diversity of other images, including a great deal of advertising. As with older advertising-driven media, the results can be highly discordant. Back in the era when illustrated newspapers and magazines dominated, Tim Page wrote of the effect: 'Open the paper and there was your boyfriend, husband or brother in terminal anguish sponsored by the corporations that were promoting the ball game.'⁶ Yet while it was the profits of advertising that drove newspapers,

⁵ Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York 2008.

⁶ Tim Page, *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden: Return to Vietnam and Cambodia*, Touchstone Books, London 1995, pp. 12-13.

magazines and TV, the algorithmic nature of the individually tailored Instagram feed (as for all the social-media monopolies), offers a distinctly novel mechanism of addiction, surveillance and manipulation. The platforms mine the data users upload to more effectively target adverts based on the automatic identification and classification of image components. And they are not alone, since the Israeli state security apparatus also spies upon the feeds to prime its algorithmically driven target-selection systems, so that the ‘sharing’ of an image may earn you and your family a bomb, missile or drone attack.⁷

That divide of purpose points to the wider tension between realpolitik and profit-seeking. Under the reign of realpolitik—the ‘great game’ of allies and enemies, power balances and hegemony—platforms bow before the states that allow them to operate. As a result, the politically weak Palestinian cause is hit with bans (open or otherwise), hostile automatic tagging to associate its activists with terrorism, and the removal of accounts on the grounds that any criticism of Israel amounts to racist hate speech. Azaiza’s images have frequently been subject to censorship, and he responds by sharing screenshots of the Meta banning notifications. Under the reign of profit, by contrast, the enormous popularity of Azaiza’s work exercises its sway, as it conforms to what the platforms find most effective in holding people’s attention: the presentation through a branded personality of the travails of an identity under threat, which elicits intense emotions and the urge to respond.

The platforms regularly carry that strategy to extremes, knowing that issues of aggrieved identity are among the strongest magnets to keep people tied to the feed and exposed to advertising. The strategy works as well for supporters of a Palestinian state as for Zionist settlers, for secular humanists as for religious fundamentalists, and for those facing invented enemies as for those actually in danger. So the sale of advertising can make it in the monopolies’ interests to amplify sectarian hatred, and if the consequence is a genocidal assault on those singled out as the enemy (as in the notorious role of Facebook in the attacks on the Rohingya), so be it.⁸

Azaiza’s work is not of this sectarian character, of course, although Zionist zealots predictably condemn him as a ‘terrorist’. It is rather an accomplished example of photographic humanism, first made in the interwar heyday of documentary, and especially in the work of those attached to the Popular Front, and now revived in the age of the NGO and the social-media platform. The great difference between the two is that in the first the humanist pleas of, say, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, Dorothea Lange or Gordon Parks were tied to powerful institutions and social movements which fought fascism and racism, alleviated poverty and improved the lives of millions of people. The prominent documentary photographers of the present—Paolo Pellegrin or Lynsey Addario or Kimberly dela Cruz—through no fault of their own, bravely pursue similar values in a situation that rarely offers such prospects.

Rather, while it is careful to celebrate the dignity and resilience of its subjects, this new humanist photography subsists as a charitable and rhetorical undertone in an increasingly unequal and violent world. As monopolisation and financialisation continue to intensify, and stagnant

⁷ On both types of data mining, and the consequences for images of atrocity and the work of Azaiza in particular, see Ashley Scarlett, ‘Learning from Atrocity: When Machines Regard the Pain of Others’, *Philosophy of Photography*, Volume 16, Issue 1, April 2025, p. 79-99.

⁸ For a cogent and damning account, see Max Fisher, *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired our Minds and our World*, Quercus, London 2022, pp. 158-64.

capitalism limps along producing a zero-sum competition between states, a clamorous nationalism rises, casting wider solidarities into the shadows. The photographer-influencers who rely on social-media platforms are similarly powerless. Azaiza intelligently responds to the demands of the platform to extend the reach of his images as far as possible while, exploiting the fame of his brand, the platform monetises the spectacle of genocide.

In this contradictory collision of latter-day humanism, militarised surveillance machines, the social-media attention economy, and the shattered public spheres that the platforms help to produce, how do these images resonate? On Instagram and other social-media sites, immediate, experiential images are highlighted over the longer forms that might describe and analyse a situation's causes, processes and trajectory. Instead, in the supposedly meritocratic and highly unequal attention economy, the exceptional individual, the branded celebrity, tends to be elevated above the subjects, weakening their collective claim on viewers' attention.

Azaiza's images are often accompanied by pleas to stop scrolling and to look the situation full in the face, but these are thrown in the teeth of the platform's core logic. Azaiza has often vented his frustration at those who treat Gaza as though it was a movie, who like and comment but do not act, and at those politicians whose solidarity ends with a selfie taken with the celebrity photographer:

I want the reaction to be on the streets, not in likes or comments. [...] Go and show what this image made you feel. I appreciate what people do protesting, or sharing and commenting [on my posts], but it hasn't stopped anything. Even the war now is about social media, it's so useless.⁹

Here the power of horrific spectacle, which has helped to produce mass mobilisation, is set against the intransigence of those Western governments that fund and arm the genocide. The millions who have taken to the streets in protest, and those who have risked arrest and assault, or sacrificed their college degrees, all too well understand Azaiza's gesture of despairing stupefaction.

In the division of the image into sunlight and shade, we might read an allegory of the plight of Gazans coming into full colour and definition, just as one day the bodies may be unearthed from under tons of concrete. Azaiza's gesture is not merely about the extremism of the political forces that drive Israeli military action, but also about the pallid character of humanitarian and civic claims in the monopoly realm where spectacle is exploited for profit, along with the continual manipulation of users towards division, polarisation and hatred, even to the point of fostering the very thing that his images protest—genocide.

⁹ Georgia Aspinall, 'Motaz Azaiza: "The Worst Things I've Seen, I Don't Photograph"', *Grazia*, 20 February 2024. The point about selfies is from: Claudia Minetti and Noor Khanafer, 'The Occupation Destroyed my Life': Palestinian Photojournalist Motaz Azaiza Gives 9th Annual DISC Distinguished Lecture at Michigan Theater', *Michigan Daily*, 1 April 2024.