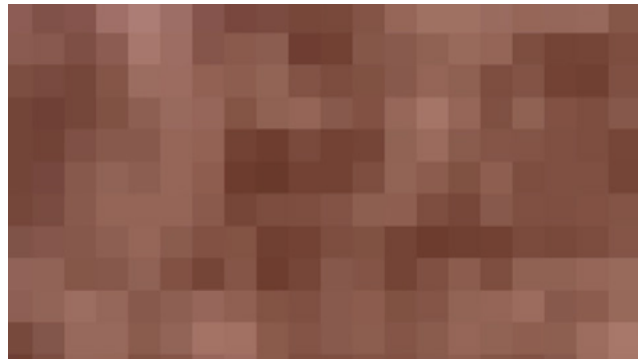


A Change of Register

Miranda Pennell

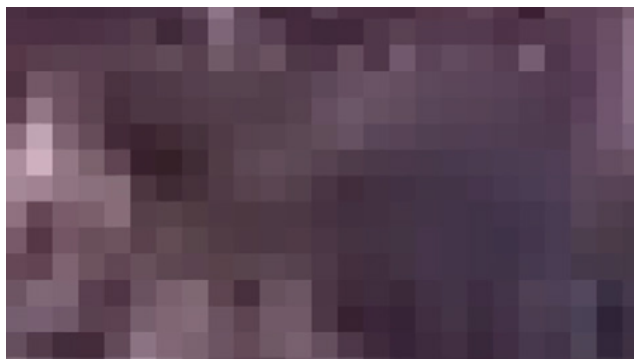


FADE UP AUDIO: Atmosphere, sound of distant crickets and frogs.

VOICE

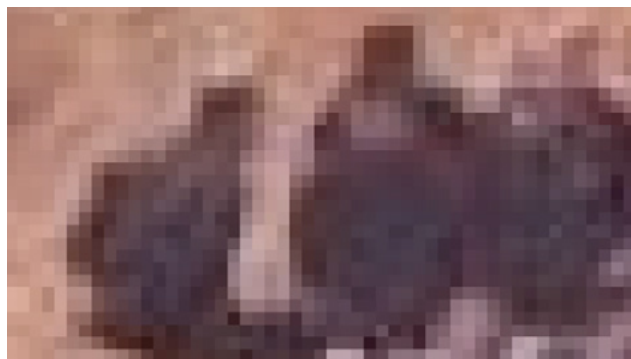
Reddish sand and earth. An open-air pit has been dug. The report mentions a “berm.” You look the word up on the internet and you learn that a “berm” is “an artificial ridge or embankment.” Within the berm, hundreds of men dressed in similar dark costumes form a blue mass. You have trouble understanding what it is you are looking at.

It’s December 2023. I’m in bed looking at the small screen of my phone; I stop scrolling and hear myself say aloud, “What am I looking at?”



Only one shape at the very edge has an outline you can properly make out as that of a man. He is kneeling, his hands behind his back. His body curves forward, making a C shape.

I need to erase what I think I already know about this place, its history, its identity. I'll erase what I think I already know about the relations country/border, soldier/civilian, perpetrator/victim, war/peace. I'll magnify the evidence and start again.



Beyond the berm, a different kind of shape. The photographer, you decide, is standing on a raised mound above the pit.



I'll isolate and examine each detail forensically, a good technique for protecting myself against the bigger picture.

You wonder what's in the box. In the foreground, a figure wearing a soldier's uniform directs an LED lamp which illuminates a group of five men. They stand shirtless in the foreground, with towels or blankets over their shoulders.

Feels like a film I might have seen. Maybe they are actors.

Yes, I'm sure I've seen films like this. Why is it easier to comprehend through comparison to other films? The scene before and the scene after are missing. But we know the story.

Their hands are bound by plastic ties. You decide that the plastic ties came out of the white box.

I think back to the way historian Carlo Ginzburg draws parallels between a famous fictional detective, the father of psychoanalysis, and an art historian expert in unmasking forgery in paintings. In his essay "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm" (1979), he traces a paradigm emerging in the humanities at the end of the nineteenth century that focuses on insignificant details as a way to comprehend "a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality." He links diagnosis via faint traces and marginal details to archaic practices of divination—collapsing opposition between lore and science, "rational" and "irrational" methods for knowing the world.

I decide the white box with the yellow sticker is the container for the plastic ties—but I cannot know it.

I decide that the captives' wrists are bound by plastic ties though I cannot see them.



Hospital green. Man number 4 is a doctor, a surgeon.

I've nearly finalized my script when I come across a blogger, "an investigative journalist with a technical edge." He uses arresting visual techniques to analyze the same image I've been looking at. I am impressed and intimidated by his authoritative use of grid, triangulation, and inset magnifications. I now worry about what I've missed with my primitive methods and naive speculations.

His investigation demonstrates conclusively that the doctor is the doctor; the soldier with the lamp is an Israeli soldier; the number of captives in the picture is 325; the photographic lamp is a "Lightpanel Mobiler Scheinwerfer." I am disappointed by these outcomes. I had not questioned the identity of the surgeon, nor the testimony of the local witness who had claimed him as his friend and mentor. I had not doubted the nationality of the soldier, nor the authenticity of the photograph as a whole. Proof of what, for whom? I wonder.



The image was originally posted in the Reporters' Chat section on the website of Channel 12, by the channel's military correspondent Nir Dvori.

According to Twitter user @Fdov21 the image was taken in Beit Lahia, in the north. "Coordinates 31.541 788 and 34.505 311." @FDov21 use geo-mapping technology. They use colour-coding to pinpoint landmarks, trees, buildings within the camera's sightlines, and match these onto existing satellite photographs.

Why the change of register? Why the need to corroborate my testimony with science?

To remind myself: This is not a fiction film and these are not actors.

I want to register the distance between the staging of the captives in the image, the place and time of the perpetrator-photographer who posts the image, and the place and time from which I, and we, look. The more concrete and precise the detail, the more powerful the effect.



AUDIO: Bursts of distant gunfire.

The shaft of artificial light turns the ground from red to yellow.

I'm at a screening in Amsterdam in November. An audience member asks about the inclusion of bursts of gunfire in the soundtrack. I suspect the questioner is coming from a position of radical anti-illusionism. I confess that I have indulged in some token realism when it comes to the treatment of sound.

She approaches me in the foyer after the screening. She seems angry. She is a photographer, I learn. I also learn that I'm about to be reported, because I have not sought permission to reproduce the photograph from the rights holder, and what's worse, I have falsified the image by adding audio effects. I hear myself protest weakly, "It's an image of a war crime." I feel vaguely disturbed by the implied legal threat, and as I defend myself to her, I see myself in court defending my film. I visualize the fundraising campaign to support my case. It will be so inconvenient. It then occurs to me that the photograph itself constitutes a breach of the Geneva Conventions, which prohibit the use of photographs to "expose prisoners of war to public curiosity." I decide I will not only win the case, but that the TV correspondent-photographer will be prosecuted. They might even be sent to The Hague. All of this flashes through my mind by the time the foyer door slams closed and the woman leaves the cinema, calling out as she goes, "And it is NOT a 'genocide.'"



You are struck by the softness of the foliage on the trees, and by the exotic outline of the palm fan against the residential buildings in the background. Everything is bathed in a soft, pinkish light.

How jarring. The pictorial qualities of a war crime.



I think this image stands out because of its aesthetic properties. The raised vantage point, the gentle quality of light, and the use of space across the whole composition. There are, after all, other images showing similar cruelties. But this one captures the staging of another photograph: 320 people are held prisoner inside the purple-blue middle ground. The soldiers are documenting something.

The photo is intended as a trophy.

The crickets and frogs are in your mind.

AUDIO: Atmosphere track cuts out.

It's cold and blustery outside. You put some nice music on.

AUDIO: Choral music cuts in.

You can't help thinking about the soldier with the lamp. And you wonder about the unseen photographer; whether in fact the presence behind the camera is the journalist Nir Dvori, who will post his photograph on the Reporters' Chat section of the website.



You think about the editor of that website, and the producer of the TV news channel; the commander of the army, the president of the country, the rulers of your own country; the people on Facebook—looking and commenting. And you, sat here, listening to gentle music as you look on.

Onlooker, observer, witness, watcher, spectator, sightseer, overseer, bystander.

I'll move the audience about—now proximity, now distance. I'm thinking about what it feels like to be a witness.

Wikipedia entry on *The Third of May 1808*, by Francisco Goya, 1814, oil on canvas, 268 × 347 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid: "A square lantern situated on the ground between the two groups throws a dramatic light on the scene. The brightest illumination falls on the huddled victims to the left, whose numbers include a monk or friar in prayer."

In Zagreb, a person in the audience says he is reminded of this painting. I nod, though I have failed to recognize the reference.

AUDIO: Choral music becomes louder.

IMAGE CUTS TO BLACK

The photograph, taken in Beit Lahia, Gaza, Occupied Palestine, was posted at 21:33 on December 12, 2023.

In the weeks before he was abducted by the military, surgeon Dr. Khalid Hamoda's wife and small daughter were killed in an Israeli air strike.

Dr. Hamoda was released several weeks after this photograph was taken.

As of March 2024 his whereabouts are unknown.

Around this time, I see researcher Abdaljawad Omar give a video interview from Ramallah about the circulation of images in which large groups of Palestinian men, often in states of undress, are paraded for the camera.¹ He says Palestinians see this as “a desperate attempt by Israel to showcase some sort of success. . . . Although they are very sympathetic with the people in the videos and empathetic to their predicament in that moment—they look at this and say, ‘They can’t get to the resistance, so they are producing this lousy propaganda.’”

As Omar discusses the images released that week by the Israeli military, I notice that the editors of *The Electronic Intifada* have blurred the faces of the captives in an effort to protect them. Should I undertake the same measures? Does such an intervention undermine the use of the camera as a weapon that makes an exhibition of the powerlessness of its victims? Does blurring victims’ features further stigmatize them?

Endnotes

- 1 “How Israel Weaponizes Palestinian Masculinity, with Abdaljawad Omar,” posted December 18, 2023, by *Electronic Intifada*, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_gvvprpJCw.