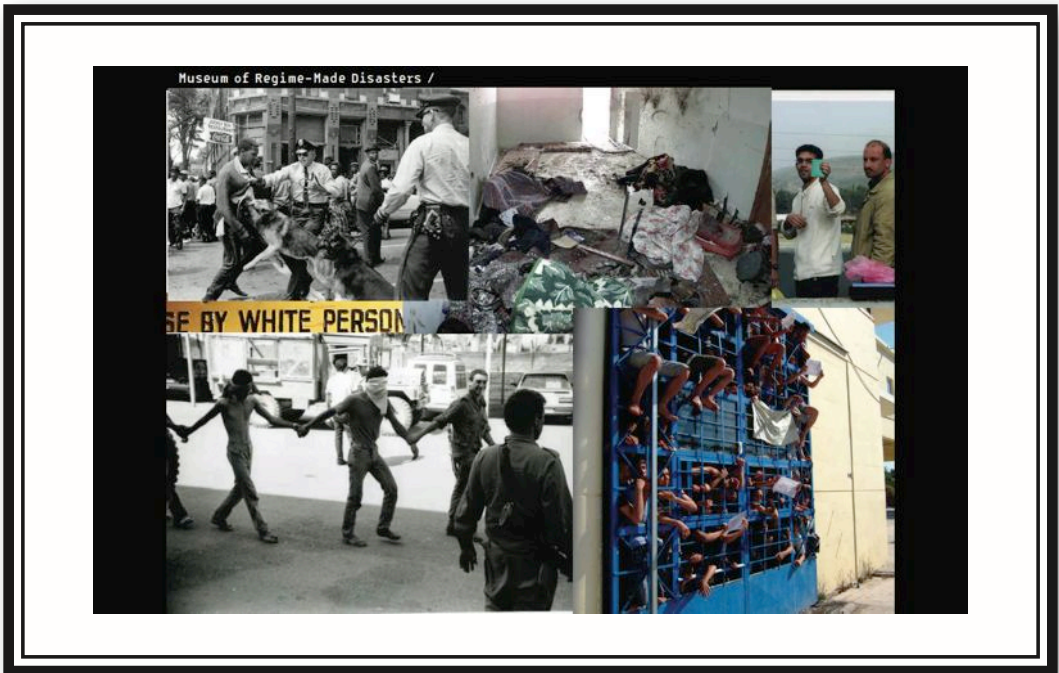# A Tour of the Museum of Regime-Made Disasters

Translated by Tal Haran

The Arab Spring and the general civil awakening in the Middle East, which has continued in Spain, England, and various Occupy movements, reveal more and more facets of regime-made disasters, and the extent to which democracy itself, rather than being their foil, is one of the regime forms wherein such disasters actually take place.

This museum is inspired by Hannah Arendt's effort to analyze totalitarian regimes. The museum does not aim to characterize a totalitarian regime or assess existing regimes in its light, nor to define the typical constellation of relations among various foundations that turns a regime into a totalitarian one. The museum adopts the widely accepted claim that totalitarian regimes of the kind analyzed by Arendt are a thing of the past, but it insists on understanding the disasters afflicting various populations in the world as regime-made disasters. The museum follows the way in which such disasters take place and are interlaced in a democratic fiber of life, while being perceived as external to the regime that generates them. It adopts the Arendtian thought linking manmade disasters of the twentieth century to those generated by imperialism but insists, nonetheless, on linking to imperialism the regime-made disasters that continue to take place after the downfall of totalitarian regimes.

This museum is a layout, an outline for visual studies of regime-made disasters. It emerges from my ongoing work on the history of Israel-Palestine and the construction of two visual archives, namely of forty years of occupation and of the four formative years 1947–50, in which Palestinians were expelled from their homeland and the Israeli regime took shape.[1] The work on and through these archives has led me to understand some of the general, universalizable features of the Israeli regime that may be identified in other geopolitical and historical settings, in the contexts of our contemporary colonial/postcolonial world and its recent imperial histories. This outline, the conceptual scheme, and the categories and classifications that unfold in it do not mean to be exhaustive or even grounded in systematic research. The scheme should be taken as experimental and the categories as working hypotheses, possible ways to organize such a museum and work from the various perspectives which it opens and through the comparative tools it provides.[2]
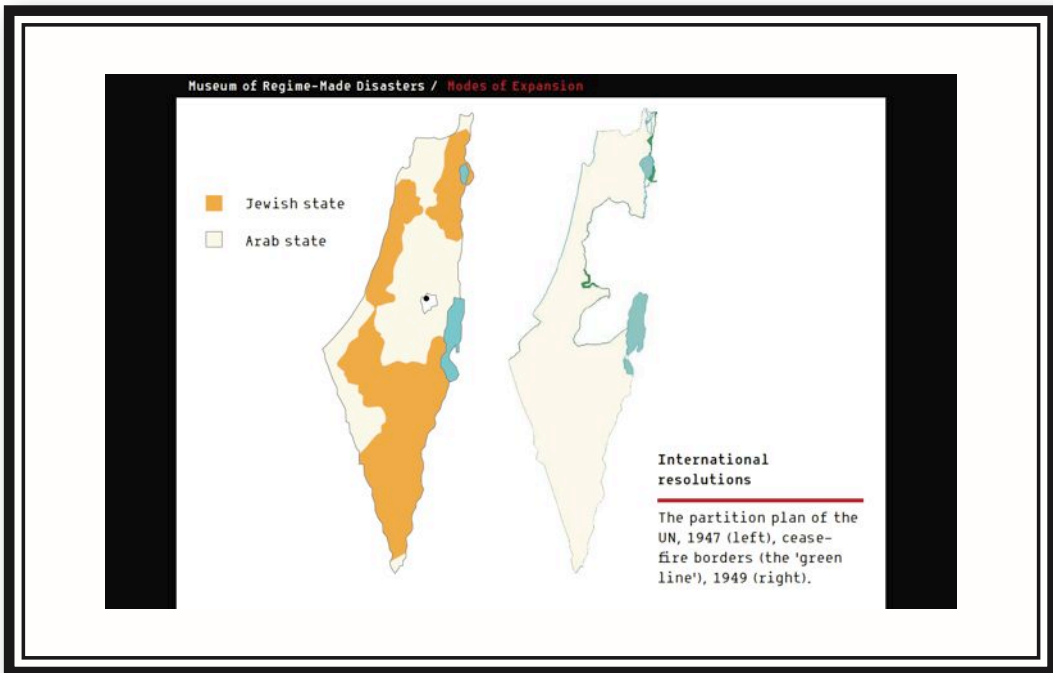
Most—if not all—of the items on display in this museum could be found in a museum dedicated to the violation of human rights, or one that focuses on victims of manmade disasters worldwide. However, the museum of regime-made disasters wishes to create a different syntax for its exhibits and to redraw their limits so as to provide an alternative to the traditional moral viewing of images of casualties or victims. The museum aims to present its collected items in such a way that what was framed in them initially for the spectator's gaze—for example, the injured victim—may serve only as a point of departure for the reconstruction of the conditions that enabled the disaster whose traces we are watching and which citizens of the same regime are tolerating or collaborating with. The museum of regime-made disasters seeks to establish a civil discourse in and from within museum space, enabling us to see the horror we observe on a daily basis in a new light, not as disasters taking place "somewhere," not as the disaster *of* others, but as a disaster that takes place—or might take place—in the heart of the democratic regimes in which and alongside which citizens live, in a way that turns them into accomplices to some extent or other.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / Modes of Expansion

Obsolete
Ob
Obsolete

Bi-lateral effects
The curious crowd around a "life exhibit" near the pavilion of French Africa in the Colonial Exhibition, Paris, 1931.

The museum of regime-made disasters seeks to read the items it displays not as signed and closed images whose story is enfolded in them but as petrified remains generated during an event whose traces are recorded therein. From such remains one can reconstruct the relationship between those who are usually in the focus of images from zones of disaster—the victim population—and those who are responsible for their plight. Thus a regime-made disaster can be drawn, an image of a regime responsible for the disaster, a regime that perpetuates the conditions in which a particular population is further exposed to disaster and considered, in a perverse way, the owner of the disaster. Thus, for example, the Nakba is considered the catastrophe *of* the Palestinians, or the Holocaust the catastrophe *of* the Jews.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / Modes of Expansion

Jewish state

Arab state

International resolutions

The partition plan of the UN, 1947 (left), cease-fire borders (the 'green line'), 1949 (right).

The museum's assumption is that a disaster can never be owned or partitioned, but rather it is always shared, although never equally, by those involved in it, either as perpetrators, victims, or bystanders. It seeks to reintroduce the perpetrators, usually excluded from the frame, into the image of atrocity and to insist on their part in the disaster, including the disastrous traces they continue to bear as perpetrators. Often the long-lasting focus on dispossessed populations and "their" disaster did not enable one to recognize disasters as disasters—not *of* this or that population—and the responsibility of democratic regimes for their production and reproduction. The first step in the reconstruction of these regimes as disaster-producers is to reject the borders of photographic frames—or frames of other images—and replace them with a backward and forward motion between the remains and the event in which the image was produced and displayed.[3]

In the name of Art

Merkers, 12.4.1945.
General D. Eisenhower
(right) inspects artworks
looted by the Nazis
and hidden in a salt
mine where appropriate
humidity and temperature
conditions were
guaranteed for their
preservation. The works
of art were stored by the
Nazis for protection from
Allied bombing raids.

Why a Museum?

The modern museum, not even once mentioned in the Arendtian epos *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, played a role—at times modest, at times crucial—in making the horrors described in this book user-friendly. It did so not because it displayed the horrors but, quite to the contrary, because it enabled its spectators to develop the viewing skills of spectators-in-the-know at various exhibits without seeing them as incriminating items. The British Museum, for example, opened in 1753, is one of the pioneer museal institutions created in the eighteenth century, and for which imperialism served as a hothouse for the breeding of a worldview that combines encyclo-pedic universalism committed to preserving the treasures of the whole world and a monopolistic nationalism that identifies these collections and their safekeeping as the nation's own business.

Rescuing Culture

London, British Museum.
Part of the Sphinx's beard.

The main practices identified with the museal institution are *collection*, *preservation*, and *exhibition*. The museum is the institution which culture dedicated to the preservation of valuable objects, rare species, and species such as are in processes of extinction. The museum bears the responsibility, usually formulated in moral terms, of making them accessible to the public and the patrimony of future generations. The museum, then, is the dwelling place of the highly valuable object that is to be rescued from extinction, preserved for the general good, and displayed to the public. The museal institution holds, as it were, the claim that "this is the proper place for such an object." But this claim is correct only when we come to describe what a museum is or what kind of objects it should contain. This claim is not sufficient to receive the object at the museum's gates; after all, the ground would then fall out from beneath the central category of the museal institution: rarity. For a given object, the chances of becoming an exhibit are often based upon the scarcity of other similar objects.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / Available Forms of Opertion / Dispossession and Plunder

SPL
Still Practiced Locally

Food supply management

Bitounia, 2003. "Back-to-back" site.

Therefore, the claim relevant to the object's entering the museum is that "this is the suitable place for this specific item, precisely on account of its specific value." When Andy Warhol introduces into the museum a Campbell's soup can and the museum becomes its dwelling place, that very moment determines not the fate of all Campbell's soup cans but of one particular can, or of those particular ones chosen by Warhol.

The museum of regime-made disasters that I had invented, some features of which are outlined here, radicalizes museal practice, and in so doing, it radicalizes this claim. I propose to do so through a civil revival of a concept that was central in constituting the modern museum, *trust*, and of which nowadays merely the essentially economic fossil has remained, namely the board of trustees. The first to use the legal device of trust was Hans Sloan, when he placed his collections in the hands of the state and willed them opened to the public: that is how the British Museum was born.

Yafa/Yafo. Land and various assets – all possessions of 750,000 Palestinians who were expelled – became Jewish property in the years 1947–1949. In the photo, the Arab mayor's house has already become the office of the Israeli military governor, while "Tnuva" (Jewish agricultural produce cooperative) is already marketing its products at the corner restaurant. Photographer not identified. IDF and Defense Archive, 1.5.1948.

Sloan asked for Parliament's promise that his possessions would be deposited in a given space—a museum—that would protect them from damage or harmful use and preserve them for the good of the public at large and future generations. The museum of regime-made disasters is not based on valuable possessions. Not one item in it is a valuable worthy of being preserved in a known museal institution. If there are grounds to preserve the items it contains, such grounds are not derived from the intrinsic value of the objects but rather from the need to *deposit* these items in a venue different from the civil space where the different types of abuse they refer to are still practiced.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / Available Forms of Opertion / Reproducing unshared power

SPE
Still Practiced Elsewhere

Ghettoization

South Africa. Architects of a township for blacks.

These items should be displayed in this museum not because of their rarity but precisely because a museum is the proper place for items of their kind. The reason to preserve them, then, is not a result of their essential value but because the public has had enough of them and demands that one place in the museum that which it no longer wants to see outside its gates. The principle of rarity does not vanish: from being a characteristic of items to be preserved, it is transformed into a civil suit that should be helped by the museum in order to make these items rare outside of the museum, to turn them into an extinct species that belongs only in a museum.
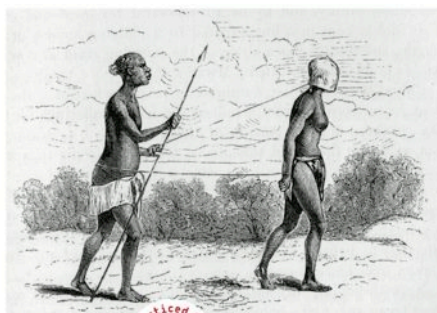
Still Practiced Elsewhere
SPE

Spatial Disorientation

"Warua slave-driver and slave," 1877.

The Museum

The museum refers to three foundations of regime-made disasters, each lying at the base of a different wing: the spatial, the discursive, and the technological. These three elements have each contributed to the creation of a new global political reality whereby entire populations are ruled without being regarded as relevant to political life. They are exposed to disasters that are perceived as happening at a different place, or external to the regime that perpetrates them, or as nondisasters. The way the disaster is acknowledged or misrecognized is a form of governance and part of disaster management.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / Available Forms of Opertion / Reproducing unshared power

Arrested without being charged

Huwwara Checkpoint, 2005.
Photographer: Liriet
Livni Lahav.

The Spatial Element

The expansion of empires around the globe has taken place apart from the expansion of a body politic.[4] This expansion has contributed to the creation of a global reality whereby whole populations are dispossessed of what they had or could have had and are ruled without participating in governance in a way that is not conceptualized as disaster, while the ruling populations do not acknowledge that the perpetration of disaster is their form of governance and do not represent the disaster itself as part of the political space.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / Available Forms of Opertion / Destruction

Boer civilians watch their own disaster.

1900–1902. The British responded to the war waged by the Boers with a 'scorched earth' policy, denying the Boers supplies and refuge.

The Discursive Element

Political thinking and discourse developed in the eighteenth century, both in philosophical tradition and in the French and American revolutions, contributed enormously to this reality. This language is considered responsible for the creation of the figure of the modern citizen, but it is no less responsible for the onset of other new political conditions such as "stateless," "refugees," or "repatriation," the quasi-proper use of which continues to generate more and more disasters. The political discourse and the judicial institutions it created relate to the body politic as if it were composed solely of citizens, thus denying the actual body politic composed of the entire governed population. Modern disaster cannot be studied without accounting for what I call the "differential body politic." Democratic regimes tend to exclude from their self-understanding and self-representation their own role in the affliction of disaster upon the various populations they govern. This gap between the citizens and the entire governed population generated a powerful heritage rarely contested by the few who have insisted on conceiving the political regime independently of its representations. To date, this tradition has enabled one to conceptualize the various disasters taking place under democratic regimes as external to those regimes, or at most as an accident, a mishap, or a temporary distortion.

"The Minority Treaties said in plain language what until then had been only implied in the working system of nation-states, namely, that only nationals could be citizens [...] that persons of different nationality needed some law of exception until or unless they were completely assimilated and divorced from their origin" [Hannah Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 275].

Hamburg, May 18th, 1945. A Polish family registering at a DP Assembly Centre. Upon their arrival, people were sprayed with anti-louse powder and issued a registration card showing their identity and nationality. When transport was available DPs were sent on to 'National' camps ready for repatriation to their country of origin.
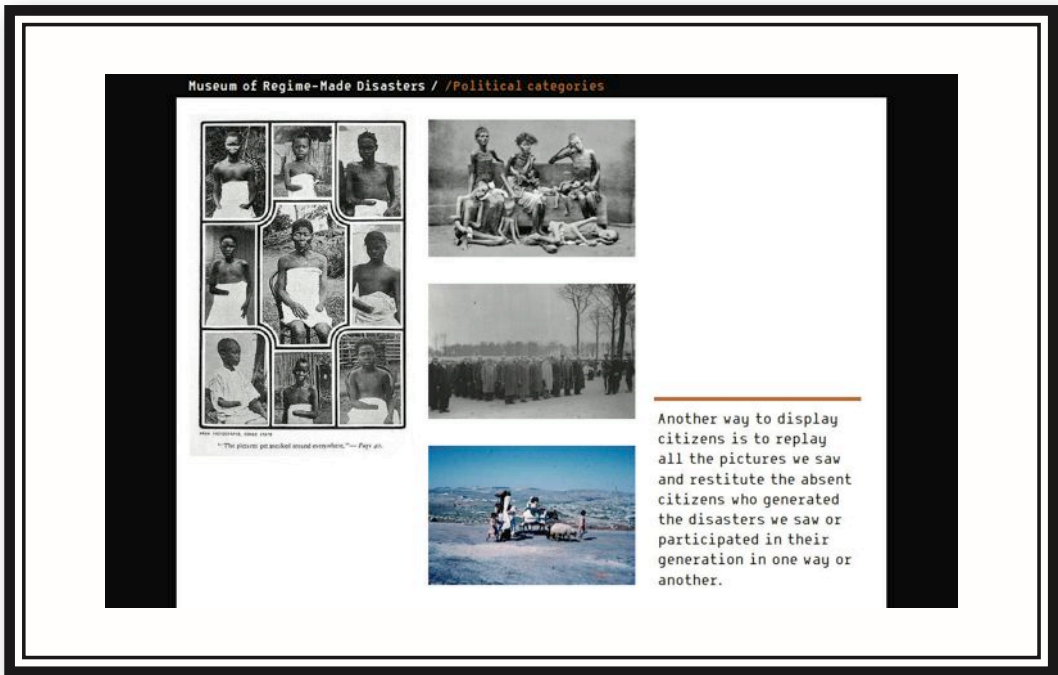
The Technological Element

Ever since the fifteenth century, various tools have been formed to create, subjugate, and administer dispossessed populations. The tools that served to inflict disasters were not always destined to do so, and most of them had served in other contexts as well. Such were the tools for managing movement in space, from identification documents to checkpoints, or tools that generate various types of destruction management. As soon as they were created, these tools became a part of an available, accessible repertoire used by various regimes to inflict disaster upon various populations. This rich repertoire enables the creation of uncounted populations while the tools remain untainted by the very disaster they inflict.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / /Political categories
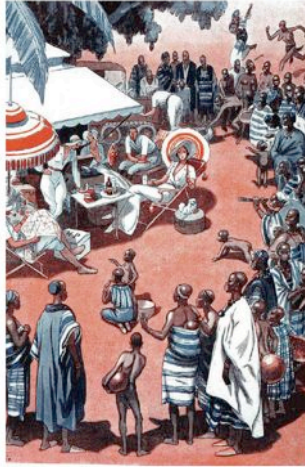
Citizens can hardly be shown directly unless they are placed side by side with non-citizens and, moreover, when they are seen from the non-citizens' point of view. "This is Paris", the Other Colonial Exhibition, published in 1931 by Vallé.

The museum is based on the assumption that with the collapse of totalitarian regimes, these three elements responsible for creating regime-made disasters did not disappear but rather continue to act without reforming as a totalitarian regime. The museum aims to read anew the pictures of past horror as images of regime-made disasters.[5] Reconceptualizing disasters as regime-made disasters whose creation involves the citizens of democratic regimes (sometimes rather thoughtlessly) is the basis for civil thinking that insists on reintroducing that which has been externalized out of citizenship and out of the regime. Hence, through the collaboration of others, this provides a civil basis for refiguring what is a "bearable" regime for the entire body politic, composed of citizens and noncitizens alike. The museum of regime-made disasters outlines a common accumulation of everything that the governed would not bear were they themselves the objects of disaster.

Another way to display citizens is to replay all the pictures we saw and restitute the absent citizens who generated the disasters we saw or participated in their generation in one way or another.

How to Recognize a Regime-Made Disaster

The epistemological question as to the way in which people respond to disaster—"the disaster of others," a question that has evoked answers such as "numbness" or "compassion fatigue"—is framed by the museum as an ontological question. It inquires into the conditions that create disaster as external to the regime, as irrelevant to the citizens in whose proximity it takes place without touching them, and for whom it indeed remains a nondisaster.[6]

Regime-made disasters on which the museum focuses do not take place off-stage, in the shadows, outside the law, or in any spontaneous manner. They are usually inflicted openly in public space. Citizens in various positions in state apparatuses openly partake in the perpetration of regime-made disasters, and to varying degrees of involvement. Regime-made disaster has several features:

Chartres. August 1944. Women who were suspected of collaborating with the Germans, and particularly those who had German-fathered babies, had their heads shaved and were insulted in public. Photographer: Robert Capa.

• **Visibility**: the disaster or some of its dimensions do not take place in the dark, and normal citizens are accustomed to not regarding it as a disaster.

• **Tools**: perpetrators use existing and available tools and modes of action which they design to fit their needs.

• **Temporality**: regime-made disasters endure in time and occur along various steps and phases, often not as a one-time event.

• **Form of occurrence**: a regime-made disaster is not incidental, and its traces enable the reconstruction of planning principles and/or management models.

• **Range of expansion**: the limits, margins, and intensity of regime-made disasters are managed, and open efforts are usually made to target only a certain population.

Museum of Regime-Made Disasters / /Political categories

Illegal workers

Only 21 out of 257 "illegal" migrants from Libya to Italy on the "rickety" ship (the boat was only meant to hold 75) survived. May 2009.

• **Target population**: a regime-made disaster targets a population that is considered external to the body politic. It does not partake in governance at the time of the disaster, nor it is supposed to be distanced from it by the disaster itself.

• **Representation**: rather than as a nondisaster, the disaster is represented as the necessary or justified effect of an external purpose.

• **Purpose**: beyond contingent purposes, from the persistence of disaster managed by the governing power, we can learn that one of its typical features is a reproduction of the differential relations among governed groups in a way that enables the reproduction of the regime based on such differentiality.

• **Defense against a regime-made disaster and aid to its victims**: the means used to defend against it or to cope with its results do not offer a sweeping solution to end disaster but instead focus on side issues and/or are aimed at individual cases.

NOTES

1. These archives now exist in book format: Ariella Azoulay, *Atto di Stato Palestina-Israele, 1967–2007: Storia fotografica dell'occupazione* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008); Azoulay, *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947–1950* (London: Pluto, 2011).

2. A first version of the museum was presented at the conference on the occasion of the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in its Hebrew translation, held at the Minerva Humanities Center, Tel Aviv University, December 2009. A second version was presented at the conference on Visual Citizenship, Institute for Public Knowledge, NYU, New York, April 2010. Another version has recently been presented in *ReCoCo: Life under Representational Regimes*, curated by Joshua Simon, Vienna, May–June 2011.

3. My effort in this museum is to expand my claim about the relationship between the photograph and the two events of photography to other types of images. On the two events of photography, see Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012).

4. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994).

5. In his essay on moral technologies, Adi Ophir analyzes the collapse of the distinction between natural disasters and regime disasters as a result of disaster-management technologies. The museum shares this claim but wishes to characterize the new type of disaster as a "regime disaster." See Adi Ophir, "Moral Technologies: Disaster Management and the Abandonment of Life," *Theory and Criticism* 22 (Spring 2003): 67–103 [Hebrew].

6. For more on the "disaster from *their* point of view," see Azoulay, *From Palestine to Israel.*