Working with ghosts. Staying in the haunting to disempower colonial aesthetics

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In this presentation, I would like to discuss the reasons behind some of the methodological choices we made in creating this visual essay. When Charles proposed working visually and aesthetically on 'the afterlife of Italian Empire', elaborating this video as a didactic tool, we understood that one of our main goals was to highlight how the power of **colonial and fascist aesthetics is far from gone**. We wanted to show how **coloniality is embodied** in our cultural background and in how we interpret the world. We wanted it to be clear how these posthumous colonial aesthetics **continue to exert a form of violence**, especially towards Afro-descendant people, whether in diaspora or with migrant backgrounds. They also affect those who know that a world deems some people less human than others produces inequalities that concern us all, in an intersectional way.

At the start of our work, we consulted various **public archives** on the history of Italian colonialism, mostly from a colonial perspective. With Saidiya Hartman, we realized that 'to read the archive is to enter a mortuary'.
Our fundamental question in imagining this video-essay was **how can we critically show the material and immaterial traces of Italian colonialism, without risking to re-legitimise its narratives and reproduce its violence**?
We did not want to continue reproducing colonial aesthetics, without contrasting them in some way. We did not want to show images of bodies and environments devastated by mustard gas, nor the bodies of resistors imprisoned and humiliated by the fascist gaze, nor the objects we took and now keep in museum deposits. But at the same time, we didn't want to deny the material and symbolic violence of colonialism and fascism. So the question was: how can we make violence 'visible' without 'showing' it? How to highlight the power of colonial aesthetics, while working to dismantle it?

We listened to Ariella Azoulay, who in her book *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* warns us that 'the invitation to enter the colonial archive is a trap'. We had to find a way to try to go **beyond the colonial frame of the archives**, and to **disempower colonial aesthetics**.
For these reasons, we decided not to show the historical images contained in the archives, but to build a visual narrative by juxtaposing **artistic works** and **activism** in an anti-fascist and anti-colonial key. In other words, we chose to highlight the perspective of subjects who have already challenged or reworked colonial architectures, imaginaries and archives, and who were particularly resonant with Charles' text, agreeing with each one a respectful way of showing their work.
This choice relates to two fundamental issues. The first concerns the **'ethics of historical representation'**, as Saidiya Hartman calls it.

We reflect on the fact that colonial archives often tell only the colonizers' perspective, offering knowledge "tainted" by this filter. If from a historical point of view these archives are fundamental for reconstructing and documenting the 'reality' of colonial events, and it was very important to bring them to light and make them accessible, we must nevertheless be aware that they are **haunted by absence**, inhabited by the shadows of all that has not been recorded.

We reflected on the fact that **'showing' and 'making visible'** are not synonymous, and we felt it necessary to articulate the action of 'showing' in a more complex way, exploring also 'not-showing' or 'showing-hiding' as aesthetic and political choices.
Art historian Benedict Savoy warns against the danger of **'radical transparency':** 'showing everything' is not synonymous with truth, or recognition. While showing 'everything', exposing colonial archives can raise awareness and provoke shock or indignation, it often fails to reveal how that brutality continues to reproduce itself in the present, or to acknowledge the resistance that fight it, now as then, producing counter-memories and counter-narratives.

The risk of colonial archives is to **normalise the violence** they contain. Our risk (as researchers) is to reproduce it. To avoid this, we must '**put them to work**', challenging **our interpretive habits** - because archives do not only teach us what to know, but also how to read.

We also need to penetrate the cracks in the archives, to break their linear temporality, and focus on what is missing: the voices and words left unsaid. By transgressing the archive from its margins, we can give back body to the ghosts that find no place or peace in the colonial archive.

With this in mind, the guiding idea of our work was to engage not 'on' ghosts but 'with' ghosts, that is, to stay in the haunting. As Avery Gordon writes, 'if you don't drive it away, if you don't kill it, if you don't reduce it to something you already know how to deal with- if you let it, the ghost can lead you to what is missing, and that is often everything'.
This leads us to a second crucial question: what does it mean to work with the spectrality produced by colonialism and fascism? And how can artistic and creative languages make a difference in this process?

Working with ghosts means, above all, unmasking the power that produced them. It involves recognizing how this power continues to reproduce itself today, and refusing to accept it as an inevitable horizon. As anthropologist Stefania Consigliere writes, domination creates spectrality wherever it operates, and its primary characteristic is its ability to perpetuate itself, through ever-new forms according to contexts and eras. Consequently, 'the world is populated with ghosts and no one can talk about them anymore'. I am referring to the ghosts generated by extractivist logics rooted in racial capitalism and colonialism: communities dispossessed of their lands, ecosystems ravaged, people enslaved, drowned in transatlantic trafficking or in today's Mediterranean crossings, genocides of yesterday and today (one unfolding before our eyes, in Gaza), and those in the diaspora who remain unrecognised as citizens. The ghost is fundamentally a sign of how violence persists. This spectral presence affects us all directly, compelling us to confront the enduring legacies of these violences.

Fortunately, ghosts by definition make noise: they scream, drag chains, ransack rooms at night. "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children", writes Toni Morrison in Beloved. Everyone knows ghosts, yet many fail to recognise them. But how can we not recognise them, if they are right before our eyes? To truly recognise these specters, our gaze and perception must be awakened – sharpened and made conscious. Artistic languages and creative practices can serve as vital tools in this process: helping us to re-read the traces of colonialism and fascism with greater awareness and critical insight. At the same time, art can counteract their persistent effects by breaking the habit of perceiving these violences as 'normal'—as part of our everyday scenes—thus challenging their invisibility and normalization. Art becomes a space for unlearning, for questioning what has been taken for granted, and for opening new ways of seeing that allow us to confront the ghosts haunting our histories and present realities.

We need to learn to unlearn what Fanon describe as the 'aesthetic forms of respect for the established order'. A kind of gaze training, that helps us to disassociate from the naturalisation of these aesthetics into a canon. This process involves de-familiarising ourselves with dominant representations, a methodology dear to the Ethnographic Surrealism movement, which in the 1920s-30s experimented with radical forms of cultural and anti-colonial critique through collaboration between artists and researchers (ethnographers, in that case).

This act, which we might call re-mediation, operates within the apparent re-presentation of archive material or colonial traces, but employs alternative mediums, or intervenes directly on images or objects. It creates what can be describe as a small perceptual earthquake, an upheaval that opens up an in-between space, where the meaning of that object can be critically reconsidered and deconstructed. This process invites viewers to engage actively, transforming the act of looking from passive observation, into a space of empowerment, awareness and responsibility. Unlearning, therefore, is a conscious choice—something no one can be forced into.

But re-mediation is more broadly concerned with disrupting the relationships between objects, spaces, bodies, audiences, researchers. It is about working 'with', never 'on'. Artists and activists are not merely objects of study; they are active subjects and producers of research processes that hold equal dignity with academic endeavours, and sometimes even restore what has been rendered invisible. Recognizing that invisibility does not equate to incomprehensibility allows us to see beyond the limits imposed by traditional disciplines.

A gaze outside the boundaries of any academic canon perceives differently than one trained and disciplined within it. This shift in perspective has profound implications for academic research: it challenges the authority of knowledge itself, opening space for a redistribution and pluralization of perspectives and viewpoints that are legitimized to read, interpret, and narrate history. As Clementine Deliss writes in *The metabolic museum*, "remediation is not about reappropriating colonial spoils safeguarded in obsolete imperial institutions. It is a process of self-reflexive and critical assessment that necessitates careful and respectful interaction with different agents willing to renegotiate the authority of the host".

In this sense, for the academy to establish collaborative research practices with artists and activists is not only useful, but essential, if we aim to challenge the Eurocentric approach to knowledge and move away from a depository model of education. Our current academic structures rarely provide space for counter-hegemonic knowledge to flourish or be recognized. We urgently need to experiment with emancipatory and transgressive models of education, as bell hooks suggests, one that resist the authority and reproduction of deeply colonial knowledge systems. Artists and activists have the capacity to produce interference in the linearity of canons, not by merely explaining or representing, but evoking, working within the space of imagination.

In this project we have the opportunity to experiment with a generative methodology: connecting imagination with critique, negotiating the always-unstable relationship between what we see and what we know; affirming that imagination is a way of knowing, a tool for envisioning different possibilities; It allows us to glimpse that things could and should be different; it reveals fractures and discontinuities within historical processes, the brutal survivals of coloniality, but also the potential histories, unactualized pasts, and the futures yet to be realized. Re-imagining involves looking both backward and forward at the same time, to bring out the possibility of a counter-memories. Working side by side with artists and activists in this urgent process enables us to experiment, through research and education, practices rooted in healing, justice, and transformation. Such justice is not merely reparative—acknowledging wounds—but also transformative: actively working to change the conditions that forces that wound to remain open.

A future in which cultural and educational institutions cease to see themselves as neutral spaces and take seriously their role in building plural and transformative knowledges, towards a justice rooted in ongoing acts of creation and resistance.