



Gil Pasternak



Intimate Conflicts: Family Photographs, Politics and State Ideology

Biography

Dr Gil Pasternak is Senior Lecturer in Photography and the Photography Course Leader in the School of Art, Design and Architecture. He was awarded his PhD from the History of Art Department at University College London (UCL), specialising in the theory and history of photography in the context of fine art and visual cultures. Prior to his current position, Gil lectured at UCL and at Chelsea College of Art and Design. As visual practitioner, Gil presented his work at a number of art galleries, including Tate Modern, Norwich Art Gallery, The Agency, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), Machida Municipal Print Museum (Tokyo), Kodeljevo Grad (Slovenia) and Gallery Infra (Sweden).

Gil is peer-reviewer for various academic journals, including *Photography and Culture*, *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *The International Journal of the Image* amongst others. His individual published research focuses on the participation of vernacular photography

in the solidification and subversion of state policies, in the alteration of Middle-Eastern cultural historical topoi, and in acts of political violence. Gil takes particular interest in exploring the various methods by which photographs are set in motion within such contexts as the construction of physical and human landscape, the domestication of militarism, private acts of political protest, and social rituals of mourning and nationalism.

This set of investigations emerged through Gil's earlier career as professional photographer, where he worked as photojournalist and war photographer, recording aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Israel, and in South Lebanon. He also collaborated with landscape architects and historians on the production and publication of documentary photo-collections featuring the modification, social restoration and re-habitation of past battlegrounds.

More recently, Gil began researching the historiographical

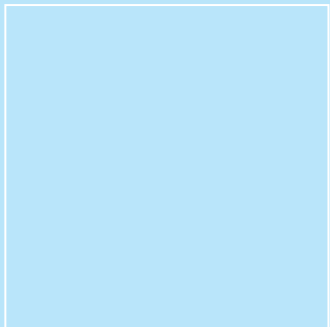
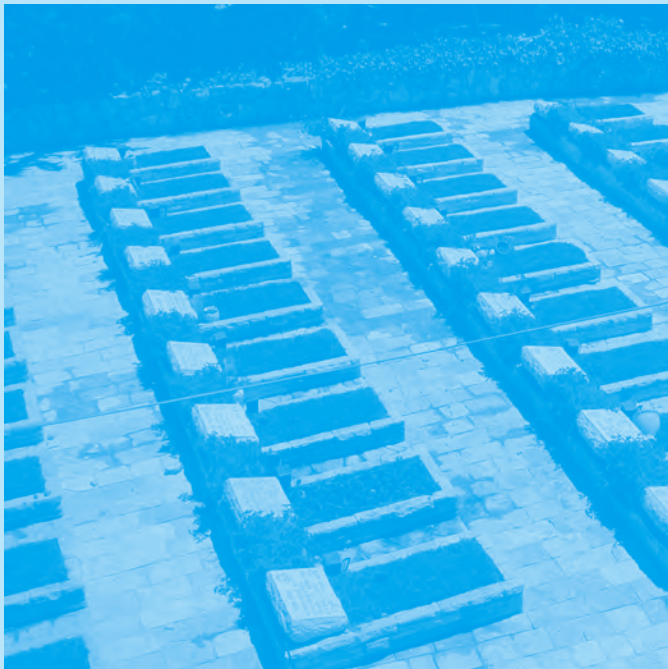
mode of argumentation utilised in the formation of the "new" history of photography from the 1970s to the present.

Current Research

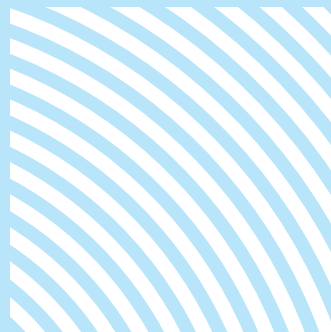
Gil's most recent complete research work is concerned with the production and dissemination of family photographs in Israel during the period ranging from the early days of the State in the late 1940s to the present. It is commonly held that family photographs are platforms on which subjects fantasise their social position and role, and inscribe themselves within history. However, Gil argues that under the disputable political and social circumstances that have prevailed in Israel since its establishment (1948), the Israeli social domain offers a challenging instance for the testing of this exclusive perception of the family photograph. Drawing upon such research methodologies as critical theory, semiology, post-Marxism and phenomenology, Gil's analysis of family photographs and the social

discourses in which they are placed brings to the fore the capacity of family photographs to constitute objects which concurrently mediate and challenge the relationship between the contested categories of the family unit, Jewish-Israeli identity, the Jewish State, and the histories and mythologies associated with the latter.

In 2011, Gil published a book chapter entitled 'Playing Soldiers: Posing Militarism in the Domestic Sphere'. Gil argues in this publication that portraits showing members of the family in military uniform operate as declarations of social assimilation and approval. "However," he adds "while I demonstrate how such family photographs assist in perpetuating positive attitudes towards the Israeli army, I show how the very nature of the genre of portraiture, and particularly of posing for a photographic portrait, conflicts with the State's ideology, thereby acting to destabilize its propagandistic image of ideal Israeli soldierly identity."



Another body of Gil's research was included in the prestige peer-reviewed journal *Photography and Culture* in 2010. Entitled 'Posthumous Interruptions: The Political Life of Family Photographs in Israeli Military Cemeteries', this article focuses on the increasingly common custom of mounting family photographs on tombstones of Israeli fallen soldiers — a phenomenon unique in Israel to military cemeteries in particular, although it is forbidden both by Jewish law as well as by the Israeli Law of Military Cemeteries. "Situating such 'secular' snapshots in the public domain," Gil explains, "suggests a transition and transgression of their alleged



message, redirecting the latter towards society and the state. Mounting such imagery on these tombstones subverts their most fundamental patterns of commemoration in formal-spatial, symbolic and ideological terms. Further, they challenge the idealised heroic image of Israeli soldiery put forward by the State's political authorities." Politically motivated violent attacks and resultant deaths have become another reason for placing family photographs in the broader Israeli public sphere. In 2009, the peer-reviewed journal *Object* published Gil's research article 'Covering Horror: Family Photographs in Israeli Reportage on Terrorism', in which he attended to this relatively new Israeli cultural phenomenon. "The context here," he clarifies, "is the Palestine-Israel conflict. I focused my research on the presentation of family photographs in news coverage of such attacks. In 1997, with the increase of suicide bombing attacks carried out against Israeli civilians since 1994, the dailies' editors virtually agreed to

rule out photographs showing dissected corpses, body parts and the like. The journalistic need, though, to show fatalities, qualified family photographs as the only acceptable means to represent them." Yet, this generates a semiological problem: in this context, family photographs portray the victims as individual 'ordinary people' caught up in political events beyond their control. "This subject is complex but, without intending to make comparisons between Israeli and Palestinian suffering, the implications of the representational reincarnation of the 'helpless' Jew in Israeli popular visual culture bridges the perceptual abyss between the two nations' 'ordinary people' by means of visual identification. It allows for the development of a political consciousness that bypasses the Israeli State's official ideology and policies."

Considering the full scope of Gil's research to date, he positions himself in dialogue with the so-called "new" historians and theorists of photography who shift the focus of photographic

discourses away from traditional art history towards visual vernacular cultures. Yet Gil would dissociate himself from the radical political critique characterising such "new" modes of argumentation. "This is", he says, "because I have only found evidence suggesting that although every act has political implications, any act should not necessarily be understood as politically motivated."

