

Images on Social Media, Their Producers and Viewers

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Abstract:

The book *Image Testimonies: Witnessing in Times of Social Media* offers a comprehensive corpus of observations on different localities and experiences which tackle the continuous discussion over the role of testimony and witnessing through social media in times of civil upheaval. Topics included are different concepts of witnessing in relation to image testimonies, body and performativity, the role of the spectator, temporalities of witnessing and others. This is explored in a fascinating collection of essays, conversations, and artistic sketches.

Bilder in sozialen Medien, ihre Macher_innen und Betrachter_innen

German Abstract:

Das Buch *Image Testimonies: Witnessing in Times of Social Media* bietet einen umfassenden Korpus von Beobachtungen zu verschiedenen Orten und Erfahrungen, die sich mit der anhaltenden Diskussion über die Rolle von Zeugnis und Zeugenschaft durch Social Media in Zeiten des zivilen Umbruchs auseinandersetzen. Themen sind u.a. unterschiedliche Konzepte von Zeugenschaft in Bezug auf Bildzeugnisse, Körper und Performativität, die Rolle des Zuschauers oder Zeitlichkeiten der Zeugenschaft. Dies wird in einer faszinierenden Sammlung von Essays, Gesprächen und künstlerischen Skizzen erforscht.

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In a time of increasing political conflicts and civil resistance, image testimonies and civil witnessing shared and distributed widely via Social Media are becoming more and more prominent. Even though social media was important for sharing individual experiences and information beforehand as well, the book *Image Testimonies: Witnessing in Times of Social Media* argues that the “circulation of images has significantly intensified the affective dynamics of image testimonies that are nowadays circulated — in part in ‘real-time’ — on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and the like. Moreover, digitization has helped to develop other forms of witnessing” (p. 1). The book thus touches on aspects like affective witnessing while examining contemporary case studies from different localities. It initially developed from a conference organized by the research center project “Affective Dynamics of Images in the Era of Social Media” at the Free University Berlin. The symposium included topics such as the different concepts of witnessing, with a focus on: image testimonies, the relation between mediated forms of witnessing and the body, the role of the spectator and more. Filmic and artistic contributions were also integrated as a part of the two-day event which took place outside of the university, in the cultural space of Savvy Contemporary Berlin. Observing images together and having conversations with producers of images added to the atmosphere of a workshop, or a ‘work in process’ and gave space to an interdisciplinary exchange. I was also there during those days, where I experienced an open atmosphere that made one feel very welcomed and engaged even only as an external listener.

The book, published a year and a half after the symposium, compiles essays from the different speakers and includes conversations and artistic works as well. It is divided into four sub-sections titled: “Epistemologies of Testimonies,” “Affective Witnessing,” “Social Media Practices” and “Witnessing Destruction.” The main tendencies of the volume are focused, on the one hand, on subjective experiences, or the ‘affective’ aspect of the research cluster. One

example is the interview “Fearless Filming:’ Video Footage from Syria since 2011” which portrays the experience of activists during the Syrian war. On the other hand, it brings examples from external or more objective observations that focus on the medial and technological aspects of testimonies and include drone images and non-human testimonies. Such is, for instance, Michael Richardson’s chapter “Drone’s-Eye View: Affective Witnessing and Technicians of Perception.”

In the third section, which focuses on social media practices, Simon Faulkner’s contribution “Photographic Witnessing, the Occupation and Palestinian Politics” is especially inspiring. The author does not compromise on showing how images illustrate the Israeli occupation, as has been written on this topic extensively already before. Faulkner rather takes the readers to a new level of micro observation while arguing for photography as a medium used to witness the occupation in the context of Facebook cover photos. He points out the blurred distinction between *professional journalism* and *politically or emotionally* involved activism that this practice might suggest. While analyzing the Facebook cover images Faulkner thematizes new modes of self-presumption: “the heroic Palestinian fighters” vs. “the social media activist” (p. 101). He further claims that those profile images are used both as a means of emphasizing Palestinian political culture but at the same time also for ‘non-practical’ causes, such as emotional or subjective self-portraits of the users. This is especially interesting to reconsider along the lines of the similar phenomenon of users updating their profile picture with a distinct icon in support of a social or political campaign. This act is oftentimes accused of ‘slacktivism.’ Namely, an act that is characterized as involving very little effort or commitment to a goal. Here, however, as Faulkner claims, a certain solidarity and an emotional affect is achieved.

The contribution of Verena Straub, “Living Martyrs,” focuses on the unique temporality which takes place in suicide video messages. For Straub, this temporality should be seen as reversed: In real-time, the witness provides predictive evidence for an event in the future. Straub suggests coining such types of videos as forms of “anticipatory image testimony” (page 10, 143). In her analysis of the semiotic and visual fields that are used in such testimonies, Straub also engages with the specific wording the Martyrs use, the speech act of commitment that they suggest, the location of the camera, the background of the frame and more. Therefore, the notion of anticipation, potentially, points to an expanded understanding of time, space,

evidence, and especially to the question of credibility and how truth is being perceived when such strategies of testimony are employed.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is that readers have an opportunity to read scholars' contributions whose opinions and perspectives on the topic are of great significance, but whose names are generally unknown in the media studies of the 'global hub'. The collection brings about a variety of technologies and practices that emerged in recent years and have not been worked on yet in academic fields. By doing so, it paves the way for more exploration of those aspects. Moreover, the collection's opting for interdisciplinary and diverse contributions makes this book especially intriguing and relevant for different fields of research such as Theatre and Performance Studies, Communication, Media Studies, and Philosophy. The emphasis on nuanced rather than the general definition is what makes the contributions work very well together and shape, nevertheless, the conception of an image testimony.