

IMAGE TESTIMONIES – WITNESSING IN TIMES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Recent political conflicts signal an increased proliferation of image testimonies shared widely via Social Media. Although witnessing with and through images is not a phenomenon of the internet era, image practices and politics in Social Media have significantly intensified the affective dynamics of image testimonies that are circulated in “real time” on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and the like. New technology has enabled individuals to record, upload, and share images directly via mobile devices, which makes nearly everyone a potential witness. We seem to live in an “era of *becoming a witness*” (Givoni 2011) in which images play central roles. The causes and motivations for producing image testimonies are wide-ranging. Political activists use their mobile phone camera as a means of resistance, people directly affected by an event as well as bystanders might produce images spontaneously without clear intentions, out of voyeurism, to document their own involvement, or in order to raise awareness, etc. In the context of Web 2.0 communication image testimonies encompass a whole range of genres, such as images of street protests, police violence, or human rights violations and extend to selfie protests and even video testimonies of suicide bombers.

What exactly is being testified by these various forms of witnessing can only be studied from multiple perspectives and necessitates complicating the “truth-claims” that are made. Whereas testimonies such as images of human rights violations demand credibility as legal proofs, other forms of witnessing justify their “veracity” with a decidedly subjective perspective of being personally affected. Further questions concern the role of the body of the witness in relation to image witnessing and its connection to the concept of martyrdom, the role of aesthetics in claims of authenticity, or the status of image testimonies in their relation between *giving* and *creating* evidence.

Besides their claim to “show the truth” or their aim to confront with political problems, the special efficacy of these viral image genres of testimony seems to lie in their ability to affect, to move, or to mobilize. Witnessing, especially when unfolding in Social Media, needs to be defined as a collective and relational practice with the effect of forming communities, and provoking further image testimonies. Thus, the producers of images, the images, and the recipients find themselves in a dynamic relationship of affecting and being affected.

Against this backdrop the symposium seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate on the topic of testimony and witnessing. Whereas testimony and witnessing have been largely theorized within the framework of epistemological, philosophical, ethical, and media-theoretical perspectives we want to focus on the specific role of images and the context of Social Media. Which different concepts of witnessing are at stake in image testimonies? What is the role of the spectator? How can we think of the relation between mediated forms of witnessing and the body? A guiding theme of the symposium is these images’ affective dynamics in order to shape a new approach on testimony theory.

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