When Matter Comes to Matter

BOOK REVIEW: Susan Schuppli,
*Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence*

Lisa Deml

In his 1969 agitprop film *Inextinguishable Fire*, Harun Farocki begins to read a statement given before the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm by Thai Binh Danh describing the incendiary effects of napalm bombing on his body and home. With an unflinching demeanour devoid of affect, Farocki recounts the physical experience of the attack alongside the unbearable heat and inflamed skin that caused burns on the face and both arms and legs of the young Vietnamese villager. After a short pause, he looks up and directly into the camera to address the viewer:

> How can we show you napalm in action?
> And how can we show you the injuries caused by napalm?
> If we show you pictures of napalm burns, you’ll close your eyes.
> First you’ll close your eyes to the pictures.
> Then you’ll close your eyes to the memory.
> Then you’ll close your eyes to the facts.
> Then you’ll close your eyes to the entire context. […]
> We can give you only a hint of an idea of how napalm works.¹

Farocki then takes a smouldering cigarette and stubs it out on his forearm, burning his flesh at 400°C. A visceral sensate experience which momentarily captures the comparative intensity of napalm, which, as a voiceover factually states, scorches human flesh at 3000°C. While Farocki’s cigarette burn is not an accurate approximation for the searing fire of napalm, it does provide a way to understand an event whose magnitude and severity might otherwise elude us – because the physical pain and psychological trauma inflicted by napalm are inconceivable; because the communities and regions subjected to its force seem far removed geographically, temporally, culturally and emotionally; and because the scale of its violence alienates, horrifies, or perhaps …

shames us as spectators at a safe distance. *Inextinguishable Fire* confronts us with the relentless quandary of how violence can be mediated without reproducing it – of how the unrepresentable can be presented, how the unimaginable can be imaged, how the unintelligible can be made legible.

Today, we are seeing a surge of images, still and moving, uploaded and streaming, that clearly depict violations of human rights or civil and environmental catastrophes, but whose informative and affective potential to overturn such wrongdoings, let alone legally convict, has failed. The blame for this, so Hito Steyerl maintains, lies with our assumption of documentary proof, ‘the notion that the images do our work for us, that because they were evidence, they were also triggers for actions that would put an end to the slaughter they showed’. The realisation that neither evidence nor public discourse are self-sufficient to bring about transformative politics is hardly new – but the question persists as to how we might have to redress our methodological approach to and reconfigure our understanding of material documents and documentary materials to effect their evidentiary claims. As evidence for events migrates and assumes ever more materially dispersed and datafied formations, in *Material Witness*, artist and researcher Susan Schuppli suggests that critical investigative practices ‘must take into account alternate modes of witnessing that operate across scales and entities – including the technical and more-than-human’ (p 309). Schuppli invokes material agency to activate the sensorial domain of testimony and to reveal ‘the degree to which a rearrangement of matter exposes the contingency of witnessing’ (p 4). In doing so, she opens up a new field of investigation, a different stratum of knowledge, out of which ‘a new

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3 Thomas Keenan has published widely and persistently on this subject, including ‘Publicity and Indifference (Sarajevo on Television),’ *PMLA*, Vol 117, No 1, 2002, pp 104–116
material witness might be said to emerge from within the depths of magnetic particles or pixels’ (p 194, emphasis in the original).

Under the term material witness, Schuppli proposes a new operative concept to explore the evidential role of matter – both in terms of evidence of a particular event, and the event of evidence. Matter is understood here as a question of properties – the capacity of materials to register events resulting in an accrual of information – and not an issue of property out of which surplus value might be extracted. Apprehending materials as dynamic and expressive witnesses rather than inert and mute bystanders implies challenging the limits of our own experience and understanding. Schuppli thus examines how ‘subjective modes of perception and our choice of interpretative frameworks play a decisive role in determining what kinds of materials can become evidential’ (p 308). Whether the consequence of deliberate action, the by-product of an activity, or even the result of an accidental encounter, material witnesses are characterised by the manner in which they manage the regimes of intelligibility that enable us to contest evidentiary systems and their corresponding truth claims. As such, material witnesses act as double agents, ‘harboring direct evidence of events as well as providing circumstantial evidence of the interlocutory methods and epistemic frameworks whereby such matter comes to be consequential’ (p 3).

As both condition and concept, the material witness affords broad investigative applicability and cultural repurposing, as Schuppli demonstrates in Material Witness. Organised in the format of a trial, the book moves through a series of cases in which a specific event and a certain form of technical media have combined to create an evidential artefact. Schuppli interrogates the expressive capacity of such evidential artefacts and tracks their movements through the discursive networks in which they gain juridical or institutional traction. In doing so, she delineates a conjunctive space ‘between entities and events that enables even minor forms of material evidence to gather and testify on behalf of much larger political processes’ (pp 27–28). Examples include the telephonic transmission of the iconic photograph of a South Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalm attack; a videotape documenting the massacre at Izbica, Kosovo, used as war crimes evidence against Slobodan Milošević; and radioactively contaminated coastal waters discovered in Canada five years after the accident at Fukushima Daiichi. Schuppli’s investigative approach draws on speculative thinking, critical fabulation and forensic analysis, and is informed by philosophical thought, aesthetic considerations, legal arguments and scientific understandings as much as by her practice as a contemporary artist, documentary filmmaker and researcher with Forensic Architecture.

In Schuppli’s argument, the opening scene of Farocki’s Inextinguishable Fire expounds the significance that the distinction between representation and the real holds out, the friction of ‘what can be known in relationship to that which is seen or sensed’ (p 4). While conflict and war have produced compelling documents of destruction and despair, the proliferation of such crisis-bound images seems to have undermined their rhetorical capacity and affective flow. The now iconic photograph of Alan Kurdi’s lifeless body lying face down on a sandy beach in Turkey illustrates this fact, for even though it raised public concern, and record donations to charitable
organisations, this emphatic response was shortlived. The discourse of representation, as it has developed since Susan Sontag, entails an ethical struggle looming in the abyss between images that ‘bruise the public eye’ with the visceral force of their depictions, and ‘the violence that is done to images through processes of mediation, which reduce embodied subjects to transactional objects’ (p 136). Such ‘cruel images’, to borrow Oraib Toukan’s phrase, ‘represent a degraded subject, become materially degraded with time and travel, and degrade a subject further by virtue of being seen’. Toukan’s critique of ‘cruel images’ draws on Hito Steyerl’s concept of ‘poor images’, which shifts investigative attention from the cognitive content of images to the networks and structures of their existence. ‘[D]istributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution’, poor images reveal ‘the conditions of their marginalization, the constellation of social forces leading to their online circulation as poor images’. This expansive indexicality confers special significance to, as Schuppli terms them, impoverished images and defective media.

The expressive capacity of such impoverished images and defective media is exemplified in Schuppli’s book by an anonymous cellphone video that surfaced in the final months of the civil war between the minority Tamil population and Sinhalese government forces in Sri Lanka in January 2009. The low-resolution footage shows ‘what appear to be Sri Lankan personnel engaged in acts of summary execution, sexual violence, and defilement of bodies presumed to be Tamil’ (p 221). In August of that year, the video was aired on Channel 4 News in the UK, igniting

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widespread public debate about its authenticity and disturbing content, as well as its potential status as evidence of war crimes that became the subject of two UN inquiries. Before airing the video on public television, Channel 4 commissioned experts, from medical pathologists to ammunition specialists and video forensics, to help establish the credibility of the events depicted, as they were well aware of the incriminatory nature of the media and the political stakes that would attend its release. With its meta-data interrogated and its pixels cross-examined, ‘the one-minute video stream transformed into a material witness that would indict the highest levels of the Sri Lankan State’ (p 219). However, arguing ‘that the visual evidence is not conclusive as to who the perpetrators in the execution video actually were, and what motivated their acts of apparent sexual violence’ (p 231), Sri Lankan officials continue to dispute the authenticity of the footage and evade any legal consequences.

The burden of evidential proof concerning allegations of serious crimes or violations of human rights often falls upon the testimonial claims of such impoverished images and defective media – considered ‘poor’ not only because of their aesthetic attributes and technical drawbacks, but also due ‘to their incapacitated juridical condition as convincing agents of truth’ (p 22). The media artefacts that emanate from contexts of prosecution, eviction, hazard or war often register technical inconsistencies, corrupt data and irregular file management that can raise legal doubts as to the veracity and integrity of their evidential assertions. However, ‘rather than diminishing their ability to stand convincingly before the tribunals of history as witnesses to a crime’, Schuppli argues, ‘the degraded quality of such evidential material should, in point of fact, augment their capacity for testimony’ (pp 191–192). Considered as material witnesses, they serve ‘both to register the radical incomprehensibility of what has taken place and to provide extraneous information about the conditions of documentation itself’ (pp 191–192). Thus, forcing wholeness and clarity from such distressed materials can ‘violate events anew, whereas accepting their flawed conditions as symptomatic of the dangerous conditions under which they were secured can aid in expanding their testimonial reach’ (p 38).
Impoverished images and defective media ‘cannot perform their truth claims entirely within the register of representation, and require further elaboration and forensic analysis’ (p 192). Schuppli considers the productive labour of forensics herein as an act of imagination that is oriented toward the expressive singularity of matter, ‘including the creative retrieval and mobilization of affects’ (p 4). She suggests that tending to the informative and expressive quality of matter can open up alternate modes of witnessing without them necessarily being contracted to the paradigms of recognition and representation. Nevertheless, the mere fact that materials register and archive eventful processes as traces within their substratum does not convert such entities into material witnesses capable of testifying before the tribunals of history. Within the methodological framework of forensic analysis, matter becomes a material witness only ‘when the complex histories entangled within objects are unfolded, transformed into legible formats, and offered up for public consideration and debate’ (p 18). As its etymological root suggests, the dimension of the public forum is integral to (counter-)forensic practices and reliant upon an expert mediator or translator speaking ‘on behalf of materials’ (p 11). Jacques Derrida, too, maintained that ‘the trace cannot bear witness’ without a mediating force who can ask it the right or relevant questions, ‘that we need the work of the historian himself, of his living testimony as it were, in order to constitute a testimony from these traces’. The significance accorded to the affective dimensions of testimony as fundamentally human is a central provocation that Schuppli’s concept of the material witness challenges. She asserts that ‘technical objects can account for and express their historical conditions; that artifacts can induce the affective register of testimony; and that materials, in short, bear witness’ (pp 13–14).

This line of argument follows the often-diagnosed transition from the ‘era of the witness’ to the ‘forensic turn’ and its reconfiguration of aesthetic formulas articulated against a cultural background that, so Eyal Weizman says, is increasingly ‘tuned to the testimony of victims’. Paradoxically, whereas impoverished images and defective media are discredited for their technical inconsistencies and expressive incoherencies, human witness statements are attributed greater authenticity and validity through the ‘silence, distortion, confusion, or outright error that trauma… inscribed’. This trend is paralleled by the proliferation of humanitarian art forms that seek to personify histories of violence and charge them with affect – but, in effect, generate accounts of vulnerability and suffering as raw material for pedagogy and instruments to facilitate ethical responses. By concentrating on the victim and aiming to elicit identification and compassion, such presentations tend ‘to mask the political context’. Consequently, the solicitations of empathy and sympathy offered by humanitarian art forms confirm, rather than challenge, the uneven

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11 Ibid, p 21
distribution of suffering that sustains liberal societies.\(^{14}\) In contrast, forensic sensibility seeks to bypass human testimony and its pitfalls of pity and compassion fatigue by achieving a state of heightened material sensitivity, enhanced by a sensitivity to the materiality of politics.

While Schuppli emphasises the imaginary scope and speculative nature of the material witness, she cannot entirely sidestep a potentially positivist position toward critical debate and knowledge production. The firm belief in the expressive and evidentiary role of matter seems to resist the sensitive attunement and affective alignment to potential histories that Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, for example, proposes.\(^{15}\) Schuppli anticipates this point of critique and asserts that, ‘if the material witness is indeed to function as an operative concept, then it is not a question of merely exposing the discursive practices and forensic procedures that produce the conditions of intelligibility whereby only legal matter attains its legitimating force, and thus capacity to testify’ (p 19). Rather, she contends, ‘[t]he point is to push at the limits of these institutional forums and disciplinary formations in order to question their authority and radicalize what matters as evidence, and who and what counts as a material witness’ (p 19). Unfortunately, her expansion of the concept of evidence is not matched by an expansion of the concept of law, and the legal structure, to which the material witness is directed, is not elaborated to the same extent as her investigative practice.

Even if Schuppli had further expounded the juridical frameworks of her argument, the question remains whether the mere extension of the legal apparatus would be productive at all – or whether such rigorous research would be better aimed at deconstructing the systems that assign legitimacy and authority and shifting the paradigms of evidence-making and truth-telling. This incongruity is particularly notable since the case studies and range of materials assembled in the book Material Witness expose the law as a neoliberal mechanism inadequate to respond to the demands addressed to it and aligned to uphold prevailing power structures. Not so much as a concept but as a condition, Schuppli’s material witness can function as a prism through which evidentiary systems and their corresponding truth claims can be interrogated and “witnessing” can itself be witnessed (p 4). This implies that admission or refusal of certain ‘matters’ into the forums of public discourse also converts them into material witnesses, ‘whether by entering into preexisting forums or, alternatively, by resisting and/or creating new ones’ (p 19). Yet, the subversive potential to create new forums for discourse and accountability remains latent, and, in this respect, Schuppli’s argument falls short of imaginative force and projective precision. Doubts persist as to whether the master’s tools could ever dismantle the master’s house\(^{16}\) – or build a new one, for that matter.

Admittedly, this perhaps idealist critique might overlook the socio-political and material realities and media climates of post-truths and alternative facts in which this debate is situated. Schuppli’s conception of the material witness is not an abstract or imaginary project but attempts to understand the prevalent legal, aesthetic and epistemic systems that determine ‘who or what is able to bestow meaning onto things, and about whose stories will be heeded or dismissed’ (p 4). Rather than engaging in either/or arguments and consolidating the binary opposition between a positivist


\(^{15}\) See Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism, Verso, London, 2019

\(^{16}\) See Audre Lorde, The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House, Penguin Modern, London, 2018
notion of evidence and a desire for ‘uncertainty, double vision, and looking askew’, we might turn to map out nuanced navigations between material evidence and ambiguity, between documenting and caring for the integrity of marginalised materials and precarious subjects. In this effort, the *material witness* opens up an investigative field that relays and mediates violations of human rights or civil and environmental catastrophes beyond the registers of pity, empathy, compassion, shock, guilt or shame. In a similar way that Farocki condenses the extent of violence and suffering in the Vietnam war and our complicity in its perpetration in the cigarette burn on his forearm, the operative concept of the *material witness* functions as an interscalar testimony to address complex historical conditions and political contexts. As such, it enables alternate modes of witnessing that shift the responsibility and burden of testimony from victims of violence to material agents.

Apprehending material as witness expands the scope of accountability for crimes that no human can bear witness to — because this could inflict further violence and prosecution of individuals and communities; because their temporal and geographical scale far exceeds national and legal frameworks; or because their ramifications reach far beyond the present into the future.

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Lisa Deml is a PhD candidate at Birmingham City University investigating visual articulations of citizenship and affective ways of seeing in documentary media. Prior to her doctoral research, she worked for public institutions and non-profit organisations internationally, including Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin; Haus der Kunst, Munich; and Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.

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