"Materials can, in fact, bear witness" (14)—this is the driving principle in Susan Schuppli’s essay Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence. Schuppli is a documentary filmmaker and contemporary artist who, as an alumni of the research collective Forensic Architecture, has dedicated most of her recent work to the collection and study of material evidence. Her interest in the construction of history and memory is tangible and in this essay she focuses her attention on the possibility of drawing historical evidence not from human testimonies—oral or written—but from traces left on matter (ordinary objects, memorabilia, ecosystems...). The influence of heavily regulated institutional contexts plays an important role in the construction of evidence and memory, especially when it comes to violent events; in this essay Schuppli, who has worked in depth on the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia court records, decides to explore material traces outside of set procedures encountered in war tribunals and other historical accounts. At the center of this argument is the concept of witnessing, and Schuppli methodically refers to the works of key theoreticians like Jacques Derrida and Hannah Arendt to establish a strong base to her analysis. As she is particularly interested in variations of perspectives, Schuppli describes the process of sharing an experience as fundamental in the difference between bearing witness and the practice of witnessing. Borrowing from Derrida, she further argues in favor of historians’ contributions to building collective memory by way of mediating experiences and testimonies. Her primary focus, however, is on the politics of visuality and the author explores what she calls the “regimes of
perceptibility” that make the economy of the material witness possible and transform it into public truths and inevitably into political messages (6).

Schuppli borrows the concept of material witness as well as much of her argumentative vocabulary from the legal field to strengthen her analysis of the relationship between matter and the act of witnessing. She argues that the cultural and legal should not be mutually exclusive, for the simple reason that the processes of questioning a legal testimony can inform the artistic and cultural spheres and conversely (11); her multidisciplinary approach and reading of various fields of human knowledge and culture are one of this essay’s most notable strengths. She does not, however, approach the subject at hand from a purely legal standpoint and offers her own definition of material witnesses: they are “nonhuman entities and machinic ecologies that archive their complex interactions with the world, producing ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reassembled back into a history” (3). Schuppli additionally notes that these material witnesses can be as difficult to approach as human testimonies, lacking any self-evident character, and therefore require precise investigations and literacy before they can be allowed to reconstruct a history.

Though she deplores her lack of training in academic theory, when presenting the functions and rhetoric of her material witnesses, Schuppli relies heavily on the philosophies and epistemologies of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Bertrand Russell, to name a few. The introduction is a meticulous overview of the historical and judicial vocabulary that grounds her arguments. She borrows and expands on ordinary concepts such as “evidence” very convincingly and makes a point of going over the epistemological roots of the key terms “event,” “matter,” “media,” to situate her essay at the junction of several fields, among which history and media studies. The rest of the essay is a collection of case studies of material evidence to violent events from a range of different contexts and media on a global scale; in 13 chapters named after trial proceedings (“Opening Statements”, “Hearsay”, “Expert Witness”...), Schuppli focuses on cases which brought to light new truths or challenges to a status quo through the intentional or unintentional recording of historic evidence, and explores the degrees of acceptance or rejection of these new rhetorical elements in political interpretations of events.

A few of these case studies are particularly thought-provoking. For instance, Schuppli offers new ways of looking at traces left by radioactive isotopes in disaster events, considering the specific case of Chernobyl. She starts by grounding her analysis from a historical perspective, reminding her readers of the historian’s role in reconstructing events through hints and inferences. She reconstructs the unearthing of the Chernobyl disaster, as well as the attempts to conceal it, by recounting the Swedish detection of a new radioactive element that had travelled far over a short period of time, and then comments on the absence of coverage of the event in international newspapers in the following weeks by retracing press coverage in archival microfiche. But human-based testimonies are not Schuppli’s sole focus, and she soon moves on to her main interest: describing the inevitably evidential nature of traces of radioactivity on the videotapes of film director Vladimir Shevchenko. According to Schuppli, this type of physical evidence outweighs any newspaper coverage. The most convincing factor mentioned by Schuppli is its inherent ability to testify to the reality of the nuclear disaster by offering palpable truth of the contamination of a film tape made during the filming of the
documentary Chernobyl: Chronicles of Difficult Weeks (1987) and the subsequent death of
the film director who was unaware of his own exposure. This case study analyzed in the
first two chapters is an efficient way for Schuppli to highlight her interest in returning
some legitimacy to analog evidence over digital traces. In fact, the analogization of
digital evidence is central to her work and a recurring theme of Material Witness.

Furthering her argument in favor of reexploring analog materials, Schuppli opens a
series of armed conflicts such as Vietnam and Kosovo up to scrutiny, which allows for a
variety of arguments mostly focused on the nature of war images. In the case of Kim
Phuc, dubbed the Napalm Girl in 1972 after she was badly burned following a napalm
attack in Trang Bang, South Vietnam, Schuppli again makes several pertinent
observations about the materiality of the girl’s burns. These Schuppli judges to be
undeniable proof of the attack, without calling into question the legitimacy of Nick Ut’s
photographs of the event. In some of these chapters, Schuppli’s arguments occasionally
become less convincing. For instance, her reflections on the processes of image
transmission before the advent of digital technology are more philosophically-minded
and seem disconnected from the main argumentative frame. Her comparison of the
violence of the process that deconstructed and reconstructed visual materials with the
violence experienced by Kim Phuc remains somewhat elusive.

More persuasive is her approach to the testifying force of photographs and videos of
atrocities from the war in Kosovo; the very low quality of these analog images, Schuppli
explains, attests not only to the damage caused by the war to the landscape and the
population, but also to the bad conditions for making these visual testimonies. Because
of technological scarcity, documentarians had to reuse tapes over and over, therefore
altering the quality of the latest record; additionally, difficulty in filming conditions
due to movement and terrain often impeded the use of such tapes in legal war tribunals
because of their altered state and diminished evidentiary value. Schuppli’s reading of
these materials is noteworthy and her approach truly multidisciplinary. She notably
argues that instead of losing their legitimacy, these altered records carry within them
additional visual and material signs to the events they represent and therefore
constitute more powerful historical testimonies. In these analyses, Schuppli follows a
similar methodology as early theoreticians of visual culture from the 1990s (W. J. T.
Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff) by proposing a comprehensive analysis of socio-political
contexts.

In Material Witness, Schuppli builds arguments from the existence, the quality, but also
from the absence of material traces. One final case to mention here is that of the Oval
Office tapes from the Nixon Administration. In the particular example of Tape 342,
whose history she goes over in detail, Schuppli notes that an erased segment of
conversation became the material catalyst leading to the Watergate Scandal because it
aroused suspicion about what the president had wanted to hide from the public.
Schuppli takes the opportunity offered by this case study to comment on the
possibilities of combining material traces (in this case the clicking sounds pointing to
the erasure of a segment) with the absence of a material trace (the erased segment and
inferences made by the public) to recreate a significant historical event and to reflect
on the complexities of opinion and memory formation.

In all these case studies, Schuppli explains that she attempts to confront the limitations
of our own knowledge and reopen academic explorations to the variety of external
factors which, she argues, have been overlooked in explorations of collective memory
even though they can alter matter and, by extension, the recorded signs of events. What Schuppli finds so relevant about material witnesses is that they offer alternative modes of witnessing while retaining critical value in investigations of historical events and experiences. In this regard, while the arguments made by Schuppli contribute significantly to the field of forensic architecture, the methodology she adopts echoes recent works by academics like W. J. T. Mitchell, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, whose multidisciplinary approach to media studies and visual culture have been historically comprehensive and not lacking in consideration of material traces. The international dimension of the cases explored by Schuppli is one of the book’s strengths, as is the range of subjects approached, from ecological disasters to political corruption, to modern armed conflicts. The methodology used is very appropriate for the intended arguments, but the author’s heavy reliance on philosophical theory and sometimes overly complicated phrasing can be daunting and limit this book to a narrow readership.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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