Between visible and undetectable violence

Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability*, Zone Books, New York, 2017. 368pp., £32.95 hb., 978 1 93540 886 4

Unequal access to visibility, along with the erasure of traces, determine the partial undetectability of various events of violence, crimes and human rights violations. Such thresholds of detectability consist, according to Eyal Weizman's definition, of 'things that hover between being identifiable and not'. At the same time, this is intimately entangled with the crisis of human witnessing as the primary mean for bringing evidence of violations of the law. What Weizman terms 'forensic architecture' is, as such, more than merely an academic discipline or a collection of literature: it designates a research method and, at the same time, a mode of intervention into the real, which builds upon, as he has argued in a previous work, an 'understanding of politics as matter in movement'.

Forensic architecture is grounded in forensics, historically defined here as the art of the forum, so as to provide a way of addressing violations and crimes within public and legal space, as well as in architecture conceived not as inert matter but as playing the threefold role of an object of investigation, research method and mode of presentation. It is in this way that forensic architecture identifies human rights violations by deploying as material evidence those traces that are left on buildings, walls and in the environment at large. Material traces are combined with human testimonies and pattern analyses, bringing into legal fora the proof of states' responsibilities for crimes committed that have otherwise tended to remain under the threshold of detectability.

In what follows, I want to focus on two mutually related theoretical and political points that Weizman's book raises. One is the quest for 'truth' and 'evidence', in academic research and in the social sciences especially, in the face of an erasure of traces and of a lack of human testimony. This is connected, in turn, to the parallel, suggested by Weizman himself, between academic research and investigative journalism; a parallel which runs the risk of drawing research into a kind of neo-positivism. The other conceptual thread concerns the question of critique. How are we to rethink critique in the light of the staging of evidence of legal violations, given the challenges of deploying a forensic gaze which consists of a strategic appropriation of the state's own technology and monitoring tools, and so an attempt to turn 'the state's own means against the violence it commits'?

Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability traces the genealogy of forensic architecture, highlighting the ways in which, historically, forensic practice served the state's interest. At stake in the book is, therefore, the degree to which the forensic approach can be turned upside down by a 'civil practice' and a research engagement that aims at reconstructing the scene of human rights violations and providing evidence of state violence. The unsettling of the state's economy of visibility is at the core not only of the book but of the various fields in which this approach has been mobilized by the research team based at Goldsmiths' Centre for Forensic Architecture led by Weizman. Such a methodological move is not predicated upon a naive conception of strategic appropriation as a smooth process nor upon a supposed neutrality of technology. Rather, the idea of a strategic twisting or re-purposing of technologies, such as radars and satellites, has a twofold intent. The *political* one consists in proving the state's violations of international law, especially in contexts where administrative violence constitutes the rule of government, such as in the occupied territories of Palestine, as well as in the Mediterranean Sea. The *epistemological* goal concerns a more general orientation across the social sciences: it involves bringing evidence and producing truth about violations of international law in cases where the reality of the state's arbitrary detentions, killing practices and allow-to-die measures remain invisible, mainly for lack of material proofs and traces. How, *Forensic Architecture* asks, can we prove evidence of a past event in the light of the absence of any direct testimonies?

As Weizman succinctly puts it, the answer to this question lies in the proposal that '[o]bjects are made to speak', arguing that researchers should rely on the assumption that matter and buildings themselves 're-gister' and maintain a trace of events. In this way, a lack of human witness is in part superseded by what Weizman calls an 'engaged objectivity' that builds on objects and buildings as the only elements which retain and can tell us something about past events. Yet *can* objects speak? Actually, as the book makes clear, this is not quite the right question. The correct formulation would rather be: 'can objects speak *by themselves*?' The events recorded by objects and build-ings remain totally mute without the intervention and the work of the researcher. In other words, the exercise of engaged objectivity is, from the very begin-ning, enshrined within what Carlo Ginzburg describes as 'the question of narrative through which truth is produced'. Unlike a traditional forensic approach, forensic architecture, in this sense, does not argue for a radical shift from human witnessing toward an object-centered investigation; rather, it stresses the need to combine the two. Nonetheless, the produc-tion of evidence is something that can be carved out from material traces left behind, through a complex work of reconstruction and assemblage of a series of punctual events (pattern analysis). The extraction and construction of evidence requires, for Weizman, a laborious activity of investigation. However, the evid-ence as such, regardless of how difficult it is to find it, is not put into question. Indeed, evidence and truth are de facto presented as synonymous in *Forensic Ar-chitecture*. Evidence seems to be the only form and mode of truth.

It is worth comparing here Weizman's 'counter-forensic' method with Ginzburg's own analysis of the production of a historical truth based on *traces.* In the book *Il Filo e le Tracce* [*Threads and Traces*] Ginzburg explores the crucial question for historical investig-ation of how to understand the boundaries between truth and fiction. While criticising skeptic and relativ-ist perspectives, positing the centrality of a 'principle of reality' that traces a neat boundary between events and facts which took place and others which did not, Ginzburg also contends, against neo-positivist ap-

proaches, that the production of truth cannot be de-tached from the obstacles encountered in the research process, nor from the way in which it is narrated. (The failure of relativism, as Ginzburg argues in an earlier book, 'is that it does not distinguish between factual judgment and judgment of value'.) As such, historical research requires, according to Ginzburg, moving bey-ond the opposition between truth and invention, and instead integrating 'reality and possibility.' Unlike the judge, the historian considers that any margin of uncertainty is positive insofar as 'it triggers a deeper inquiry'. This means, first, that opacity is assumed as the constitutive element upon which truth is pro-duced and that is constantly put to work, rather than fully erased in the name of a pure 'transparency', in the narration of past events. Second, what Ginzburg makes clear is that 'the necessity for the truth to be produced and staged', as Weizman puts it, must al-ways consider the power relations determining access to archives and the possibility of twisting to new uses the state's own tool. This is in fact one of the main lessons of Michel Foucault's famous account of the politics of truth. In the place of the pairing of 'truth-knowledge', according to Foucault, we should bring to the fore the pairing of 'power relations-production of truth'. In this sense, rather than demonstrating a capacity to arrive at an 'objective' grasp of past events, forensic architecture actually enacts what Fouacult terms 'a certain modality of producing the truth'.

It is this conflictual dimension in truth produc-tion, then, that should not be lost. As Weizman re-minds us in his genealogy of forensic practice, the latter derives from the Latin *forensis* which refers to 'a mode of public address and a means of articulating political claims using evidence grounded in the built world'. As such, he rightly insists that both the field of investigation and the legal forum are shaped by 'con-flict and violence'. Yet, while the persistence of the power asymmetries and conflicts are registered (and indeed stressed) in the forensic method as Weizman describes it, they seem partly to vanish at the level of forensic architecture's outcomes and goals, where the quest for transparency and objectivity remains the apparent priority.

It is striking in this regard that a certain parallel between academic research and investigative journalism underpins the whole book, with a focus on practices of engaged objectivity and on the politics of traces. Building on the scarcity of direct testimonies, forensic architecture aims, in Weizman's words, at 'making claims, using matter and media, code and calculation, narrative and performative'. This raises the question, however, of how forensic architecture relates to the tasks assigned, today, to the social sciences and academic research more generally. Given the centrality accorded to the production of evidence as one of the main goals underpinning contemporary academia, of what would a *critical* knowledge production consist? If we take into account those 'spaces of governmentality' that are marked today by a certain overexposure or overt visibility of states' violence, as in the case of migrants' deaths at the borders of Europe, then the quest for 'evidence' risks undermining the potential to produce disruptive effects at the level of knowledge production as such. Similarly, in political contexts where opacity and confusion, more than invisibility and total erasure, are peculiar modes of government in themselves, a research investigation oriented towards proving evidence is obviously less effective in neutralising the power's effects of subjection and control.

Weizman's book equips us with the relevant tools to interrogate the contemporary tasks of academic research and production of critical knowledge. More precisely, Weizman's book helps to raise the issue of how to rethink critique. What does it mean to engage in a *critical* research practice where, in many political contexts, states themselves deliberately act against the law? What is the force of critique, beyond bringing forth proofs of human rights violations, when many such proofs are already in front of our eyes? The practice of investigative journalism which is echoed in forensic architecture could be productively put into communication here with a somewhat different conception of journalism - that is, with a 'philosophical journalism' of the kind suggested by Foucault's conceptualisation of philosophy as itself a practice of 'radical journalism'. The latter consists of advancing the question of the present and of our critical engagement with it as the primary philosophical task: a 'permanent critique of our historical being'. Instead of *proving* or bringing evidence, it engages in a *transformative attitude* that builds on a detailed diagnosis of power relations so as to grasp 'the points where change is possible and desirable', and to determine 'a specific form to give to such a change'.

The field of legal actions reinforces the dominant forms of political intervention envisaged by Weizman's counter-forensic approach. As he puts it, 'forensic architects deal with the application of

architectural facts to legal problems'. However, the book maintains a clear distance from any ingenuous reliance on international courts and legal forums. The section of the book entitled 'Counterforensics in Palestine' illustrates eloquently the conundrums and contradictions of addressing international tribunals for settling disputes. This becomes particularly glaring in Palestine, where the limits of a legal approach depend primarily on the non-recognition of the Palestinian people as subjects of rights, and, more broadly, on what Judith Butler calls the ungreviability of their lives. Indeed, the 'forensic dilemma' that Weizman addresses concerns the constitutive ambiguity of a political tactic that builds on the international legal framework to turn the law against states. Weizman's caution is directed here not only towards international courts – that 'are not in themselves transformative platforms' – but also with regard to the autonomy of a legal perspective, which would be lacking in itself if it is not combined with 'political and social processes'. Moreover, legal battles against states' violations should be aware of 'lawfare'. The strategic use of law forms a contested battleground, in which there are no fixed positions, for or against either human rights or international law. Instead, both the vocabulary of rights and the political stakes of legal battles can be stretched and twisted in different directions by heterogeneous actors who sometimes oppose each other. Human rights are political weapons that have been used both by civil movements against Israel's occupation of Palestine and by Israeli lawyers who have turned the perspective of the Palestinians upside down, considering the latter as the colonisers of Israeli lands. The contested legal ground, its possible tactic local use and the slippery terrain that this constitutes, are today at stake also in the field of migration governmentality, for instance, where state authority routinely acts to break both national and international law. The possibility of a strategic engagement with international law has nonetheless been demonstrated by the work of the Forensic Oceanography research group, led by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani, who managed to reconstruct, building on material traces and human testimonies, the legal responsibility of state actors and international organisations in letting migrants die in the Mediterranean. By turning the state's technological eyes, such as radars and satellites, against the state, and by getting access to images that proved the delays and failures in rescuing migrants at sea, they demanded states account for migrant deaths.

The apparent oxymoron 'humanitarian violence' designates new practices of killing and making people die that are predicated upon a humanitarian logic, declaredly centred around protecting and saving human lives. Drones are the paradigmatic 'humanitarian technologies', officially conceived of as killing by precise targeting, and therefore avoiding civilian casualties. However, as Weizman points out, drones have in fact introduced new modes of violence and, consequently, the necessity to invent a new counterforensic practice able to discover crimes which often remain under the threshold of detectability – in particular, by studying the peculiar material traces left on buildings. Humanitarian violence can be similarly enacted also in contexts where there is neither a declared war nor declared enemies. This is the case when 'human security', for example, is mobilised as a strategic term for blocking people in the name of their own safety, and supposedly protecting vulnerable populations. On such occasions, where there is neither a clear target nor a specific technology deployed, the possibility of pointing to a specific crime or infringement of the law is evidently much harder.

Forensic Architecture is a book that strategically plays on the edges of the law, pointing to the limits and the dilemmas of legal battles as well as of attempts to prove evidence of states' violations of the law by turning the states' technologies and means against themselves. How to reposition the forensic gaze when the evidence of administrative violence is under our eyes and once the thresholds of detectability are rendered visible? The enactment of a counter-forensic approach beyond the binary opposition between invisibility and evidence is certainly part of the laborious work of rethinking critique required today, both beyond and outside the academy. Weizman's book provides us with a significant contribution to this work.

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