Seeing witness: Visuality and the ethics of testimony

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discussion of the photograph creates a chapter that appears to have been written originally for a different volume. As such, it provides an anti-climactic end to this edited book.

Lastly, while the major purpose of the book is an engagement with contemporary and historical photography theory, many of the chapters’ limited use of photographs is problematic. In fact, the book generally suffers from a lack of images; only five of the nine chapters include visual images, and many rely on descriptions of photographs instead of printing the images themselves. In chapter 6, for example, Shawn Michelle Smith critiques Barthes’ original discussion of several images, but fails to include these as references, leaving the reader at a loss and unable to fully engage with the author’s discussion. While we might assume that the reason for these omissions may have been copyright issues or an inability to obtain permission to reprint the images, there is no mention of this, leaving the reader guessing and imagining what the photographs look like.

Though the book suffers from these few shortcomings, it still offers an insightful and important examination of photography theory of the past and present and advances new and critical examinations of various photographic genres. This book would be of interest to those engaging in visual methodologies or to anyone interested in the ways in which we view and understand photographs.

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Seeing witness: Visuality and the ethics of testimony by Jane Blocker
Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, 192 pages
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Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony tackles the problem of witnessing in contemporary culture, focusing on the authority and privilege that bearing witness grants to certain individuals to control what society understands as truth. Jane Blocker terms this phenomenon the ‘colonisation of reality’ (xvii), and illustrates it through examples of different works of art. The book has an introduction, seven chapters organised into three thematic sections and a conclusion. In my discussion of each thematic section I evaluate the key ways in which Blocker uses artistic paradigms to show how the contemporary witness wields power over our perceptions of reality.

In the introduction Blocker presents her primary intention in writing this book: to develop a framework in which the reader is able to assess: (1) who is acting as witness in a given situation; (2) the technologies and mechanisms through which acts and events are witnessed; and (3) the power or authority that places the witness in that position and which is reinforced through the act of witnessing (xxii). Although inspired in part by the claims of the George W. Bush administration regarding the existence of nuclear weapons in Iraq and the testimony of former Secretary of State Colin Powell in support of those claims, Blocker’s intent is not to analyse political discourse or to determine the truth behind any specific testimony. The book’s purpose seems to be tackling the larger religious discourse associated with the act of witnessing which lends it the power to create certain realities, analysed within the framework of art as a mechanism through which we can see the act of witnessing.

The first thematic section of the book analyses the recording of history as a privileged form of witnessing that allows the historian to shape our understanding of the past. In this section Blocker addresses three problems of history as witness: (1) the subjectivity of the historian; (2) the ethics of writing history; and (3) how to separate the religious and historical meanings of history. In chapter 2 she uses the performance art of James Luna to show that historical accounts of Native Americans tend to rewrite the realities of the past to coincide with popular commercial images geared toward Whites. Blocker uses several examples of Luna’s art to illustrate how historical accounts can create unauthentic images where dominant cultural groups have colonised our memories of what came before us. She successfully demonstrates that the historian as witness to the past is in the unique and powerful position of fabricating memories.

The second thematic section of the book focuses on how contemporary technologies affect how we witness the world around us. In chapter 4 Blocker uses the photojournalistic work of Gilles Peress and Alfredo Jaar on the Rwandan genocide to demonstrate the ways in which photographs can distance a witness from the subject event. Using the West’s failure to offer aid during the genocide as an example, she argues that photographic depictions of tragedy can create a type of voyeurism that manifests in a sense of neutrality and disinterest. In chapter 5 Blocker artfully demonstrates through the example of Japanese group Dumb Type’s memorandum that advancements in digital technology have altered the ways in which we witness by
allowing us to access virtually anything, but severely altering the ways in which we remember and bear witness to what we have experienced. Her analysis provides an excellent example of how the digital age has changed the ways in which we see and relate to others, thereby altering the act of witnessing in contemporary western culture.

The third thematic section of the book focuses on how we conceive of ourselves as witnesses and the ways in which we observe others’ acts of witnessing. In chapter 6 Blocker analyses how the genome bears witness to certain biological facts such as race, which can then be displaced by identity politics. She also evaluates the ways in which biotechnology can challenge contemporary ideas about human visibility. In the final chapter of the book she uses blushing, the physical manifestation of certain emotional responses in the face, as an example of how we see the act of another’s witnessing.

In the book’s conclusion Blocker reintroduces religion to her discussion of how to deconstruct witness accounts of reality. She also posits that witnessing in contemporary culture is deeply affected by the entertainment industry and advancements in digital and biotechnology, and that art is a productive tool for questioning the reality that the authoritative witness creates.

Seeing Witness is an excellent resource for students and scholars of visual studies and the social sciences who wish to explore the social construction of truth and the relationship between contemporary art and our understanding of reality. Although Blocker provides an engaging and thought-provoking analysis of witnessing in contemporary western culture, I think that her goal of using art as a framework in which to understand how the discourse of religion and piety grants the witness the power to create certain realities becomes slightly convoluted in the second and third thematic sections of the book. Specifically, I found myself struggling to understand how religious discourse as an authority-granting instrument was implicated in her discussions of digital technology and biotechnology. I think I would have benefited from a more salient analysis in each chapter of how certain power structures mobilise particular acts of witnessing and how in turn witness narratives reinforce those power structures. Although fascinating arguments were developed in each thematic section, I believe they could have been more strongly linked to each other and to Blocker’s stated intentions in the introduction. Relating the analyses of witnessing directly back to the idea of the witness as a privileged subject would allow the reader to better understand the relationship between witnessing, socially constructed reality and contemporary art. Overall, however, Blocker skilfully illustrates the ubiquity of the invisible witness in modern society and the myriad ways in which witnessing affects our understandings of truth in contemporary culture.

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Cultural Icons analyses the multiple meanings of widely recognised visual icons in a collection of essays unified by a common theoretical and methodological framework. According to Tomaselli and Scott, visual signs become cultural icons when they exemplify a culture, represent historical continuity, lodge themselves in transformative media, accrue layers of consonant and conflicting connotations, and use seductive power to attract public attention and recognition (21). The authors examine the cultural, social, moral and political meanings of cultural icons and how these connotations emerge from changing historical and geographic conditions.

In an effort to establish a methodology appropriate to the cultural study of visual signs, the authors adopt a semiotic cultural studies approach that balances semiology (the study of sign systems) and hermeneutics (the study of interpretation and meaning production). Specifically, the authors draw heavily on Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic methodology, emphasising the triadic relationship between icon, index and symbol. This enables the authors to analyse signs, connotations, mythology, habits and collective identity. The essays examine cultural icons that represent numerous national cultures and span a wide range of forms, including public figures, fictional characters portrayed in literature and visual media, monumental architecture, painting, religious artefacts and national symbols. By using such diverse icons, the book demonstrates the applicability of a visual semiotic approach to analysing cultural icons in general.

The cultural icons evaluated represent national cultures on a domestic and a world stage. As the icons gain resonance outside their national discursive origins and...