
Review essay. Empire on trial: the forensic appearance of truth †

“Truth not only exists; it appears.”

Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*

The publication of *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* marks a formidable intellectual and political intervention in the analysis of the ways in which traces of destruction and violence are built into the geographies of our imperial present. The book is a collective effort of staggering scope, depth, and ambition that has one clear goal: to level a forensic gaze on state and corporate crimes. This is a gaze finely attuned to the negativity of matter, sensitive to the many ways in which rubble, buildings, scars, chemicals, bones, sounds, algorithms, videos, or photographs can become the evidence of crimes committed by the powerful forces that continuously ravage the world.

This extraordinary volume is the collective work of Forensic Architecture, an interdisciplinary team based at the Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths College, University of London, which since 2011 has been engaged in collaborative work with partner organizations and activists from all over the world. The intellectual leader of this international effort is the noted architect and activist Eyal Weizman, the author of the widely acclaimed books *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (2007) and *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (2012). *Forensis* draws from Weizman's previous work on many levels, particularly in its emphasis on the materiality of violence and domination and the political power of an architectural, spatial, and forensic lens. In *Hollow Land* Weizman demonstrated how the Israeli state controls Palestinians through the manipulation of the materiality and architectural forms of the terrain (walls, checkpoints, roads, tunnels) and the control of vertical fields of vision (through hilltops, drones, and satellites). *The Least of All Possible Evils*, in turn, examined the logic of ‘the lesser evil’ used by imperial actors to justify their allegedly humanitarian violence; it also dissects the evidence that reveals the terrorist nature of this violence, such as the rubble and corpses created by Israel in Gaza. *Forensis* develops this sensibility in much further depth, and captures an outstanding diversity of traces of destruction from the world over; in doing so, it not only reveals the evidence of state and capitalist crimes but also proposes a novel political and conceptual sensibility. This is a disposition that resonates with what I have called—on the basis of my own ethnographic study of rubble—an object-oriented negativity: that is, a gaze oriented toward objects marked by traces of rupture and dislocation (Gordillo, 2014).

Forensic investigations have recently gained enormous appeal in popular culture through TV shows like *CSI*. But this is a forensic gaze that seeks to solve only crimes recognized as such by the state, thereby celebrating state power and its apparatuses of surveillance. Weizman and his colleagues, in contrast, propose to *reverse* the forensic gaze and turn it into “a counter-hegemonic practice able to invert the relation between individuals and states, to challenge and resist state and corporate violence and the tyranny of their truth” (page 11). *Forensis* reveals that this tyranny is built on “well-constructed lies” (page 29) and draws on a ‘forensic architecture’ to expose them, understanding architecture not in a narrow disciplinary sense but as a ‘mode of interpretation’ sensitive, as Weizman puts it, to “the ever-changing relations between people and things, mediated by spaces and structures across multiple scales” (page 13).

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This volume brings together an innovative collective of talented scholars, artists, theorists, activists, and partner organizations analyzing evidence of imperial crimes on all continents and in all sorts of terrains, including the ocean, the sky, and the underground. The book's chapters take the reader on a gripping journey to a global constellation of traces of dislocation, from Guatemala to Pakistan, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Mexico, from the Arctic to sub-Saharan Africa (among many other places). The richness of the material is clear in the volume's 760 pages, forty-eight contributors (including individuals and organizations), and hundreds of photographs, maps, charts, and computer-generated models. Given the book's scope and the consistently high quality of all chapters—a notable feat for a volume of this size—no review can do justice to the sophistication and detail of the ideas articulated by its contributors. My aim, in this regard, is to reflect on some of the most important theoretical, methodological, and political threads running through *Forensis*, in order to evaluate the promises and challenges of a forensic gaze devoted to exposing the fraught materiality of the global order.

What sets this forensic lens apart from state-run forensics is not only its more radical negativity but also its goal to recover the original meaning of the Latin word *forensis*, 'pertaining to the forum'. As Weizman argues in the introduction, *Forensis* interrogates the relationship between the *fields* where the evidence is collected—actual geographies that he views as elastic and contested force fields—and the *forum* as the space "where the results of an investigation are presented and contested" (page 9). This forum is a dynamic triangulation between the contested object (the trace of violence and destruction), the forensic interpreter, and "the assembly of a public gathering". More crucially, this triangulation is not limited to legal courts. *Forensis* does, indeed, cover evidence that Forensic Architecture has presented in court, for instance in the genocide trial of the Guatemalan general Ríos-Montt (Case: Guatemala) and in the petition submitted to Israel's High Court to ban the use of white phosphorous in urban environments by the Israel military (Case: White Phosphorous). Yet the book's contributors are keenly aware that political struggles are not decided in legal battles, where the global elites have the upper hand. *Forensis* is primarily a political, rather than legalistic, intervention that seeks to empower global struggles against those crimes that states and corporations refuse to name as such, from targeted assassinations by drones to the environmental dislocation created by the fossil-fuel industries and climate change.

The majority of the crimes documented in *Forensis* respond, directly or indirectly, to the capitalist system of globalized sovereignty that dominates the world as a whole, and that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) have called 'Empire'. This is why I interpret these crimes as imperial in nature—even if the contributors to *Forensis* do not necessarily use this concept. Hardt and Negri have been criticized for presenting Empire as a disembodied, totalizing abstraction and for giving the misleading impression that the globe has been politically homogenized by transnational flows. But the existence of a multicentered and planetary Empire does not contradict that this globalized formation creates localized and extremely diverse patterns of destruction, often shaped by the affective fields of particular nation-states. Most of the crimes covered in *Forensis*—from the killing of civilians in Yemen to the impact of climate change—involve states and corporations defending the imperial hierarchies of the global order. And these actors are permanently surveilling the totality of the planet with multiple technologies in search of signs of resistance and antisystemic disruption. And this is where *Forensis*'s brilliance lies: in reversing the direction of the inquisitive gaze to expose the overwhelming evidence of the destructive nature of this globalized system of sovereignty. In doing so, the book puts Empire on trial in the political forum of world public opinion.

The multiplicity of objects and technologies analyzed in *Forensis* is simply outstanding. The contributors examine evidence made up of extremely diverse materialities: human remains (chapters by Keenan, Sheikh, Pereira); buildings, rubble, and ruins (chapters by Weiss, Littell, Türekten, Cuellar, and Dische-Becker and Ashkar; interview with Jan van Pelt; Case: Living Death Camps); images congealed in photos and videos (Case: Bil'in; Case: White Phosphorous; chapters by Kazan, Schuppli, Heller, Amir); the sound of tape-recorded interrogations, the sound waves used to map the underground, or the soundscapes created by drones (chapters by Hamdan, Bishop; chapter "Uneasy Listening" by Schuppli); toxics embedded in human bodies (chapters by Türekten, Pereira, Caygill, Ahmed); toxics spread in the ocean and rivers (chapters by Tavares, Ahmed); satellite imagery of destroyed villages, polluted rivers, degraded forests, or NATO ships (chapters by Weizman and Weizman, Pereira; Case: Guatemala; Case: Left-to-die Boat); local perceptions about the impact of climate change (chapter "Can the Sun Lie?" by Schuppli; chapter by Modelling Kivalina); the hyperfast algorithms generated by financial institutions and responsible for market crashes (chapter by Nestler), or the distress calls made by African migrants on a boat drifting in the Mediterranean and left to die by NATO forces (chapter by Heller and Pezzani).

Many of these forensic traces are so faint, elusive, and microscopic that their detection by Forensic Architecture and their partner organizations required both a nuanced human gaze and sophisticated bundles of technologies and sciences: DNA analysis, ground-penetrating radars, sound-wave sensors, satellite imagery, microbiology, mineralogy, toxicology, computer modeling, or the georeferencing of cell-phone calls captured by satellites—which were all used following the forensic principle that "every contact leaves a trace" (Locard, cited in chapter by Lahoud, page 508). But since many traces of physical contact can be faint, detecting them requires what Weizman calls a sensibility for "weak sensors" that are "suggestive rather than conclusive" (page 29). These weak sensors—for instance the blurred video image of an Israeli soldier shooting a tear gas canister with the intention to hit and kill an unarmed Palestinian protestor—can nonetheless become politically powerful 'modes of capture'. This is the capture of an element of the truth congealed in the trace: the evidence that a crime has been committed.

An important concept articulated by Weizman in his introduction to Part II (Secrets) is that of 'threshold of detectability'. Many traces of violence are hard to detect not only because of their small size but also because the technologies that can capture and recognize their existence may keep those traces from reaching this threshold. Detectability therefore involves *two* sets of materialities, that of the evidence itself and also "the physicality of the media by which it was captured" (page 365). A fascinating example involves the traces of US drone strikes in tribal areas of Pakistan where the work of journalists is extremely difficult (a topic also covered in the chapters by Woods and Burns). Activists seeking to document drone strikes, therefore, can often count only on satellite imagery of targeted areas. The hellfire missiles launched from drones into buildings, however, are designed to explode not on contact with the roof but immediately after piercing through it, so that the blast kills anyone inside but leaves the roof largely intact, except for the hole left by the missile passing through. This hole is usually smaller than 50 cm². This size is forensically and politically significant because it is *below* the threshold of detectability of publicly available satellite images. 50 cm² is the size of a single pixel in the resolution to which these images, following a security rationale, are degraded by the United States in order to camouflage its military actions. Therefore, a hole in the roof is turned into an invisible presence, for it "might appear as nothing more than a slight color variation, a single darker pixel perhaps, in the pixel composition of the image" (Introduction, Part II: Matter against Memory, by Weizman, pages 371–372; see also Case: Drone Strikes).

Those practicing a critical forensics of drone strikes, in short, are able to see less than the perpetrators of a crime and seek to pierce through these intentionally created patterns of opacity. One of the principles of state-run forensics, as Weizman argues, is that a crime's investigator should be able "to see more, using better optics or a better resolution, than the perpetrators of that crime. . . . In our case, however, it is the state agencies that do the killings and independent organizations the forensics" (page 372). This induced opacity opens up 'the space of denial' through which imperial forces can silence their crimes. And this is why the members of Forensic Architecture working on drone strikes also draw on witness testimonies and other techniques and technologies of interpretation. By drawing from witnesses, locally produced footage, and computer-generated models of targeted buildings, activists and forensic architects were often able to amass the evidence that revealed a truth: that unarmed civilians were killed in a strike by US drones.

This takes us to a conceptual core of this volume: its unapologetic commitment to a materialist idea of truth, clear in the subtitle: *The Architecture of Public Truth*. This is not the positivist truth represented on *CSI*, where know-it-all forensic geeks always and transparently solve the crime. *Forensis* reveals that traces of violence and destruction are often disjointed, blurred, and microscopic. Their interpretation, therefore, is often inconclusive. As Weizman argues, "material forms . . . can only reflect truth in fragments and ruins, and suggest uncertain, discontinuous, and lacunar interpretations." Yet *Forensis*, at the same time, rejects the antiuniversalism of those who downplay truth as something "relative, multiple, or non-existent". Instead, Weizman proposes to view truth "as a common project under continuous construction" (page 29). Yet I believe that *Forensis*'s approach to truth is, in fact, more radical than the idea that truth is constructed. After all, if truth is constructed, it can be argued that different actors construct it differently, and this may open the door back to the relativism that the book rightly disputes.

The problem of truth is certainly complex and politically charged. But Alain Badiou may help us read *Forensis* from a new angle, for he is the most important continental philosopher committed to a revitalized and political approach to truth: that is, a truth that subverts the lies of states and corporations. In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou (2009) proposes to conceive of truth from a distinctly immanent ontology, one based not on the 'being' of truth but on its *appearing*. Badiou argues that there are four truthful realms of human action: love, art, science, and politics. These truths do not simply 'exist' but *appear* as part of truth-procedures marked by *events*. The truth of the love shared by a couple, for instance, appears for Badiou in the event of their amorous encounter, the same way that the political truth that human beings are born equal appears in the event of revolutions. In our case, the truth revealed by a forensic gaze is not simply 'there' but *appears* through a careful examination of the *evidence*. In one of the most important chapters in *Forensis*, Thomas Keenan gets close to articulating this idea when he argues that evidence is "a matter of *appearance*, of sight, of what *manifests itself in the realm of visibility*" (page 48, my emphasis). This appearance of evidence that is *also* the appearance of truth is the result of the combination of what Badiou views as two fundamental truth procedures: science as a mathematical bundle of technologies of sensory and geometrical capture *and* politics as rupture with what is. In *Forensis* science and politics come together through what can be seen (to draw again on Badiou) as the contributors' *fidelity* to the victims of the violence and destruction that created the trace as evidence.

The truth that appears through the often-gripping pages of *Forensis* is that of a vast state-corporate machinery unleashing social and environmental destruction in the name of profits, the state, and civilization: the truth released by the mass graves and degraded forests created by state terrorism in the Guatemalan highlands in the early 1980s; the truth of the poisoned rivers, oceans, and land ravaged by mining and oil operations in Chile, the United States,

or West Papua; the truth of the bodies of rescue workers sickened and killed by the toxic debris of the World Trade Center in New York; the truth that the 2009 climate change conference in Copenhagen was a ‘crime scene’ where wealthy nations—in agreeing to an ‘acceptable’ global average of a two-degree increase in temperatures—sentenced sub-Saharan Africa to a future of devastating droughts. These multiple truths, indeed, often emerge in fragments and in blurred patterns of evidence; but this evidence reveals that damage, death, and destruction *have* occurred and *will* continue occurring—unless they are stopped by collective actions.

Unlike the transcendental Truth advocated by states or religions, the truths documented in *Forensis* emerge from disruptive patterns of multiplicity that problematize the univocal ways in which some forensics or victims may interpret what those truths may mean in the first place. The chapter by Shela Sheikh, for instance, examines the attempts to identify the remains of the thousands of people massacred by the Bosnian Serb army in Srebrenica in 1995. As elsewhere in the world, relatives of the victims were very keen to identify the remains. But drawing on the work of the Grupa Spomenik collective, Sheikh examines how DNA technologies may contribute to reproducing the identity politics of the perpetrators (and of genocide) by labeling the victims ‘Muslims’, a label that many victims did not identify with (page 173). Sheikh shows that a critical forensics should avoid projecting a bounded identity onto the evidence and, instead, extract truth from its disjointed, opaque multiplicity. Human remains, in this regard, are the evidence of a crime but *also* “an excessive and stubborn remainder” that bears “the potential to resist identification, quantification, burial, and sacralization” (page 179). This elusiveness makes another truth appear: what Badiou (2009) calls ‘the pure multiplicity of being’, the unclassifiable multiplicity of human beings that, in the Balkans, was erased by an essentialist identity politics that turned it into *one* killable entity: ‘Muslims’.

This example takes us to another point that to me is theoretically and politically crucial, but that *Forensis* does not articulate explicitly: that the forensic appearance of political truth shatters the trace as fetish. In the introduction, paradoxically, Weizman seems to argue the opposite when (drawing from Arjun Appadurai) he writes that a critical forensics should embrace a ‘methodological fetishism’. In his words, “If fetishism is the attribution of an inherent power and a certain agency to inanimate objects, then we must embrace the term as we come to understand objects, buildings, cracks, and their representations as historical agents” (page 19). Weizman clarifies that he does not view the fetish as “a mystifying and obfuscating veil” but as the “entrypoint” to reconstruct larger forces (pages 18–19). Objects, indeed, should not be reduced to dead, passive matter devoid of affective power. However, treating them as fetishes with agency seems to contradict what *Forensis* does best: to undermine the fetishization of objects. Isn’t the revelation of the *processes* that create objects (be they commodities or traces) the basis of what Marx saw as the *critique* of fetishism? The fact that an incomplete trace can help us understand the actions that created it, in fact reveals that the generative ‘agency’ that the forensic gaze seeks to capture is that of those *forces* that coalesced in the trace.

Several case studies in *Forensis* confirm that the fetishization of rubble or places cuts them off from the processes that created them or the people who inhabit them—and in doing so serves the interest of the powerful. This is, incidentally, a major point I make in *Rubble* (Gordillo, 2014). In *Forensis* cases in point are the rubble of houses from the Palestinian village of Jaffa that Israeli architects turned into a Zionist memorial that erases the prior Palestinian presence (chapter by Cuellar) and the project in Belgrade to evict people who have been living in a former death camp for six decades in order to create a memorial (Case: Living Death Camp). The examples confirm that a critical forensic work is hostile to the transformation of matter charged with negativity into an object-fetish, for in the case

of Belgrade “a holocaust memorial cannot be built on a forcefully cleared ground without immediately compromising its purpose” (page 194).

In *The Least of All Possible Evils*, in fact, Weizman provided a compelling example of this antifetishistic disposition involving the rubble created by Israel in Gaza in late 2008 and early 2009. He shows that the forensic architects sent to Gaza by the UN to assess the destruction were often accused of ‘ruin fetishism’ because of their detailed, careful observation of the ruins created by Israeli violence. Yet Weizman’s analysis shows that the opposite was the case. The forensics defetishized the ruins because they examined their forms not for the forms’ sake, but to deduce the type of violence that created them. The ‘pancake form’ of some ruins, for instance, revealed to them that Israeli military engineers had destroyed the building by putting explosives in internal columns. Once the columns collapse, “the floor slabs come down on top of each other like a pancake” (Weizman, 2012, page 120). The ruins created by Israeli armored bulldozers, in contrast, looked like “pyramids or collapsed houses of cards”, with the edges destroyed and “the central pillars left standing” (page 119). The forensic team concluded that most of the ruins of Gaza had pyramidal shapes. This was the geometrical evidence that the rubble had been largely produced by Israeli bulldozers to “shape the battle space” and facilitate a safer movement of troops, which under international law is a war crime (page 124). Weizman cited Hito Steyerl, who wrote, inspired by Walter Benjamin, “The thing is never just an object, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces are petrified” (in Weizman, 2012, page 111).

Forensis is such an illuminating, persuasive, and important book precisely because of its revelation of the constellations of forces petrified in objects all over the world. Its materialism is not just that of objects as traces but also that of dynamic forces, pressures, and what Weizman calls ‘field-causalities’. And this materiality has an undercurrent of affective dimensions, which are apparent in Weizman’s evocative closing of his introduction. There, he writes that being sensitive to the materiality of politics entails a predisposition to be affected by the evidence, for “to detect is to transform, and to be transformed is to *feel pain*” (page 30, my emphasis). This relationship between forensic detection, transformation, and the experience of *feeling* pain hints at something politically vital, which *Forensis* could have perhaps explored in more detail: that revealing the evidence that a crime has been committed is never enough to induce change. Since ‘the forum’ is by definition a field of confrontation, the evidence may be solid but insufficient to make others feel pain and act collectively. In his chapter on evidence, Keenan articulates this problem when he challenges the commonsense idea that “the evidence speaks for itself”. The evidence, he argues, “never seems to speak for itself, at least not loudly enough”, for it “needs to be shown, demonstrated, stated, claimed, proved ... made evident to others” (page 42). Evidence, more importantly, is “what is used to persuade”. It is not a matter of fact, but “that *upon which* a decision can be rendered about what the facts in this case are”. This means that evidence “is not an answer, but a question: it asks for a decision, for a reading or an interpretation” (page 45).

The fact that the evidence needs to be “made evident to others” poses the most fundamental political question that permeates *Forensis*: how to use the evidence of imperial crimes to *persuade* those who are inclined to disregard it. After all, isn’t the evidence of human-generated climate change already indisputable? Isn’t the evidence of atrocities committed by Israel in Gaza in the summer of 2014 equally clear in the over 2000 corpses and huge piles of rubble produced by its indiscriminate violence? The powerful actors that rule and ravage the world will always disregard the evidence of their crimes; and when confronted with it, they will relentlessly seek to discredit it and destroy it. This is the disregard for suffering that Ann Stoler (2009) has aptly called an imperial disposition: an inability to be moved, or to be moved deeply enough, by the suffering of those deemed dangerous, unworthy,

and disposable. Yet politics happens also because the hegemonic naturalization of this disregard can be challenged and eroded. In many circumstances, the evidence is exposed in such a way that it does have the power to induce empathy and critical collective action. *Forensis* is a groundbreaking book precisely because it draws from and, crucially, moves *past* the examination of evidence of destruction from all over the planet to pursue a more challenging, urgent task: to persuade the forum that Empire is guilty of crimes against humanity and life on Earth.

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