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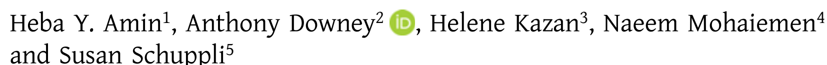
Memory, Mind & Media

DIALOGUE

Witness statements and the technologies of memory: *A conversation between Heba Y. Amin, Anthony Downey, Helene Kazan, Naeem Mohaiemen, and Susan Schuppli*



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Abstract

Bringing together artistic and scientific modes of inquiry, *Witness statements and the technologies of memory* examines the impact that digital technologies have on the substance of truth and historical facts. Hosted as part of Heba Y. Amin and Anthony Downey's online symposium, which was held in conjunction with Amin's exhibition *When I see the future, I close my eyes, Chapter I* (curated by Downey for the Mosaic Rooms in 2020), the panel discussed the legacies of colonial power and command, regimes of memory, and the ex post facto constitution of evidence from online archives. Drawing upon the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the panellists, which included Helene Kazan (Oxford Brookes University), Naeem Mohaiemen (Columbia University), and Susan Schuppli (Goldsmiths, University of London), Heba Y. Amin (Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Stuttgart), and Anthony Downey (Birmingham City University), *Witness statements and the technologies of memory* sought to more fully understand the impact of digital archives on historical records and evidence-gathering. Against the backdrop of indiscriminate expurgations of online material, we observe how the evidentiary potential of digital archives is compromised by the commercial imperatives of social media networks, censorship, and state surveillance. Among the many questions that arise here, the extent to which personal recollections are often presented as virtual artefacts of memory – a technology of recall or a mnemo-technics in its own right – remains central to the debate about the future of memory in our post-digital age.

Keywords: Online archives; Digital cultures; Evidentiary aesthetics; Surveillance; Social media; Conflict

As digitised, highly personal and subjective, records of historical events – including, but not limited to, the revolutionary events that occurred in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010 and 2011, respectively – produce notional networks of political engagement, both on- and off-line, the online archive is increasingly positioned as a means to narrate the history and, in some instances, perform the role of evidence. Against the backdrop of the indiscriminate expurgation of online material, the evidentiary potential of digital archives is often compromised by the commercial imperatives of social media networks, censorship, and state surveillance. Furthermore, what happens, as other authors ask elsewhere in this inaugural

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issue of *Memory, Mind & Media*, when people experience impairments in autobiographical memory – or, to return to the conversation, what happens when the mnemo-technical devices we associate with digital records exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, uncertainty and ambiguity (Murphy-Hollies and Bortolotti 2022; Schacter 2022). The veracity of the digital record, on the most obvious level, is often countered by the fact that the digital image – specifically the latter's reliability as a sustainable repository of memory and information – is increasingly susceptible to manipulation, re-purposing, censorship, obsolescence, and summary suppression. The digitised record of war, upheaval, and conflict more broadly, offers, therefore, an all too timely reminder of how we need to continually redefine the critical frameworks through which we understand the production, reception, and dissemination of images and data from zones of conflict.

Online archives are invariably formulated with a view to define, if not determine, present-day and future realities, be they political, social, or cultural. We need to distinguish, that is to observe, the heuristic effect of digital networks on the material realities of everyday life. In this respect, each speaker considered how their work intersects with digital evidence-gathering, online and material archival systems, and political agency, with individual insights into how historical memory is extruded through digital systems and networked forms of communication. How does the violence of trauma alter our contemporary understanding of witness statements? This conversation, as transcribed and edited below by Lisa Deml, further expands upon how historical consciousness is increasingly defined, if not undermined, by digital apparatuses and archival devices.[1]

Anthony Downey

Initially launched in 2020 by Amin and Downey at The Mosaic Rooms, London, "When I See the Future, I Close my Eyes, Chapter I" is an interdisciplinary collaborative platform that explores art- and exhibition-making as a methodology for new and ongoing research. Dedicated to broadening conversations around emerging forms of digital authoritarianism, the evolution of machine vision, and the technologies that support asymmetric warfare, the research platform reflects upon the colonial histories of technology and their role in maintaining models of extraction and Western regimes of visuality. The second iteration of Amin and Downey's project, "When I See the Future, I Close my Eyes, Chapter II", hosted at Gallery Zilberman in Berlin in May, 2022, continued a discussion into how art as a practice and research in the everyday realities of technological apparatuses critically reveals (neo)colonial processes of image production and their legacies on contemporary debates about the future of image production (Amin and Downey 2022). The element that remains constant throughout this research, and in the conversation below, is how interdisciplinary research and its relationship to practice can produce methodologies for deconstructing digital images from *within*, rather than merely reflecting *upon*, global infrastructures of reproduction and image economies.

For fuller details of the Mosaic Room exhibition, *When I see the future, I close my eyes, Chapter I*, see https://www.wheniseethefuture.com/exhibition/.
For an overview of the Zilberman Gallery project and attendant programme, see https://www.zilbermangallery.com/when-i-see-the-future-i-close-my-eyes-e311.html.
See also: https://wheniseethefuture.com (Figure 1).

[1] Amin and Downey, alongside the speakers, would like to specifically thank Lisa Deml for her expert editing of the original transcript and her invaluable support throughout the process of publication. The transcript of the original panel discussion was edited and revised here for clarity.

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Figure 1. Heba Y. Amin, *Project* Speak2Tweet, 2011 – ongoing. Installation at The Mosaic Rooms, London, 2020/2021. Photo: Andy Stagg.

Anthony Downey: To open the conversation, I want to turn to Helene Kazan first: could you describe how your work, and the projects *Under Multiple Suns* and *Frame of Accountability* in particular, relates to issues of jurisdiction, history, climate change, and, indeed, socio-political transformation in the context of Lebanon? I am particularly interested here in how your artistic and research practice, alongside that of both Naeem's and Susan's respective practices, address the matter of memory – be it public memory, social memory, or, indeed, personal memory – and its correlation with different registers of witnessing.

Helene Kazan: *Under Multiple Suns* (2020) serves as a short documentary prelude to the research-based, multimedia project *Frame of Accountability* (2021–ongoing). Through testimony and archival evidence, these projects produce an account of the little-known history of violence that takes place in Lebanon and Syria during World War II. In the documentary *Under Multiple Suns*, Soubhi Antonios describes the events while re-encountering their effects on his bombarded home, revealing the scars they still carry, both material and memory. It exposes the historic legacy of this condition of perpetuated risk inscribed in the materiality of the lived-built environment in Lebanon as (de)constructed existence "under multiple suns."

In the development and editing of this short documentary, I started to think about the relationship between Soubhi and his home, the human and non-human relationship, particularly in the context of the colonial violence that took place in 1941 and that continues through long histories and cycles of violent conflict. The work depicts the lived experience of this limited condition, as the audio and visual conversation between Soubhi and his home testifies to the trauma they share. *Under Multiple Suns* begins to frame this history in the larger processes by which international law has come to legitimise

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the violence of aerial warfare, and points to ways by which juridical legitimation has served to reinforce and exacerbate this violence globally. At the same time, when curating the exhibition *Points of Contact*, I became interested in the relationship between poetics, documentary, and different forms of knowledge production around giving testimony to the longue durée of colonial cycles of violence. This gave rise to the idea of poetic testimony and the legal and revolutionary potential of this notion (Figure 2).

These considerations led me to *Frame of Accountability*, a research-based, multidisciplinary multimedia project realised through film, installation, writing, and public engagement. It encompasses a series of short film episodes, each trying to unpack a complex historical condition through developing an understanding of the coloniality of law. These episodes are designed as installations to allow the audience an embodied experience of the work. In the episode *(Un)Touching Ground* (2021), I give an account of the events that took place during the Allied invasion into Vichy-French-controlled Lebanon and Syria in 1941. Under the legal construct of "military necessity," two foreign forces fight for control and access to natural resources in the territory. The episode foregrounds a contract of "risk" created by these events as a colonial technology imposed in the racialised consequence of decontextualising resource commodities through capitalist financial systems and violent modes of conflict. International laws of war and aerial bombardment thus become the violent process and action undertaken by strong states to secure sovereignty and control of power over bodies, land, and resources. The project as a whole attempt to recontextualise this condition of risk as a complex of human and non-human voices gives poetic testimony to its disproportionate effects in a broad attempt at opening a discussion on how to dismantle the continued capacity of international law as structural violence.

(Un)Touching Ground engages a decolonial archival practice to create what I term as legal fiction, activating feminist and artistic methods towards a wider engagement in international legal justice. This particular episode traces the human and non-human effects of these events to undo a temporal–spatial distance constructed in distinguishing this violence as environmental and conflict-based. It, literally, follows the roots of the violence and the three directions of the attacks through Lebanon. Rather than showing a colonial map, I bring the audience to touch the ground in an embodied experience of that space.

Figure 2. Helene Kazan, *Frame of Accountability: (Un)Touching Ground*, 2022. Digital film still. Courtesy of the artist.

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Anthony Downey: What comes across here then is the emphasis you place on material evidence in relation to testimony. *(Un)Touching Ground* is not just a film about a series of events in 1941 that you relay through archival documents connected to the annexation of land in Lebanon and you specifically focus on the material reality of that space. This project is, therefore, not just about you presenting historical evidence but about the evidentiary material that is brought forth into legislative institutions – there seems to be more to it, something latent rather than overt (Figure 3).

Helene Kazan: This comes forward in the episode *In Her View* (2022), which is situated around an archival image I discovered at the Arab Image Foundation in Lebanon. It reveals the sexual exploitation of a woman by occupying Australian soldiers fighting for the Allied forces in 1941. I wanted to find a way for her to give an account of what took place and really didn't want to just reproduce and continue the violence inherent in the photograph taken. Using feminist and decolonial methods, instead I move through the image tracing her presence and positioning her encounter. The sound plays an important part in this sensing as the material vibrations form a poetic testimony coming from the woman. I'm particularly aware in this work of the questions that come forward in this panel around concerns in the use of such digital technologies in relation to the political context being addressed. These questions and intentions still need to be unpacked as part of feminist and decolonial methodologies and in discussing such histories of violence.

Anthony Downey: What I find particularly interesting is the extent to which we are not just dealing with the "what" of images, the informational value of images; we are dealing with the "how" of images, the apparatus of image production, the materiality of the image itself as well as of its means of production. I want to turn to Susan Schuppli in this respect: I was very taken by one specific quote in your book, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence*, which outlines your understanding of the material *as* a witness; or materiality as a form of witnessing in and of itself. If I may, I will read from the book in question: "This book introduces a new operative concept – *material witness* – an extrapolation of the evidential role of matter as registering external events as well as exposing the practices and procedures that enable such matter to bear witness." (Schuppli 2020, 3). In this context, you open the book with an extraordinary account of a CCTV monitor taken from Long Kesh prison in Northern Ireland where Bobby Sands died while on a hunger strike in 1981. This monitor is instrumental in your argument, not for what it transmitted at the time, but for the material residue, a slow burn of the prison's architecture into the TV screen, and the form of material

Figure 3. Helene Kazan, *Frame of Accountability:* In Her View, 2022. Digital film still. Courtesy of the artist.

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witnessing it enacts. Could you speak more about this notion and more broadly about the book itself?

Susan Schuppli: The short statement that you read does encapsulate the stakes of the entire book project. What *Material Witness* aims to do through a number of case studies is to investigate a series of media artefacts in relation to human rights violations and reflect upon the forums that these materials, in turn, move through or, in many cases, highlight the lack of frameworks of accountability. Inasmuch as the book attempts to look at materials as carriers of information that can tell us something about the conditions of the documentation, it also analyses how materials can give us insight into certain political questions by following these artefacts through various contexts, legal, and otherwise, including the courts of public opinion, especially if they do not enter into the more formalised mechanisms that have been established to respond to allegations of wrongdoing, be it in the form of legal accountability or financial compensation. The proposition that I am trying to develop is to consider institutional forums, such as a trial, as evidential artefacts in and of themselves. Trials can tell us a great deal about what materials count as significant, worthy of the categorical designation "evidence" and what are deemed irrelevant. They can also provide insight into the role of expertise, and how frictions or contestations emerge vis-à-vis those who are not deemed legitimate observers or witnesses, and thus not granted authority to speak on behalf of events (Figure 4).

I open the book with a specific incident in Northern Ireland because it is a straightforward example of a material artefact that carries information about the spatial context of a violent event from the past. The material artefact in question is a CCTV monitor that carries a crystalline trace of violence in the form of a screen burn depicting the corridor of H-Block two in Long Kesh prison where Bobby Sands was on hunger strike. It's a static image without any kinetic movement that would indicate human presence, but it is a reminder that technologies of image capture were on the scene for years thus corroborating the fact that this place and the horrific events that took place within its architecture actually existed. The screen burn functions as a *material witness* according to my formulation. Having said that, I think we need to consider carefully when it is productive to use

Figure 4. CCTV monitor with screen burn and maps of H-Block in Long Kesh/Maze prison in the Irish Republican History Museum, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Courtesy of Susan Schuppli.

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terms like “witness,” “testimony,” “evidence,” or “memory,” and when we need to be very precise about how these terms are operating.

Anthony Downey: Effectively, this notion of material witnessing is, on the one hand, opposed to digital witnessing and, on the other hand, complementary to it. For instance, there are correspondences to Helene’s practice of working with and through digital materiality. The question is, what does that material-based evidence actually mean? I want to quote from Naeem Mohaiemen’s essay here on the film *Muktir Gaan* (1995), which he describes through the following terms: “Built by Tareque and Catherine Masud from repurposed found footage shot by Lear Levin, the film *Muktir Gaan* was received by most Bangladeshi audiences as an exact documentary” (Mohaiemen 2016). I was very taken by this term “built” because it proposes in and of itself an argument – that the images are not appropriated, they are neither factual nor documented, they are “built.” It is a structured evidentiary context that we are being invited to engage with throughout the film, not just to peruse or contemplate, but to actively investigate what that “built” environment means.

Naeem Mohaiemen: To set the context, that film is part of a large body of work about the Independence war of 1971 that split Pakistan into two separate countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh. *Muktir Gaan* was the first major film about the war after a long period (1975–1995) of governmental intervention and censorship to prevent cultural engagement with the war. The film, whose title translates as *Song of Freedom*, was completed in 1995 by Tareque and Catherine Masud. When the film premiered, the term “docu-fiction” was sometimes used. Yet, in general, Bangladeshi audiences ignored, bypassed, or forgot about that phrase and considered the film wholly a documentary. This misreading was interesting to me and became the subject of the essay you referenced which also charts my journey vis-à-vis this film and my own work around the liberation of Bangladesh. I shifted from quasi-religious reverence of the sacred narrative toward a sharply critical, sceptical turn.

In 1971, the American filmmaker Lear Levin travelled to what was then East Pakistan and started to film the war. Of course, he was not permitted to enter into the conflict zones and was primarily filmed in the refugee camps and borderlands under the control of the Indian army. So, the footage he captured on his 35 mm cameras is very carefully choreographed. Soon after he returned to the United States (USA), the war ended – much quicker than expected, within nine months, because of the intervention of the Indian army. Lear Levin lost his steam to finish the film and the footage sat in his Manhattan basement for two decades – until Tareque and Catherine Masud retrieved all the footage and stitched together this film, carefully editing scenes into a narrative that did not exist before (Figure 5).

An example of the way the Masuds “built” the film is a singing sequence with Bengali musicians, for which Tareque Masud rewrote the lyrics to express anti-American political sentiment and with which the scene was dubbed. For almost ten years after the film came out, I was not aware that this was a new song written by Masud to insert a critique of “Uncle Sam,” even though the war effort itself was not critical of US intervention. To select footage with George Bush in the United Nations and to rewrite the song lyrics, these decisions were made during production between 1991 and 1995, looking back at a war in 1971 and trying to reinterpret it.

My perception of the film, as well as that of many Bangladeshis, has changed over the years. For instance, one of the last scenes is spliced together footage of the Bengali musicians and of the Indian army arriving in Bangladesh. In 1995, this was not controversial, but in recent years, the relationship between the two countries is strained and therefore

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Figure 5. Mishuk Munier shooting recreation of 1971 night battle scene for *Muktir Gaan* (1995 dir: Tareque & Catherine Masud). ©Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

the role of India in Bangladesh's liberation movement has been contested. The fact that the Indian army enters Bangladesh to liberate the nation is uncomfortable for the nationalist narrative. In 1995, people were overjoyed to see evidence of the war – in colour – and the authenticity of the footage, the intervention of the directors in producing a "docu-fiction," were of little concern. But in 2021, people raise questions about these issues – *why is the finale foregrounding the Indian army?* – and I am interested in this shift in perception.

Anthony Downey: The film that you are discussing means and has meant very different things across 40 years. From 1971, when the footage was recorded, and 1995, when the film was released, to 2021, as we sit here today, the film has accrued memories and continues to do so as it proceeds through time. The film seems to invite us to think from within its structuring of reality in order to deconstruct our relationship to that reality. I would like to bring Heba in here because I know these issues are pertinent to her research.

Heba Y. Amin: This brings me to something you often allude to, Anthony, regarding the predictive function of archives: we have to readdress the past in order to configure the future (Downey 2015). Through various approaches, all the panellists seem to grapple with the ways in which we constantly have to revisit and reconstruct historical materiality so as to plot the future. The example of *Muktir Gaan* focuses on how we have to contextualise these narratives and remind ourselves that the general consensus of understanding is constantly changing, as are the material repositories we have access to. This becomes all the more evident when, today, certain narratives are strategically advanced by social media networks and digital technologies, while others are systematically and purposefully erased from future access. What does that mean, then, for reconstructing narratives? As an artist, I am constantly confronted with the problems that arise with pushing new histories,

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and the fear that this instils in people. I am curious to hear from you, through your own practices, how you deal with that. What does it mean to think about images and archives as testimonies and witnesses to history, and to engage with them in ways that are fluid and not necessarily merely evidentiary? (Figure 6)

Naeem Mohaiemen: I hesitate to say that artists have a unique perspective on this accumulation of meaning, but I think that we exhibit our work in spaces that are to a certain extent removed from a national stage where expressing a slight discomfort with the hallowed narrative can lead to censorship and material effects, ie losing your job, being blacklisted, or going to jail. The circulation within art networks is sometimes slower, to a smaller audience, and indirect in its language and impact, and this gives the possibility of more ambiguous conversations at a slower pace. Because Anthony and Heba both underscored the role of social media, I also want to speak to the speed of the feedback loop when engaging with historical materiality. For instance, in the film *Muktir Gaan*, there are a number of technical inaccuracies. Certainly, the Bengali singing group was not present when the Indian army arrived, this scene is within the realm of fiction. But to express that opinion took many years, it is a very slow, long thought process. In contrast, a few years ago, there was an attempt to establish war crimes trials around the Bangladesh liberation war. In this context, an image of a massive burial site circulated on social media attributing it to 1971 – and it took just a few minutes for somebody to identify the site as Bergen-Belsen from 1945. So, there was a feedback loop on social media that immediately debunked the inaccuracy and the image was deleted. As I experience it, we have reached a point where erasure, correction, and interpretation of information are happening simultaneously. Aspects of this high-speed accumulation of meaning are helpful, and of course, it bears many risks as well. I am always wondering what gets lost with the rush to speed.

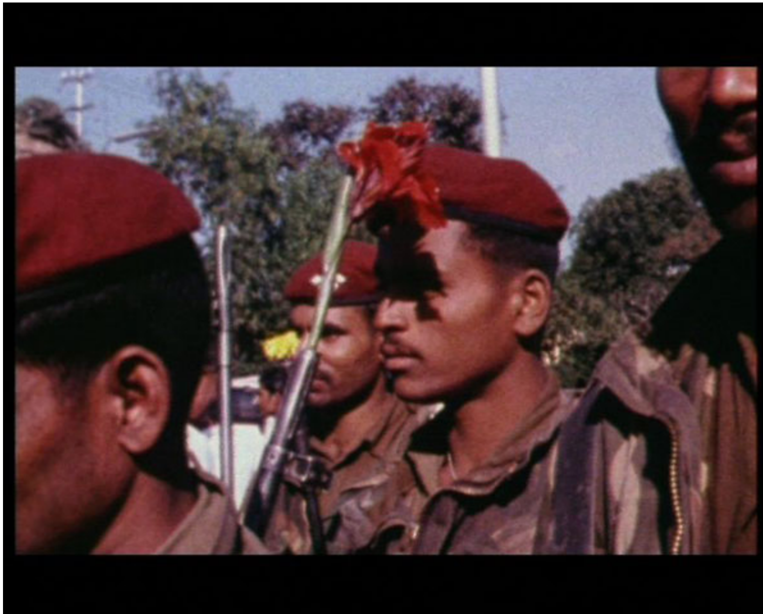

Figure 6. Newsreel footage of Indian soldiers entering Dhaka, December 1971; scene from *Muktir Gaan* (1995 dir: Tareque & Catherine Masud). ©Tareque Masud Memorial Trust.

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Susan Schuppli: I completely agree with Naeem. I was thinking about my investigations into the Chernobyl disaster, where I focused on the 19-day gap between when the event actually happened and when it was publicly admitted by the former Soviet Union. Contemporary search engines retroactively correct the timeline of the Chernobyl disaster and attribute it to April 26, 1986. But in my book, I argue that the event actually happened 19 days later, on 14 May, 1986, and that this breach in time and the temporal gap becomes the space of the political and the space of potential investigation. This was an extremely productive and useful conceptual insight that I could only arrive at by going back and looking at the microfiche of international newspapers to see what was being reported globally and in the Soviet press at the time. For 19 days, there was no mention of Chernobyl. This understanding also serves as a cautionary note for my own research, as our use of online search tools has become second nature but its corrective mechanisms sometimes foreclose the politics that I tend to (Figure 7).

In relationship to Heba's point vis-à-vis history, I was thinking about Harun Farocki's film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988) and the image of the Auschwitz concentration camp that was captured incidentally at an aerial flyover as part of American surveillance efforts. It is not until the 1970s that the image is discovered and its significance is realised. I think that there are a lot of images whose full potential to speak back to certain histories operates as a latency that is not yet fully recognised. Some of the image practices in Palestine documenting daily life under occupation form part of this visual archive that is being produced for a future in which there might be some mechanisms of accountability or legal frameworks where this documentation would speak to the coercive state practices that govern the everyday mobility and life worlds of Palestinians. There are many photographers producing images that are

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Орган Центрального Комитета КПСС
ЕДИНЫЕ ЦЕЛИ, ОБЩИЕ ЗАДАЧИ
В ПОЛИТБЮРО ЦК КПСС
ПРЕДМАЙСКАЯ ХРОНИКА
Королева ситцевого бала
Только факты

ПРАВДА
Орган Центрального Комитета КПСС
ТРУДОВАЯ ХРОНИКА
Выступление М. С. Горбачева
по советскому телевидению
«Наирит» и другие

Figure 7. Cover of *Pravda* newspaper, April 26, 1986, day of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and cover of *Pravda* newspaper, May 15, 1986. Nineteen days after the accident at Chernobyl, President Mikhail Gorbachev made a television address to the Soviet people. Courtesy of National Gallery, St. Petersburg, Russia.

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lying-in-wait for a future that may or may never arrive. So, these are two instances where the moment of image capture and the realisation of its relevance do not co-exist within the same temporal framework.

I think it is important when we produce new accounts of events or alternate histories that they do not supersede, eradicate, or erase previous understandings of events. Rather, every formulation, every new telling of a story, and every crafting of a new account somehow redistribute the narrative field, so that all accounts operate in tension with one another. A point made beautifully by Donna Haraway early on as I recall. Only then can we really understand how certain authorities are produced, where power resides, and how that power generates a very specific narrative account, especially in relation to national myths. We need to be able to tell different stories without one story simply replacing the previous one and returning to a singular, dominant narrative (Figure 8).

Anthony Downey: The specific incident you referred to with regard to Farocki's film involves the Allied Air Forces taking photographs of war industry installations in the region of Upper Silesia looking for the IG Farben factory but instead picking up an image of Auschwitz, which in 1943 was not recognised as such despite the fact that the evidence of Nazi concentration camps existed. It was not until 1977 that Auschwitz was identified on these photographs by two Central Intelligence Agency operatives who analysed and coordinated the footage. It is almost as if the machinic processes of collating images predetermine – in the absence of our input – how we understand landscapes. To return to Heba's point, this process of revisiting archival material and readdressing histories to examine what was *over*looked at a specific moment in time seems to be key to the development of Helene's practice in the films we are discussing here.

Helene Kazan: Absolutely, this image of Auschwitz that you talked about is a crucial example of that. This is the real difference between the film *Under Multiple Suns* and the wider project *Frame of Accountability*. I am not telling the history; I am putting forward

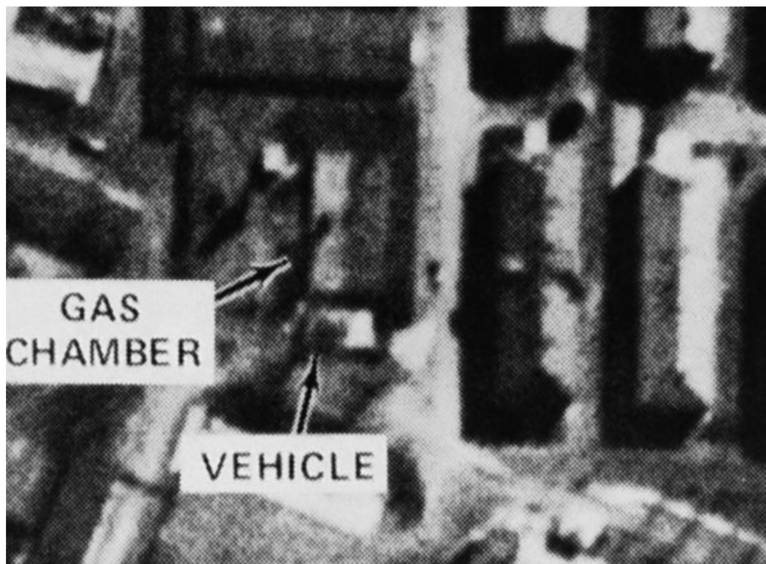

Figure 8. Harun Farocki, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War/Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*, 1988. Film still. ©Harun Farocki GbR.

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a certain account. This way, I want to engage in an open conversation around what that history means, as it is not an arbitrary series of events but a setting up of a technology that still has an impact today. For me, as Heba was saying, I consider history as fluid, and, just as Susan mentioned, my practice is concerned with the way that power constructs and produces certain accounts of history and how we could collectively undo or think through these dominant narratives.

Heba Y. Amin: On that note, Naeem, can you talk about how the use of terms like "docu-fiction" may serve to destabilise or delegitimise certain forms of evidentiary witnessing?

Naeem Mohaiemen: I was thinking about whether the term "docu-fiction" is a useful container. Ten years after the initial release of *Muktir Gaan* and with the publication of the DVD, there were opportunities to clarify the production process and context. This is different from contemporary visual art exhibitions and the networks of dissemination where we have become used to practices of blending fact and fiction, appropriating and combining archival and recreated footage, unmoored from the specific context of a period and recontextualised in an adjacent situation. In some ways, this allows for a fluid mixing of forms and blending of fictitious and documentary elements without having to identify which is which. The fact that this film came out in 1995 in a standardised theatre distribution is, I think, why the term "docu-fiction" is useful. Had the film circulated in museum exhibitions, as Harun Farocki's work did, maybe we would not have had to use that term. In Bangladesh, there is nervousness about mixing things together and the stakes seem so high as much of the war is still considered unfinished business without a proper truth and reconciliation process. And naturally, in our solipsism, we always think we are the "only people" who have ever faced such conjunctures.

Heba Y. Amin: In thinking about terms like "docu-fiction" in relation to non-fiction, I go back to evidentiary and witness documents which are often deemed unchangeable or definitive. But the ways in which we have developed and currently use technologies have revealed all kinds of biases that are built into imaging technologies from their creation, not only at the stage of image-making, but, particularly from the colonial context in which they have often been conceived. Those narratives seem to be coming to the forefront now. With this in mind, I find it interesting that, as artists, we often have to justify or defend our work from being written off as unscientific. It is precisely this idea of "docu-fiction," that fictional elements can help amplify and reinforce representational reality, that I find compelling. I would be interested how you, Helene, Naeem, and Susan, are dealing with or thinking about these issues (Figure 9).

Helene Kazan: I think there is some danger in the binary understanding of truth and fiction which plays into the colonial legal construct and framing of the victim–perpetrator axis. I propose the *Frame of Accountability* as a legal fiction, drawing on practices of science fiction writing, as a dynamic space of knowledge production. Testimony is not just situated within the legal frame, testimony is part of a reparative process, individually and collectively. As Susan pointed out, there are many issues with legal frameworks, these platforms, and these spaces of the law are restrictive and exclusive. What happens when terms such as "testimony" and "witness" are used outside of those spaces?

Anthony Downey: With regard to the context of technologies themselves, how do you engage with deteriorating and defective media formats as carriers of knowledge in archival practice and research, particularly as content and material structures are, to a certain extent, lost in the process of digitising this material? Or, to put it another way, how is

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Figure 9. Heba Y. Amin, *The General's Stork*, 2020. Installation at The Mosaic Rooms, London, 2020/2021. Photo: Andy Stagg.

meaning transformed through digitisation, specifically where memories are encapsulated in the material realities of the digital and thereafter generated or accumulated through processes of deterioration?

Susan Schuppli: Where this really comes to the fore, in my understanding, is in relation to the digitisation of analogue materials, and in particular of photographs. For instance, historical photographs from colonial archives were scanned and deposited in online databases – but the backs of these images, which often denoted the name of the photo studio, the client, the date, and institutional inscriptions and stamps, were rarely scanned. Consequently, a lot of information that would give insight into the politics that frame such images were completely eradicated with the move to digitisation. The same happened with WikiLeaks which only gathers pdf files without the institutional markings that accumulate as printed documents pass through the hands of different authorities and offices to create a chain of evidence. These are two examples where digitisation has sanitised or removed key information from material documents, inscriptions, and markings that might furnish vital information with regard to questions of responsibility and accountability.

Heba Y. Amin: Against this background, what role does reconstruction play in investigating narratives and histories that have been written out or erased through such processes? And what happens when we as artists and cultural practitioners fill these gaps and, in doing so, impose our own biases on these histories? What impact does this have on the evidentiary quality of historical events?

Naeem Mohaiemen: For me, it is partially a question of who is exploring the gaps. When working with historical documents, we often start by digitising the material in its comprehensiveness and then cleaning up, zooming in, and narrowing down the material

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selection. I often wonder what it would look like if, after a project is finished, the original material is made available for people to craft other meanings with what has been excluded. What would it look like if I went through the 30 hours of footage from *Muktir Gaan* and edited it down to a feature-length film? In this footage, I noticed that there are scratches at the bottom of the negatives, which means that they have been heavily cleaned up. What would a project look like where all marks and dirt around the edges remain, and what theoretical framework could account for this material residue and damage?

Anthony Downey: Damaged materials often emerge from contexts of violence and conflict, that is, from within the space and place where your practices are situated. In this respect, do you see your practice as more than a symbolic sphere in terms of its ability to speak differently to the question of violence? Perhaps Helene has a view on that, with regard to legislative violence.

Helene Kazan: More than the symbolic, I try to investigate the question of violence through certain methodological frameworks that allow that violence to be seen or known, without reinstating its ongoing effects.

Susan Schuppli: And, to add to Helene's comment, in light of environmental disasters and ecological destruction, we need to reframe the sites of violence – not only symbolically, not just in terms of the kinds of kinetic violence associated with crisis and conflicts, thus not purely within the paradigm of destruction but rather in terms of "climate emergence" to ask what kinds of rights-based claims could emerge from reframing these violations of life worlds? In other words, how might we think about justice "climatically"? (Figure 10)

Anthony Downey: This question of violence brings us back to the outset of our conversation and also elements of Heba's show at the Mosaic Rooms in London: that is, the degree to which access to historical consciousness and understanding of past and future events is increasingly defined by the digital. I just want to open up a parenthesis here and observe how so-called Big Tech companies increasingly censor, through algorithmic and other means, voices from, say, Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the extent to which that is a form of epistemological violence (see, for example, Alsaafin 2021). It has a material impact on how we can access the record of the "here and now" as we go forward into the future. We assume that the evidence of potential war crimes can be found – but what if such evidence has been extracted from the public forum, through opaque algorithmic systems, for example, without our knowledge? How can we access this evidence with the tools that we currently have at our disposal?

In relation to each of the practices outlined here, they would appear to rehearse a potential methodology for engaging with precisely these issues. On behalf of myself and Heba, I want to round this off with a set of questions for further consideration down the line: What happens when material evidence related to trauma and witnessing is in absentia? How can this condition be brought forward as a material entity, or an immaterial entity, through digital processes of evidencing? How can we address these questions from within the apparatus of technology and *through* the digital as a productive field of engagement? Practice-led research and the knowledge it produces can also often provide a means to cross-reference and self-reflexively engage with the research in question and how it functions as a form of (applied) knowledge. To fully understand the potency of practice-led research, we need, I would argue, to revise what we understand as an appropriate methodological approach to the question of epistemology: or, what is

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Figure 10. Heba Y. Amin, *Operation Sunken Sea*, 2018 – ongoing. Installation at The Mosaic Rooms, London, 2020/2021. Photo: Andy Stagg.

it to produce historical knowledge through creative practices in an age of apparent digital dystopia? I want to suggest, finally, that these questions remain pertinent not so much because technology pre-empts our relationship to the world – we are all technical beings – but how it en-frames our relationship to notions of the future. As such, these are formalisable ontological questions about our conceptualisation of technology in relation to memory and, more importantly, how the traumas associated with memory are being recalibrated through digital means.

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