Philosophy of Photography
Volume 14 Number 1
© 2023 Intellect Ltd Interview. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/pop_00068_7
Published Online January 2024

INTERVIEW

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The visual terms of state violence in Israel/Palestine: An interview with Rebecca L. Stein

Abstract

This interview with media anthropologist, Rebecca L. Stein, conducted by Noa Levin and Andrew Fisher in Spring 2023, takes her recent book Screenshots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine *(2021) as its starting point in order to explore issues of state violence and the militarization of social media in Israel/Palestine. This book marks the culmination of a decade-long research project into the camera dreams introduced by digital imaging technologies and the fraught histories of their disillusionment. Stein discusses the way her research has critically conceptualized the recent history of hopes invested in the digital image in this geopolitical context, by the occupier as much as the occupied, and charts the failures and mistakes, obstructions and appropriations that characterize the conflicted visual cultures of Israel/Palestine.*

Keywords

Israel
Palestine
occupation
colonialism
militarization
digital image
social media
ethnography

Andrew Fisher (AF): *We'd like to start by focusing on your most recent book,* Screenshots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine*, which appeared in 2021, and then work from there towards your earlier work and the broader issues around your research as a cultural anthropologist investigating changing visual cultures in and around Israel/Palestine.*

Rebecca L. Stein (RLS): *Screenshots* is part of a larger project that I began around 2010, spurred by the political investments in digital media that emerged during the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Cellular technologies and social media played a central role in these popular uprisings and many western pundits credited these technologies with the uprisings' initial success. This was a period before the consolidation of surveillance capitalism and digital authoritarianism as we know them today, and many onlookers endorsed the notion that digital technologies were somehow organically suited to pro-democracy mobilization from below.

Readers might remember a recurrent media image from the 'Arab Spring' coverage that of activists holding their mobile phones skyward as they recorded the unfolding events. There was something telling about this viral trope: as if the cell phone was infused with an almost divine power. This image was part of a larger investment in the outsized power of digital technologies as tools of revolution. It was a techno-utopian dream of a familiar kind, one we have seen throughout history when moments of political watershed correspond to periods of technological shift. Historically, these dreams have tended to be short-lived. So, too, in this context. As the political gains of these anti-authoritarian revolutions began to falter, so did the associated technophilic dreams.

My project began as an attempt to reconsider these political investments in digitality from the vantage of Israel/Palestine – starting with my co-authored book *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* (with Adi Kuntsman) and concluding with *Screenshots*. Both are accounts of the interplay of digital technologies and military occupation and chronicle how the Israeli military

occupation has changed in the digital age. Both are interested in popular investments in the political power of digital technologies, and how these investments breakdown.

Noa Levin (NL): *I would like to ask more about your personal story, and how you came to this topic. Prior to the publication of* Digital Militarism, *your work was not specifically focused on digital technology, and I wonder how that shift happened and what compelled you in this story of digital technologies.*

RLS: My work has always been interested in the relationship between politics and popular culture. As these poles have shifted, so have my research foci. My first monograph (*Itineraries in Conflict: Israelis, Palestinians and the Political Lives of Tourism*) was an investigation of everyday Israeli tourism culture as a lens onto cultural terms of the so-called Middle East peace process (or Oslo process). The book was a response to growing international interest in these regional diplomatic processes, but also an attempt to retell this political moment from the vantage of the Israeli and Palestinian everyday that many commentators had overlooked. *Itineraries in Conflict* focused on how Jews and Palestinians were translating diplomatic processes into everyday popular idioms and cultural practices of tourism, hospitality and consumption. I focused on the ways that most Jewish Israeli tourists were normalizing the inequitable terms of the Oslo process and how Palestinians – in their role as tourist hosts – were using the tourism marketplace as a site of political contestation. As in all my work, this book reads the Israeli national project as a colonial project, and attempts to use cultural critique as a decolonizing analytic practice.

My subsequent scholarship followed the path of Israeli political culture as it moved into digital spaces, but retaining an interest in the politics of ordinariness. *Digital Militarism,* for example, paid a lot of attention to the rise of what Adi Kuntsman and I called 'selfie militarism': namely, the ways that Israeli militarism was being consolidated through everyday social media practices, like the art of the selfie. We were interested in how Israeli state violence was sustained through ordinary digital acts.

NL: *That's very interesting. It sounds like, realizing that the arena of digital technologies was becoming more and more important, you followed its path.*

AF: *You have described yourself as a scholar interested in the intersection of war and media, and have said that you focus on moments in which political problems are mistaken as media problems, which I find apposite to your description of the development of your project. In this vein, you describe* Digital Militarism *and* Screenshots *as dystopian books. One of the key themes in* Screenshots *is 'failure' and one of the key themes in* Digital Militarism *is 'the mistake'. Could you talk to the centrality of questions of mistakes and failures in these studies?*

RLS: *Screenshots* is a book focused on media – and media dreams – that fail. I spoke a little bit about the eventual political failure of the Arab revolts, and the corresponding breakdown of political dreams tethered to cellular technologies. That amalgamation of failure inspires my book's central thematic.

I view failures and mistakes as very generative analytic sites for anthropological work. For example, *Screenshots* focuses on ethnographic moments when, for the Israeli state and its supporters, political problems were mistaken as media problems. I have a chapter which chronicles a recurrent lament articulated by official military spokespersons, bemoaning the ways that the military failed to keep pace with its enemies, particularly Palestinians, when it came to media management and production. In the state's own telling, it found itself perpetually lagging behind the media savvy enemy. Such state narratives, which I've traced as far back as the first Palestinian uprising, have often emerged in the early days of an Israeli military operation gone awry or at a moment when desired pace or scale of military victory was not achieved. The narrative has been repetitive in its form. It often took the form of this sentence: 'we are losing the media war'.

The lament interests me as a site of strategic misrecognition: namely, where both military or political miscalculation, *and* the scale and terms of military brutality, is retold by the state and its supporters as a media failure. The story has been particularly audible during the military's periodic assaults on the Gaza Strip – bombardments that often resulted in massive Palestinian death and civilian casualties, and colossal devastation to the infrastructure of the Gaza Strip. These assaults began in 2008 and continue in the present. During this period (2008–23), the digital ecosystem shifted radically for Palestinians under occupation, as it did for populations across the globe. Digital penetration increased massively, resulting in progressively greater usage of social media by Gazans as an anti-occupation toolbox. Thus, each successive Israeli military operation was met with a more voluminous media response. By 2021, online publics across the world were able to watch the Israeli assault on Gaza in something close to real time, thanks to the footage of Gazans under fire.

For the state, this shifting media landscape was a source of tremendous anxiety. And here the state lament emerged: 'why are we failing in the media arena?'. Or, as state officials and military analysts would often ask, even as bombs were falling: 'why are we ceding the "victory image" to our enemy?'. This strategic misrecognition – when the lethal violence of the Israeli military assault is replaced by a conversation about media capacity – is tethered to a dream about Israel's standing in the international community: if only we get our media right, successfully counteract the inciting images of our foes, then we will finally be redeemed in the international arena.

***NL:** In the book you describe this 'strategic misrecognition' as part of the victimization narrative that is dominant in Israeli politics and is often used, for example, in speeches by Benjamin Netanyahu.*

RLS: Yes, Netanyahu has long been a proponent of this storyline. The narrative of misrecognition casts Israel as the ultimate victim of the scene of war and military occupation: namely, a victim of inciting enemy media. My chronicle of state misrecognition is an attempt to unsettle this foundational mythology of Israel as the ultimate victim.

NL: *I want to, maybe sidetrack a little bit with a related question about the significance of your methodology as an anthropologist and how that relates to failure. In the introduction of* Screenshots *you distinguish your focus as an anthropologist on practices of visuality from other postcolonial researchers of Israel/Palestine, like Gil Hochberg and Ariella Azoulay, insofar as they focus on what you call 'representational politics', the implication being that this entails a predominantly retrospective focus on the image.*

A key distinction here seems to be your focus on practices of visuality as laborious, on the photograph that has not yet been achieved or the photograph that will not happen. There's a focus in one chapter on footage which has been collected, but has never seen the light of day because it has been prevented from circulating. Maybe you can speak a little bit about that kind of failure, a failure of the image to materialize. How does your perspective as an anthropologist open up these kinds of failures and how do these failures shed light on the situation you focus on.

RLS: As an anthropologist, I'm interested in what some scholars in my field have called image operations or what we might call photographic labour, which includes the cognitive labour that precedes the image, the exchange labour involved in what Zeynep Gursel calls 'image brokering', and the daily labour by video activists and photojournalists in capturing and delivering images. The latter is particularly constrained for photographers working in the violent context of Israel's occupation, particularly when they aim their lens at state violence – which is the focus of my book. Ethnography gets us to this through the study of the daily work of image makers, brokers and curators. It also enables the study of everything that can get in the way of these processes.

You mention my discussion of pictures that failed to materialize. This is something Ariella Azoulay talks about in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, where she developed a very powerful inquiry into the imagined history of visual archives that don't exist – that failed to materialize because of conditions of violence. She asks: 'has anyone ever seen a photograph of a rape?'.

I was very drawn to that analysis of what we might call the conditions of visual impossibility. Anthropology – or more pointedly, ethnography – gives us the opportunity to explore these conditions with the subjects involved, those for whom the image was stymied or wholly occluded.

Let me be more specific. One of my chapters focuses on Palestinian video activists and photographers who were working in the occupied West Bank at an early moment in the development of digital infrastructures – photographers seeking to chronicle Israeli state violence and the Palestinian experience under occupation. I study moments when their photographic work – their efforts to

capture and circulate images or videos of soldier attacks or military raids – was actively stymied by the apparatus of military occupation. Sometimes this took the form of a camera or memory stick confiscated by a vengeful soldier at a checkpoint or was the result of an attack on a photographer or photojournalist by the military. Or it might take the form of a failure, by photographers, to deliver footage to media or human rights institutions on time because they were stymied by military closure or curfew. I think those failures are a particularly rich site for interrogating the history of the military occupation's relationship to media practices at an earlier moment in the digital infrastructure. This gets us back to Azoulay: the ethnography of images or visual archives that don't exist. But unlike her more speculative analytic modality, ethnography enables us to add the conditions of the image operation, and its subsequent failure, into the equation.

Part of what I am getting here, with this ethnographic chronicle of media failures, is an invitation to visual studies to spend more time on what we might call the pre-life of the image. What if one doesn't presume its capacity to exist or circulate, but considers all that may prevent its *coming into visibility*. *Screenshots* uses ethnographic methods to meditate on the infrastructure of visual occlusion.

AF: *If I could just follow up on Noa's question to ask you to talk a little bit more about this approach and the way you frame the image as effectively having a social life, which includes questions of whether or not the image is realized, whether it arrives in – or survives over – time. My question relates to the passage Noa asked about earlier where you frame your project in contrast to what you call 'representational politics' and its retrospective characteristics. You establish this difference using two concepts, 'visual practices' and 'image operations'. What you mean by 'visual practices' has, I think, been fleshed out in the examples you have already articulated here. The term 'image operation', by contrast, strikes me as belonging to a quite different context. It seems to imply a much more autonomous function to the image itself and to belong to a different kind of discourse about the machinic operations and the inhuman character of contemporary imaging technologies.*

RLS: To the contrary, the notion of the image operation is employed as a counterpart to theories of autonomous function as a way of considering the multiple infrastructures, social processes, and labour at play in any site of photographic production. I've already talked about the ways that the physical infrastructure of occupation constrained and sometimes wholly obstructed the work of Palestinian videographer and photojournalists. But *Screenshots* is equally concerned with political infrastructures in a longer historical view as they have made their mark on visual processes.

For example, I spend considerable time with the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, focusing on their long-standing project to incorporate Palestinian videographers and eyewitness footage into their institutional project of evidence collection. B'Tselem has long been aware that any Palestinian-produced footage they seek to screen on Israeli television for advocacy purposes,

in an attempt to educate Jewish Israeli viewers about the military occupation, is deemed suspect in advance by this national viewership. They understand that Palestinian eyewitness video as always already failed evidence where Israelis are concerned. History is crucial, here. For mainstream Israeli viewers, the inability of such video to function as evidence is rooted in the longer colonial ideology of 'Zionism' and what I describe as the ontological failure of Palestinian humanity, as many Israelis see it. The failure of the image operation in the digital present is thus merely a replay of colonial ideologies with a considerable history.

NL: *I have a further question about the apparatus of occlusion, an interesting term that you have used. I wonder about the possible continuities or discontinuities between, on one hand, the soldier that breaks the camera, the apparatus of occlusion that is the technical military obstruction preventing visual materials reaching a broader public and, on the other hand, what you describe as the fake news narrative or the narrative of repudiation. But also the public who simply doesn't want to see the image. The fact that the media doesn't want to show these images because they know public opinion is not interested in seeing this material. I'm interested in the fact that you trace this apparatus of occlusion from these different perspectives. We can also say that the state violence you trace is acted out on different levels, on the level of the erasure or rewriting of the narrative, as well as the level of the soldiers who enforce the occupation.*

AF: *This perhaps also brings us to your analysis of the Israeli army's practice of mapping and to the narrative you tell of the Israeli soldier engaged as a photographer whose responsibility it was to produce coerced images of the interiors of Palestinian dwellings and their occupants. He presumed these images would contribute to an archive of surveillance images, but they turned out to be unwanted when his superior told him to simply trash them. This introduces another, sinister, narrative of the photograph that doesn't materialize, that is exhausted by the oppressive performance of its making.*

RLS: All these are instances of colonial curatorial practices. And this is a primary through-line in *Screenshots*: the Israeli state as curator of the visual record of state violence. In the example you are referencing, Andrew, we see a photographic record being destroyed by the military at the material level of shredding of documents. This is a very concrete case of image occlusion: photographic records that are destroyed on-site.

To provide more context: at issue is a standard Israeli military occupation practice called 'mapping', which the Israeli NGO Breaking the Silence has chronicled in detail. Israeli soldiers on patrol in the occupied territories are routinely instructed to sketch a 'map', as they term it, of the individual Palestinian homes in the West Bank that they are raiding at night – including drawing images of the interior, and producing a photographic record of its male inhabitants, including young children. The photographs taken by soldiers during these operations were ostensibly intended to

live in a state archive in which they would be catalogued and used as intelligence materials to aid in future military operations.

But as I discuss, the photographs didn't always work this way. I describe the case of a military sniper and photographer who discovered that his photographs of Palestinians under occupation, taken during a night-time raid, were being shredded by superiors. For him, the realization is a moment of shock – which for me, as the interviewer, was very interesting. His shock rested not in the brutality of the operation, but in the military's failure to operationalize the image. So – Noa, returning to your question – this was a very particular kind of apparatus of occlusion.

NL: *Can you speak some more about the Israeli history of 'fake news' or what you call the 'repudiation script' and its role in the apparatus of occlusion?*

RLS: I use the term to describe the history of an Israeli and pro-Israeli conspiracy theory that posits that Palestinians fake images of their own death and injury for political gain. The theory proposes that most images of Israeli military perpetrators that circulate in the media have been faked. I argue that this conspiracy was a political strategy of the Zionist right that became more important in the digital age as the social media archive of state violence began to grow. The script solves the problem of the viral image of state violence generated by Palestinians. It literally performs a vanishing act: removing it from public view or so was the hope, through the charge of fakery.

Approaching this topic anthropologically yielded some very interesting observations. What I learned, in conversations with proponents of these theories, including Israeli settlers, was the considerable work required to semiotically refigure the Palestinian-generated image. This was another apparatus of visual occlusion at work.

AF: *Earlier, you were talking about the state's misrecognition and this lament that they are always a step behind, always losing the media war. In your narrative this lament evolves into a successful media strategy. You detail the history of the labour of teaching and learning that it took to establish the script that prepares the ground for repudiation of existing and future images that capture state violence. This obviously resonates with the context of recent American politics and the discourse of 'fake news'. Both are rather reflectively constructed and successful strategies, albeit in a dystopian and fundamentally regrettable sense.*

RLS: Yes. Indeed. I should say that I was writing this book during Trump's America, watching the proliferation of this fake news narrative and its very similar uptake to the Israeli case. As in the US case, the pro-Israeli narrative moved from the conspiratorial blogosphere to the Israeli political centre. Eventually, as I describe, it was adopted as the language of state. This is also the story of the

far right in the United States. Interestingly, the Israeli case anticipates the US phenomenon by over a decade.

I think that the anthropologist has a unique opportunity here. The ethnographic research question became: how do publics identify something as fake? How do they retrain themselves to see an image as a site of probable fakery? I don't think this is purely a tactical matter. I take very seriously the notion that they – those who support this theory – have successfully retrained their eye to see these visuals as fake. Here, I believe in what we might call perpetrator sincerity.

Screenshots also chronicles the failure of a long-standing media dream: the dream that putting cameras on the scene of violence and injustice will facilitate justice. It's a dream that has been chronicled by many scholars of war and media – most famously Susan Sontag – but not in an ethnographic idiom. One of the interventions I'm making is that *all* the players in the political theatre of Israeli occupation – from human rights workers to the Israeli military – shared a version of this dream. Namely: that greater numbers of cameras on the political scene, delivering the political reality more rapidly to global audiences, would advance justice as they knew it. And for all these parties, the dream would break down.

NL: *I'd like to push back a little bit on the sense of digital dystopia here. I'm thinking about a central case study in your book, namely human rights organization B'Tselem's Camera Project, through which the organization distributed many cameras in the occupied territories so that people could document the occupation from their own perspectives. I feel like, yes, this registers the failure you describe with regard to making humanitarian change or reaching some kind of social justice. But there is also a success insofar as such projects give people a voice, by letting them tell their own stories and share them on social media, for example.*

RLS: I have followed B'Tselem for a long time – since their founding during the first Palestinian uprising. It was only after my research on *Screenshots* began in earnest that I realized that I, as an anti-occupation activist, shared a version of the very camera dream I was chronicling – at least, in my research's initial stages.

I'm often asked, 'Aren't you going to concede any successes for the Israeli left?'. Today, it appears self-evident that the Israeli left, and the Israeli human rights community, was unduly celebrated by many anti-occupation activists – particularly Jewish activists in the US. So, the story of failure is also a corrective to a certain kind of Jewish solidarity stance that overestimated the political significance of the Israeli left within the larger Israeli political landscape.

I would add that I am also using 'failure' to reconsider the foundational postcolonial theoretical telos. Namely: to rethink a scholarship whose analytic and political endpoint was the undoing of colonial power. Think, for example, of Homi Bhabha's celebrated 'Of Mimicry and Man' which

concludes in Bengal with a scene of the English bible used as waste paper. *Screenshots* tried to refuse this triumphant final instance by asking: what if we imagine a postcolonial project which dwells on impossibility as a radical gesture?.

NL: *Yes, that's very interesting. I think in a way, this reading of the political situation is more realistic. In the last several years, and especially with the current government, human rights organizations are constantly under attack. Resistance to the occupation is an almost impossible task. In this context, the politics of failure makes a lot of sense.*

RLS: Right. For me, the media failure is also an attempt to index a larger set of political failure: of the Israeli left and human rights community, of the 'Oslo Process' of the 1990s, of the dream of the Two State Solution – and more broadly, of the Zionist colonial project. That's why media failure is so important.

In a rather different vein, let me add that this book was also written with and against Azoulay's *Civil Contract of Photography*. This is an incredible piece of scholarship which undergirds *Screenshots* at many points. Yet as an anthropologist, I remain dissatisfied with all that is occluded from the 'civil contract' as a concept. Missing is any addition to consider the everyday workings of images operations, the infrastructure of photographic relations and operations. When one includes such operations, the book's utopianism – albeit, strategic utopianism – cannot stand.

Screenshots presents the flipside: namely, the account of what happens when the civil contract fails. The book asks: what would it mean to narrate the failure of this contract? To attend to cases in which the photograph subject is not redeemed? In which her citizenship is not restored? In a sense, that is the subject of my book.

AF: *That is really interesting. Although I admire her work, I think there is a certain limitation set by the concentration on photography in Azoulay's earlier writings, where the photograph takes on the characteristic of being the exemplary form of civil contract that might avoid oppressive forms of social relation and governance, however weak or thin the possibilities it offers might seem.*

RLS: I think you've posed the problem interestingly. For Azoulay, the endpoint is indeed the image. For me, the image always routes through, and is contingent upon, a much larger set of political conditions and operations. Her book generated an enormously lively conversation about cameras as political subjects and the ways that visual archives might function as tools of political repair. But again, *Screenshots* is pushing back against such propositions.

NL: *Yes. I think maybe it is also pushing back against this idea of the forensic capacities of the image.*

RLS: Absolutely. I'm not sure if you were referencing Forensic Architecture there…

NL: *Yes, I was. Forensic Architecture, and more generally the positivistic refiguration of images as bearers of proof or testimony, insofar as they are open to forensic investigation.*

AF: *In a sense that project is like a mirror image of yours insofar as you set out to construct a different prehistory of the present. A strong tendency in Forensic Architecture has come recently to focus much more on technical novelty, to embrace imaging technologies such as point cloud models and mapping techniques because they promise such a heavily saturated archive of information. But the results also sometimes verge on a utopianism of the archive.*

RLS: Yes, I think you're absolutely right about their utopian investment in technological excess. This is crucial and an important part of the story I am telling. I became very interested in the historic moment when testimonial video entered the Israeli military courts for the first time and produced attendant shifts in forensic logics. One of these shifts involved the emergence of the so-called expert in Palestinian media. They appeared in court to repudiate the veracity of Palestinian eyewitness video. Again, these experts and their so-called forensic methods solved a political problem for Israel: denuding the power of Palestinian eyewitness videography.

I'm quite split on the work of Forensic Architecture. While their work can be incredibly powerful for populations seeking redress, I remain critical about the technophilia that undergirds their projects: the implicit proposition that better technology will solve what is essentially a political problem. I'm also troubled by their growing intimacy with the art world, and the kind of performativity that has followed. While I share their scepticism about the political utility of traditional notions of evidence, I am concerned about the shift from the evidential to the aesthetic. In the case of Palestine, one wonders if such shifts might inadvertently bolster Israeli colonial ideologies about Palestinian ontological incredulity, their failure to function as a witness or proffer evidence?

In closing, I would stress that *Screenshots* tells a story that scholars and activists working in Palestine and Israel have long known: a story about the colonial history of the Israeli project. The book is simply an attempt to consider how coloniality was given a new digital dressing in the twenty-first century. That is, how camera operations and camera dreams, in the digital age, functioned as players in this long-standing colonial drama.

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