

Anthropology Book Forum

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STEIN, REBECCA. L. (2021). *Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine*. Stanford University Press, 234 pp., ISBN 978-1-50362-803-8.

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During the last seven months, we have been exposed to extremely sensitive content from the Gaza Strip. Young Palestinian journalists like Motaz Azaiza, Bisan Owda or Hind Khoudary have documented their daily lives amidst the latest Israeli aggression on Gaza, becoming digital influencers and attracting millions of new followers. At the same time, a myriad of TikTok videos from Israeli soldiers during the ground invasion of Gaza have become viral, awakening disparate opinions from social media users. During these months, much has been discussed regarding the veracity of pictures from the events of the 7th of October and its aftermath, proving that in a narrative war, pictures become weapons.

This “visual war” is exactly what Rebecca Stein, an American cultural anthropologist and Associate Professor of Anthropology at Duke University, documents in her book, *Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine*. Published in 2021 by Stanford University Press, it focuses on the “entanglement of consumer photographic technologies and Israeli state violence” (p. 5) during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a period marked by the second *intifada* and multiple Israeli aggressions on Gaza (2008, 2009, 2014). The core focus of the book is Jewish Israeli actors and institutions such as human rights workers and activists (paying special attention to the International Information Center for Human Rights in The Occupied Territories (B’TSELEM)), the Jewish settler population and the Israeli military. However, it also highlights the stories of Palestinian video activists and civilians living under occupation.

The ethnography analyses the changing media landscape in Palestine and Israel by incorporating visual devices such as cameras into the daily routine of different political constituencies and the attendant challenges. Instead of focusing on the life of pictures after they

are taken, the book focuses on what precedes their entry into social worlds: “the various forms of labour, political and aesthetic assessments, negotiations and contestations, that make images and visual circuits possible” (p. 13). Throughout the chapters, Stein answers questions such as: How are images used in the Israeli and Palestinian political and legal arenas? What visual policies emerge? How do different actors adapt to the new use of cameras and mobile devices? In what ways are the images processed and distributed? What strategies are used to communicate a specific message through visual evidence? By answering these questions, Stein shows how, despite having completely different goals, both Israeli and Palestinian actors use visual devices with the aspiration of achieving their political dreams.

Chapter 1 explores military photography in the twenty-first century's first decade and the use of private optical devices in the Israeli military arena during the second *intifada* (2000- 2005), the war on Lebanon (2006), and the 2008-2009 assault on the Gaza Strip. Israel uses images to document, acquire information, and ensure spatial control in these contexts, becoming occupation tools. Stein observes how the camera nature changes from a personal device to a wartime actor. In this sense, cameras and cell phones oscillate from personal use and occupation technologies, which require special policies and raise new challenges.

Chapter 2 is a “counterpart to the global dreams about digital revolution” (p. 69) and shows the experiences and challenges of Palestinian videographers and camera activists in the West Bank who collaborated with B’TSELEM between 2000 and 2012. Stein documents the beginnings of amateur eyewitness videography and how digital technologies spread through the West Bank, paying special attention to the temporal and spatial constraints they faced due to military restrictions, settler attacks, technical problems or material confiscation. These struggles hindered the arrival of the pictures to Israeli media or human rights organisations.

Chapter 3 explores the credibility of Palestinian visual evidence within Israeli society, analysing the appearance of a repudiation script which emerged from the Zionist social margins (Israeli settler media outlets and pro-Israeli bloggers in the United States) and has gradually been consolidated and normalised, reaching Israeli mainstream Media and even political discourses. The Palestinian “fakery” (what some call “Pallywood”) serves as a political tool to improve Israe’ls international image, heavily damaged by the violent scenes coming from the occupied territories. Stein articulates the connection between colonialism and visual

authenticity; showing how the repudiation campaigns of videos from Palestine serve as a colonial strategy to invalidate the native narrative, this time in the social media era.

Chapter 4 focuses on the work of B'TSELEM's West Jerusalem office staff, showing what precedes the circulation of visual evidence from the Occupied Territories. Through ethnographic fieldwork, the chapter explores how human rights defenders watch, analyse and distribute the eyewitness videography coming from the West Bank. It also sheds light on the discussions within the organisation and the strategies used to appeal to the Israeli audience at a time when human rights institutions grew increasingly vilified. The chapter is a good opportunity to discover all the labour involved before images are displayed to the world.

Chapter 5 centres on Israeli media policy, exploring how the Israeli military responds to the visual evidence from Palestinian video activists and Israeli human rights defenders. Stein articulates the chapter through three "hasbara fail" cases and the consequent strategies to win empathy from the public audience. These often require military investment in cameras, media technologies, photography-trained soldiers, and visual campaigns. Throughout the chapter, we approach the Israeli military from a Public Relations perspective, discovering their struggles and strategies to adapt to the new digital battlefield.

Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine offers a solid contribution to visual anthropology studies in Palestine and Israel from an anti-colonial perspective. Her status as an American Jewish researcher allowed her to access a myriad of spaces, from the offices of B'TSELEM to the military's Jerusalem offices, which allows the reader to understand the visual goals and aspirations from different perspectives. Even though the book documents events that go back up to 20 years ago, the book's content still resonates with what is happening today in the Gaza Strip, being a useful tool for analysing the use of visual content around the current war.

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