

Disrupted Dwelling: Forensic Aesthetics and the Visibility of Violence

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The aim of the present text is to offer an interpretation of Eyal Weizman's concept of forensic aesthetics, demonstrating how this approach reveals the ways in which the aesthetic perception of violence, trauma, and decomposition of human dwelling can be transformed in the current digital optical war regime. Forensic aesthetics tries to grasp a forensic sensibility as both an aesthetic and political practice, requiring individuals to become sensitive to violence and be able to comprehend and experience the affects of disintegration, trauma, and despair that are characteristic of the experience of the survivor. The environment, dwelling, and architecture are not only inert observers, but rather have become material witnesses of crimes, violence, and destruction of various dwellings inhabited by various species. The application of digital technologies in forensic aesthetics carries a strong ethical appeal to avoid injustice. Traces and fragments of evidence, as well as multiple videos and images, are synchronized and recomposed within digital architectural environments and dwellings, as an optical and interpretative tool that shapes a new type of aesthetics. | *Keywords: Forensic Aesthetics, Violence, Dwelling, Visualization, Operational Images*

1. Introduction

In 2010, a research group called Forensic Architecture was founded at Goldsmith, University of London, under the leadership of Eyal Weizman. The group seeks to investigate abuses of human rights by governments, militant organizations, police forces, and corporations through the use of technologies such as visualization, digital projections, and cartographic tools. These tools are used to reveal and make visible the traces of violence inscribed in both human bodies and architecture and urban environments. According to Weizman, the group's objective is "to bring new material and aesthetic sensibilities to bear upon the legal and political implications of state violence, armed conflict, and climate change" (Weizman, 2014, p. 9).

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Weizman's approach, referred to as 'forensic aesthetics', diverges from the traditional understanding of aesthetics as a formal or structural analysis of an autonomous work of art, which often neglects its pragmatic utility and relies on concepts such as beauty or aesthetic function (see Shklovsky (1991), Mukařovský (1970), Culler (1975)).¹ It also distinguishes itself from the phenomenological-aesthetic concept of environment, home, or dwelling, which is linked to the ancient tradition of poetics (*poésis*) as a means of producing relatively stable objects or buildings, and to the capacity to be affected and afflicted by the arrangement of one's surroundings (cf. Heidegger (1993, pp. 343–363), Harries (1998)).

Forensic aesthetics focuses on dwelling, particularly the uninhabitable and disrupted dwelling, as evidence of violence and the transformation of aesthetic perception of violence, trauma, and the decomposition of the (human) milieu. The disrupted dwelling serves as a 'material witness' of violence and has the ability to alter human sensitivity, leading to a deeper awareness of the impact of conflict on the surrounding environment and on human lives.

This text is organized into three main sections. The first section introduces the inception of forensic aesthetics and the concept of material testimony. The second section provides an overview of the forensic investigation of disrupted dwellings, including an explanation of the basic concepts and principles used in forensic aesthetics. The third section addresses the visibility of violence within the current optical regime of war, which establishes and reinforces forensic sensibility through visualizations and 'operational images'.

2. Preliminary Notes on Material Witnessing

The introduction of the main principles of forensic aesthetics appeared in a book written by Eyal Weizman and Thomas Keenan called *Mengele's Skull. The Advent of Forensic Aesthetics*.

The identification of the presumed remains of Mengele was a peculiar one because not only the skull and bones were at the disposal for the eyes of the various experts, but also photos and images from Mengele's war file, including his medical reports. Therefore a diverse scientific forum was formed: in addition to Brazilian investigators and forensic anthropologists, there were graphologists, radiologists, dactyloscopists, and experts in dental analysis records and X-rays and photographs, as the potential range of evidence allowing identification was highly variable. Experts had to come up with a technique, which would prove that these different registers fit together and that the remains and archive materials refer to the same person. One of the members of the investigating team (Richard Helmer) perfected the video-imaging process "called face-skull superimposition, in which a video image of a photograph is placed over a video image of a skull to determine whether the two are the same person" (Weizman and Keenan, 2012, p. 32).²

¹ Anne Mari-Fors's seminal study on the aesthetics of dwelling suggests that "art-based aesthetics has been challenged, particularly by inquiries in environmental and everyday aesthetics that expand the aesthetic domain by considering everyday environments and matters as objects of aesthetic appreciation" (Fors, 2014, p. 170).

² Helmer became a 'cameraman' switching between two viewfinders of the camera and

The skull and the bones became material witnesses (see Schuppli (2021)) of the violence of events that happened during Mengele's life, they were sensors of his decisions, accidents, and ways of living, but not only that; in an abstract sense, they also conserved the violence produced by Mengele in the past, and conserved the violence of crimes against humanity that had happened forty years before Mengele's death. The newly produced image by face-skull superimposition, which merged photographs and the skull, was the ultimate evidence for identification. But the image, as well as bones and the skull, could not speak for themselves. The experts needed to present this evidence in front of different forums: in places where the expert is the translator and representative of these material witnesses and the task of the expert is to convince others (whereas it is the media, public or jury) in order to convict someone without any 'reasonable doubt'.

The moment, when the bones and image appeared in the courtroom was a decisive one: the existence of material witnesses was acknowledged and affirmed and thus the so-called forensic sensibility was established (Keenan and Weizman, 2012, p. 70). Without the use of technologies of visualization this turn in contemporary political aesthetics would not be possible, as Keenan and Weizman believe.

3. Forensic Aesthetics and the Investigation of the Disrupted Dwelling

Forensic aesthetics investigates the ways in which violence can alter the appearance of structures, such as buildings and infrastructure. It involves examining the physical traces of violence on these structures, including damage caused by lethal weapons. Prefabricated houses and collapsed buildings that have been disrupted by military-political conflicts can also be considered material witnesses, as the event of destruction is often inscribed in their walls and structures through visible signs such as holes from gunshots and bomb shrapnel, shards of broken windowpanes embedded in human bodies, and complete environmental devastation.

To further discuss what has previously been mentioned, Weizman (2011, pp. 5–6) regards architecture as a 'pathology' of the present times, as it is not a static and unchanging entity. Rather, it is 'elastic' and 'responsive', constantly undergoing deformation in response to the forces it encounters. The traces of these forces remain present in the architecture, waiting to be revealed and presented before relevant committees and tribunals. Technologies used for reconstruction, visualization, and analysis reveal the affective level of environmental deterritorialization. As such, Weizman (2017, pp. 95–96; Fuller and Weizman, 2021, pp. 37–40) asserts that architecture acts as a 'sensor'. The concept of a sensor has a dual meaning in this context. On one hand, architecture serves as a surface upon which the effects of political, social, and

focusing on the skull. Shuffling between these two with different images until upon the third screen, the television screen, emerged from the two images only one image: "With the exact positioning of the skull corresponding to the head position on the photograph in the electronic superimposition, complete conformity has been found to exist concerning all recognizable proportions of the head, face, eyes, nose, and mouth. The outline of the soft tissue layer model on the skull was congruent with the facial contours lying in the photographic plane" (Weizman and Keenan, 2012, p. 35).

military forces are inscribed. At the same time, it also has the ability to recursively reshape these forces. Additionally, architecture serves as evidence in trials and media accounts of conflicts, potentially helping to prevent further crimes against humanity.

One notable example of this approach is the work of Weizman and Mir Ali, who sought to explore alternative paths for accessing traumatized human memory *via* digital technologies. Typically, their fieldwork involved examining walls and ruins to determine if the structures matched the instruments of death (for example, by comparing the inscription in the walls to the material structure of bullets and missiles, or by analyzing the shape of the ruin to determine the type of missile attack that caused it). However, in this particular instance, they did not have access to the site in question. All that was available for Weizman and Mir Ali to work with was satellite imagery, which showed only a blurred outline of a house that had been attacked by drones (Weizman, 2017, p. 45). With the help of a survivor of the attack, they attempted to create a digital model of the house as the survivor remembered it, without pre-determining which details were important. Using the survivor's memories as a guide, they populated the model with objects such as doors, furniture, and kitchen utensils, striving for as much accuracy as possible. In this case, architecture did not serve as material evidence, but rather as "a mnemonic technique, a conduit to testimony. The model was a stage on which some of her memories could be accessed and performed" (Weizman, 2017, p. 46).

The dwelling was plundered, reshaped, and consequently rendered uninhabitable.⁵ The only remnants of its previous state were in the survivor's memory (Fuller and Weizman, 2021, p. 25). However, visualization technologies were able to 'reconstruct' the dwelling and produce affectivity associated with it, synthesizing the broken pieces of material objects into a representation of the home that existed prior to the attack. The difference between the dwelling's 'before' and 'after' highlights the terror that occurred. The disrupted dwelling and its digital double, presented by Weizman and Ali before legal and public forums, demonstrated the consequences of the transformation of the milieu into a toxic environment inhabited not by humans but death itself. The digital double created by Ali and Weizman served to illustrate the lost sense of home, subjective feelings, and attachment to a particular location but also revealed the raw reality of losing one's dwelling due to violence, which can never be restored to its original form. The digital double merges the subjective sensing of dwelling and the global terror of losing a home, highlighting the powerlessness of those who have lost everything.

Forensic aesthetics makes these situations visible through the creation and presentation of evidence in various forums. It exerts pressure on geopolitical, state, military, and militant organizations or institutions by exposing their acts of violence to public scrutiny.

⁵ The destruction of dwelling can be called an event. For Gilles Deleuze, the event is a radical transformation of everything in everything, i.e., it destabilizes the territory, milieu, or dwelling, it disrupts the stratification of habitual and everyday orientation in known space, and thus it rearticulates our schemes of perception and affection, unfolding new ways of experiencing the world (cf. Deleuze (1990), Deleuze (2003)).

In this context, forensic aesthetics can be considered a form of investigative aesthetics. Utilizing advanced visualization technologies, it ‘slows down time’ and deconstructs it into frames of temporal relations involving the subject’s lived experience and the duration (and decay) of material objects. Its investigation is centered on forensic operations, initially focusing on the material environment and treating objects as sensors of events capable of recording transformations in space. These objects and transformations are then reconstructed and presented in a legal or expert forum (Weizman, 2017, p. 94).

According to Weizman, forensic aesthetics involves a method of revealing information in forums, which includes gestures, techniques, and technologies of demonstration, methods of theatricalization, narration, and dramatization, as well as the use of technologies to project, deconstruct, and differentiate images, ultimately leading to “the creation and demolition of reputation, credibility, and competence” (Weizman, 2011, p. 10). Weizman supports his argument by pointing out that forensic aesthetics is closely related to the Greek concept of *aisth sis*: to experience something sensually is to be ‘aestheticized’, and conversely, to be ‘insensitive’ to sensory impressions is to be immune to the experience being presented in the forum (Weizman, 2017, p. 10). The ability to experience sensory impressions is a necessary condition for the possibility of being affected by the information presented in the forum, while the material thing itself is also ‘aestheticized’ or made perceptible and visible. In other words, Weizman asserts a recursive relationship between the human capacity to feel, which allows for the potential radical transformation of perceptual schemas through affectation, and the material ‘sensors’ in which events are inscribed, and the deterritorialization of the norms and practices of witnessing. From this perspective, aesthetics is a mode of interaction among socio-political-economic-legal-war forces, material things, and the human capacity for sensibility. Aesthetics, as *aisth sis*, not only plays a role in the production of evidence but also fundamentally influences the reception of evidence and the confirmation of its existence, potentially altering the perception of a specific event or situation (Weizman, 2017, p. 95–96).

4. Visibility of Violence and the Optical Regime of War

In the previous section, the use of digital and visualization technologies in tracking the violence of ongoing conflicts through an epistemological forensic aesthetics perspective was discussed. In the following paragraphs, I will delve further into the contemporary optical-warfare regime created by technologies and machines of vision, which enables war at a distance, significantly altering our perception of violence and its impacts on the human dwelling.

Paul Virilio has theorized about the relationship between the apparatus of vision and war, stating that the incorporation of film and photography in the First World War significantly accelerated war operations due to the dissemination of film footage and photographs, which allowed for new modes of representing the environment through images (Virilio, 2009). However,

in recent decades, technology has advanced to the point where what was previously made possible by 'new' media in the early 20th century has evolved into a completely new optical regime of war.

Since the 1970s, the digitalization of camouflage has led to its evolution and expansion, with computer-controlled algorithmic procedures now responsible for the "production of its patterns". The emergence of "stealth technologies" allowed camouflage to "dynamically adapt to their immediate environment" (Bousquet, 2018, p. 155): "[D]igital camouflage uses computer algorithms to produce designs that incorporate multi-scale patterns intended to deceive at a variety of observational ranges" (Bousquet, 2018, p. 170).

As a result, 'vision machines' (Virilio, 1994), new systems, and technologies for deconstructing camouflage had to be invented. These war technologies are simultaneously duplicated and supplemented by the use of satellites scanning the entire surface of the war conflicts, but also the Earth itself. Therefore, they can be described as sensors (in Weizman's sense) because they are very effective in making the battlefield "transparent" (Glezos, 2012, p. 57).

In this context, Bousquet refers to a 'martial gaze' that is able to reveal all the patterns and invariants of the transformed environment. This 'martial gaze' is capable of detecting the enemy that is hidden below the level of ordinary visibility. While photography and film have achieved this to some extent, it was in the context of a different perceptual situation, as the images were interpreted by trained human experts who dealt directly the medium in question.

The current optical situation requires a distinct form of perception and aesthetic attunement. The earth's surface, buildings, cities, settlements, and roads are replaced by their digital representations, or digital images (DeLanda, 1991, p. 189). A fundamental characteristic of these images is that they are primarily designed to be read by technology or computers, only secondarily by the human subject. Harun Farocki referred to this type of images as 'operational', meaning that they are structured as a sequence of digital code that is readable by a computer. In the case of these operational images, communication occurs at the machine-to-machine level (see Parikka, [forthcoming]).

In other words, it is necessary to translate the digital encoding of data (or images) into a form that is readable and interpretable by human beings. This leads to two consequences: the conflict is conducted based on communication between the technologies that evaluate the data, with the human serving as an operator and command giver, but only having access to already translated information. The conflict becomes increasingly mediated and almost becomes a virtual and abstract conflict, in which individual people, deaths, destroyed buildings, disrupted and devastated environments, and dwellings are nothing more than simulations of data, resulting in a remote death that is removed from the sphere of affective reaction. After all, the use of homing missiles or the involvement of combat drones in conflict is based on this principle. Drone operators sit in front of a screen, removed from any physical threat, while they sow death through individual commands articulated on a monitor screen.

In his films *Serious Games* (2009, 2010), Harun Farocki discusses the incorporation of computer technology into the training of soldiers and how the new optical warfare regime is based on creating the illusion of being a simulation. Consequently, deadly conflict is being gamified. Nevertheless, computer games and simulations are also being used as therapeutic tools for soldiers returning from conflict zones. As Farocki writes: “Traumatized U.S. troops returning from combat are treated with video games. In therapy, they watch virtual scenarios that simulate some of the situations they experienced in Iraq. The idea is that the virtual images will help the soldiers to remember the events that caused their trauma” (Farocki, 2014, p. 89). In the second case, the trauma is superimposed by a simulation, as if to create the impression that its physical aspect was simply a simulacrum of a distant and phantasmagoric past and that the psychological consequences are easily removable. However, it is characteristic of both cases that physical violence is downplayed and movement in virtual reality is controlled by digital images and computers. But how do these observations relate to forensic aesthetics as an investigative practice? The Centre for Forensic Architecture has featured attacks using homing missiles or drones in various art exhibitions, including a drone strike in Miranshah (Pakistan) in 2012 and the use of white phosphorus in urban environments in Gaza between 2008 and 2009.⁴ In these exhibitions, forensic architects and aestheticians retrospectively reconstruct the process and impact of the violence, including identifying the technologies that disrupted the environment and dwelling. Two other aspects are noteworthy: the technologies of visualization and vision, as well as the aforementioned ‘operational images’, are used to make violence visible. Even forensic aestheticians must work with the translation of digital DNA of images into a form where violence can be seen and confronted (albeit mediated). This practice of tracking and making violence visible is both a deconstruction of the optical regime of war and a revelation (and confirmation) of the perceptual and aesthetic schemas that enable violence to be seen and or remain unseen.

By this practice, forensic aesthetics demonstrates that violence, even if it is largely experienced through images and visualizations, is real and physical violence that results in the loss of human lives and the destruction of human dwellings to the point of uninhabitability, disrupting the fabric of everyday life, habits, joys, and sorrows. Forensic aesthetics stands against all forms of relativization. Gunshot wounds on walls and bomb holes alter the character of the dwelling, making it uninhabitable.

The current optical regime of war creates the conditions for the emergence of new forms of violence and their visibility. Forensic aesthetics utilizes the means of war against themselves, demonstrating that what may appear on a monitor as a mundane explosion on a few pixels is actually a radical destruction of human dwelling, a radical experience that necessitates a new form of perception and affectivity that is sensitive to human suffering.

⁴ See section ‘airstrikes’ on home web page of Forensic Architecture (*Forensic Architecture*, no date).

5. Conclusion

The use of digital technologies by forensic aesthetics carries a strong ethical appeal to avoid injustice. Traces, fragments of evidence, and multiple videos and images are synchronized and recomposed within digital architectural environments and dwellings, as digital models become an optical and interpretative tool that shapes a new type of aesthetics (Fuller and Weizman 2021). As Weizman writes: “No matter if you are a building, a territory, a photograph, a pixel, or a person, to sense is to be imprinted by the world around you, to internalize its force fields, and to transform. And to transform is to feel pain“ (Weizman, 2017, p. 129).

Forensic aesthetics, through the localization of the disruption of our environment and dwelling on microscopic and macroscopic levels, provides a way to address the unsustainable path humanity has chosen. It attempts to cultivate a ‘forensic sensibility’ as an aesthetic and political practice, enabling individuals to become sensitive to violence and to comprehend and experience the effects of disintegration, trauma, and despair that are characteristic of the survivor’s experience. The environment, dwelling, and architecture are not merely passive observers, but have become material witnesses to crimes, violence, and destruction affecting all forms of living beings. Forensic aesthetics disturbingly and unflinchingly reveals those responsible for the current state of affairs.

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