Call for Papers: Media Fields IX Conference

Witnessing

Film and Media Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara
March 7th and 8th, 2025

Submission deadline: January 12, 2025

Keynote speaker: **Diana Flores Ruíz** (Assistant Professor of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Washington)

Keynote roundtable: Moderated by **Bishnupriya Ghosh** (Professor of English and Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara); other roundtable participants from UCSB to be announced

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We witness the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, the accelerating devastation of anthropogenic climate change, ongoing racial oppression and state-sanctioned police violence, and the upheaval of global health emergencies. The need for sustained, collective forms of witnessing and documenting has always been pressing; in our contemporary media-technological moment, critical practice and thought around these acts prove only increasingly important.

By creating images, recording, live streaming, archiving, and indexing traces of these events and processes, film and media play a critical role in the reception and unfolding of these crises. However, media technologies are far from neutral devices of sensorial capture. They function as tools of ubiquitous and unequal surveillance, blurring the boundaries between public and private spaces, intensifying state and corporate power along lines of sociopolitical marginalization. While they enable new forms of visibility, they also reinforce systems of control and domination, turning individuals into data points in an ever-expanding regime of digital oversight. When accounting for non-human entities such as satellites, military drones, and algorithms, witnessing can be more lethal than liberatory, enacting the very violences they are meant to impassively record (Richardson 2024). Further, to witness does not guarantee accountability, as issues of political and libidinal economy, coloniality, hegemonic structures of race, gender, and sexuality, and other sociopolitical forces structure the act of witnessing itself (Beutin 2017). The reciprocal relation between these crises and the technologies which render them witnessable produce a staggering array of problematics: the material and ethical limits to what can be witnessed, the use

of senses other than sight in witnessing processes, the positionalities of those witnessing and those being witnessed, and the possibility who can be a witness at all, to name a few.

For this conference, we pose three sets of inquiries: First, what is *witnessing as an act*, and what role does it play in the world we are living in? How does witnessing, often visually biased, compare to other modes of sensory perception? Is witnessing simply an evidentiary method for inscribing and archiving an event, creating a source from which human and nonhuman actors produce a testimony of the world? Or, how has witnessing also become a site for creative and collective contemplation, from which new modes of critical inquiry emerge and the present is reworked/reimagined? Second, what is the *temporality of witnessing*: is witnessing strictly tied to engaging with contemporary processes and logics, or do historical traces and speculative futures fold into such mediations? How does witnessing deal with the recursivity of past worlds and the desires of futurity that leak through it? Third, what are the *technologies of witnessing*? What kind of aesthetics and politics of witnessing do cinema, electronic media, or data-driven technology enable or complicate? Lastly, to problematize witnessing, we note that witnessing can slide into an act of spectatorship, with its own perverse pleasures (Stanley 2022). With such questions in mind, this conference aims to open up a discourse on witnessing as both a site and method of inquiring into the present, an approach that (particularly for scholars of film and media) offers productive insights for navigating the current streams of political and social violence, accelerated environmental and health-related crises, and systems of state-sanctioned racial, colonial, and economic oppression.

We welcome presentations that engage broadly with witnessing and their connections to cinema, media, and technology. Presentations may engage with, but are certainly not limited to the following themes:

- **Evidence:** documentation; aesthetics; archives; forensics; memory; truth/claims
- **History:** historiography; genealogy; publics and communities; reenactment; colonialism; governance
- **Affect**: embodiment; violence; containment; desire; volatility; libidinal economy
- **Technologies:** surveillance; documentaries; algorithms; policing and capture; war and media; content moderation
- **Environmental:** sensing; mapping; toxicity and harm; more-than-human witnessing
- **Economy**: financial forecasting; optimization strategies; futures trading; volatility and risk; degrowth.

We invite scholarship from across disciplines and methodologies. Alternative presentation formats and early-stage projects are welcome. Participants will have 15-20 minutes to present their work. Please email a 250-300 word proposal and a brief bio to witnessing.mediafields@gmail.com by **January 12, 2025.**