

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #69

EYAL WEIZMAN ON THE ARCHITECTURAL-
IMAGE COMPLEX, FORENSIC ARCHEOLOGY
AND POLICING ACROSS THE DESERTIFICATION
LINE

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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EYAL WEIZMAN ON THE ARCHITECTURAL- IMAGE COMPLEX, FORENSIC ARCHEOLOGY AND POLICING ACROSS THE DESERTIFICATION LINE



Incidents in global politics are usually apprehended as the patterned interaction of macro-actors such as states. Eyal Weizman takes a different tack—an architect by training, Weizman tackles incidents through detailed readings of heterogeneous materials—digital images, debris, reforestation, blast patterns in ruins—to piece together concrete positions of engagement in specific legal, political, or activist controversies in global politics. In this *Talk*, Weizman—among others—

elaborates on methods across scales and material territories, discusses the interactions of environment and politics, and traces his trajectory in forensic architecture.

What is—or should be—according to you, the biggest challenge, central focus or principal debate in critical social sciences?

We live in an age in which there is both a great storm of information and a progressive form of activism seeking to generate transparency in relation to government institutions, corporations or secret services. These forms of exposure exponentially increase the number of primary sources on corporations and state and provide also rare media from war zones, but this by itself does not add more clarity. It could increase confusion and increasingly be used disseminate false information and propaganda. The challenge is to start another process to carefully piece together and compose this information.

I'm concerned with research about armed conflict. Contemporary conflict tends to take place in urban environments saturated with media of varicose sorts, whenever violence is brought into a city, it provokes an enormous production of images, clips, sounds, text, etc.

As conflict in Iraq, Syria, Missouri and the Ukraine demonstrate, one of the most important potential sources for conflict investigations is produced by the very people living in the war zones and made available in social networks almost instantly. The citizens recording events in conflict zones are conscious of producing testimonies and evidence, and importantly so, they do so on their own terms. The emergence of citizen journalists/witness has already restructured the fields of journalism with most footage composing Al Jazeera broadcasts, for example, being produced by non-professional media. The addition of a huge multiplicity of primary sources, live testimonies and filmed records of events, challenge research methods and evidentiary practices. There is much locational and spatial information that can be harvested from within these blurry,

shaky and unedited images/clips and architectural methodologies are essential in reconstructing incidents in space. Architecture is a good framework to understand the world, alongside others.

Whereas debates around the ‘politics of the image’ in the field of photography and visual cultures tended to concentrate on the decoding of single images and photojournalistic trophy shots we now need to study the creation of extensive ‘image-complexes’ and inhabit this field reconstruct events from images taken at different perspective and at different times. The relation between images is architectural, best composed and represented within 3D models. Architectural analysis is useful in locating other bits of evidence—recorded testimonies, films and photos—from multiple perspectives in relation to one other bits of evidence and cross referring these in space.

But ‘image complexes’ are about interrogating the field of visibility it is also about absence, failures of representation, blockages or destruction of images.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in your thinking about global politics?

I’m an architect, and my intellectual upbringing is in architectural theory and spatial theory. I tend to hold on to this particular approach when I’m entering a geopolitical context or areas that would otherwise be the domain of journalists and human rights people, traditional jurists, etc. Architecture taught me to pay attention to details, to materiality, to media, and to make very close observations about the way built structures might embody political relations.

When I study political situations, I study them as an architect: I look at the way politics turns into a material—spatial practice—the materialization, and at the spatialization, of political forces. Architectural form—as I explained many times—is slowed-down force. My thinking is structured around a relation between force and form. And form, for an architect, is an entry point from which to read politics. So when I look at matter and material reality—like a building, a destroyed building, a piece of infrastructure, a road or bridge, a settlement or suburb or city—I look at it as a product of a political force field. But it is never static. A city always grows, expands or contracts recording the multiple political relations that shaped it.

Buildings continuously record their environment. So one can read political force on buildings. In taking this approach, I am influenced by building surveyors, and insurance people going into a building to look at a scratch in a wall to piece together what might have happened, and what might still happen. So I feel like a kind of property surveyor on the scale of a city at times of war. But in practicing this [forensic architecture](#) I also work like an archaeologist: archaeology is about looking at material remains and trying to piece together the cultural, political, military, or social spheres. But I’m an archaeologist of very recent past or of the present. While some of my investigations will always retain a haptic dimension based on material examination, much of it is an analysis of material captured and registered by various medias. Verify, locate, compose and cross-reference a spatial reality from images of architecture.

What would a student need to become a specialist in your field or understand the world in a global way?

The institutes I run do not recruit only architects. We need to open up the disciplinary bounds of education. We work with filmmakers and architects and with artists.

It embodies a desire to understand architecture as a field of inquiry, with which you can interrogate reality as it is effectively registering material transformation. I see architecture as a way

of augmenting our way of seeing things in the world, but it's not for me a kind of sacred field that should not be touched or changed.

But I'm also using architecture across the entire spectrum of its relation to politics, from the very dystopian—with forensic architecture, a kind of architectural pathology—to the utopian. I have a studio in Palestine with Palestinian partners of mine, and internationals. Alessandro Petty and Sandi Hilal are in this group, which is called [Decolonizing Architecture](#). It's this group that is engaged in very utopian projects for the West Bank and Palestine and the return of refugees and so on. So I use architecture across the entire spectrum, from the very dystopian to the very utopian. Architecture is simply a way of engaging the world and its politics. Space is the way of establishing relations between things. And actually space is not static, it is both a means of establishing relations between people and objects and things. Just as material itself is always an event, always under transformation. So that is something I have taken from architecture and try to bring into politics, but not only in analyzing crimes, but in producing the reality yet to come.

So what we need from people is the desire to understand aesthetics as a field of inquiry, not simply as a pleasurable play of beauty and pleasing kind of effect, but as a kind of very sensorial field, sensorium, in which you can interrogate reality as it is effectively registering material transformation. So I would look simply for that kind of sensorial intensity and high critical approach and understanding and speculating of how it is we know what we think we know. Of course, you cannot see, or you do not know what you see, you do not have the language to interpret or question what it is you 'see' without abstract constructs. This means I don't necessarily look for theoretical capacities in people: I see theory as a way of augmenting our way of seeing things in the world, of registering them, of decoding them, but it's not for me a kind of sacred field to which I submit in any way.

So what is it you work on now?

I'm mostly trying to establish forensic architecture as a critical field of practice and as an agency that produce and disseminate evidence about war crimes in urban context. Recent forensic investigations in [Guatemala](#) and in the Israeli [Negev](#) involved the intersection of violence and environmental transformations, even climate change. For trials and truth commissions, we analyze the extent to which environmental transformation intersect with conflict.

The imaging of this previously invisible types of violence—'environmental violence' such as land degradation, the destruction of fields and forests (in the tropics), pollution and water diversion, and also long term processes of desertification—we use as new type of evidence of processes dispersed across time and space. There are other conflicts that unfold in relation to climatic and environmental transformations and in particular in relation to environmental scarcity.

Conflict has reciprocal interaction with environment transformation: environmental change could aggravate conflict, while conflict tends to generate further environmental damage. This has been apparent in Darfur, Sudan where the conflict was aggravated by increased competition over arable due to local land erosion and desertification. War and insurgency have occurred along Sahel—Arabic for 'shoreline'—on the southern threshold of the Sahara Desert, which is only ebbing as million of hectares of former arable land turn to desert. In past decades, conflicts have broken out in most countries from East to West Africa, along this shoreline: Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal. In 2011 in the city of Daraa, farmers' protests, borne out of an extended cycle of droughts, [marked the beginning of the Syrian civil](#)

[war](#). Similar processes took place in the eastern outskirts of Damascus, Homs, al-Raqqa and along the threshold of the great Syrian and Northern Iraqi Deserts. These transformations impact upon cities, themselves a set of entangled natural/man-made environments. The conflict and hardships along desertification bands compel dispossessed farmers to embark upon increasingly perilous paths of migrations, leading to fast urbanization at the growing outskirts of the cities and slams.

I'm trying to understand these processes across desert thresholds. There has been a very long colonial debate about what is the line beyond which the desert begins. Most commonly it was defined as 200 mm rain per annum. Cartographers were trying to draw it, as it represented, to a certain extent, the limit of imperial control. From this line on, most policing was done through bombing of tribal areas from the air. Since the beginning, the emergence of the use of air power in policing in the post World War I period—aerial control, aerial government—took form in places that were perceived, at the time, as lying beyond the thresholds or edges of the law. The British policing of Iraq, the French in Syria, and Algeria, the Italians in Libya are examples where control would hover in air.

Up to now I was writing about borders that were physical and manmade: walls in the West Bank or Gaza and the siege around it—most notably in *Hollow Land* (2007, read the introduction [here](#)). Now I started to write about borders that are made by the interaction of people and the environment—like the desert line—which is not less violent and brutal. The colonial history of Palestine has been an attempt to push the line of the desert south, trying to make it green or bloom—this is in Ben Gurion's terms—but the origins of this statement are earlier and making the desert green and pushing the line of the desert was also Mussolini's stated aim. On the other hand, climate change is now pushing that line north.

Following not geopolitical but meteorological borders, helps me cut across a big epistemological problem that confines the writing in international relations or geopolitics within the borders organize your writing. [Braudel](#) is an inspiration but, for him, the environment of the Mediterranean is basically cyclically fixed. The problem with geographical determinism is that it takes nature as a given, cyclical, milieu which then affects politics—but I think we are now in a period where politics affects nature in the same way in which nature affects politics. The climate is changing in the same speed as human history.

What does your background in architecture add to understanding the global political controversies you engage in?

We are a forensic agency that provides services to prosecution teams around the world. With our amazing members we ran 20-odd cases around the world from the Amazon to Atacama, for the UN, for Amnesty, for Palestinian NGOs, in Gaza of course, West Bank, issues of killings, individual killings in the West Bank that we do now, and much more drastic destructions.

Forensic Architecture is unique in using architectural research methodologies to analyze violations of human rights and international humanitarian law as they bear upon the built environment—on buildings, cities and territories, and this is why we get many commissions. We produced architectural evidence for numerous investigations and presented them in a number of cases in national and international courts and tribunals. We were commissioned by the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights to [study single destroyed buildings](#), as well as patterns of destruction, resulting from drone warfare in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Gaza. This study was presented at the UN General Assembly in New York. We developed techniques to locate the remains of buildings and villages overgrown by thick rain forests and presented this material as

evidence in the genocide trial of former president [Efraín Ríos Montt](#) in the National Court of Guatemala and the Inter-American Court. We quantified and analyzed levels of architectural destruction in Gaza after the 2014 conflict for Amnesty International. We provided [architectural models and animations](#) to support a petition against the wall in Battir submitted to the Israeli High Court, helping to win the case.

Recently, we use and deal with the reconstruction of human testimony. Witnesses to war give account of the worst moment of their lives; times when their dear ones have died or hurt. Their memory is disturbed, and tends to be blurred. We have developed a way of very carefully interviewing and discussing with witnesses. Together with them, we build digital models of their own homes. So we can see a very slow process of reconstruction of the relation between memory space and architecture. And events start coming back, through the process of building.

In order to develop this, we needed to explore the historical use of memory and architecture, such as Frances Yates' *The Art of Memory* (read it [here](#)), as well as different accounts on the use of trauma, and bring them into the digital age, bring an understanding of the relation of testimony and evidence into contemporary thinking. Single incidents tend to be argued away as aberrations of 'standard operating procedures'. To bring charges against government and military leaderships, it is necessary to demonstrate 'gross and systematic' violations. This means finding consistent and repeated patterns of violations. Architectural analysis, undertaken on the level of the city is able to demonstrate repetition and transformations in patterns of violation/destruction in space and time—within the battle zone along the duration of the conflict. Architectural analysis is useful not only in dealing with architectural evidence—i.e with destroyed buildings—but also helpful in locating other bits of evidence—testimony films or photos—in relation to one other bits of evidence, and cross referring these in space.

Urban violence unfolds at different intensities, speeds and spatial scales: it is made of patterns of multiple instantaneous events as well as slower incremental processes of 'environmental violence' that affects the transformation of larger territories. We aim to analyze and present the relation between forms of violence that occur at different space and time scales. From eruptive kinetic violence of the instantaneous/human incident through patterns of destruction mapped across and along the duration of urban conflict, to what Rob Nixon calls the 'slow violence' of environmental transformation (read the introduction of the eponymous book [here](#), pdf).

Last question. How does your approach to research relate to, or differ from, approaches to international politics?

To study conflict as a reality that unfolds across multiple scales, we use the microphysical approach—dealing with details, fragments and ruins—as an entry-point from which we will unpack the larger dynamics of a conflict. We reconstruct singular incidents, locate them in space and time to look for and identify patterns, then study these patterns in relation to long terms and wide-scale environmental transformations. This approach seeks to make connections between, what [Marc Bloch](#) of the Annales School called 'micro- and macro-history, between close-ups and extreme long shots' in his thesis on historical method. This topological approach is distinct from a traditional scalar one: the macro (political/strategic/territorial) situation will not be seen a root cause for a myriad set of local human right violations (incidents/tactics). In the complex reality of conflict, singularities are equally the result of 'framing conditions' and also contributing factors to phase transitions that might affect, or 'de-frame' as Latour has put it, changes occurring in wider areas. Instead of nesting smaller scales within larger ones, our analysis will seek to fluidly shift from macro to micro, from political conditions to individual cases, from buildings to environments and this along multiple threads, connection and feedback loops.

While in relation to the single incident it might still be possible to establish a direct, linear connection between the two limit figures of the perpetrator and the victim along the model of (international) criminal law, evidence for environmental violence is more scattered and diffused. Instead, it requires the examination of what we call ‘field causalities’—causal ecologies that are non-linear, diffused, simultaneous, and that involve multiple agencies and feedback loops, challenging the immediacy of ‘evidence’.

Establishing field causalities requires the examination of force fields and causal ecologies, that are non-linear, diffused, simultaneous and involve multiple agencies and feedback loops. Whereas linear causality entails a focus on sequences of causal events on the model of criminal law that seeks to trace a direct line between the two limit figures of victim and perpetrator field causality involves the spatial arrangement of simultaneous sites, actions and causes. It is inherently relational and thus a spatial concept. By treating space as the medium of relation between separate elements of evidence brought together, we aim to expand the analytical scope of forensic architecture. It is inherently relational and thus a spatial concept. By treating space as the medium of relation between separate elements of evidence brought together, field causalities expands the analytical scope of forensic architecture.

Let me illustrate this a bit. Forms of violence are crucially convertible one to another. Drying fields along the Sahel or the Great Syrian Desert, for example, reach a point in which they can no longer support their farmers, contributing to impoverishment, migration to cities, slumization and waves of protest that might contribute to the eruption of armed conflict. These layers call for a form of architectural analysis able to shift and synthesize information at different scales—from single incidents as they are registered in the immediate spatial setting, through patterns of violations across the entire urban terrain to ‘environmental violence’ articulated in the transformation of large territories.

Eyal Weizman is an architect, Professor of Visual Cultures and director of the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London. Since 2011 he also directs the European Research Council funded project, [Forensic Architecture](#) - on the place of architecture in international humanitarian law. Since 2007 he is a founding member of the architectural collective [DAAR](#) in Beit Sahour/Palestine. Weizman has been a professor of architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and has also taught at the Bartlett (UCL) in London at the Stadel School in Frankfurt and is a Professeur invité at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) in Paris. He lectured, curated and organised conferences in many institutions worldwide. His books include *Mengele's Skull* (with Thomas Keenan at Sterenberg Press 2012), *Forensic Architecture* (DOCUMENTA13 notebook, 2012), *The Least of all Possible Evils* (Nottetempo 2009, Verso 2011), *Hollow Land* (Verso, 2007), *A Civilian Occupation* (Verso, 2003), the series *Territories* 1,2 and 3, *Yellow Rhythms* and many articles in journals, magazines and edited books.

Related links

- [Faculty profile at Goldsmiths](#)
- [Forensic Architecture homepage](#)
- Read Weizman’s introduction to *Forensis* (2014) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Weizman’s *Forensic Architecture: Notes from Fields and Forums* (DOCUMENTA 2012) [here](#) (pdf)

- Read Weizman's *Lethal Theory* (2009) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read the introduction to Weizman's *Hollow Land* (2007) [here](#) (pdf)