# Review:

Stein, Rebecca L. 2021. *Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine.* Stanford University Press.

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*Abstract*

Screen Shots *takes an ethnographic approach to explore the visual history of the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories and the different roles photography played within the decades-long conflict. Choosing to forgo the usual route of exploring the impact of photos on social activism, the author focused instead on how easily images can be utilized as tools of colonialism supporting the occupation; a unique viewpoint offering readers a more comprehensive understanding of the function of photography as a political placeholder in modern age. Although* Screen Shots *attempts to showcase a solid overview of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through images for over more than two decades, it still comes short in terms of balance in revealing real-life experiences of snapping photos for political purposes from both sides.*

*Keywords*
*Photography, Digital Photography, Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, State Violence, Israeli Military Occupation, Middle East, Civilian Photography, Digital Activism, Social Media*

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Rebecca L. Stein's *Screen Shots* comes amidst a highly sensitive period of escalation in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in 2021. Although the conflict itself has gone on for decades, 2021 marked various unprecedented large-scale incidents from protests and police riot control, rocket attacks on Israel by Hamas, and Israeli airstrikes targeting civilians in the Gaza Strip. These incidents started with uprising protests in East Jerusalem that quickly spread to all Palestinian territories and even triggered mass protests around the world. Soon after, it became a full-on war between Israel and Hamas, and after 11 days of continuous attacks that left more than two hundred people dead, both sides agreed to cease fire on May 21 while both claiming victory (Cai et al. 2021). Simultaneously, as *Screen Shots* went to press, the Black Lives Matter protests against police violence were reigniting the interest in the bystander camera as a tool of social change and putting an end to state violence. *Screen Shots* explores the role of civilian photography in politics, while chronicling the photographic timeline of Israeli state violence in the occupied Palestinian territories during the first two decades of the 21st century.

In an attempt to capture the gaze of both sides from Palestinian activists and human rights workers to Israeli soldiers and Jewish settlers, Stein manages to propose a comprehensive visual historical context of the Israeli military occupation; a context that goes back to the early years of consumer digital photography in the 2000s and extends to the current era of social media proliferation. Throughout the book chapters, one can clearly observe the comparison held between the role and impact of state violence images taken with rudimentary digital cameras by Israeli soldiers or Palestinian witnesses in the early 21st century, and newer ones currently taken in abundance by cellphones. Contrary to most current claims about digital activism and utilizing new technologies and social media for social change, and in an attempt to let go of the digital optimism or utopianism that was a product of the Arab revolts almost a decade ago, Stein shows the other side of the coin; focusing on the close relationship between colonialism and technology and investigating how the Israeli occupation sets to benefit from the current shifts in the

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media ecosystem and use social media as a toolbox for supporting the occupation.

It is often thought that new technologies are almost organically suited for grassroots prodemocracy movements, however, *Screen Shots* takes a different stand and asks whether the current presence of cellphone cameras at the scenes of state violence and our anticipation of the visual evidence of such incidents are somehow normalizing these scenes as we are growing accustomed to the sights of killings. Stein investigates what she calls the "digital promise"; further elucidating that the promise of new photographic technologies offering clearer pictures with better details in real-time will somehow aid different parties in achieving their political dreams. The book follows how different actors including the Israeli military, Israeli soldiers, Jewish settlers, pro Zionists, Palestinian witnesses, and Israeli and Palestinian human rights workers, each on their own, manage these modern photographic technologies to realize this camera dream or digital promise.

From Israeli soldiers practicing on taking photos to perfect the military's image, to human rights activists capturing soldiers killing civilians, to Zionist conspiracy theorists accusing Palestinians of playing dead in photos, *Screen Shots* delves deep into the visual history of all these players. In the author's chronicles of the Israeli state violence photographs, Stein succeeds in vividly demonstrating the function of photography as a political placeholder during the past two decades. She focuses on image operations and visual practices concerning the same topic, but through different lenses of a broad range of actors and institutions. From her viewpoint, readers explore how different actors share the same dream of using photos and photographic technologies to lobby for their own political agenda.

The book's first chapter "Sniper Portraits" comes through the lens of the Israeli soldiers whose jobs—set by the military—were clear: to take photos that combat the bad images of Israel playing on TV sets across the globe and strip the Palestinians from the visual field, replacing

them with the military's gaze instead. As Stein puts it: "in the hands of the Israeli sniper, even the simple Fujifilm camera was also a tool of occupation." She then moves to chronicling the experiences of Palestinian videographers and camera-activists working in the occupied West Bank as well as Israeli videographers working with the Israeli NGO "B'Tselem" (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), and the continuous risks they had to endure to visually capture Israeli state violence.

Unpacking the perspective of Jewish settlers, she highlights the conspiracy theories utilized by these groups to counterattack state violence images and normalize such acts; from claims that killings did not happen because blood was not looking dark enough to allegations that funerals were not authentic. The continuous flood of allegations is now anticipated and expected whenever Israeli violence against Palestinians is captured on camera, to the point that bloggers argue that any new surfacing video, depicting wrongdoings by Israel, is presumed to be fake until proven otherwise beyond unreasonable doubt. All this contributed to images of dead or injured Palestinians being seen and treated as mere weapons in a war against Israel instead of being taken as evidence of awfully paramount human rights violations.

The book also explores the Israeli military's evolving media strategies to counterattack citizen photography uncovering Israeli wrongdoings in the Palestinian occupied territories and its end goal of monopolizing the visual coverage of occurring events. As Israeli officials witness with concern the proliferation of cameras and cellphones in the hands of Palestinians and human rights activists, particularly in the digital media era, they are constantly attempting to narrow the gap by acquiring new cameras and setting a surveillance infrastructure, so the world can get to only see their representations of occurring incidents, in lieu of these of Palestinian citizens or human rights workers and institutions.

Although Stein offers her readers a solid overview of state violence photos in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, through different lenses, the

book still lacks balance in terms of showcasing real-life experiences from both sides. Only one chapter covers in detail the Palestinian visual experience in regards to shooting and distributing state violence images, with the rest of the book chapters solely following the Israeli experience, whether represented in Israeli soldiers, B'Tselem NGO and its activist workers, Jewish settlers, or the military. Dedicating more space to discussing the Palestinian viewpoint of how the occupied country's citizens are using photos to make their case would have granted readers further significant insights into the issue.

Additionally, even though the book focuses on the broken camera dream and chasing the digital promise of using photos and technologies to realize political agendas; a promise that—according to the author—often ends up in failure, it could have also touched upon incidents where the other opposing narrative of digital activism for social or political change proved successful. Nevertheless, *Screen Shots* offers readers an unorthodox outlook on the modern ideological battlefield; a battlefield where photography and images are employed as weapons that are as salient and potent as tanks and soldiers, or even more so.

## References

Cai, Weiyi, Josh Holder, Lauren Leatherby, Eleanor Lutz, Scott Reinhard, and Karen Yourish. 2021. "The Toll of Eight Days of Conflict in Gaza and Israel." *The New York Times*, May. Accessed [January 14, 2022]. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/17/world/middleeast/israel-palestine-gaza-conflict-death-toll.html.