Higher Seminar MKV/SH:

Open Lecture


Arranged by Media- & Communication Studies and the RJ-funded project
The Times of Television at MKV/SH
- Staffan Ericson, Amanda Lagerkvist & Paul Achter -

The lecture will be followed by a reception in the department

Media Witnessing and the Perpetual Ripeness of Time

Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski

Department of Communication and Journalism

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Abstract

‗Media witnessing‘ describes a new configuration of mediation, representation, and experience under conditions of ubiquitous media technologies and global risk. It refers simultaneously to the appearance of witnesses in media reports, the possibility of media themselves bearing witness, and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events. In conflating these three strands, media witnessing not only speaks to the complexity of their interactions (a television news report may depict witnesses to an event, bear witness to that event, and turn viewers into witnesses all at the same time), but it also appears as a new problematic in media theory. Media witnessing, we will contend, offers new ways of thinking through some abiding problems of media, communication, and culture. And it is intimately—perhaps causally—involved in the transformation of our relation to historical significance, and our experience of time.
Media witnessing is expressed in a number of overlapping dimensions:

1) **The Instance within the Instant.** The referential inclusiveness of ubiquitous audiovisual recording technologies (e.g. surveillance and cellphone cameras) makes the potential significance of incidentally recorded events available for immediate public reproduction, troubling the distinction between the event as a unique instant and as a reproducible instance, the traditional dichotomy between primary (‘first-hand’) and secondary witnessing, and enabling ongoing recollection and review of everyday worlds as sites of historical transformation and potential future crisis.

2) **Connective Assemblage.** The proliferation of portable media technologies and connectivity systems enables the rapid dissemination of reproduced events via the internet and television, turning almost anyone into a media witness. Interpersonal and mass media of connectivity are organized as hybrid assemblages of human and technological agents with shifting and volatile boundaries, forces of association and lines of influence. These new constellations of recorded experiences defy traditional models of mass communication, producing ad hoc communities of attention on a global scale (e.g. the Neda Agha-Soltan affair in Iran).

3) **Ripeness is All.** Media witnessing points to a general intensification of the eventfulness of the world. Not just the transformation of ordinary lives and routine experiences into the ground of events discursively marked as historically significant, but, through ubiquitous recording, the potential recovery of all time – of every one of an increasing number of recorded instants – as retrospectively critical, made microscopically searchable and isolable through technologically-enabled techniques of temporal and representational manipulation (slow motion, freeze frame, picture and audio enhancement). Intensified eventfulness is thus connected to an increasingly forensic experience of potentiality and temporality, a generalizing into ordinary life-worlds of the permanent crisis-readiness that was once restricted to institutionally distinct ‘centres of operation’ such as news-rooms and war-rooms.

4) **The Mediatization of Trauma.** In an age of globalized risks (nuclear disasters, climate change, epidemics, terrorism), media witnessing is generalized across multiple, unpredictable threat scenarios that take the whole world as their arena.

Hence it incorporates audiences into a system of perpetual crisis-readiness. This is the case not simply with respect to those who themselves produce media reports of crisis, but also in the sense that audiences perform crisis-behavior. Through the extension of metaphors and protocols of
trauma to media audiences, media witnessing inculcates crisis-emotions among those who were not physically present at the critical event but nevertheless feel potentially affected by it (‘it could happen to us’). This performance of crisis behavior is informed not by a psychoanalytical sense of individual trauma, but by a collectivized account of cultural trauma which is concerned less with identity and shared history and more with impending threats and future dangers.

5) Perpetual Vigilance. Media witnessing enlarges and extends the systemic nervousness of modern life, at the same time creating cosmopolitan risk publics who perceive their commonality through representations of shared vulnerability. Proceeding from the moral imperative of ‘never again’, media witnessing acts as a belated response to the inaction of the world during the Holocaust. It therefore re-articulates the relation between knowing and doing by shaping shared moral memory and participating in a temporality of cataclysmic recurrence.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

**Dr. Paul Frosh** is an Associate Professor (Senior Lecturer) in the Department of Communication and Journalism at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His books include *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry* (2003), *Meeting the Enemy in the Living Room: Terrorism and Communication in the Contemporary Era*. (2006, in Hebrew, co-edited with Tamar Liebes) and *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (2009, co-edited with Amit Pinchevski). He is currently working on *The Poetics of Media: Imagination and Communication*, to be published by Polity.

**Recent Publications:**

**Books**


*Meeting the Enemy In the Living Room: Terrorism and Communication in the Contemporary Era*. 2006, Kibbutz Hameuchad (in Hebrew). Edited with Tamar Liebes


**Articles**


**Dr. Amit Pinchevski** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University, Israel. His research interests revolve around philosophy of communication and media. He is the author of *By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication* (Duquesne UP, 2005) and co-editor (with Paul Frosh) of *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (Palgrave, 2009). His current project is on the mediation of trauma.

**Books**


**Articles**


