

International Conference

Testimony/Bearing Witness. Current Controversies and Historical Perspectives

Berlin, January 15–17, 2015

Testimony and bearing witness are key figures in cultural and epistemological practices. Within current debates in the humanities both have turned into controversial concepts that convey seemingly incommensurate claims: On the one hand, testimony is seen as a reliable source of information and knowledge, as a piece of evidence promising objectivity (predominantly in discourses of epistemology and law). On the other hand, bearing witness carries ethical and political reflections in terms of memory and history (for instance in the testimonies of survivors of genocide and extreme violence). We are even confronted with diverse epistemological ambitions and methodological trajectories: At one end of the spectrum a general concept of testimony as knowledge through the words of others, is reflected; at the other end, there is a skepticism towards general definitions, combined with the desire to shape figures of bearing witness by tracing their manifold sources in religion and cultural history.

This conference aims to channel the debate on bearing witness and giving testimony especially towards those aspects that appear precarious and controversial between philosophy and cultural history: What are the opportunities and limits involved in communicating epistemological and ethical, philosophical and cultural-historical, past and present perspectives on the phenomenon and concept of testimony and bearing witness?

The conference is organized by the research project “Zeugenschaft” (“Testimony/Bearing Witness”) and sponsored by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG). The project is led by Sybille Krämer (Institute of Philosophy, Freie Universität Berlin) and Sigrid Weigel (Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung Berlin); collaborating researchers are Aurélia Kalisky, Heike Schlie (both ZfL Berlin), and Sibylle Schmidt (FU Berlin).

Venues

Conference location:

Freie Universität Berlin, Institut für Philosophie, Habelschwerdter Allee 30, 14195 Berlin (Dahlem)

Film screening:

Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Schützenstraße 18, 10117 Berlin-Mitte

Contact

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Thursday, Jan. 15

2:30 p.m. Welcome and Introduction

I. The 20th and 21st Centuries – Witnesses between Memory, Politics, and Justice

Chair: Sybille Krämer

3 p.m.

José Brunner (Tel Aviv)

A Narrative Turn in Human Rights Discourse? Victims of Gross Human Rights Violations: Between Truth Commissions and the Right to the Truth

Marcel Lemonde (Strasbourg)

Testimony/ Bearing Witness in Light of the Khmer Rouge Trial

5 p.m. Coffee break

5:30 p.m.

Sigrid Weigel (Berlin)

Tensions and Interplay of Different Types of Testimony in a Film from the Warsaw Ghetto – “A Film Unfinished” by Yael Hersonski (2010)

II. Historical Perspectives on the Concept of Testimony

Chair: Sigrid Weigel

7 p.m. Evening lecture

François Hartog (EHESS Paris)

The Presence of the Witness

Friday, Jan. 16

10 a.m.

Axel Gelfert (Singapore)

Enlightenment Perspectives on the Problems of Testimony

Michèle Bokobza Kahan (Tel Aviv)

Can We Believe in What We See? Historical and Philosophical Approaches of Testimonial Discourses in the 17th and 18th Century in France

12 a.m. Lunch break

III. The Epistemology of Testimony: Secondhand Belief or Genuine Knowledge?

Chair: Sibylle Schmidt

1 p.m.

Sybille Krämer (Berlin)

Epistemic Dependence and Trust

Miranda Fricker (Sheffield)

Having Your Say: The Expressive Value of Testimony

3 p.m. Coffee break

3:30 p.m.

Dirk Koppelberg (Berlin)

How to Account for Group Testimony?

Film screening at *Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung, Schützenstr. 18, 10117 Berlin-Mitte*

6:30 p.m.

A Film Unfinished (ISR/D 2010), directed by Yael Hersonski

Followed by a Discussion with Yael Hersonski (Tel Aviv)

Moderation: Aurélia Kalisky

Saturday, Jan. 17

IV. Trauma and Testimony – Perspectives from Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis

Chair: Aurélia Kalisky

9:30 a.m.

Steve Weine (Chicago)

Testimony and Therapeutic Culture

Zohar Rubinstein (Tel Aviv)

The Testimony of the Traumatic Witness: The Tension between the Therapeutic Act and the Loss of Words and Meaning

11:30 a.m. Coffee break

12 a.m.

Janine Altounian (Paris)

Wenn das Zeugnis nur durch die Vermittlung der zweiten oder dritten Generation erfolgen kann – Der armenische Fall

1 p.m. Lunch break

V. Testimony and Visual Evidence in Art and other Media

Chair: Sigrid Weigel

2 p.m.

John Durham Peters (Iowa City)
Like a Thief in the Night: Witnessing and Watching

Peter Geimer (Berlin)
Remembrance of Things Past: Testimony and Imagination

4 p.m. End of the conference