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Holography, Historical Indexicality, and the Holocaust

Abstract

Each year less and less survivors arrive in Auschwitz to commemorate the International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In 2005, almost 1500 survivors attended the anniversary; in 2015, only 300 survivors came to Auschwitz. Therefore, as the memory of the Holocaust increasingly depends on commemoration and re-telling of the story for the sake of the new generations, various Holocaust-related educational institutions come up with innovative ways of bridging the past with the present. This fact motivates the main question of this paper: what happens when all the survivors are gone?

By focusing on a case study of the USC Shoah Foundation’s holographic testimony-based project developed with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies: New Dimensions in Testimony, this paper centers on the relationship between new technologies, visual studies, and Holocaust memory. By technology, I mean the study of interactivity in contemporary Holocaust memory, representation, and education, as well as developments in digital media, digital humanities, and computer science. On a more abstract level, this research discusses how technology informs the way we relate to our past. The second question, therefore, that motivates this paper is: what is the future of Holocaust memory?

However, as the last witnesses of that time are dying and the memory of the Holocaust increasingly depends on commemoration and re-telling of the story for the sake of the new generations, various Holocaust-related educational institutions face an existential question: what happens when all the survivors are gone?

One of them, in particular, uses new digital and interactive technologies to enrich the process of learning and knowing history via images, while generating, archiving, and curating the memory of the Holocaust. Two years ago, the USC Shoah Foundation announced its holographic testimony-based project being developed with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies: New Dimensions in Testimony. The project records interviews with the Holocaust survivors and creates 3-D holograms that support the foundation’s educational efforts and are meant to evoke an emotional connection between the survivors’ testimonies and the youth.

Can holograms substitute or replace living survivors’ mission to educate about the Shoah?
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How can 3-D technologies affect attitudes towards the past and how does this new effort to ‘bring history to life’ shape the Holocaust narrative? Do 3-D holograms enhance oral history’s claim to truth and ‘historical indexicality’ in a way that 2-D films cannot? How does this “world’s first ever full-life history captured in true 3-D” impact the way we understand film as a medium of memory’s expression, physical materialization, and control? These questions lie at the heart of this paper that, through examining ethical, epistemological, and theoretical questions that the USC Shoah Foundation’s project raises, offers a consideration of what’s at stake in this reimagining of live witness testimony. Moreover, it considers the seemingly dichotomous relationship between education and spectacle (or entertainment) and discusses the feasibility of new holographic technologies within the field of historical testimony. On a more theoretical level, this research discusses how technology informs the way we relate to our past; what are the implications of memory curatorship; and what are the new avenues of approaching the spatio-temporality of testimony that this project enables.

For purposes of maintaining a theoretical focus, this paper specifically analyzes the case study of the USC Shoah Foundation’s holographic project ‘New Dimensions in Testimony’ that highlights the above-mentioned tropes of technologized memory. First, I discuss the project’s historical background and its epistemological assumptions. Second, I contextualize it within a broader visual studies theoretical framework by invoking writings of Bernard Stiegler, Emmanuel Levinas, Roland Barthes, Andre Bazin, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard. Finally, on a less abstract level, I discuss both production- and reception-centric questions that this project raises.

2. History as Liveness

In 1994, inspired by his experience of filming Schindler’s List (1993) in Poland and meeting numerous Holocaust survivors, Steven Spielberg founded the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in Los Angeles. Its original goal was to secure video-based testimonies from living survivors and witnesses of the Shoah. In 2006, the Foundation became part of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences and changed its name to the USC Shoah Foundation: The Institute for Visual History and Education, which reflects the broadened mission of the Foundation: “to overcome prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry through the educational use of the Institute’s visual history testimonies.” Keeping with this sentiment, it has gradually become an umbrella institute for the collection and curatorship of testimonies from the survivors of Rwandan, Cambodian, and Armenian genocides. In 2012, eighteen years after its foundation, the USC Shoah Foundation completed the Holocaust testimonies project, which will “guarantee that survivors’ voices will be heard, that their faces will be seen, and that their memories will endure for generations to come.” Symbolically, this archival achievement contributes to transnational efforts of genocide oblivion (and denial) prevention.

Further emphasizing the relationship between personal and collective histories, the USC Shoah Foundation has championed new technologies and digital media literacy in all of their commemoration projects. One of them, the online educational iWitness platform, provides educational resources to students and teachers in a form of a searchable testimony database. It allows users to browse through the Foundation’s archive categorized by commonly used 9,000 keywords, such as ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau’, ‘Warsaw Ghetto’, ‘Treblinka’. Together with the integrated Google Maps geolocation search function, the directory “enables educators and students to jump to the exact minute within a testimony in which topics of interest are discussed.” Finally, this search engine allows users to create online classroom spaces that promote digital humanities and history projects; it also provides access to archival and library materials from other educational institutions such as Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Three years ago, the Foundation announced its newest and most ambitious undertaking yet: a holographic testimony-based project. Stephen Smith, the director of the Foundation, explains the methodology behind the design and the actual creation of the first hologram in March 2014:

Pinchas Gutter sits in a red chair
surrounded by bright green fabric under the glare of several thousand LED lights, 53 cameras capturing his every move. This is the world’s first ever full-life history captured in true 3-D. As I interview him, I perch on a stool 8 feet away at 90 degrees to Pinchas. We can see each other through a mirror angled at 45 degrees. I have 400 questions in front of me as we settle in for five days of intensive interview. This is not the fireside chat in the comfort of the interviewee’s home. We are joined in the studio by a host of graphic and natural language scientists, multiple interviewers and producers frantically scribbling notes. Oral history just changed irreversibly.

New Dimensions in Testimony, the first truly interactive question-and-answer program, is the brainchild of concept designer Heather Maio. Frustrated by the lack of human dialogue with digital content in an interactive age, and concerned that conversations between survivors and young people would be forever lost, she set out to beat the clock. Her criteria were demanding: content must be natural language video conversations rendered in true holographic display, without the 3-D glasses. (…) [She] brought together the USC Shoah Foundation, the largest archive of testimony in the world, with USC institute for Creative Technology, the only lab in the world that could capture true 3-D imaging with the language-processing skills to build a voice-recognition system to make conversation-based testimony. 8

How is, therefore, this holographic testimony different from published memoirs and recorded interviews? Is the memory digitization merely a consequence of technological advancements?

What makes this so different is the nonlinear nature of the content. We have grown used to hearing life histories as a flow of consciousness in which the interviewee is in control of the narrative and the interviewer guides the interviewee through the stages of his or her story. With the Maio methodology, the interviewee is subject to a series of questions gleaned from students, teachers and public who have universal questions that could apply to any witness, or specific questions about the witness’s personal history. They are asked in sets around subject matter, each a slightly different spin on a related topic. In order to get to those specific questions, the interviewee does provide a life history (in this case to the USC Shoah Foundation). They also provide a five minute, 15-minute and 40-minute summary for use with different future audiences. Then a long series of stand-alone questions are asked, such as, “Did you ever find your sister?” “Do you feel hatred or the need for revenge?” Do you believe in a God?” “How do you feel when you see genocide happening to others?” 9

Stephen Smith ends his account by summarizing the experience of interviewing Gutter and explaining the type of labor this Holocaust survivor from Poland put into the project:

Pinchas is placid, adaptable, and takes direction well. That is just as well, because he also has to provide comments like, “I am sorry, can you repeat that?” “Let’s stick to the topic, shall we?” And, “I am really pleased to have shared my thoughts with you.” When the New Dimensions project is complete, you will be able to go to a museum, such as the Illinois Holocaust Museum, listen to Pinchas give his 15-minute story, then ask questions that comes to mind, and Pinchas will be able to answer your questions about the Holocaust and his life before and after, as well as what he thinks about issues in the world today. 10

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The expansion of the New Dimensions in Testimony project has continued and September 2015 marked another milestone in its operation. Seventeen years after giving her original testimony to USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive, Anita Lasker Wallfisch – Auschwitz survivor – became the second person to complete the New Dimensions in Testimony interview first piloted by Pinchas Gutner in 2012. Similarly to Pinchas, Anita “spent Sept. 21-25, for six hours each day, sitting on USC Institute for Creative Technologies’ cutting-edge 3D capture stage surrounded by high-definition cameras and LED lights.” However, the number of questions in the hologram’s database has significantly grown. Stephen Smith asked Anita about 1,250 questions total that paint a much different story from that of Pinchas. The goal is to interview survivors, whose Holocaust stories vary and convey a complex and multifaceted portrait of their WWII experiences and whose holograms will be installed in various Holocaust museums and educational institutions in the United States. According to the Foundation’s website about a “dozen more survivors are currently in talks to be filmed for New Dimensions,” a project that “undeniably speaks to the Foundation’s earnest desire to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.

Therefore, instead of answering the question of whether this project marks a necessary turn in Holocaust education, the next part of this paper considers theoretical, ethical, and epistemological questions that this technologically advanced endeavor raises. Consequently, while it avoids discussing the holographic project’s feasibility, it examines its implications for the study of memory and cinema.

3. Face to Face with Simulacrum

Spotlighting the importance of witness testimony and impending threat of losing all of the living survivors, the hologram undeniably and inevitably attempts to replace the dead by preserving the experience of engagement and interaction with the witness. Its aim is to be the educational surrogate. Jacques Derrida’s thoughts from Echographies of Television apply to the first affective impression this project triggers, as we already feel and “already know that death is here.” Indeed, the recognition that Pinchas sits motionlessly on a chair and patiently responds to 400 questions precisely because his death is imminent becomes one of the first cognitive and affective sensations and side effects this project creates. In many ways this realization pertains also to other technologies of commemoration. It evokes basic theories of mimesis and reproduction of reality and rests on the assumption that something in the photograph, film, and the hologram is immediate.

In What Is Cinema?, André Bazin introduces the notion that the Western lineage of art consists of this mummification effort, since to “preserve, artificially, (...) body appearance is to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.” Despite the fact that photography, film, and the hologram differ from previous art forms, our obsession with realism and liveness (as a mode of sustaining life) has carried over. The “complex” of the plastic arts lives on, and the hologram becomes a new form of mummification and a relic of a survivor.

In the same text, Bazin notes that the “production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making.” Indeed, the notion of objectivity and sincerity applies to this discussion of the holographic simulation of liveness. The imitation of the survivor is meant to present an objectively hyper-real yet subjectively engaged testimony. In other words, using Emmanuel Levinas’ idea pertaining to human sociality, this face-to-face encounter with the hologram intends to evoke the feeling of responsibility for the Other’s story, memory, and testimony. The direct contact with the imitation of the survivor’s body and memory is paramount. However, since the idea of simulation presupposes a form of artifice it is worth asking: what kind of illusion is it?

Pointedly, Roland Barthes elucidates this ‘phantom discourse’ further in Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography. He argues that every photograph, despite the assuredness of the reality it captures, evokes the acknowledgement of the absence (of that object being photographed) in the future. Instead of liveness, the image conveys perpetual death. He describes this catastrophic
realization in the context of Alexander Gardner’s photograph of Lewis Payne from 1865: "The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the studium. But the punctum is: he is going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence."19 This reciprocal relationship between photography, nostalgic pleasure, past, and death applies also to one’s experience of and with the hologram. While it forces one to acknowledge that the ‘real survivor’ must have been present in front of and captured by multiple cameras, the hologram does not grant access to all reality.

Similarly, Jean Baudrillard provokes one to question the three-dimensionality of holograms as a guarantor of the real:

why would the simulacrum with three dimensions be closer to the real than the one with two dimensions? It claims to be, but paradoxically, it has the opposite effect: to render us sensitive to the fourth dimension as a hidden truth, a secret dimension of everything, which suddenly takes on all the force of evidence. The closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum (…), the more evident it becomes (…) how everything escapes representation, escapes its own double and its resemblance.20

If a hologram reveals the Real it is always already in the past. In other words, the hologram (via its illusory liveness) (re)produces the past. The (historical) indexical moment of one’s contact with the survivor is replaced by one’s contact with the past (of the limited recording).

The notion of historical indexicality invites the consideration of the technology behind the hologram as this project is not simply about turning 2D into 3D. In its core, the project uses language recognition technology and it simulates human cognition. In other words, the brainy part of the technology matters just as much as the simulated achievement of semblance. Indeed, the hologram of Pinchas engages with the audience; it answers their questions; it reacts to the external stimuli. However, it also reaches its cognitive limits: it is able to give only what it has previously received from its makers. Since the set of pre-programmed questions is fixed, the hologram’s account does not meet the criteria for a live witness testimony. If the hologram of Pinchas is asked an off-topic (off the list) question, it will reply in a courteous manner that he is not meant to discuss this issue today and that he is here to discuss the Holocaust.

4. Body and Memory

The debates concerning cinematic and other representations of the Holocaust evoke the relationship between personal and collective histories and memories that – in turn – is germane to the holographic project under consideration. From Descartes’s *A Discourse on Method* to Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), philosophers and artists have been asking: how is subjectivity formed? One’s consciousness secures one’s existence – asserted the former text in a pivotal humanist moment of European philosophical thought. To which the latter added: memories are part of the formation of one’s subjectivity. We entered the 21st century suspecting that a synthetic human can believe to be a complete/real human on the basis of his/her memories that he/she has carried in his/her artificial intelligence head. How does the problem of memory and subjectivity relate to the hologram? Here, Bernard Stiegler’s divagations on the paradox of death come to mind (directly inspired Martin Heidegger’s notion that one must confront his/her death to become himself/herself). In *The Ister* (2004)21, he asserts that everyone fears death, and yet – paradoxically – nobody will experience it. In a sense, our relationship to death is never in first person; we are always once removed from it. We experience death through the death of others. The hologram, therefore, by salvaging one survivor’s memories creates a promise of memory’s life after death. Memory produces a certain type of certainty: to remember means to have a grip on not only one’s past but on one’s consciousness. But it is data and not memory that constitutes the logic of the hologram’s interaction with its audience. Here lies the next form of irresistible illusion produced by this project.
Could one argue that both the body and memory of the survivor become an artifact? Seemingly, this question takes us back to Bazin’s notion of art’s mumification effort. In a sense, the hologram project presupposes our taking for granted the fixed relationship between the survivor (reality) and his/her ‘mumified’ representation (hologram). However, what actually takes place is the mumification of the body (semblance) but not of the mind. On the contrary, the project creates an ontologically new entity, whose goal is not necessarily consistent or compatible with the objective of the living survivor. In other words, the durable goal of the survivor is to be a human and a witness. The hologram, on the other hand, works according to its main objective: the constant improvement of its function and functionality. One can imagine that the future holograms might use artificial intelligence, thus further deepening the gap between the reality and the artifact. (One could also imagine a potential for manipulating the data and hacking the hologram’s ‘memory’, thus obfuscating and changing the historical narrative.) This project becomes, therefore, a sign of incredible trust that survivors put into this commemorative project.

For the sake of Holocaust education, they let their bodies be holographed, thus transferring the agency over their bodies and testimonies to somebody else. The temporality of their testimony opens itself up and becomes: futurity.

5. Interactivity and Spectacle in Contemporary Holocaust Education

The notion of bringing history to life has always meant preserving the authenticity of the testimony and of the voice of the survivor. It was never about protecting the physical contact with the person giving the testimony. The holographic project initiates a thought-provoking shift of the general focus of the USC Shoah Foundation’s commemorative efforts. As a result, some may fear that the holographic simulation of liveness might alleviate the impending threat of losing all of the Holocaust witnesses and therefore absolve us of the responsibility to remember and to do the remembering. In other words, instead of facing the notion that it is our responsibility to remember and (self) educate, we might begin to rely on this simulacrum of life, on this spectacle. Conversely, hundreds of students who have already interacted with the hologram of Pinchas at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center report that “meeting and talking to Pinchas Gutter through New Dimensions is an engrossing, powerful experience. Docents have also noticed that students seem more comfortable asking ‘virtual Pinchas’ sensitive questions that they would be hesitant to ask a survivor in person.”

Hence, another set of questions arises: does interactivity necessarily evoke pleasure and affective response and how should we consider these two notions in terms of Holocaust education? Should we provide genocide education that is pleasurable and enticing (especially to children and youth that have been brought up watching 3D movies) even if the topic is tragic? In other words, we should consider whether it has, indeed, become our goal to adapt the mode of the historical transmission to the viewer.

The problem of the spectacle in genocide education relates to one of the basic divides in theoretical approaches to cinematic representations of the Holocaust. While the in-depth discussion of these discourses remains beyond the scope of this paper, one could use the examples of Claude Lanzmann’s documentary Shoah (1985) and Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993) to illustrate the differences between them. In its most basic formulation, this theoretical and aesthetic discussion is about the division between education and entertainment. It forces us to ask whether we should make it easier for people to learn about the Holocaust.

Therefore, one must both acknowledge the sense of connectivity, as well as aesthetic and medium familiarity that this holographic project might offer the youngest generation and wonder whether this project’s long-term effects might turn people away from the demands of educational hard work. In a broader sense, every Holocaust museum faces the basic dilemma of how to inspire new generations to learn about the genocide that is slowly becoming more and more abstract. They navigate the landscape of mimesis and pathos and balance their choices between education and entertainment. This, in turn, evokes the notion of labor and curatorship. It could be argued that Pinchas motionlessly sits for many hours, so that somebody else will not have to perform the labor of learning about the Holocaust.
in a more traditional (and less spectacular) way. This provocative assertion forces us to consider the way the future generations will be or won’t be able to connect to the memory and history of the Shoah (or even: history at large).

6. Conclusion: Politics of Visual Media Consumption

The above-mentioned questions of memory preservation and labor evoke notions of politics of memory and curatorship. Jacques Derrida discusses what links “the juridico-political to seeing, to vision, but also to the capture of images.” He argues that:

[It] remains a question as to who, in the end, is authorized to appear [se montrer] but above all authorized to show [montrer], edit, store, interpret, and exploit images. It is a timeless question, but it is taking on original dimensions today. One would have to approach this specificity via the very general question of the right of inspection, which exceeds both our time and our culture. (…) But even if we confine ourselves to framing this question exclusively in terms of our time and in terms of the technology of images, there is much to do. There is much to say, whether about the right to penetrate a “public” or private” space, the right to “introduce” the eye and all these optical prostheses (movie cameras, still cameras, etc.) into the “home” of the other, or whether about the right to know who owns, who is able to appropriate, who is able to select, who is able to show images, directly political or not.26

The questions, therefore, that one shall be asking are: ‘how does the hologram tell history?’, ‘why does the hologram tell history?’, and ‘who is telling history via the hologram?’ and elucidating the connection among all three.

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Notes

4. “While most of those who gave testimony were Jewish survivors, the Foundation also interviewed homosexual survivors, Jehovah’s Witness survivors, liberators and liberation witnesses, political prisoners, rescuers and aid providers, Roma and Sinti (Gypsy) survivors, survivors of Eugenics policies, and war crimes trials participants.” See: USC Shoah Foundation official website, accessed 04.08.2015, http://sfi.usc.edu/about/institute.
5. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
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12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. From this point on, I will be referring to the USC Shoah Foundation’s New Dimensions in Testimony project as a ‘hologram’.
17. Ibid., 13.
22. In a sense, the project attempts to bring history to life while insisting that it stays alive (in a sense forcing the survivors to stay alive). Here, one could consider the notion of biopolitics and biopower as examined by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*.
23. In many ways the hologram approximates the experience of televisuality rather than cinema (I am referring here to the notion of TV’s liveness and the sense of simultaneity that it produces).
25. One of the examples that comes to mind is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s idea to give out personalized passports with one of the Holocaust victim’s names to the museum visitors. This is meant to evoke a personal and intimate connection with the past.