

Live memory: Holocaust memory and the holographic encounter

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For those committed to upholding the memory of the Holocaust as a crime against humanity, the ageing of its last survivors is a matter of concern. Once the last victims who are able to provide first-hand accounts of the Holocaust perish, it is feared that denialism will grow stronger and will be harder to fight. Memorial institutions are preparing themselves for this moment by attempting to document and preserve survivors' stories as fully as possible. Cutting-edge technologies are recruited to face this growing distance between the "there and then" and the "here and now", and as these platforms expand in both numbers and appeal, it becomes crucial to understand their implications.

At the centre of my research lies one of the most elaborate technologies aiming to preserve Holocaust memory and engage publics with it: holographic Holocaust testimonies¹. These testimonies allow museum audiences to interact with audio-visual, seemingly three-dimensional images of actual Holocaust survivors, often referred to as holograms. Using language processing algorithms, the virtual survivor is able to "understand" visitors' questions referring to his or her life, memories and attitudes, and respond with appropriate, pre-recorded answers. In this manner, the project wishes to convey a sense of conversing with a present survivor while addressing visitors' personal interests and needs. The installations are part of the USC Shoah Foundations' Dimensions in Testimony project, and can now be seen in permanent or travelling exhibitions in several museums in the US and in Europe. By examining museumgoers' interaction with them, my aim in this research is to explore what kind of Holocaust memory this technology promotes, and how it shapes its audience as carriers of memory.

In this context I conceptualise the hologram as an inherently contradictory entity, unlike any other memory technology before it. It offers visitors to take part in a dialogue, yet its answers are pre-recorded, leaving them to talk to an "empty" algorithm; it is extraordinary, fascinating, and potentially playful, while dealing with suffering and trauma; it is virtual yet suggests corporeality and physical co-presence. These contradictions raise questions about holograms' ability to turn museum visitors' witnessing of Holocaust testimonies into a flexible, educational, and authentic experience.

The interaction between museumgoers and the hologram is explored through interviews with visitors who have interacted with holographic survivors or observed such interactions. Using thematic and discourse analysis, I wish to discuss the ways in

¹ For a video demonstration, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXr5NMNQB4>

which the holographic encounter is perceived as an authentic, personal and emotional experience. By following the tensions the encounter creates and how they are negotiated by visitors, this study aims to suggest a novel framework for understanding Holocaust testimony in the digital age.