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New Ways of Seeing: Digital Testimonies, Reflective Inquiry, and Video Pedagogy in a Graduate Seminar

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THE FUTURE OF HOLOCAUST MEMORIALIZATION:

Confronting Racism, Antisemitism, and Homophobia through Memory Work

EDITED BY
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NEW WAYS OF SEEING: DIGITAL TESTIMONIES, REFLECTIVE INQUIRY, AND VIDEO PEDAGOGY IN A GRADUATE SEMINAR

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The active inquiry process of working with video testimonies of Holocaust survivors from the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA) directs graduate students' attention to questions of representability and memorialization of the Holocaust (Dorner and Pető, forthcoming). In particular, multimedia projects embedded in the social sciences and humanities curricula at the graduate level give a special focus to the processes of researching conceptual questions through the development of new media narrative forms. For example, IWitness is a secure online tool for watching, searching, editing, and sharing the audio-visual contents provided by the USC Shoah Foundation.

In this contribution to the conference publication, we discuss and reflect on the multiple ways in which students integrated both the medium and the message in their projects, in order to arrive at a systematized inquiry about representation. We then investigate the question: to what degree did that process result in a reflective deconstruction and/or a conceptual reconstruction of memorialization.

Case Being Described

The current analysis is based on undergraduate and graduate students' coursework in the *Gendered Memories of the Holocaust* research seminar offered by the Central European University, Hungary, in collaboration with Smith College, US. This seminar is modeled on the pioneering transatlantic research seminar, *Interrogating the Archive*. Launched in Fall 2012 in collaboration with the University of Minnesota, US, *Interrogating the Archive* offered a methodological precedent as far as digital pedagogy is concerned (Dorner and Pető, forthcoming). The *Gendered Memories of the Holocaust* seminar was designed to foster the development of students' critical perspectives of Holocaust narratives that are shaped by practices of memorialization. This approach to the interconnection between "Holocaust-as-history" and "Holocaust-as-memory" was built on the assertion that understanding the Holocaust is inseparable from the ways in which it has been handed down to us (Young 1988). The structure of the course itself was designed, firstly, to develop students' familiarity with theoretical frameworks regarding narratives about Holocaust memorialization (more specifically various ways of gendering the Holocaust), including case studies of several genres of Holocaust representation (memorial sites, memoirs and diaries, family photographs, and video testimonies

archived digitally) and, secondly, to foster students' engagement with these concepts by having to edit their own multimedia narrative with the help of the IWitness program.

Students were first introduced to the VHA through scholarly critiques of digital collections and through a demonstration of the use of the search engine in the archive before being trained in the use of IWitness. The multimedia assignment is the essence of the video pedagogy. Through this assignment, students are introduced to the skills required to edit a short movie using clips of survivor testimonies, after which the students record a one to three minute video, reflecting on their own research and learning process. The assignment was also followed by a separate classroom session dedicated to viewing the participants' video materials as well as engaging in "dialogues of witnessing" (Zembylas 2006, 318).

Insights

Based on our analysis of multimedia projects from twenty-eight students that included 171 selected excerpts from the visual testimonies, the subject matter selected by the students ranged from the historical interrogation of women as historical agents (e.g., female perpetrators, women in resistance movements), specifically gendered experiences (e.g., identity exposure, postwar liberator assault, pregnancy during the Holocaust), and analyses of domestic and family traditions (e.g., narratives of food, concepts of family, home, faith), to the excavation of less often analyzed survivor groups (e.g., lesbian camp inmates, Afro-German experiences of the Holocaust).

We understand these subjects to reflect those narratives that have come to constitute the "mainstream" representations and as we see through a more complex structure, these multimedia narratives could ultimately be transformed to include perspectives on the ethical and epistemological responsibilities of representation and memorialization. Without structural complexity these narratives can seem repetitive and shallow. Without the analytical attention to the "overall text of the testimony" (Young 1988, 168), the sheer number of testimonies can become an overwhelming mass of digital information.

On a positive note, in a few cases the students' topical choice demonstrated the potential for constructing space for new narratives (e.g., "Estonian Concentration Camp Scenery: A Gendered Analysis of Fear Geography"; "Liberation: The New Hiding"; "Silencing and the Holocaust"; or "The Afro-German Experiences in the Holocaust"). However, in these cases the novelty of the topic was through the students' high level of digital authority, accompanied by the highest level of sophisticated engagement. In these cases, the theoretical constructs were critiqued and further explored through "creative theorizing" (Benmayor 2008, 195), by using technology to convey symbolic meaning in an artistic visual representation.

The demonstration of one's awareness of one's own agency is the highest level of digital authority that we observed in a video project. This revealed a critical engagement with the medium of the video itself through exploring its potential for conveying symbolic meaning, and indicated a reflective deconstruction of representability, thus contributing to the process of memorialization in an authentic way. The video narrative entitled "Silencing and the Holocaust" explored the topic of silencing from different perspectives, including survivors' self-silencing, the silencing perpetuated by the archival process, as well as the medium of the video itself. Instances of technical failure (e.g., audio or visual failure) were included as frames for the less than four-minute video that contained an abrupt collage of seventeen survivor clips on topics that were organized in the fashion of the VHA, as "testimony sharing willingness/reluctance" and "future message". This video with the speedy sequence of one to two sentence-long clips by survivors draws attention to the threat of de-personalization facing survivor testimonies in the digital archive through the deconstruction of those practices of memorialization that demand

coherency, intimacy, and familiarity of survivor narratives.

Two additional student projects demonstrated a thoughtful inquiry into the challenges of representation and memorialization in multimedia narratives. These two projects contributed to the reflective deconstruction of memorialization in their video narratives by analyzing the silencing in the archive itself through a focus on the small victim category of Afro-Germans and the gender-specific experience of liberator sexual assault.

The video exploring the Afro-German victim category discussed memorialization in multimedia narrative by examining the availability of search terms and the results supplied by the online archive. It also reflected on the respective research questions and assumptions that the student filmmaker voiced in the video narrative. In doing so, the student constructed a video that is both a narrative from Holocaust survivor testimony in IWitness, as well as a self-recorded reflection. This video demonstrates that self-reflection on behalf of the researcher can reveal a combination of emotional and theoretical motivations that contribute to Holocaust memorialization. At the same time it demonstrates the ethical and epistemological responsibilities involved in representing and preserving memories of the past.

The video narrative on the post-liberation experience of sexual violence against female survivors was similarly laden with the notions of ethical and epistemological responsibility. This video included reflection on the student's anger at the tendency for scholarship to silence more difficult narratives. The intention to create space for emerging new narratives was voiced in the video – particularly by extending the analysis of the Holocaust to include what is generally referred to as the aftermath of the event – as well as through the assertion that "post-Holocaust does not mean post violence" especially for female survivors.

Significance for the Future of Holocaust Memorialization

By adopting a bottom-up, inductive approach to our empirical data, we were able to re-examine the preliminary analyses of students' multimedia narrative projects that dealt with issues of representation and memorialization in video narratives created from video testimonies of Holocaust survivors. As we argued, students' engagement with narratives of Holocaust historiography and their contribution to memorialization can be located in their decisions regarding topic and structure, their self-positioning as authors/narrators (including the level of digital authority and self-reflectivity), and their editorial and creative (artistic) stance towards the inclusion of other historical materials in their video narrative. A highly developed critical approach towards the theoretical constructs of representability and memorialization that includes attentiveness to ethical and epistemological responsibilities can be identified in projects that emphasize manifestations of the process of silencing in both survivors' testimonies, as well as those processes implemented by the visual archive in the act of collection.

As the title of our contribution to the conference publication indicates, we are interested in our students' (new) ways of seeing, that is, how they explore and multiply mediated representations of the Holocaust, and eventually deconstruct those same representations to also open up space for new narratives. At the same time, as educators we also want to continue to develop our own ways of seeing. It is our responsibility to continually strive for an ever more nuanced analytical perspective of new media narratives, in order that we may further expand our instructional strategies through the purposeful use of video narratives in the university classroom.

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