



Information Research - Vol. 28 No. 4 (2023)

Virtual Holocaust memory

At the start, the book on the holocaust memory has attracted my attention as at present I am working on the project that should produce an inclusive digital platform presenting multisensory representations of cultural heritage objects for people with various disabilities. I expected to find interesting digital solutions not only representing the traumatic memories, but also presenting these memories in different formats for different audiences. I did find some that would be useful for the project, but I also found a lot more.

Being born in post-war Lithuania and growing up in Vilnius, which used to be named the Northern Jerusalem, one is never far away from raising the questions how the massacre of Jews in this region and Lithuania in particular could be possible and how come my country men have to carry so much responsibility for it. Quite amazingly, more and more studies of Holocaust memories are being conducted by the younger generation of Lithuanian scholars and they echo many of the issues investigated and presented in this rich and interesting book, which provides a variety of possible discussion avenues. However, I will touch on only some of them in this review that may be of interest to *Information Research* readers.

The book describes, presents, and discusses from different perspectives the current projects of Holocaust memory. The first part of the book is focused on the project Dimensions in Testimony conducted by the [Shoa Foundation](#) (the University of Southern California) and the [Forever Project](#) of the National Holocaust Centre and Museum in the UK. Though different both projects use advanced technology that allows visitors of different Holocaust centres and museums to have a [conversation with virtual images](#) of the Holocaust survivors and genocide victims. The second part includes the project of the Bergen-Belsen memorial museum recreating the virtual panorama of the concentration camp and allowing visitors to explore it using an iPad; the Kristallnacht exhibition on the main grid of Second Life; the virtual Secret Annex of the Anne Frank house museum; and an entirely analogue documentary exhibition at the Topography of Terror in Berlin as opposed to the digitized content. As the text unfolds other digital media devoted to the Holocaust are brought into the discussion, but to a much lesser extent just illustrating some statements or raising questions, e.g. as depicting violence in digital games.

First, a reader of the book is facing the issue of memory, in this case the traumatic memory of holocaust. The discussion is serious and looks in the philosophical underpinnings of what consists our memory, its truth and truthfulness as inevitably the recollection of trauma over time leaves gaps in the factual fabric of what has really happened. Memory is obviously also shaped by many external and internal factors, such as telling repeatedly the same story publicly over a longer period of time that affects the way the memory is shaped and recollected, the emphasis of certain elements and toning down the others. The authors also note that presumed audience affects what is omitted from the story, e.g., removal of sexual harassment when it is directed at young people and children or very wide public.

Another important problem raised in the book is the testimony of a witness, as most of the digital stories involve survivors who have been children and teenagers and lived to the old age after the Holocaust. Many critics and even the survivor Levi states that *we, the survivors, are not true witnesses* (p. 113) because it is impossible to provide memories or those who perished and often the ones who “survived were not the best”. The authors present a good argument for preserving the

memory of the Holocaust in different forms as long as those, engaging with testimony, feel that it is truthful.

The issue of factual documentary information rather than personal narratives of the people or imaginative creations in art and games is highlighted through presentation of the Topography of Terror museum in Berlin. Together with the history of the building and controversies surrounding it, the rational informative exhibition provide a *literally* 'documentary' past that alienates a modern visitor and leaves him unaware of the contradictions surrounding it.

This brings us to the issues of media that represents the testimony of the survivors. The first documents from concentration camps were black and white photographs and films, the documentation found in these camps and other institutions and direct interviews of the prisoners who were alive immediately after their release. The physical memorials and museums started emerging later in time displaying these analogue documents and items to represent the enormity of the crime against humanism. The next round of interviews with the survivors was recorded on VHD tapes and a number of books and movies were grounded in this documentary and personal evidence of the past. This art was not only recording the history but also involving the public into emotional and aesthetic understanding of the memories with an element of entertainment.

This last stage of representing the traumatic Holocaust memory by digital means raises even more issues. It is cast as Americanization, infantilisation, and gamification of the traumatic past. Some accusations of making profit from it are also made, though all the activities are financed by charity foundations and do not create enough revenue to cover their enormous costs. Most of these activities and their results unequivocally pursue educational goals to make people aware of personal traumas, perpetrators' crimes and institutionalized evil. This should lead to consideration of our own personal positions, beliefs and critical approach to our societies.

However, as an information professional, I was trying to understand what was actually represented by these digital projects. What would be my professional position regarding an interaction between a visitor of the Holocaust centre and the hologram of a survivor, while the system matches the answers of the survivor to the questions of the visitor. The five-days long interview recorded long ago using specific stage setting is now fragmented in a rather equivocal context of the visitor, while the person who gave this testimony is most probably dead long ago. What is being represented and, even more importantly, what is perceived by the visitor in this situation? I could not give a good answer to myself, even after I have visited the available websites and engaged in a short interview with Mr. Pinchas Gutter on the iWitness of the Dimensions in Testimony.

It was much easier to accept and approve of the Secret Annex tour of the Ann Frank's house, follow the eerie Kristallnacht exhibition on the Second Life or the Bergen-Belsen illusionary landscapes, though I only saw photographs of it. The professionals of the digitization of cultural heritage through libraries and in general in humanities are discussing the issues of authenticity of digital representations of artefacts, the truthfulness of the digitized evidence, the reception and evaluation of these digitized items by our library or archive, or museum users and visitors. This book adds another dimension to these discussions of the media, connective memory, factual and truthful evidence, access to and use of our controversial past and unreliable memories even when they are documented according to high professional standards.

The book is illustrated by numerous and intriguing photographs, holds a useful index, and provides remarkably interesting notes. I cannot remember when I read notes with such an interest and concentration.

Surely, it is an interesting text for those working with any cultural heritage and digital projects of different kinds, but it may also attract wider audience. The traumatic memory is in the centre of the book, but it is also posing questions that are relevant to our digital and AI age in a more general sense.

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November, 2023