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Ford Forum

4/19/2011

Abstract

In my paper I examine the role of film in preserving Holocaust memory. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum utilizes documentary film and video testimony, which both personalize history and force its unsettling reality into the present. This modern technology reshapes the way history is conventionally represented. Survivor testimony gives trauma an individual face, and exposes the haunting of memory within the speaker's present. Documentary film helps preserve events for future generations that could not be expressed through written reports or historical artifacts. Film cannot lie—it is forced to be honest, uncomfortably so, for its viewers to watch history and humanity unfold.

Memory Filmed:

Video Testimony and Documentary Film in the USHMM

When the camera turns on, the survivor looks away. She is not sure what she is supposed to look at—the little red light? The interviewer? She is worried she will not remember everything, but she has to do this. She wants to preserve her story, document her troubling history for the museum. The questioning starts and she can't stop talking—forgotten moments leap out before she can censor them. Has she said too much? She wonders how much her face gives away. There will be no film editing. Decades from now, every frame will still be there: her past always present.

A museum's ultimate purpose is to teach, to keep knowledge of a historical event alive. With conventional artifacts, the facts and details of our past can be kept straight, and can carry our understanding into the future. But as we move forward in the twenty-

first century, technology redefines this process of historical preservation. When captured on tape, events are no longer confined to the past. A documented moment or an eyewitness account play out on the screen for us as if we were there ourselves, jolted by the same experience. Audiovisual technology has reshaped memory in The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Documentary films and video testimony personalize history and force its unsettling reality into the present.

The USHMM is home to one of the largest oral history collections of Holocaust testimony that exists. The collection contains over 9,000 interviews containing “first-hand accounts of those who experienced, witnessed, or perpetrated the events of the Holocaust” (USHMM Oral History). Both the audio and visual technology enable witnesses and survivors to share their stories in a way they had not been able to before. Without it, their experiences would be chained to pen and paper or a black-and-white photograph. The video technology adds another dimension for the viewer—hearing a survivor tell his or her story as if they were sitting right in front of you, talking to you personally. The survivor’s facial expressions alone add a whole new realm of emotion to the account that simply was not possible before the emergence of video testimony.

The museum’s impressive collection of Holocaust artifacts, quotes and photographs are, of course, equally as important as the technological components. They are evidence, proof to history’s existence in the same way the nearby Museum of Natural History’s fossils are. With such objects we can prove that Dinosaurs once roamed the earth, that catastrophic genocide once wreaked havoc among us. But what catapults this history into our present lives is living memory, watching a survivor recount his or her troubling experience. In live film there is no rehearsed performance. Sections of the

interview cannot be crossed out later in red pen. We see the memory come alive for the speaker, and witness their raw suffering unedited. Every stammer, pause, and glance away from the camera speaks a truth of the survivor's experience that a written testimony could not do. How they uncover their memories—how they attempt to retell them—shows us the emotions of their experience with unsettling honesty. The memories leap out of the textbook and become humanized, an individual trauma.

Those who conduct the interviews are specifically trained not to intrude on the interviewee's narrative. They are instructed to only ask new questions in a moment of transition or a pause in dialogue. In following these guidelines the interviewer can "avoid intrusive interruptions at all times, but be prepared to interject questions at opportune moments" (USHMM interview guidelines). This allows the testimony to be unobstructed, and play out as genuine as the speaker's memory. The uninterrupted flow of speech takes on its own form, without the intrusion of someone else's thematic reorganizing. There is no story arc—just any event, in any order, that the survivor wishes to share. The interviewer rarely responds or reacts to what is said so that for the viewer, the speaker's words will stand on their own.

Due to its spontaneous nature, the spoken dialogue of video testimony is much different than the precision of written testimony. It is conversational and distinct in its colloquial rhetoric. There are vocal fillers, tangents, language confusion—moments of human error that anyone would find familiar. Years are blurred, names are forgotten, and different experiences are mixed together, just as they would be in a dinner table conversation. This makes the testimony more of a reality for the viewer, who can identify with its humanized form. The witness becomes an individual, startlingly

accessible, a singular person sharing their suffering.

In Elie Wiesel's *Night*, an international bestseller chronicling Wiesel's experiences in several concentration camps, the written testimony reads beautifully, as sophisticated as classic literature. The eloquent description of his suffering is poetic in its emotional intensity:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. (Wiesel)

These lines describe Wiesel's first moments inside the camp. The imagery makes the terror of the scene vivid in the reader's imagination. His work is undoubtedly powerful and an important documentation of history, but is different from live testimony in that it also utilizes literary technique. His message is planned and carefully polished after years of writing and editing, just as a work of fiction would be. Though we cannot make sense of the events he describes in his memoir—far from fiction—we can at least recognize religious imagery, symbols of smoke and darkness, themes of silence that we find in other literature. The horrors of the Holocaust are foreign to us; the techniques of Whitman and Wordsworth are not. The talented writing is a familiar craft that we can understand, and makes the truth of troubling memories more accessible to us.

In survivor Thomas Buergenthal's interview in the USHMM's *Life After the Holocaust: stories of Holocaust survivors after the war* project, he touches on this issue:

But—you know, what is interesting is that while memories of details fade, what doesn't fade is the memory of the episode as a whole. And I wish I could—I could

have the poet's soul to write about it, ah...to capture that. Because I think...I'm not sure that one—that that is coming through in the literature. I don't know, as a matter of fact. I haven't read any books about the camps. I can't. (Buerghenthal)

Buerghenthal admits that while he does not have the “poet's soul”, he is not sure the Holocaust literature captures the horrors endured by the victims. For him, the memories alone are what keeps the past alive. Even in transcript form, Buerghenthal's dialogue reads like genuine conversation, his thoughts expressed bluntly and honestly. His words do not read, or sound, like literature—they are pure human speech. He fumbles, thinks aloud, struggles to find the right words to convey his message. And the impact of the last phrase of this excerpt—“I can't”—speaks for itself.

Another survivor interviewed in the museum's *Life After the Holocaust* series is Blanka Rothschild. Her testimony addresses the stark difference between life during the war and life after the war. Video testimony shot in the present shows this dichotomy as the speakers try to convey the struggles of both time periods, having lived through both of them for many years. How can one resume a sense of normalcy after enduring such trauma? Is it even possible? This is a key question in most survivor testimony, and leaves the viewer wondering if these two worlds can ever truly be separated. What turns a Holocaust victim into a Holocaust survivor? Video testimony is our best resource in exploring these difficult questions. No other medium can produce as honest an answer as a live interview—with no time to rehearse, the speakers can only rely on the truth of their experience.

In her testimony, Rothschild does not attempt to relate her two very different experiences together. For her, “they are two different lives. There is no comparison. There is nothing that I can say” (Rothschild). Even after fifty postwar years, the six she

spent suffering still haunt her present—an emotion that can only be captured on film. When viewing only her face and hearing her voice, the inability to conceal her past is glaringly obvious. We are viewing her in the present, but are primarily seeing her past reawakened. Written testimony simply cannot convey the presence of the past in the way a living survivor can, for the simple reason that they have the ability to hide. A writer does not have to reveal everything about his or her past in the way the human face is forced to. For the survivor, the memories are not over, have not faded into history—they are a daily reality. No long pause or glance away from the camera can hide this. Auschwitz sits beside them in every frame.

Perhaps the most well-known audiovisual project within the museum is Steven Spielberg's Film and Video Archive. The project is a branch of Spielberg's much larger *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation*, founded shortly after the filming of *Schindler's List* (USC Shoah). The archive stores historical footage, currently holding 1,005 hours of film that documents from the beginning of the Nazi regime to the Nuremberg trials in the 1960's, most dating from 1920 to 1948 (Spielberg). Visitors of the museum can view the historical footage, as can visitors to the museum's website. This collection of documentary films serves a different purpose than the museum's video testimonies do—it serves as evidence to the atrocities that took place during the Holocaust. Like the museum's artifacts, these films help us learn about this period of history and prove its unsettling reality. Each film can be thought of as a form of testimony, as the filmmaker shares the events he or she witnessed during this troubling time. But these films are not retrospective—their purpose is to document history, not to

attempt to make sense of it. These films are the events themselves, before they become memories.

A large part of the project focuses on preservation of these valuable films and videos. Those involved focus on “cleaning and repairing the originals...transferring the new films to video for research and reference use...[storing them] offsite in temperature and humidity controlled vaults to ensure their continued safety and longevity” (Speilberg). This intensive care ensures that these valuable historical films will not be lost to future generations, who will know no living survivors. These films are proof of important events in history, evidence to help us map out what happened with much greater accuracy. Reading about these events, or hearing someone speak of them, could not have the same effect as seeing them unfold on live film. Unlike the museum’s video testimonies, there is no commentary, recollection, or reflection involved—these films simply show us what took place. For the viewers, there is no greater accuracy in the ability to witness an event itself.

The USHMM’s recently acquired documentary series titled Julien Bryan’s Collection also emphasizes preservation. Bryan’s collection of film, photographs, and historical artifacts serve as a valuable resource for today and tomorrows researchers. The documentary footage, given to the museum twenty-five years after Bryan’s death, “shed[s] new light on the experience of people struggling to defend themselves from Nazi persecution and to rebuild their countries and their lives” during World War II (JBC). The film is an important legacy that Bryan contributed to the USHMM, and its historical value is clear with or without his physical presence. Like Spielberg’s Archive, Bryan’s film preserves historical moments for future generations to learn from.

Donated in 2003, the collection fits with the USHMM's desire to incorporate technological resources. While still designing the museum, the museum's leaders felt that "audiovisual technology will be indispensable: we must speak the language of 1990 and 2000" (Linenthal 143). The film portion of Bryan's collection fits with the modern emphasis on the value of technology. As time moves forward, technology will only become more prominent in our lives, and future generations will want their history to be accessible to them in familiar formats. Documentary film captures history much more vividly than any artifact could—it is as close to experiencing something firsthand as we can currently get. How can Holocaust memory fade with important moments captured on tape? As Bryan explained himself, "people might not believe my story if I told it in words when I returned to America. Everyone would believe my pictures" (JBC). The documentary film preserves history in a medium that cannot be forged or forgotten. Bryan's film proves itself important historical evidence, and a witness to the catastrophe of the Holocaust.

Another film project associated with the USHMM is Sandra Wentworth Bradley's film *Testimony*. Despite its title, the film's thematic organization makes it more of a documentary piece that weaves various survivor testimonies together. She was contracted to "construct [the film] around themes of resistance, rescue, and defiance", preferably with a hopeful ending (Linenthal 253). Before even beginning to film survivor's stories, Bradley was urged to keep these guidelines in mind, which would arguably render *Testimony* much less of a true testimony. By creating a thematic story arc the survivor's testimonies would no longer be the focus of the film's creation. For her to create the film as she was originally contracted, testimonies would have to be

inserted at the film's convenience, edited for thematic relevance, and forced into its predetermined frames. *Testimony* would not feel like much of a testimony at all.

Bothered by this idea, Bradley took her documentary in a different direction. She kept the original themes in mind, but followed them much more loosely than the museum leaders had anticipated. She conducted research on the experiences of around three hundred survivors, and filmed twenty-three of them, twenty of which appear in the film (Linenthal 253). Instead of focusing on predetermined themes, she did her best to aptly portray each survivor's message. Naturally, it was hard for her to only include such a small group, but this allowed her to focus more time on each individual survivor. By bringing the focus of the film back to the survivors themselves, the film was able to avoid the "triumph of the human spirit" trap that some Holocaust books and films fall into, focusing more on the viewers comfort than the survivor's truth. Conventional storylines thrown aside, the film was able to "remind visitors that the individual reality of the Holocaust was much more chaotic" than a "coherent narrative" (Linenthal 253).

Though still a documentary at heart, *Testimony* does, in some ways, keep true to its name. The film focuses on the speaker's faces, the background out of focus to capture the presence of the speakers past (Linenthal 254). With only the survivor's face present on the screen, viewers can focus on the charge of their words, the haunting of their suffering. Even the background behind them is blurred, incapable of influencing the scene. These moments in the film echo the museum's video testimonies in their concentration on the survivor alone. With no distractions, we witness the past "explode on the faces of those who sob as unacceptable memories erupt into their present" (Linenthal 254). Each survivor's emotion is explicitly clear, even in the most

uncomfortable of moments, when memory overwhelms. Bradley's finished product, still loosely following its intended thematic structure, is a documentary with moments true to survivor testimony.

Modern filming technology has proved a valuable resource in remembering history. The USHMM's video testimony gives us a frightening glance into the horrors of the Holocaust in watching each survivor tell their difficult story. Documentary film preserves historical events for future generations and ensures the world will never forget about them. Without this technology, these important memories could be lost on a future generation that thrives solely on technological resources. Both types of film capture Holocaust memory in a way no other medium can. Video testimony and documentary film redefine memory in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. This technology both preserves the past and captures the individual experience of mass suffering.

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