

Memory and Transcendence of Place and Time in Online Holocaust Memorials

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Abstract

The vital images that appear in digitized format serve to remind us that the past is forever present. Yad Vashem, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), deathcamps.org, and other organizations that remember the Holocaust use personal testimony, images, and videos that argue for social activism. Some images act as persuasive arguments in digital memory by helping to transcend space and time for their audience.

Digital and online resources from Google, Yahoo, Flickr, Facebook, and Wikipedia attempt to transcend and decentralize time and place. We argue that place still matters in memory and memorial. Place names serve as reminders, icons, and cultural collections of memory. Some significant locales like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, have been emphasized by historians, governments and the media. Other places that are not as well documented by visual memory include: Jasenovac, Drancy, and Ebensee.

Several types of visual images have become iconic in the digital memory of the Holocaust: photos of victims; images of children; videos of survivors; piles of cadavers in mass graves; objects taken from victims; and digital maps of camps and ghettos. All of these visual images help to promote a vivid sense of the past. These images can be found by online searches, in databases of towns and family names, by examining tagged photos, by watching online videos, and by examining the layers in a Google maps. Digital images have helped make the past come alive for audiences of all ages.

Key Words: Holocaust, Digital memory, Yad Vashem, Holocaust Memorial Museum, Tags, Google maps.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the enduring role of memory and its various textures as they are refracted and reflected through the use of images that

symbolize the past and represent; the bleak future of Jewish life in Europe during the 1930's and 1940's. Visual images taken during the Holocaust recounts stories of inestimable loss. The internet enables us to use the past to inform the present and future, thus giving a sense of timelessness to the viewer. The most original feature of this paper is the discussion of the rich visual narrative, which retrieves and mediates the past. The vital images that appear in digitized format serve to remind us that the past is forever present. Yad Vashem, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), deathcamps.org, and many other organizations that remember the Holocaust and fight against Neo-Nazism use personal testimony, images, videos, and performances to argue for social activism.

Digital and online resources from Google, Yahoo, Flickr, Facebook, and Wikipedia can transcend and decentralize time and place. We find that place still matters in memory and memorial. Place names serve as reminders, icons, and cultural collections of memory. Some significant locales like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, have been emphasized by historians. Places such as Jasenovac, Drancy, and Ebensee have been given less attention by historians.

This paper showcases the visual representations of the richness of cultures and helps the present generation imagine the lives that were lost during a dark time in world history through the use of digitized media. Some areas we address include: 1) A rhetorical framework for memory and remembrance 2) how digital images function as persuasive arguments 3) how online digital images reach new generations of different audiences 4) and that digital images help memories transcend time and place.

2. A Rhetorical Framework for Memory and Remembrance

Well before the ideas of collective memory, public memory, and cultural memory became popular with Maurice Halbwach and Pierre Nora, memory was an established rhetorical concept.¹ Memory was one of the classical canons of rhetoric existing along with invention, organization, style and delivery. Memory was seen as part of persuasion, oratory and public discourse since the ancient Greek and Roman period. Aristotle stated that “memory, even the memory of concepts, cannot exist apart from imagery.”² Memory, for Aristotle, was emotional and somewhat uncontrolled.

Recollection, Kendell Phillips noted, “involves a disciplined approach to the logical sequence of events and through repetition of this discipline one is able to evoke memories in a more controlled way.”³ Aristotle in “Memory and Recollection” stated that recollection was part of the deliberative process. The “process resembles a search and, owing to its nature, recollection accrues only to those that have the power of deliberation, for deliberation is a sort of syllogistic process.”⁴ The rhetorical art of memory was developed by having people associate ideas with visual images

or established concepts. Ideas could be associated with a place in a physical space that was known to individuals or by compelling people to think of a list of topoi or argumentation topics. Most importantly, commonplaces of argument should be able to produce visualizations to facilitate recollection.

Memory when used as recollection also becomes refractive. The power of recollection and reflection is part of Foucault theorizing on “the representation of the sign”⁵ Foucault talked of the power of the sign, and its link to reality. It is how we make this link that fuels the power of memory. Memory is an instantaneous response to a visual prompt. It is a visceral and immediate response to visual stimuli such as images. Recollection therefore is an intellectual aftermath and can be defined as the process of remembering. The reflection and recollection of a particular photo might lend itself to a particular type of mirroring, whereas the refractive quality bends the likeness to the events in the memory, thus affecting the purity of the memory and making it a more individual experience. This is what Foucault called *l’imagination de la ressemblance*.⁶ In contrast; the experience of memory can also produce an opposite effect, a memory that becomes alienated from the actual experience producing an objectification, a distancing relationship. Here the memory is refracted in such a way as to relate the memory to the photo as an object, thus producing an objectification.

3. Digital Images Function as Persuasive Arguments

Photos are a tool of persuasion that the viewer can use in a deliberative context. Photos act as evidence or as Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* had said “that the thing has been there.”⁷ Images act as direct evidence. This evidence is enhanced when text helps to anchor meaning. With the use of online tools, people can add text to digital photographs.

Several types of photos and visual images have become iconic in the digital memory of the Holocaust. There is a genre of visual persuasion that act as commonplaces of the Holocaust: victim(s) or survivor (s) photos; images of children; witness online videos; piles of corpses; and objects taken from victims.

One of the most popular images is that of a group of survivors in a three level bunk in the concentration camp at Buchenwald. This picture may have become popular because it shows Elie Wiesel (second row, seventh from left) the 1986 Nobel Prize winner, who writes *Night*. *Night* has sold millions of copies and is on the reading list of thousands of schools. The photo was taken on April 16th 1945 just a few days after the camp was liberated. This liberation photo was used in the New York Times on May 6, 1945, in war crime cases, at holocaust exhibits, in books, and in later online files. In the online digitalizing of photographs, smart photos allow

individuals to add text to images. A smart photo of this image was produced by Jo Hedwig Teeuwisse that gave details about some other survivors' stories and provided this image with new life online.⁸ The man standing is named Simon who returned to the Netherlands and became a businessman. He never talked about this photo. Anonymous photos give a sense of personal alienation while the identified persons tend to create a more visually accessible memory (re-memory).



Another famous photo is of a child with their hands up in the Warsaw Ghetto. This photo has become a smart photo posted online by ARC that gives more information about some of the people shown.⁹ Photos with children convey the horror of war, the loss of childhood and show the victims as real people.



For many people, the concentration camp that first comes to mind is Auschwitz. Auschwitz- Birkenau is the place most often photographed in Holocaust records. The massive number of people killed there and the numerous photos taken by SS officers Ernst Hofmann and Bernard Watter in May and June of 1944, now preserved at Yad Vashem, ensure that Auschwitz will remain an important visual recollection of the Holocaust.

This image is of Hungarian Jews on the selection ramp in May 1944. This photo has appeared in many books and online at sites about holocaust history. The child with the yellow star, the expressions of the mothers and their children looking at the camera create a sense of empathy and reflection.



Place names like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Dachau serve as reminders, icons, and cultural collections of memory. These three camps had many visual images to reinforce the importance of these places as emphasized by historians, governments and the media. Other places that are not as well documented by visual memory include: Jasenovac, Drancy, and Ebensee. These places may become better known as more records are placed in online databases and texts can be added through online commenting.

Yad Vashem, the center for remembering the Holocaust, with Google have posted 130,000 photographs to the web that includes important text, the names of victims and survivors along with related individual documents such as deportation orders or visas. You can search on a family name and even add additional information about that person, their family or other recollections.¹⁰



For example, Doron Avni found a picture of his grandfather and he added to the online photograph this comment:

This picture, of my grandfather, was taken at the end of 1941, after his release from the Nazi prison (called the "Red Prison") located on Traku Street in Siauliai, Lithuania. 800 Jews were brought into this prison, after 2 months only 140 survived. ... From the picture, my grandfather gazes at me – thin, after losing 16 kg of his weight, hair in wild disarray, the yellow patch on his garment – but with strength and determination shining in his eyes.... For almost a year he hid in the forests with my grandmother Lea, whom he married in the Ghetto. They were eventually liberated by the Soviet Army in the summer of 1944. At first, the Russian soldiers mistakenly thought my grandfather to be German, and wanted to kill him. His life was saved when my grandmother presented this photograph, which he stitched to his coat when escaping the ghetto, showing my grandfather wearing a yellow star. My grandfather died in Israel in 2009 at the age of 91.¹¹

Another trace of past lives that is technological transformed into the present is by the use of maps. Google maps are used by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) to educate about the holocaust.¹² These Google maps focus on the well known- The Warsaw Ghetto, Auschwitz, Dachau, liberation of the camps, and Voyage of the St. Louis. USHMM extends the memory of the Nazi Holocaust victims by discussing recent genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. The past is linked to the present in memory, in pictures and by interconnected hyperlinks. "On-line digital platforms such as Google Maps can provide a platform for connecting, negotiating and shaping thoughts, superseding past events of destruction and overcoming distances in both time and space."¹³

4. Online Digital Images Reach New Generations of Different Audiences

Large non-profits have such as Wikipedia, Yad Vashem, USHMM dominate holocaust online search along with corporations like Google and Yahoo. Google has over 17 million results for the Holocaust. Holocaust pictures are one of the top related searches.

Each site has a different audience distinguished by age, place, and need. At present, the top ranked site for the Holocaust is Wikipedia. This site is popular with students. Yad Vashem is the top site for Holocaust searches in Israel, Poland and Argentina. It is most popular with people 45 years and older. Thirty-two percent of the audience comes from Google search in the United States, 18% from Google Israel, 12% from Wikipedia and 8% from Facebook.¹⁴

USHMM web site's users tend to be aged 25 years and under and over 45years, "and they are disproportionately highly educated, both high- and low-income women browsing from home."¹⁵ Most of the visitors come from the US, France, Britain, Spain and Mexico.¹⁶ Quantcast shows that 33% of the audience for USHMM is between 13-17 years of age.¹⁷

Yahoo shows the following search patterns for the word Holocaust: 29% of the searches are conducted by people under 24; and 19% by 25 to 34 and that 57% of the searches are conducted by women. Searches spiked with current news events, controversies, and The International Holocaust Remembrance day (January 27th), or Holocaust Day in Israel.¹⁸

5. Digital Images Help Memories Transcend Time and Place

The Internet allows for creative engagement in terms of furthering text and image. Technology invites a response from the viewer searching for and looking at photos, adding tags, reading comments, and using the digital databases of maps and images. Individuals can build community to reflect on the tragic experiences of the Holocaust. "Memory appeals to us partly because it projects an immediacy we feel has been lost from history."¹⁹

Individual memories are shared with families, communities and larger publics.

The Internet helps the transfer of memory between individuals and publics in different spaces and times. Digital images help build a sense of community by encouraging dialogue, emotional feeling and deliberative responses. Educational programs use digital images of the Holocaust to teach about war, genocide, and discrimination. Messages conveyed by images include: Genocide is wrong, people living everyday lives are subject to immeasurable loss, and questions about how genocide can be prevented.

“Memory is the belated response to the great trauma of modernity, the Shoah.”²⁰ Digital memories serve an important and persuasive purpose: to bring back the memory of the lives that were lived, interrupted, and destroyed forever. Digital images become a metaphor for a world that has disappeared, a formal comment on the subject of the Shoah. The images explore Jewish history as well as the history of genocide. These popularized images represent traces of family and history that would otherwise be rapidly disintegrating. They allow for engagement with a text in a way that had previously been unimaginable. The power of the visual focuses a complex lens on the way we tell a story, and on how we relate the past to our present and the present to our future.

Notes

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