

Displaced Empathy: First-Person Testimony in the Museum

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In the late twentieth century audiovisual testimonies have emerged as one of the dominant means by which audiences relate to current and past events: we live in the era of the witness. Testimonies of those that have lived through collective violence, displacement and trauma provide not only unique insight into first-hand experience but are supposed to bridge the 'veracity gap', the divide across space and time which is so often ground for doubt, disinterest and indifference. Depending on how close to the actual events these interviews are being conducted, we understand them as part of the work of professional or citizen journalists, giving a human face to ongoing conflicts or, in the case of testimonies recorded years later, as memory work undertaken by historians. For societies living through the aftermath of atrocities and mass violence, personal testimonies have become crucial for processes of transitional justice and democratic state building.

The testimonies filmed by UNTV in 1994-95 during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were produced and broadcast during the conflict. The team of journalists working for the United Nations peacekeeping mission in former Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR) had the aim of providing a source of reliable information beyond the ethno-nationalist biases of state broadcasters, but increasingly came to see their work as an intervention in the conflict itself by drawing attention to genocidal violence.

Several decades on, after these testimonies have entered the archive, they acquire yet again the potential to mobilize: their transformational potential can also be used for a wider audience, not only to remember or mourn an event 'safely' situated in the past, but to grant critical insights into how the impact and legacies of ethno-nationalist and racist ideologies intersect, merge, and overlap in multidirectional ways both historically and geographically. In this context, testimonies that might have originated in a journalistic context, produced to intervene in an ongoing crisis, then start to operate through the framework of memory, educating audiences not only about 'what happened', but making them think about what ethical witnessing at a remove (in time and/or space) actually entails. This article aims to

highlight some of the issues that arise when audio-visual testimony is presented the museum context.

Audiovisual testimonies – in their more traditional format but increasingly also in Augmented or Virtual Reality formats – are often found in museums that seek to address legacies of violent pasts and human rights issues and have variably been labelled as memorial museums, sites of conscience¹ or activist museums, defined by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell in their recent volume *Museum Activism* as a ‘museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change.’² This might sound like a mission that is only shared by very few museums given that so many are still bound to a notion of ‘neutrality’; but interestingly, similar aims have found their way into the new International Council of Museums definition which, after a consultation phase, was due to be announced at the 25th ICOM General Conference in September 2019 in Kyoto, Japan. The proposed formulation proved so controversial however that a second consultation phase will now run till May 2022. It read: ‘Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are [...] aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.’

It seems to me that this definition reflects the high expectations museums face, especially in post-conflict societies: museums are trusted to deal authoritatively, responsibly and sensitively with traumatic events and to mediate between different memory communities working towards social inclusion, restitution and reconciliation. They are to provide a safe space in which the past can be experienced vicariously and have a humanising effect on

¹ Joyce Apsel and Amy Sodaro, eds, *Museums and Sites of Persuasion: Politics, Memory and Human Rights* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020).

² Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, *Museum Activism* (London: Routledge, 2019), p.1.

visitors. They are supposed to facilitate public debate and collaborative, community-led activities and they are to help ‘people and communities [to] face or denounce social injustices’.³ In 2019, the Director of the Museums Association (the independent, professional body for British museums), Sharon Heal, commented on this responsibility: ‘Concerns about ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ mean that public trust in the media and politicians is at an all-time low, although trust in museums remains high, which means they are well-placed to host debate and discussion and to facilitate change.’⁴ Some, such as the Ulster Museum in Northern Ireland, acknowledge that a consensual narrative is not always possible or even necessary and instead favour a perspective based on agonistic memory in which people on both sides of the conflict acknowledge their competing and conflicting lived experiences without having to agree with each other. However, in our post-truth times, museums also have the responsibility of providing a curated public sphere in which national myths and blind spots can be exposed and interrogated. To quote the summary from a roundtable discussion at the [Activist Museums & the Impact of COVID on Museums](#) at the Museums Association Conference 2020: ‘Museums are not neutral – they have a responsibility to their communities to create truths, to create space and platforms for those who are traditionally without agency.’

Depending on the remit of the museum and its location, there is of course a wide spectrum of how testimonies are used to confront difficult histories: does the museum intervene in a so-called ‘memory war’ where a shared understanding of the past is still elusive, or does it represent a mainstream perspective on the topic that is supported by the majority of the museum visitors? Is its mandate predominantly to commemorate and mourn or to educate and inform? Even if these aims are not mutually exclusive, they certainly provoke a tension which is echoed on the website of [the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience](#):

³ Afsin Altayli and Mathieu Viau-Courville, ‘Editorial’, *Museum International*, ‘Museums and Contested Histories’, 70 (2018), 279-280: 3-8 (p. 3).

⁴ Sharon Heal, ‘Museums in the Age of Intolerance’, in *Museum Activism*, ed. by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (2019), pp. 208-219.

‘Serving diverse social and political goals, memorialization has the potential to contribute to positive social transformation, but also to divide societies.’

[The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center & Cemetery](#) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, established in 2003, is part of this International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. A memorial room was opened in 2007. The audiovisual testimonies filmed by UNTV and the oral histories collected by the museum’s curators are part of their permanent exhibition. The museum’s website describes the different functions it has to fulfill with the following words: ‘[the site] offers a space for prayer and remembrance and serves as a final resting place for many of those massacred. In the Spomen Soba (Memorial Room), visitors hear testimonials, watch film installations, and view recovered artifacts. In the on-site cemetery, a memorial wall is inscribed with the names of the 8,372 victims and provides one of the largest open-air Muslim prayer spaces in Europe’.⁵ The museum needs to cater for memory communities that are still in mourning, who feel that they need help to make their voices heard and are in an ongoing ‘truth and reconciliation’ process.

But what happens when the same testimonies are ‘displaced’ and made to speak in a broader historical context and to audiences that have not been directly affected by the events? The temporary exhibition [IWM ‘Refugees: Forced to Flee’](#) (24.9.2020-13.6.2021) spanned a hundred years of conflict unlocking ‘the personal stories of people forced to flee their homes and those who work to support them’ through the testimonies of Belgian Refugees in WWI, survivors from the *Kindertransport*, Displaced Person camps in the Second World War and camps in Bosnia to contemporary Afghanistan with the aim of giving ‘visitors the space to consider their own responses to similar experiences and dilemmas.’ Here, it is not so much the historical and geographical specificity of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina that the testimonies help to illuminate, but the first-hand experience of violent displacement with which visitors are encouraged to empathise. For that purpose, traditional audiovisual testimonies are increasingly complemented or enhanced by immersive experiences to allow museum visitors to engage with conflicts to which they have no personal connection. [Life in](#)

[a Camp](#), which was also part of IWM's Refugees season, used a three-wall projection to immerse audiences in the makeshift Moria camp on the Greek Island of Lesbos that houses more than 18,000 mostly Syrian refugees, reminding visitors that they 'experience just five minutes of what, for many, is a reality that stretches on for years'.

Shift to Immersive Witnessing

The conviction that these forms of vicarious and immersive witnessing are a strong motivator for action has been driving production of Virtual Reality documentaries in human rights campaigns and advocacy journalism.⁶ The term 'virtual reality' (VR) is commonly used to describe a three-dimensional, computer-generated environment that can be explored and interacted with by a user. Users or participants largely consume VR experiences through either on-location 360° panoramas or on-location headsets accessible through institutions such as museums and at film and documentary festivals. VR's presumed effects on mobilising witnesses are the main reason for the [UN Sustainable Development Goals Action Campaign's](#) increasing investment in VR experiences over the last few years. Anecdotal evidence by UN campaigns suggests that VR is twice as effective in raising funds. 'Being there', a sense of presence at the scene of the event, matters because it is thought that it is precisely the experience of physical and temporal proximity that both attests to the event's authenticity and calls for an active response rather than mere contemplation. The fact that audiences feel as if they are either co-present (in a different time at a different place) is supposed to enhance both the urgency and the emotional impact of what they are witnessing. In his 2015 TED talk entitled 'How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine', entrepreneur and VR artist Chris Milk describes his collaboration with the United Nations to produce the 360° video *Clouds over Sidra* which he first showed to decision makers at the World Economic Forum in Davos (VRSE, 2015). Users share the first-person perspective of a refugee child in the Za'atari

⁶ Silke Arnold-de Simine and Eugene Ch'ng (forthcoming), 'Distributed Remembering: Virtual Reality Testimonies and Immersive Witnessing', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture*, ed. by Sara Jones and Roger Woods (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

refugee camp in Jordan, experiencing her everyday life ‘through her eyes’ and via her ‘inner voice’:

‘You’re not watching through a screen, you’re sitting there with her [...]. You’re sitting on the same ground she is sitting on, and because of that you feel her humanity in a deeper way; you empathise with her in a deeper way.’⁷

The notion that VR is able to engender empathy more so than any other medium has been attributed to the fact that the brain registers VR experiences as real experiences rather than mediated ones⁸ and therefore responds with both emotional and behavioural reactions to experiences in the virtual world that can have lasting impact.

Even if scholars such as Amy Coplan would argue that the personal distress that might be felt by audiences being made to view the world from the perspective of those less fortunate can equally be well self-oriented as actually directed towards others⁹, immersion in real world content through VR is seen to have a unique prosocial potential and to deepen a sense of relationality. These mixed reality experiences offer to enhance ethical engagement through the participant’s spatial and temporal imbeddedness and immersion. VR’s ‘framelessness’ promises not only a unique form of being present but with its absence of a cinematic point-of-view also an absence of bias. Therefore, it is deemed a productive way to engage a wider public with difficult pasts and facilitate a feeling of moral responsibility and agency in audiences. But while some laud VR’s unique prosocial potential through empathic

⁷ Chris Milk, ‘How virtual reality can create the ultimate empathy machine’, *TED*, 2015.

https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_milk_how_virtual_reality_can_create_the_ultimate_empathy_machine?language=yi. (Accessed 5 July 2022).

⁸ Michael Medary and Thomas K. Metzinger, ‘Real Virtuality: A Code of Ethical Conduct: Recommendations for Good Scientific Practice and the Consumers of VR-Technology’, *Frontiers in Robotics and AI*, 3 (2016), 1-23 (p.6).

⁹ Amy Coplan, ‘Will the real empathy please stand up? A case for a narrow conceptualization’ in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 49 (Spindel Supplement), (2011), 40-65 (p. 56).

investment, critics have also remarked on the ethical dangers of this format - from the creation of false memories and what Kate Nash has called 'improper distance' in the potential misappropriation of the victims' experiences and the denial of the 'alterity of the other'¹⁰, to the de-politicisation of the structural violence and injustices that many non-fiction VR experiences aim to highlight and alleviate.

Why Empathy?

Empathy is usually defined as the 'affective act of seeing from another's perspective and imaginatively experiencing her or his thoughts, emotions and predicaments'.¹¹ Since the eighteenth century, philosophers such as David Hume and Adam Smith have claimed an intimate connection between empathy (which they called sympathy), compassion and prosocial behaviour and it is still widely assumed that one will lead to the other. As an emotional reaction based on a shared humanity, it is implied that empathy somehow stands outside or beyond the divisively ideological. And yet, it is part of the production of a 'self-managed neoliberal subject' who is encouraged to respond as an individual to another individual's suffering. As a well-meaning attempt to humanise those who have been dehumanised, it equates humanisation with individualisation and thereby risks obscuring the complex and historically specific workings of structural violence such as racism which can only be effectively grasped and responded to through political solidarity and collective action.¹²

To call on audiences' empathic investment suggests that it is really everyone's personal choice to emotionally invest in somebody else's suffering. It implies that empathy is needed to relate to someone's experiences and that this 'other history' can only be made relevant and comprehensible to audiences by evoking a personal emotional relationship to it, via empathy.

¹⁰ Kate Nash, 'Virtual reality witness: exploring the ethics of mediated presence', *Studies in Documentary Film*, 12 (2018), 119–131 (p.124).

¹¹ Carolyn Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (New York, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 6.

¹² Silke Arnold-de Simine and Catherine Gilbert, 'Commemoration and the Limits of Empathy', in *On Commemoration: Global Reflections upon Remembering War*, ed. by Catherine Gilbert, Kate McLoughlin and Niall Munro (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020), pp. 175-182 (p. 176f).

Instead of relying on visitors to suffer with the 'other' in a seemingly generous gesture of extending our emotional and cognitive understanding, the museum can also facilitate audiences' understanding as 'implicated subjects, participants in and beneficiaries of a system that generates dispersed and unequal experiences of trauma and well-being simultaneously' (Rothberg, 2019: 12)¹³. This is not to argue that there is no place for empathic witnessing in testimonial encounters but to highlight other important ways that testimony can be received by museum audiences, not least by acknowledging implication and accountability.

One such example is the immersive experience 'A Face to Open Doors', commissioned by IWM and produced by the creative studio Anagram as part of the museum's 'Refugees' season. The act of giving testimony takes centre-stage but the aim is not to provoke an empathic reaction in audiences. Rather, it reminds them of the significance of the testimonial encounter. The question of how the testimonial narrative produced by refugees will be received by decision-makers is indeed the deciding factor on their status as asylum seeker. In these legal situations, testimony does not so much work towards making refugees 'grievable' but has to convince decision-makers that what they are listening to is 'believable'. This is in turn determined by their expectations of what counts as markers of truth, the authenticity and the 'correct' emotional response to trauma, inflected by an understanding of trauma deeply rooted in Western trauma discourses.

The installation encourages audiences to think critically about the context in which the testimonial encounter is situated and about its power dynamics. As participants they are not so much encouraged to 'feel sorry' (for the other, for themselves), it asks audiences to understand their implication in ongoing structural violence and encourages them to take on a shared responsibility for the future. While VR films such as *Clouds over Sidra* invest all their efforts into familiarising 'others' in the attempt to allow audiences to identify and empathise with them, 'A Face to Open Doors' defamiliarises visitors from their comfort zones to enable them to see how their everyday life is embedded in structures that create the idea of 'the

¹³ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2019) p. 12.

Other'. Far from detracting from its serious ethical implications, the playfulness of this testimonial performance opens up a space in which participants can start to think about how their everyday life is embedded in structures shaped by the legacies of racist ideologies that might be unconsciously performed, but have found their way not only into individual minds, but also into institutions or into the programming of algorithms that determine how facial recognition and other digital technologies operate. Their design increasingly shapes not only how we collectively remember, but also how we classify and identify people and how we extend to them (or indeed withhold) the feeling of empathy and respect as a fellow human being and, even more importantly, the civil and human rights many of us take for granted.