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# Whose emotion?

Encountering Holocaust Survivors' Testimonies

According to John Durham Peters a witnesses' status in general is constituted through a specific ambiguity that is related to the "fragility of witnessing".<sup>1</sup> To describe this fragility Peters carves out three dimensions of the witness: first the dimension of the agent bearing witness, secondly the text of the testimony and thirdly the audience who listens to the witness. This constellation of experience, communication and listening is reminiscent of the communication triangle of speech-act, agent and audience. From this follows Peters' definition of a witness as "the paradigm case of a medium: the means by which experience is supplied to others who lack the original."<sup>2</sup> The witness mediates an absent event and makes it present and thus is being supposed to have a privileged access to the past. The faculties that are therefore necessary are mirroring the constellation of witnessing: first of all the faculty of memory, that is the ability to recall what happened at another place and another time, secondly the faculty of narrating, to communicate these memories in form of a comprehensible (and sometimes even reproducible) narrative, and thirdly, turning to the side of the listeners, the faculty of imagination, which is according to Hannah Arendt "the ability to make present what is absent"<sup>3</sup>. In this regard the listeners' do not only reflect "on an object [or the core and text of the witnesses account] but on its representation [the specific form how something is said]."<sup>4</sup> They take a position that is distinct from that of the witness. Following Arendt we could state that the listener moves towards the position of the judge [referring to a juridical setting] or regarding historic events to the position of an historian: "who by relating [the past] sits in judgment over it".<sup>5</sup> That implies a position from "where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection"<sup>6</sup>, which brings us back to imagination as "condition for memory".<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the status of the witness we can observe that it constantly shifts between the position of a passive observer and an active narrator. Thus Peters states that the witness has

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<sup>1</sup> John Durham Peters: "Witnessing". In: *Media, Culture and Society* 23.6 (2001): 707-723, p. 710.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 709.

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt: *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. and with an interpretation by Ronald Beiner, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr. 1982, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

“two faces: the passive one of seeing and the active one of saying”<sup>8</sup> and points out that this “journey from experience (the seen) into words (the said) is precarious.”<sup>9</sup>

Now proceeding from these general assumptions about the status of the witness and its listeners (the communicative and imaginative dimension of testifying, the fragility of witnessing and its affinity to media) to the specific character of Shoah witnesses we first have to realize certain distinctions. As an event without precedent the Shoah did not only challenge concepts of progress and reason but also shatters the concept of witnessing; especially as the Shoah was as is known an event without witnesses. Thus Shoah witnesses are in the precarious situation that most of the perpetrators never admitted their crimes and on the other hand hardly no uninvolved spectator ever witnessed the events when they actually took place. Even more the aim of the crime was to annihilate potential witnesses and to destroy all evidence. Following these specifics of the event the Shoah witnesses’ precarious status permanently oscillates between that of a disgraced victim and that of a retroactive witness that tries to make sense of a crime that challenges the boundaries of sense and ratio.

Additionally we have to take into account that only a fractional amount of victims ever became witnesses. First of all the vast majority never could testify because these people were killed. Secondly we have to consider that the majority of surviving victims was never able to speak about their experiences and to tell their stories. Thus only a minority of the victims ever gained the speaking position of a Shoah witness either at a trial, as historian, author of biographies, interviewee in documentaries or as an eye witness telling his or her story to the next generation.

Having clarified the specifics of Shoah witnesses we can now turn towards the conditions and expectations of the audience within this specific triangle of witnessing. Therefore audiovisual media is today the most important agent. We can assume that the recalling of personal memories is shaped by the setting of conversation, by the recording and especially through the selection of specific parts from an interview for the final version of a testimony. Furthermore the making of such films is influenced by common expectations of the audience as well as through conventionalized stylistic patterns. This concerns the specific forms of addressing and the presentation as well as the triggering of emotional responses on the side of the witness as well as on that of the audience.

Here we need to be distinct again. The witnesses’ emotional response is characterized through an actualization of conserved previous emotions from the past or even a release of suppressed emotions for the first time as well as through ‘primary’ emotions such as sorrow about the

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<sup>8</sup> Peters: Witnessing, p. 709.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 710.

loss of friends and relatives, fear of the returning of unbearable memories or pain during the tough act of remembering. In contrast the emotional response of the audience is mediated through the recorded testimony and appears as immediate because of the specific cinematic perception. Thus the spectator's emotions respond to the cinematic perception of emotions, which are exceedingly related to stylistic devices. These stylistic devices create a mode of re-experience, which is linked to specific responsive experiences by recalling own 'memories' on the spectator's side. On the one hand these secondary 'memories' are linked to personal experiences if the film experience reminds the spectators of similar or identical experiences they had in their own life. Thus the audience tries to link the testimony to its own personal memories (which of course are often also exceedingly shaped by cultural conventions or interpersonally shared concepts). On the other hand the emotional addressing can be linked to an earlier film experience that became part of the individual stock of emotions and experiences. Such media (or other culturally shaped) experiences are creating assumptions how a film or an audiovisual testimony about the Shoah should look and feel like. Such assumptions can modify in different periods of media history. Judith Keilbach for instance found in her seminal research on historical television in Germany that Shoah witnesses during the sixties had to accommodate to the sober mode of juridical discourses while since the 1990s more and more emotional expressions of the witnesses became an expected marker for a film's perception as authentic.<sup>10</sup>

These assumptions and expectations are not only shaped through media but also by the specific socio-cultural and political context, in which a society addresses the past. I argue that the specific epistemological challenges of the Shoah produce nearly necessarily feelings such as unsettledness, uncertainty and disorientation. Out of this results a requirement perceiving the Shoah in a bearable manner, to heal the wounds of the past and to get a closed and harmonic image of this unimaginable history. It is noticeable that in a specific way the turn towards the surviving witnesses in audiovisual media since the 1980s had reinforced this requirement. The survivors' testimonies were more and more perceived as a bearable surrogate for the shocking archive footage from the liberated camps and the Nazi films shot in the Ghettos. Enhanced by feature films like Spielberg's *SCHINDLER'S LIST* the Shoah was told as story of survival with a positive ending of returning to life, which nevertheless included the exclusive offer to get an insight into the abyss of brutality and evil. Regarding the stylistic forms of such attempts the fragility and fragmentary composition of the cinematic as well as

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Keilbach: *Geschichtsbilder und Zeitzeugen. Zur Darstellung des Nationalsozialismus im Bundesdeutschen Fernsehen*, Münster 2008.

of the witness's narrative had to vanish just as compositions of failure, gaps, missing links and stylistically caused unsettledness that would create different emotional responses.

To elaborate these specific emotional responses to and the addressing through survivor's testimonies I will now discuss a prototypical documentary that is primarily based on accounts of Shoah witnesses. *THE LAST DAYS*, a documentary directed by James Moll in 1998 that won an Academy Award for best documentary feature follows the fate of five Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. Regarding Wikipedia it "focuses on the horrors of life in the concentration camps, but also stresses the optimism and desire to survive".<sup>11</sup> Thus the film, which was produced by Steven Spielberg and was one of the first attempts to illustrate the importance of the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, follows the narrative described above and creates an historical access to the past by focusing on individual memories with a certain emotional impact. The latter is reinforced through the stylistic form of merging testimonies with archive footage and shots from the historical sites as well as with an emotionalizing musical score and through the film's narrative following the life stories of the survivors from cared childhood through the shattering catastrophe to a relieving end.

However the film is not primarily accessing the biographies of its protagonists in depth but elaborates the witnesses as firsthand medium towards the past. Thus the film creates the impression of immediacy by compounding the individual testimonies to a generalizing image of the past events.

In a central sequence, in which Irene Zisblatt, Rene Firestone and Alice Lok Cahana are describing their personal memories from the deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the montage is obviously merging the three witnesses into one single voice. One woman finishes a sentence that her predecessor had opened. The visual adjustment on the one hand interloops short testimony pieces into the image of a universal victim that is proving but at the same time also repeating the Nazi effort to de-personalize their victims. On the other hand this generalized image of the deportation experience is also intended to enable access to these very specific, existential and cruel experiences. However the dissolving of the different individual perspectives and voices would never finally be possible because always individual markers like the face, clothes, certain personal objects or the tone of the voice will thwart such an impression. By this means the testimony footage itself resists the generalized cutting.

But obviously this sequence creates a specific mood. The fast cutting creates tension and the feeling of disorientation. This tension endures during the report about the deportation until it

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<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Last\\_Days](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Last_Days).

is culminating in the word “Auschwitz” and the simultaneously edited photography of the camp’s gate.

Outstanding emotional responses of the survivors are included into this stylistically triggered mood. Following Greg Smith emotion and mood have to be seen in close relationship: “To sustain a mood, we must experience occasional moments of emotion. Film must therefore provide the viewer with a periodic diet of brief emotional moments if it is to sustain a mood. Therefore, mood and emotion sustain each other.”<sup>12</sup> Overwhelmed witnesses create such emotional moments. Those moments are deliberately cut into the sequence and accompanied by certain visual accents. The camera for example focuses Irene Zisblatt’s clenching hands when she is recalling her fear of losing her brother. In a following shot her voice perishes and she covers her face with her hands. Such emotional expressions are enhancing the addressed mood but do not make aware the fragility of the testimony and therefore the shattering character of the event itself.

Rather such scenes match with the audiences’ expectation and assumption to meet traumatized people, which Judith Keilbach has perfectly described as a stylistic device. She states that such stylistic devices are meanwhile conventionalized emblems of trauma.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand those intense emotional moments tie in with the spectator’s own emotional memories. Thus many of these situations depict general human experiences. Both moments from the testimony of Zisblatt did for instance refer to her family. The reference to family relations is an important bridge to trigger emotional responses.

Furthermore the interviews often try to focus on details and symbolic and symptomatic moments within the general narration of the events. In the following sequence Rene Firestone for instance recalls how she had to take of her bathing suit that she had taken on her way to the deportation to have something reminding her of her childhood. The recollection of the bathing suit functions as a vivid detail that refers within the unbearable catastrophe to normal life. On the one hand the spectators can connect it with objects that are for them in a similar way valuable as memory objects. On the other hand this special object is used to demonstrate the cruelty of the persecution. The adding of historic photographs even intensifies this narrative function. The picture of young Rene in the bathing suit serves in this sense as a memory image that can also be adopted by the audience. The photograph on the one hand warrants the testimony (the bathing suit was real) and on the other hand serves as definite illustration of an imaginary recollection. The later photograph of the shaved women in Auschwitz on the contrary indicates the brutal reality that disrupted these memories.

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, Greg M.: *Film Structure and the Emotion System*. Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Keilbach: *Geschichtsbilder*, p. 163.

As *THE LAST DAY* is combining the testimonies of three female and two male survivors also gender related expectations become obvious. Generally emotional responses of women are much more anticipated. Those emotional reactions adapt to culturally imposed concepts of gendered emotions. The opposite would be the testimony of Tom Lantos in *THE LAST DAYS*. Lantos is always speaking in a very sober and coherent way about his experiences. But what is meeting the expected gendered behaviour could conflict with the canonized image of a Shoah survivor's testimony. Michele Barricelli, Juliane Brauer and Dorothee Wein for instance have highlighted in a report about the educational use of survivor's testimonies that the young spectators of such testimonies are often disappointed when the survivors do not openly express their emotions. Thus the authors concluded that this expectation seems to be related to the representation of witnesses in audiovisual media mainly as distributors of emotions.<sup>14</sup>

Following this observation it seems as if in the specific case of Shoah witnesses the expectation of explicitly emotional expressing predominates the expectations of gender related emotional responses. Thus a highly emotional scene depicting the survivor Bill Basch getting overwhelmed by his memories from the camps meets the spectator's expectation much more than Lantos' historically coherent narration. Therefore it is interesting that at the end of the film Lantos is explicitly marked as a 'professional' public speaker, because of his position as US congressman.

Finally I want to discuss a last sequence from *THE LAST DAYS* because it seems to me that this interview with Dario Gabbai, who was a member of the Jewish Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, is the most puzzling in the film and illustrates a different concept of emotional response. In the first part of this interview, which appears like a film within the film, Gabbai tells soberly his biography, his first impressions of the crematorium and describes the work that has been done by the Sonderkommando. His extremely gentle speaking is accompanied with a dramatizing musical score and illustrated with archive photographs.

It is remarkable that although Gabbai's emotional strain is clearly expressed by his nervously moving hands the camera stays in the distance and does not focus his hands in close up. Besides the use of archive footage the film also illustrates Gabbai's memories with a tracking shot through the restored ruins of the crematorium. This deserted space, which is as an allegory for the de-humanization of the victims, has to be related to the experiences of the witness through the audience's imagination. Thus room to imagine what is unimaginable is

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<sup>14</sup> Michele Barricelli, Juliane Brauer and Dorothee Wein: Zeugen der Shoah: Historisches Lernen mit lebensgeschichtlichen Videointerviews. *Das Visual History Archive des Shoah Foundation Institute in der schulischen Bildung*. In: *Medaon* 5/2009, 9. 10.

opened by transgressing the concept of pure illustration in favour of a communicational exchange between voice and image that are both limited.

But what is even more striking is the sequence's continuation. In its second part Gabbai recalls a specific incident when friends of him arrived in the killing zone. In contrast to the stylistic program of the whole film the music score breaks off and from this tremendous and nearly unbearable point of the testimony no further cuts interrupt Gabbai's memories.

In contrast to our expectations Gabbai speaks quietly but calm about this extraordinary incident. Thus his words puzzle even more, because we encounter a conflict between content and form. The apparently sober but nevertheless deeply empathetic tone of his narration thus has an unsettling effect on the spectators. In result other emotional responses become possible, even because our expectations are thwarted: Disappointing turns into irritation. Irritation becomes uncertainty. Uncertainty causes involvement. The modified involvement raises new questions.

Thus especially because of the thwarting of our expectations we become aware of the fragility of witnessing and find new access to the witness's testimony. Regarding Peters assumptions about the witness as medium we see in this case that the experience is precisely supplied because of a reduction to the spoken testimony and the perception of the speaking witness that brings our attention towards its inherent forms of intermediation. In contrast to using the testimonies to create a certain mode for historical re-experience the imparting character of the testimony becomes obvious. Thus audiovisual media can also open space for the spectator's confrontation with the witnesses' accounts and for imagination instead of narrowing the testimonies' fragility into definite and relieving narratives.

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