

## FEATURETTE:

# An Eternal Witness by Rebecka Katz-Thor

How can one remember and commemorate an event marked by double death? The survivors of the Holocaust will soon be gone, and with their deaths, the memory of the Holocaust also faces a potential death of another kind. Death might not be a guarantee of a complete dying, to paraphrase Primo Levi's remark on the complete witnesses of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> Only those who perished were the complete witnesses to the event, thus creating an absent, impossible witness.

According to David Rousset, "When no witnesses are left, there can be no testimony." Thus one must turn to other sources and forms of commemoration to understand our historic past.<sup>2</sup> *Dimensions in Testimony* is such a project that also could be read as resisting a *complete dying*. It is a collaboration between the USC Shoah Foundation and the University of Southern California, where "interactive biographies" of survivors are created as an "initiative to record and display testimony in a way that will continue the dialogue between Holocaust survivors and learners far into the future."<sup>3</sup> One might ask what it is that is being kept alive in such contemporary practices of witness' recordings: the memory or the witness?

By filming the survivors with 116 cameras and posing around a hundred questions, a sort of interactive witness hologram is created. The project blurs the line between the witnessing subject and witnessing *beyond* the witness. It is neither a living person giving testimony nor an image or film. Or maybe it is both. It features a subjective testimony, but the testifier is missing. There cannot be any outbursts, breaches, or impasses in discourse, as Michal Givoni has rightly pointed out. In her



Erik Lernestål, Statens historiska museer & Judisk kultur i Sverige.

view, this amounts to a “witnessing without witnesses.”<sup>4</sup> A farfetched affinity could be traced to montage, but the analogy doesn’t hold as the montage is the tool of the filmmaker in the construction of a narrative, whereas the interactive hologram directs beyond the one who scripted the questions. Hence, what happens to the ontology of the witness and the image alike? Regardless, the survivors, as individual bodies, seem granted, or doomed to, eternal survival.

In a short film about the project produced by the *New York Times*, an elderly woman is surrounded by flashing cameras. A voice is heard: “Why don’t you ask me about Auschwitz?” and the woman repeats the question in slightly broken English. The neutral instruction changes into a request to address a deeply traumatic and personal experience. The witness is not only asked to narrate, but also to steer the expected viewers’ interaction with the hologram. The witness becomes responsible both for testifying and making sure that there is someone there to listen. As if she/the hologram/the research program in charge silently says: “don’t ask me about trivial things, ask me about Auschwitz.” The “why don’t you” implies a question not being asked; it seems almost like an accusation, bound to the trope of *never again*. Thus, the way in which a testimony is presented, the way speech is structured, and the way narratives are shaped all inform the testimony as such, a testimony grounded in an authorial presence that, in the form of a hologram, remains in question.

Dying as a Holocaust survivor could remain an individual death, a *complete dying*, and not a move from life to living memory. Yet, in a project like this the witness seems to remain, not as a ghostly presence, but rather as a refusal of passing—an insisting on a right to remain, to be seen and heard as an eternal survival of the witness.

1 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 70.

2 David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), 464. Hannah Arendt also quotes the passage in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1976), 451.

3 “Dimensions in Testimony”, US Shoah Foundation - The Institute for Visual History and Education, April 15th, 2021. <https://sfi.usc.edu/dit>.

4 Michal Givoni, *The Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crises* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 215.