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More than Meets the Eye – The Intricate Relationship between Selfies at Holocaust Memorial Sites and Their Subsequent Shaming

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Abstract: As the ethical barriers surrounding ‘digital Holocaust etiquette’ remain contested, scholars like Daniel Magilow and Lisa Silverman question whether there can be unwritten rules of behavior at sites of historical trauma. Because of significant shifts in the digital arena, too, legacy types of memory formation, such as collective memories associated with physical spaces, are being challenged by a new type of digital archive that is both active and passive. This article seeks to interrogate the socio-psychological aspects of selfies taken at Holocaust memorial sites and of their subsequent shaming. We wish to juxtapose current research findings with the public audience’s reaction to these photos after they have been posted on social media. In many respects, commenters may offer insight into a larger phenomenon outside of what is deemed appropriate in terms of Holocaust memory. Our article may not provide solutions or easy answers, but this is not our goal. Rather, our research aims to point to the complex, often uncomfortable, nature of this topic due to the fact that selfies encapsulate both micro and macro histories, reality and virtual reality, and a shift in traditional types of memory formation.

Keywords: cultural/collective memory, holocaust memorial site, memory work, post-witnessing, selfie, shaming, social media, visual culture

Article note: The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Gratz College, the Technical University of Berlin, or the University of California, Berkeley.

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Figure 1: Selfie of a visitor at the Babyn Yar Memorial (Instagram User 1 2021).

When looking at Figure 1, an Instagram photo made by a self-proclaimed female performance artist,¹ one can imagine what she is contemplating. With large, dark sunglasses covering her eyes, she stares off into the distance and pulls back her hair as she crouches down at one of the installations at the Babyn Yar Memorial site outside Kyiv. *What does the image tell us about the subject and their experience at the memorial?* In a post accompanying the picture, she writes about the future in general and succeeding in life – without making any real connection to the site itself. *Do the comments, then, represent the individual’s interaction with the Holocaust memorial?* Such selfies might look like a snapshot in time, done within seconds and ultimately superficial, but they are inherently more complex; they

¹ Unless referencing public figures, the authors have removed user names and blurred faces from social media posts in this article to keep examples anonymous. All posts referenced, however, are viewable to the public.

are more than what meets the eye. To quote artist and photographer Diane Arbus: “The more a photograph seems to tell you, the less you seem to know” (Schjeldahl 2005). So, the question then becomes: *What do we actually know by looking at a picture and what are we projecting into it?*

Although without motion, still photographs represent multilayered and multidimensional characteristics. As Susan Sontag explains, a photograph is not merely “an encounter between an event and a photographer” but rather “an event within itself” (Sontag 2005, 8). What a photograph may seem to tell us can, in fact, be an illusion, a simulation of reality. Without context, photographs may have multiple explanations due to the subjectivity of the viewer and are thus “inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (Ibid, 24). Take, for example, selfies nowadays. The modern self-portrait, the “selfie,” acts in a visual way to communicate with the person’s followers, and is part of a larger conversation and discourse of the *Zeitgeist*.² This *Zeitgeist* includes, according to William Merrin, a shift in cultural content which concludes in the “creation of ‘me-dia’ – the explosion of individual, horizontal, mediated interpersonal and public communication” (Merrin 2014, 13). He argues that this “me-dia” circles around the individual and assigns them the power of creating, managing, and distributing (Ibid). Rather than simple images, selfies represent “a diverse cultural practice with wide meanings and potentials” (Douglas 2020, 396). They are “[...] complex and full of visual and computational nuances as it is layered with information we have yet to decode or understand” (Wendt 2014, 10). Like Arbus said, knowledge of what is happening in the photo is an illusion. Decoding and understanding the layers means to contextualize, read them as texts, understand their complex and contradictory nature, and also reflect on our own expectations of selfies. Furthermore, we must acknowledge our own limitations in our efforts to grasp such context. Thus, interpretations of photos, and especially selfies, “should reflect this uncertainty” (Douglas 2020, 394). As selfies at Holocaust memorial sites become more prevalent, the “uncertainty” of their intentions and contexts have often been disregarded, urging researchers to reframe how we analyze the public shaming of such photographs.

Our article may not provide solutions or easy answers, but this is not our goal. Rather, our research aims to point to the complex, often uncomfortable nature of this topic due to the fact that selfies encapsulate micro and macro histories, reality and virtual reality, and a shift in traditional types of memory

² Jill Walker Rettberg states that selfies “are not simply texts published from a distance. They are images and words that are part of a conversation.” James Meese et al. calls selfies a “communicative act” (Rettberg 2014, 19; Meese, et al. 2015, 1821).

formation. Selfies and their shaming, then, are both more than what comes across at first glance. Like Daniel H. Magilow argues, however offensive selfies at Holocaust memorial sites may be, they must be understood as examples of “social photography,” as conceptualized by Nathan Jurgenson. Yet these images should also be analyzed in the context through which they were made possible, in this case the sociotechnical media available to consumers in the 21st century, which contradicts previously accepted Holocaust-related memory work, especially in the West. To this point, historian Amos Goldberg references the “paradigmatic” international collective memory that formed since the Holocaust, where such “global memory” (as suggested by Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, among others) is not necessarily connected to a coherent social group or nation, but instead to a “vague collective identity” generally comprised of “the West” and the “Euro-Atlantic space” (Goldberg 2012, 187). The internet and social media, then, provide new international platforms to present and interact with fellow constituents while also reshaping how Holocaust memory is established and communicated (S. Béhler and Pfanzelter 2016, 211). In turn, our article will focus on selfies taken at European memorial sites with a special emphasis on the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, Germany, and the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau in Oświęcim, Poland, which are considered part of the “four shrines” (together with Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., USA) and are globally renowned memorial sites, as well as ethically defined cultural institutions (Ibid., 218). Because such memorials have traditionally been understood to guarantee a particular memory associated with the site due to their “land-anchored permanence,” they provide intriguing case studies to new trends in memory in an ever-changing socio-digital world (Young 1993, 3).

1 Socio-Spatial Barriers in Past and Present

Let us begin by exploring some of the underlying qualities of selfies. Importantly, we do not distinguish between a selfie taken with a selfie stick, a selfie taken by an individual’s own hands, or a portrait taken by another individual. Our research shows that regardless of the methods used to capture a selfie, the communicative aspects are nevertheless present, including the opportunity for shaming. Shaming occurs in various forms and for various reasons, yet for the purposes of this paper, it is defined as a public mechanism intended to convey a sense of moral failure regarding an expected duty in an effort to alter actions. (The online project *Yolocaust* by Shahak Shapira may come to mind.) For our definition of selfies, particularly at Holocaust memorial sites, we draw upon

several leading scholars across the interdisciplinary spectrum. As previously mentioned, we turn to Nathan Jurgenson's definition of "social photographs" first and foremost, in which a selfie is primarily a form of self-expression, a cultural practice that is part of "a broader development in self-expression, memory, and sociality" (Jurgenson 2019, 10). In this manner, a selfie is not a static photograph but rather an "image-speak." This "image-speak" communicates the individual's "own *voice as image* and is thus especially intimate and expressive" [emphasis added] (Ibid, 85). Daniel H. Magilow builds upon this theory by arguing that "Shoah selfies" within media streams in fact "contribute to the photographer's ongoing narrative of self-fashioning" (Magilow 2021, 155–187). The "image-speak" then acts as an extension of the individual's voice and understanding of their surroundings. Because of this, Holocaust memory arguably becomes more individualized, revealing the personal connection to the site of trauma, i.e., post-witnessing. Instead of being viewed as anti-social or removing oneself from the moment, selfies can be a normal part of how individuals, particularly young individuals, interact with their socio-spatial surroundings, "no matter how offensive they may be" (Ibid., 155). As historian James Young argues in his analysis of memorials and public memory: "Rather than patronizing mass tastes, we must recognize that public taste carries weight and that certain conventional forms in avowedly public art may eventually have consequences for public memory—whether or not we think they should" (Young 1993, 12).

Along these lines, selfies provide a way to negotiate, figure out, and find identity, especially for young people:

Youth exceeds the binary limits of adult and child and also, by association, those of reason and unreason, mind and body, presence and absence. Likewise, social media produce a similar kind of conceptual excess by collapsing boundaries of public and private, real and virtual. Young people's lives are increasingly lived and expressed virtually, and these virtual experiences are both private and public, not to mention intensely 'real'. Young people are representing their own coming of age processes, negotiating identities, sexualities and friendships, and making moral and ethical decisions regarding their online conduct. (Fleur 2014, 108).

Social media creates platforms for individuals to communicate directly and indirectly about real-life experiences. Moreover, once cell phones became part of everyday life as "wearable memory prosthetic," so too came the possibility to store messages, videos, and photos on them (Reading 2011, 303). For many, these devices became almost an extension of themselves: much like a selfie. Social media and selfies can thus be understood as visual and public spaces for the process of finding oneself in the virtual, as well as in the real world.

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok, are key technological drivers behind this phenomenon. They provide a platform with relatively easy access to which only an internet connection and a phone with a built-in camera are needed. Because they are easily accessible, these platforms have become “[...] a ubiquitous part of everyday culture, a performance of identity” (Douglas 2020, 385). Illustrative of this is the Academy Award-nominated Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*, which highlights the extensive length to which social media companies will go to get users’ attention, while a recent *Wall Street Journal* article explains how “TikTok’s algorithm regularly propels virtual nobodies onto millions of viewers’ *For You* page” (Jargon 2022, A10). Social media can create bubbles of idealistic and seemingly perfect images, yet Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym urge us not to always label selfies as “acts of vanity or narcissism” (Senft and Baym 2015). With mobile devices today, participants may engage in a “scan-and-search” experience, where there is a constant struggle between active and passive (re)actions (S. Hoskins 2018, 99). In this sense, social media creates an illusion that encourages, maybe even coerces people, especially younger ones, to participate. This type of media, therefore, operates like a mostly non-political mass movement – one may call it a mass movement of illusionary wealth, health, and happiness – that people can easily join but not leave easily. (See research on social media addiction).

Social media is also inclusive and exclusive by design. On the one hand, it can potentially connect people from around the world and from any background, regardless of nationality, political opinion, sexual orientation, gender, or age. On the other, it easily fuels fabricated opinions built solely on a picture, which is often highly staged, photoshopped, or filtered, as a performance. The complexity of a human being and their life is reduced or erased. Once posted, this two-dimensional image of the person or, in the case of Holocaust selfies, a situation and experience, is available for their immediate followers but also potentially for everybody on the internet – and their unfiltered opinions. To a large extent as well, social media at Holocaust sites does not allow much leeway or wiggle room in terms of what is perceived as appropriate. Therefore, selfies may be viewed as a performative act to present and communicate the intended – and perhaps pretended – experiences to the followers.

Beyond this understanding, because selfies may be performative or illusionary, even the lived moment becomes arguably disingenuous. Let us for a moment consider the selfie as a form of Jean Baudrillard’s simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994). Despite his provocative theories on digital media and consumerism, Baudrillard’s notion of a simulacrum is quite fitting when applied to the socio-digital realm in which Holocaust selfies exist. According to his

theory, a simulacrum is an imitation (or copy without a true original), which attempts to simulate reality but is ultimately disingenuous, and thus disconnected from the real historical moment. As a simulacrum a selfie can act as a representation (the aforementioned “image-speak”) conveyed through yet another representation of the real person (their social media account), distancing itself each time from reality. Andrew Hoskins articulates moments like this as “greyed,” “unlived,” and a kind of “sharing without sharing.” The memorial site importantly acts as a spatial medium connecting the lived history with the contemporary, narrated representations. Due to the all-consuming nature of digital memory, we are witnessing “a move from capturing representations of the world in which we inhabit to one which we can inhabit only through our capturings and connectivities” (Hoskins 2018, 101). Once posted on social media, selfies become part of the public digital archive with the potential for a perpetual number of copies. In other words, regardless of the individual’s intent and simply due to the intrinsic nature of a selfie, self-portraits taken at Holocaust sites can indeed be seen by viewers as abstractions existing outside of reality. The viewer recognizes it is a false, oftentimes macabre version of the original, historical moment. This is the paradox of selfies at memorial sites: they may simultaneously represent individualized, communicative self-expressions, as well as de-individualized and detached abstractions.

2 Selfies as Self-Image, Self-Expression, and Self-Protection

By visiting Holocaust sites, people entering a memorial become second-hand witnesses – or post-witnesses – to the violence and destruction of those locations. Diana Popescu describes the act of post-witnessing as, “[...] a position of immediate and unmediated personal relationship developed with a place of trauma in the present moment” (Popescu 2016, 275). Witnessing in the case of second-hand witnessing means not being exposed to the traumatic experience directly. Kate Douglas states that the visitor is obliged to second-person witnessing, which consists of “the willingness to (often publicly and collectively) observe the witness and testimony of others, to respond and comprehend one’s relationship to communal trauma and social suffering” (Douglas 2020, 386). Such witnessing is designed and directed by the way memorial sites and their exhibitions are structured. Telling examples are the indices of victimhood, such as the piles of shoes, glasses, and hair at the Memorial of the former concentration camp Auschwitz I. These “memorial ghosts,” in the absence of their

owners, need someone else to see them: a witness.³ This is the role of the visitors to memorial sites: through them, “the past becomes present through symbolic interactions, through narrative and discourse, with memory itself being a product of both ...” (Eyerman 2011, 305).

To develop this argument, we would like to draw from the novel *The Town Beyond the Wall* by survivor Elie Wiesel, published in 1964. Based on Wiesel’s personal experience, this fictional work deals with the role of the bystander during the Holocaust, and the moral issue of indifference in its broader implications. The novel depicts the journey and experience of a Holocaust survivor named Michael, whose main goal is to find a person he could never forget: the person who watched the Jewish victims waiting for their deportation without rushing to help (Wiesel 1967, 148). The role and depiction of the bystander in *The Town Beyond the Wall* provide insight into the complexity of visiting a memorial site with two crucial differences. First, the temporal gap spans decades between the bystander and the visitor’s role. In the novel, the bystander lived during the Holocaust and therefore had a part on the role spectrum between victims and perpetrators. Meanwhile, the contemporary visitor most likely did not experience the Holocaust. The second crucial difference is taking action. Whereas the bystander was part of the scope of action between historical victims and perpetrator, therefore creating a moral issue, the visitor has a more neutral role after the Holocaust. By being uninvolved in the situational conflict between victims and perpetrators, the bystander is literally standing by “someone else’s history,” as Mary Fulbrook points out (S. Fulbrook 2019, 16).

Historically, the category of the bystander became known through Raul Hilberg’s trichotomy of perpetrator-victim-bystander, but this does not depict the complexity of events or people(s) participating in the violence or offering to help the victims, such as looking away or onlooking (S. Morina and Thijs 2019, 1, 3). Whereas Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs state that the trichotomy’s ambiguity is captured by the “hybrid spectrum between indirect and direct involvement rather well” (Ibid.), Fulbrook argues that the entire trichotomy needs to be reframed to conceptualize the (re)actions within a system of violence (S. Fulbrook 2019 31).

The (on)looking at someone else’s history is a position the Holocaust bystander and the contemporary visitor share. Roma Sendyka considers the bystander a “visual subject” (Sendyka 2019, 53), a state the contemporary visitor can also inhabit despite the temporal difference. However, the moral issue comes

³ “We are disturbed and humbled by each reminder of the cruelties of suffering alone and are reminded that the gaps in memory and in mourning can never be filled in a solitary fashion; rather, the absences require the presence of others for both their registration and their reworking throughout the life span” (Gerson 2012, 360).

into play when observing the visitor's behavior at the memorial site. The visitor nowadays "takes action" by taking a selfie and interacting with the traumascap, making it an object and subject of action at the same time.

One example of someone "taking action" via selfie to educate others on Holocaust history is basketball superstar Ray Allen, who retired from the game in 2016, and continued down a path he had begun over a decade earlier. As a Black man in America, Allen found it especially important to understand discrimination across cultures and to connect actions back to the level of the human. Thus, the following year in 2017, he took his first trip to Poland in order to bear witness to the horrors of the Holocaust. Reflecting upon the daunting experience of walking through the former death camp in Auschwitz, he wrote:

I thought I knew what the Holocaust was, and what it meant. [...] But I wasn't prepared for how deeply the visit would affect me. The first thing I felt when I walked through those iron gates was ... heavy. The air around me felt heavy. I stood on the train tracks where the prisoners of the camp would arrive, and I felt like I could hear the trains coming to a halt. I had to take a breath to center myself. It was so immediate. So overwhelming ... How does somebody process that? You can't (Allen 2017a).

What Allen's quotes hint is how overwhelming representations of violence and death can be for the visitor, resulting in an internal process which might not be visible to others. In fact, the visitor's struggle with an emotional response to the traumascap is part of the memory work process. Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Lital Henig argue that the "[...] feeling, as well as the inability to feel, become subjective indicators for memory" (Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Henig 2021, 228). Here they play with the notion of "*i-memory*," depicting the ego-centered aspect of the 'I' while addressing its interactive part with 'i' (Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Henig 2021, 231). Individuals may attempt to avoid being overwhelmed by the socio-spatial qualities of the moment through a *Rückbezug* (back reference), or by turning to something familiar: for example, taking pictures of themselves with their cell phones. Douglas points to the photographic direction of selfies as illustrative of this: "[...] a selfie involves looking away rather than looking at the traumascap. The selfie involves looking into a mirror, at the self, rather than outwards" (Douglas 2020, 387). Cell phones support this theory of a back reference, too, as they are not merely digital gadgets for communication but "central to our sense of self," as Merrin phrased it (Merrin 2014, 14). Consequently, selfies at Holocaust memorial sites could be viewed in the very literal way: as a "self"-ie, a way for the visitor to turn away from the trauma of the moment and (re)connect with themselves.

Like so many visitors to Auschwitz, Allen's difficulty with processing the socio-spatial qualities of the site is echoed in his social media posts. While



Figure 2: Selfie of Ray Allen at the Auschwitz memorial site (Allen 2017b).

remaining cognizant of the sensitivities around social media, he was optimistic about spreading some of this history with his followers. In an interview conducted with *Andscape* (ESPN’s platform formerly known as *The Undefeated*), Allen emphasized how important it is to be careful in “how the message is delivered” (Evans 2017). To him, that meant “taking a picture, putting it on Instagram and educating people about certain things. I want people to look at something that I post [and say,] ‘You know what, I should go see that for myself’” (Ibid.). These sentiments are reflected in the text accompanying Allen’s posts as well, which include thoughtful insight, historical information, and relevant hashtags such as #neverforget and #eachoneteachone (Allen 2017b).

Despite his arguably “appropriate” selfie (see Figure 2), Allen still received criticism. Importantly, because he was not concentrating on current struggles plaguing Black Americans, some of his followers questioned why he was visiting a Holocaust memorial rather than focusing on issues at home. Such shaming comments “got to him,” he remarked later, although he “understood where they were coming from” (Allen 2017b). In response, Allen penned an article in *The Players Tribune*, “Why I Went to Auschwitz.” In it, he was sympathetic and explained that some people “were looking at my trip the wrong way. I didn’t go to Poland as a black person, a white person, a Christian person or a Jewish person – I went as a human being” (Ibid.). Ultimately, in his efforts to educate others via

social media, Allen's important memory work that was being conducted on a personal level was taken out of context in the public sphere. In this sense, even if photographed and shared with the best of intentions, selfies at Holocaust memorial sites may be (mis)construed and subsequently shamed for a variety of reasons.

Not only are selfies exemplary of a means of self-expression and reflection but they can also be viewed functionally as a form of self-protection, a *Schutzmechanismus*. Physical signs of dealing with being overwhelmed by the gravity of the site, such as smiling, nervous laughter, or joking behaviors can be observed in younger visitors. This is not meant to excuse those who wish to denigrate the site's historical significance, but rather it is a call for pause before judging *all smiles* at sites of trauma as disrespectful. To cope with this, some may turn to something familiar, yet distancing from the concurrent moment. Scholars like Imogen Dalziel have conducted their own studies at the Auschwitz memorial supporting this. Visitors interviewed expressed feelings of how "putting a camera lens between oneself and the object or scene representing atrocity creates a distance that lessens the potentially traumatic effect on the visitor" (Dalziel 2016, 191). In describing three different modes of self-witnessing while visiting memorial sites, Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Henig called the "introspective mode" a negotiating process in front of the camera, which points to the internal process of the visitors to distance themselves but does not go as far as a psychological protective barrier (Ebbrecht-Hartmann, Henig, 214). In this sense, the visitor is not fully engaging in the act of post-witnessing because their use of a cell phone nonetheless creates a barrier.

Turning to *The Town Beyond the Wall* once more, Wiesel's complex depictions of bystander action in the novel may also be juxtaposed with contemporary visitor action regarding the idea of a physical separation barrier. In the novel, the bystander chooses to watch violence perpetrated against Jewish victims from a window. Wiesel describes this person as a "face in the window across the way" (Wiesel 1967, 150). The bystander is both part of the scenery and separate from it, the in-between position made possible by physical distance. The window ultimately helps to separate him from the disturbing event. In the case of contemporary visitors and their selfies, the cell phone works as a physical, emotional, and symbolic barrier. Although not as large as a window, a mobile device nevertheless brings something into the space between the person and the memorial site. In both cases, there is an opportunity to disengage from the situation.

One possible example of a "self-protection selfie" was also taken at Auschwitz, by a female teenager from the United States. While visiting the memorial site in 2014, Breanna Mitchell posted a photograph of herself smiling as she walked

through the same memorial. The post, made public, was accompanied by text that read “Selfie in the Auschwitz. Concentration Camp,” followed by a blushing smiley face emoticon. Suddenly, millions of people had access to – and a negative opinion of – this self-image. *Were some of these selfie-shamers actively looking for images to shame, or were they confronted with what the algorithm expected them to find click-worthy?* After being humiliated on social and mass media platforms, Mitchell shared that she had been interested in Holocaust history for a long time. Previously, she had hoped to go on an international trip with her parents after graduation but, with her father’s passing the previous year, she unfortunately had to make the trip without him. The post was meant to be a tribute to her father, she claimed, in order to communicate that she was both grateful and sad to visit Auschwitz. This defense suggests that “when staged at trauma sites, selfies can function as proof of pilgrimage, witness and affect” (Douglas 2020, 385). Clearly, though, what visitors attempt to communicate may not come across as hoped.

The immediacy with which Mitchell was publicly shamed speaks to the gravity associated with these historical sites, and the larger uncertainty surrounding the future of Holocaust memory. Media coverage regarding this selfie highlights the complexity of judging what can superficially be (mis)construed as a self-centered, disconnected selfie. In fact, the international backlash she received most likely hindered rather than supported her selfie as a form of self-protection, with Mitchell making her social media account private since the ordeal. Indeed, when compared with Allen’s, the accompanying text did not delve into detail and granted the viewer much room for speculation; however, both received shaming comments. This prompts the question: *Just as the selfie-taker does, is the selfie-shamer also grappling with coming to terms with difficult cultural memories, and similarly using the mobile device or social media platform as a tool for distancing and communication?* By looking at the broader picture, scholars are better able to glean how selfie-taking and selfie-shaming may reflect two sides of the same coin in terms of the future of memory formation.

3 Conclusion: The Panoptic Paradox in the Digital Arena

Every day, millions of people are able to view selfies taken at traumatic sites. Despite this relatively common occurrence, society-at-large tends to be privy only to those selfies which go “viral,” mostly proliferated through algorithms that purposefully promote controversy. Our last example is one without much



Figure 3: Social media user posing for a selfie at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Instagram User 2 2018).

international recognition but which ends up complicating the story further. By looking at Figure 3, what does one notice about this Instagram user and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin?

At first glance, the individual seems to be taking a solemn snapshot, reflecting and standing in the direction of a setting sun. As an otherwise generic selfie, the self-image does not tell us if the user is “self-centered, superficial, and historically ignorant individual or not” (Kansteiner 2018, 113). Upon further analysis, it is also a secondary photo of the user’s own self-image – i.e., it is a photo taken of a photo being taken – further distancing it from reality. This is important, as the image above has been posted on the user’s Instagram account, while the accompanying text tells us the original photo was likely placed on a separate Tinder account. The text certainly highlights the user’s intentions at the site, for which he is subsequently shamed: “Nothing gets your tinder poppin’ like a selfie in the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. #berlin” (Instagram User 2 2018). And despite not reflecting upon the Holocaust per se, the user clearly takes notice of their place within the socio-spatial environment and, for better or worse, reflects upon it. Like other visitors to the site, they “not only *consume* the place through digital photography at the Holocaust Memorial, but they also emotionally *engage* with the place and the past it represents” [emphasis in original] (Bareither 2021, 61–62). In doing so, this user presented two potential simulacra to the larger community, and thus two representations of his interaction with the site. Because of this, the intricate

relationships of reality and virtual reality; self and audience perception; and active and passive (re)actions are especially nuanced. Harkening back to our initial question of whether it is the self-image, the stream of comments, or our subjectivity that is most revealing, this example shows how it can be all of the above.

Due to the particular type of engagement communicated to the public, the post received a few shaming comments while one was relatively supportive; yet, interestingly, it did not receive international vitriol. While the lack of extensive public shaming is arguably due to gender (mis)perceptions,⁴ it also reflects a larger tendency to quickly glance at a social media photo and not necessarily read the comments. Coupled with this is how many scholars have shied away from studying – perhaps accepting – that posing for selfies at Holocaust sites could be a part of natural changes in memory work. Many others have shied away from recognizing that selfie-shaming may reflect an important trend in how society shares its feelings about “forgetting” traumatic histories. Indeed, some of the selfie-shamers could be considered “self-appointed defenders of Holocaust memory,” and, in many ways, they are; however, as previously shown, shaming comes in various forms and with various motivations, and it is not only Holocaust memory which they are defending (Magilow 2021, 155). Thus, by not looking at the holistic picture of selfies taken at sites of trauma, one may accidentally assume intentions or naïveté on either the part of the visitor, or the commenter. Taking this a step further, not only is the individual capable of presenting multiple representations of themselves but audience members, too, are able to receive multiple versions of the original, which may, or may not be edited by the initial user. Contemporary digital media therefore allows new “hybrid” memories to form that can shift between the private and the public realm (Pfanzer 2016, 220).

Moreover, with recent years showing newfound insight into “collected” memories, Maurice Halbwachs’ *mémoire collective* has entered new scholarly discussions through publications by Jan and Aleida Assman, Astrid Erll, and Michael Rothberg. The concept of *cultural memory* in particular acts in a trans-disciplinary and multifarious manner in that it is rooted in the idea of communication through media, themes and objects (S. Erll and Nünning 2008). As strong motivators and connectors for group action, memories can occur at the micro level, such as within a household through intimate objects and narratives, or at the macro, national level, through museums and memorials. Elizabeth Alexander points out how typically “monuments and memorials are places where people

⁴ For more analysis on gender perceptions, see Daniel H. Magilow, “Shoah Selfies, Shoah Selfie Shaming, and Social Photography in Sergei Loznitsa’s *Austerlitz* (2021).”

come together to remember, to collectively mark a moment, to be a ‘we,’ to help identify a new direction, and to make a way forward” (Alexander 2021, 93–96). And yet, as memorial sites become increasingly visited by the average selfie-taker, people will need to grapple with “collectively marking a moment” in a world that is becoming simultaneously more hybrid and individualized. Traditional public memories that have been associated with sites like the “four shrines” have been, and will continue to be, challenged by the digital realm and especially by social media, shocking the very foundations upon which current Holocaust memories have traditionally formed.

In light of technological advances, too, research further supports theories regarding a symbiotic relationship of memory. For example, Wulf Kansteiner and Andrew Hoskins address the “multitudinal” qualities of digital archives. In his publication on the “memory of the multitude,” Hoskins explains how digital technologies have created a “connective turn” in memory formation that alters how we envision the spatial qualities of a typical archive. In this new, public, and digital archive, memories become subjected to “the multitude,” changing typical non-digital dynamics as “digitally connected memory is both humanly and algorithmically archived, mixing up and blurring the conscious and the unconscious, the discriminate and the indiscriminate” (Hoskins 2018, 87). Memories, which are actively and passively added to this massive archive, become perpetually intertwined and obscured. As Hoskins stresses, the “memory of the multitude replaces collective memory as the imagined dominant form of memory-in-the-world [by] undermining the very idea of memory beyond the individual” (Hoskins 2018, 90). Because of this, traditional memories must be viewed as what Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Henig called an “i-memory,” which “interlinks the subjective adaptation of digital commemorative practices with interactive modes of engaging with the past through memorial sites” (Ebbrecht-Hartmann and Henig 2021, 214).

To conclude, we do not intend to answer the questions posed, but to provoke thoughtful and scholarly exploration into the delicate subject of selfies in relation to memory. Crossing disciplines and boundaries, selfies at Holocaust memorial sites reflect a dynamic shift in memory formation that challenges foundational frameworks of current memory and memorialization patterns, particularly in the West. Just like the past is “dual natured,” acting “as a sedimentation of relics, traces and personal memories and as a social construction,” so too is digital memory (Assman 2011, 15). With elements not necessarily visible to others, selfies at Holocaust memorial sites should not automatically be assumed to be superficial gestures of modern times, but instead inherently complex: they are, naturally, more than meets the eye. Public shaming is one road to take, which may unintentionally define someone’s “digital self” forever. However, we offer a road less

traveled – accepting the very real, yet rather challenging, normalcy of these selfies. In doing so, we hope to amplify the call from scholars like Gemma Commane and Rebekah Potton, who stress that online engagement with traumatic sites leads to new avenues through which we can generate visibility around Holocaust history for future generations (Commune and Potton 2019, 159). Instead of condemnation or shame, let us proceed with critical exploration.

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