Remediation and remembrance: “Dancing Auschwitz” Collective Memory and New Media

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Abstract: A new generation is changing the face of Holocaust remembrance, a morally laden subject that continues to captivate public imagination, spark controversy and generate dialogue, now by using social media. In summer 2010, controversy erupted worldwide as “Dancing Auschwitz,” a YouTube video of a Jewish family dancing at various Holocaust remembrance sites, defied the existing cultural narrative through a novel expression of Holocaust remembrance. The artifact exemplifies the larger debate whether technology aids memory as successfully as we believe or whether by freeing us from the burden encourages us to forget. We argue that virtual memorials can fulfill roles left vacant by more traditional forms of remembrance and open new avenues of communication and expression that allow participants, especially Germans and Jews, to re-mediate their...
identities. Virtual memorials can enhance the remembrance experience by cultivating fluid, interactive and creative spaces that encourage high degrees of participation, collaboration and self-expression. In the case study, YouTube users implemented three forms of remediation: role switching, redefinition, and disassociation. Despite the obstacles (e.g., destructive identity forces, commercial culture, and temporalities of social media trends), technology ultimately act as an aid to humanity’s deep-seated desire to remember.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, identity, collective memory, new media, virtual memorial

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A new generation is changing the face of Holocaust remembrance, a morally laden subject that continues to captivate public imagination, spark controversy and generate dialogue, now by using social media. In summer 2010, controversy erupted worldwide as a YouTube video, “Dancing Auschwitz,” defied the existing cultural narrative through a novel expression of Holocaust remembrance. Proponents commended the video’s bold take on what it means to remember, regarding the joyfulness it inspired as a refreshing departure from the otherwise lugubrious tones of Holocaust remembrance. Others were offended and accused the short film of
trivializing the world’s greatest tragedy and undermining the cultural awareness achieved by more traditional remembrances. The video, part of a triptych from a Jewish Australian artist and her Holocaust survivor father, raised questions of narrative authority (e.g., to whom did the Holocaust belong?) and how the social media generation will remember the Holocaust.

“Dancing Auschwitz” is situated in a larger discourse of remembrance suspended over the German cultural landscape. If humans are chained to the past like no other species on Earth (Nietzsche, 1876/1995), then Germans are among the most chained. Their present continues to be defined by a “past that [simply] won’t go away” (Langenbacher, 2003, p. 1). No nation in the world faces the level of expectation to confront the recent past like Germany does (Naumann, 2000). The Holocaust continues to impact German public policy (e.g., government funding of Holocaust remembrance and education1) while remaining just as strong in the vein of popular memory—landing on the front pages of major publications, becoming the subject matter of hit television series and turning books into bestsellers (Naumann, 2000). The third millennium has reached the pinnacle of “memorymania” (Welzer, 2007) in what Hirsch (2008) calls an “era of memory.” The Holocaust dramatically shifted our understanding of memory as well as our sensitivity to the ethics of remembrance (Blustein, 2008). As evidenced in the literature, the concern is less about historical accuracy and the preservation of official records than about the conservation and perpetuation of memory (Hirsch, 2008; Langenbacher, 2003; Reading, 2003). As Holocaust survivors dwindle in number at ever accelerating rates (Gubar, 2003; Jeffries, January 27 2010), questions arise as to the impact on remembrance when the living memory of those first-hand accounts no longer exists (Hirsch, 2008; Hoskins, 2003; Landsberg, 1997).

This essay argues that virtual memorials, like “Dancing Auschwitz,” can fulfill roles that more traditional forms of remembrance have left vacant and open new avenues of communication and expression that allow participants, especially Germans and Jews, to re-mediate their identities. To analyze this phenomenon, we first elaborate on the symbiotic relationship between memory and self. Second, examine the ways that memories are externalized, namely through remembrance—the act of recalling memory—and memorials—the objects of memory—and how each serves as an expression of collective identity. Third, we explore memory in the realm of new media. New media technologies fundamentally altered media participation reducing both the fiscal obligations and skill level needed for participation, thus, enabling online participants to perform remembrance and create objects such as “Dancing Auschwitz” in the interactive, creative exchange of social

1 Even as recently as 2008, the German Bundestag doubled its funding for memorials (Neumann, 2011). In addition to the funding to build and maintain museums, archives and other remembrance sites within Germany, Germans donate millions to other nations for their Holocaust remembrance endeavors (e.g., $13 million to Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, DPA 2012, and EUR 60 million to restoring the Auschwitz memorial, DPA 2009).
media content. Finally, we use “Dancing Auschwitz” as a case study to talk about the void left by traditional remembrance and the potential of virtual memorials to encourage democratic remembrance—marked by high degrees of participation, collaboration and self-expression. The mechanisms the descendants of Holocaust victims and especially Germans employ to re-mediate their identities encounter obstacles to online remembrance—temporalities of social media trends, the commercial culture of these spaces (e.g., issues of copyright) and destructive identity forces (e.g., Internet trolls).

1. Concepts

1.1. Memory and identity

Humans are distinct in their ability and proclivity to set memory in relationship to identity, and humanity is deeply rooted in this symbiotic relationship, as a short discussion of memory and identity’s characteristics and bond will demonstrate.

1.1.1. Memory

Memory and forgetting are not bitter enemies. Rather, forgetting is integral to remembering. Since Plato, forgetting has been vilified as “a signifier of loss, absence or lack” (Vivian, 2010, p. 5). Fear of our own mortality drives the negative characterization of forgetting (Plato, 360/2008; Mayer-Schönberger, 2009). Without memory, an individual’s essence dies with the body, so forgetting appears to be the adversary of human identity. Yet, that which is forgotten is not irretrievable. As the etymology of “forget” indicates, it is merely out of grasp (Vivian, 2010). Both remembering and forgetting are necessary for the health of the individual, community and culture—a balance of remembering and forgetting the right things at the right time (Blustein, 2008; Nietzsche, 1876/1995). “Remembering is a form of forgetting” (Milan Kundera in Blustein, 2008, p. 1). Every memory inevitably forgets some information.

Because we are social, our memories are social. Our identities, which are not fixed, impact the way in which we store, retrieve and interpret memory (Addis & Tippett, 2004); therefore our memories are as fluid and subject to reconstruction. The past is a confluence of what was, is and may be. Of all the types of memory scholars have conceived, collective memory, often simply social memory (Vivian, 2010; Connerton, 1989), is the most social. Collective memory, like Holocaust remembrance, is more than the mere combination of individual recollections; it is the synthesis of multiple memories (Halbwachs, 1992). Because memories are socially constructed, they exhibit instability, transiency, and fragility (Vivian, 2010).
1.1.2. Identity

Identity is an answer to the driving question, “who am I?” a question perpetually bound to human dignity (Arendt, 1958), and part of a more general construct of self. Both have considerable impact on our ability to partake in community, the means by which we fulfill our humanity (Phillips & Taylor, 2009). Being irrevocably bound to humanity, identity is of great importance, particularly in regard to the social, symbolic and reflexive character of self and communication’s crucial role.

Though there are certain bodily limitations, identity and the larger construct of self grow from our relationships with others as we recognize our sameness and difference (Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902; du Gay, Evans, & Redman, 2001). The self is a product of language, because symbolism is the only way we can assign meaning. Without the significant symbols inherent in human communication—action and speech—no self is possible (see Arendt, 1958). Identities are “constituted or ‘performatively’ enacted in and through the subject positions made available in language and wider cultural codes,” which is why no truly pre-social self can exist (du Gay et al., 2001, p. 10). Symbolic interactionism, a uniquely human process of interpreting and acting on the basis of symbols, enables us to construct the self by interpreting and acting upon the symbols communicated by the other (Blumer, 1969). Therefore, these social interactions are not merely a backdrop of expression; they are the basis for self.

The self is reflexive, a quality that enables morality. Reflexivity, a “language of inwardness” (p. 130), is the only way we can even think of ourselves as a selves (Taylor, 1992). Mead (1934) explores this reflexive character through the division of the self into the uncommunicated “I,” an unpredictable aspect of self with the agency to have a unique response, and the “me,” an aspect of self that embodies the conventions and/or expectations of the generalized other. As soon as it has been spoken or enacted, the “I” becomes the “me.” The self’s unique quality of being both subject and object can be achieved only through communication, because then we become objects to ourselves. Thus, an individual cannot know who she is until she has made herself an object through communication (Arendt, 1958; Mead, 1934). Taylor (1992) further contends that an awareness of self enables us to make moral judgments and consider the human soul (Taylor, 1992).

1.1.3. Memory and identity: The unbreakable bond

While identity grows from social interaction, a sense of self depends greatly on being able to retain and organize those social interactions as memories. Memory and self, both of which are dynamic and fluid, share a symbiotic relationship (Howe, 2004). Memory records the relationships vital to self construction and enables access to who we were in the past. In turn, the content and form of the memories we store and retrieve are shaped by the self at the time of the event, at the time of
retrieval, as well as at each change to self in between (Addis & Tippett, 2004; Conway, 2005; Howe, 2004). While the self is constantly transforming, it also depends on a sense of continuity or overall coherence of past, present and future or potential selves (Addis & Tippett, 2004; Conway, 2005). Memory enables the sense of personal, collective and cultural past needed to create a meaningful, inner narrative about time.

In the words of Elie Wiesel (1997), “A person without memory is still human; but he or she is no longer a person” (p. 14). Wiesel is drawing a distinction between the biological and spiritual character of humanity. Biologically speaking, we are Homo sapiens. We were born and will die with at least most of the biological characteristics unique to our species. However, our body does not make us a person; our soul—the spiritual essence of humanity—does. Alzheimer’s serves as an apt illustration of the vital role memory and identity serve to our status of personhood. The great tragedy in a disease like Alzheimer’s does not occur with the biological loss of certain physical faculties; it occurs much earlier with the loss of memory and self—a loss of personhood. Memory and identity do not require such a literal loss to exert their impact. Damaging socially constructed narratives within and around memory and identity can work similarly, compromising an individual, a group, or an entire culture’s claim to personhood.

1.2. Memory: Remembrance and memorials

Once communicated, and therefore accessible, memory becomes a narrative, which in turn may lead to ritualized action—remembrance—and/or manifest object—memorial. All collective memories are mediated (Kansteiner, 2002). To be shared, they must travel through a medium—a ritualized action, a place-based memorial (e.g., physical architectures), or space-based memorials (e.g., film). Regardless of the memorial type, media act as the bridge between present and past (Van Dijck, 2004).

1.2.1. Remembrance

Remembrance reifies memory; it is the act of making an imprint of memory tangible and as an action intersects with ethics, particularly in regard to the Holocaust, “a moral signifier of our age” (Confino, 2006, p.9). Remembrance defines the things of a culture by reinforcing who we are and the defining moments of our culture. It has the ability to “influence collective thought and behavior by assigning normative meaning to signal dimensions of the communal past” (Vivian, 2010, p. 63). Remembrance is selective about the events and people remembered as well as which details are conveyed. With a tragedy of the Holocaust’s magnitude, a society’s remembrance culture must determine how it will address the most precious task of “preserv[ing] the cultural lifeblood of oppressed peoples” (Vivian, 2010, 4). It is through the reification of remembrance that a culture bears witness or
legitimizes a person or group’s experience, thereby recognizing and restoring the humanity that was forcibly taken from them.

Immediately after the war, remembering was the issue, or more precisely, not forgetting. “Never again” and “never forget” express the deep-seated anxiety that comes from casting remembering and forgetting as antithetical to one another (Kronderer, 2008). These early post-war Germans are condemned for sins of omission and repression, but over time, the question was not so much whether to remember but how to remember (Confino, 2000; Fuchs, 2002; Hoskins, 2003). The Historikerstreit of 1986 was one of the more public debates asking whether there is an expiration date for dredging up the Nazi past in the name of remembrance.

The debate reflects the identity tug-of-war still at play in German remembrance culture, namely between what Moses (2007) calls the “non-German German” and the “German German”. These two identities adopt very different stances regarding Holocaust remembrance and the past’s role in contemporary Germany. The non-German German identity places the past at the epicenter to provoke “critical reflection and dissolution of the national we” through constant confrontation (Moses, 2007, p. 65). It leaves the broken national identity behind and works toward a new collective identity marked by a general self-antipathy and disavowment of nationalism (Moses, 2007). The German German, unsatisfied with a “NON-IDENTITY” (Hajo Funke & Dietrich Neuhaus in Moses, 2007, p. 69, emphasis in original), tries to repair the collective self using strategies that make the past bearable. Whereas the non-German German denationalizes the collective self, the German German denationalizes the crimes against humanity by drawing a distinction between Nazis and Germans (e.g., not all Germans are Nazis) and reinforcing the thousand years of German history that came before the Third Reich (Moses, 2007).

1.2.2. Memorial

Memorials reify memory into a material thing to be experienced through the senses. While the built materials may not hold much intrinsic value, memorials are the embodiment of a nation’s memory, values, and even soul (Blustein, 2008; Young, 1993). They serve an essential function in the collective memory infrastructure often acting as a buttress for memories passing from one generation to the next (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994). Memorials prompt us to identify with the object and the narrative it represents by “invit[ing] us to enter into an empathetic relationship with the people of the past” (Morris-Suzuki, 2005, p. 22).

Some memorials are bound to place because of their built structures, but many others are portable and some enter an altogether ethereal space. Remembrance is tied to narrative and not to stone, glass or steel (Young, 1993). Space-based memorials quickly evolved from written words to images, film, television, and the
Internet (Morris-Suzuki, 2005; Zelizer, 2001). These objects turn both event and person into an object that can travel and be owned (Morris-Suzuki, 2005; Sontag, 2003) and create a space for remembrance when a physical place is unavailable or not yet developed (Young, 1993). As Huyssen (1999, p. 205) argues, the “[migration] from the real into the image, from the material into the immaterial, and ultimately into the digitized computer bank” was a reasonable outcome of our postmodern condition. The process of mediating memory inevitably leads to the transformation of memory into information to be stored (Assmann, 2003).

1.3. New media and the virtual memorial

The quintessential space-bound memorial appears in cyberspace, but there is debate whether technology aids memory as successfully as we believe or whether by freeing us from the burden encourages us to forget. Digital memory combines ordered storage and interactive presence (Haskins, 2007). For much of human history, the demands of remembering have been higher and more costly than forgetting. Technology has balanced the relationship providing vast storage and easy retrieval allowing remembering to become the norm (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009). With the exponential growth of storage space, we no longer select but compulsively collect, record and remember everything that the abundant storage capabilities will allow (Gillis, 1994; Haskins, 2007). Haskins (2007) and Van Dijck (2004) posit that technology may actually undermine rather than reinforce memory when it does more than supplement but actually replaces remembering. Memory then becomes little more than “a topological skill” of locating and identifying rather than remembering (Van Dijck, 2004, p. 272). Factual knowledge may be conducive to a topological strategy, but the collective and cultural memory of remembrance are beyond its reach. In fact, by taking on some of the tasks required of remembering, particularly of facts, technology has become “an artificial prosthesis [freeing] the brain of unnecessary burdens and allow[ing] more space for creative activity” (Van Dijck, 2004, p. 271-272). Collective and cultural memory are the creative activity—the self-expression of identity and community so vital to our humanity—technology is freeing us to partake in. Technology does not take away the responsibility or the desire to participate in cultural remembrance.

Virtual memorials are dynamic in a way that emulates memory itself in that they are in a constant state of transformation. Just as the links established between memory imprints fluctuate, the architecture of the online environment is built on dynamic hyperlinks so the number and variety of connections to any given artifact are in a constant ebb and flow (Morris-Suzuki, 2005). Virtual memorials also mimic memory’s ability to capture the natural flow of discourse and create spaces for and witness to an ongoing discourse. The ability of virtual memorials to capture and create a dynamic experience of the same character as memory can be more satisfying because it is closer to the lived experience.
Virtual memorials have the capacity to break down the distinction between producer and consumer and lead to a truly democratic experience of remembrance. The development of new media technologies fundamentally altered media participation resulting in what some scholars, most notably Axel Bruns (2008), have called “produsage.” Web 2.0 and social software in particular are marked by a reduction in the fiscal obligations and skill level needed for participation while traversing many of the limitations of collaboration (language, geography, social background, financial status, etc.) (Bruns, 2008). Memorials can now be generated by users with ease. Technology enabled a single artist from Australia to create and post a video on YouTube with wide-reaching impact on Holocaust remembrance and enabled others to remix that video and create a nuanced Holocaust remembrance experience. Of course, produsage does not guarantee that remembrance achieves this highly collaborative and self-expressive state (e.g., institutional remembrance websites limit interaction and social exchange among visitors) but merely affords the conditions for the possibility of democratic remembrance. However, “Dancing Auschwitz” demonstrates the potential of virtual memorials to transcend comparatively passive forms and become points of interaction offering objects, ideas and feelings to be played with. If media encourage the reshaping of the narratives we tell (De Bruyn, 2010; Morris-Suzuki, 2005), then virtual memorials encourage the transformation of cultural narratives into truly open sourced entities of the people, for the people, by the people.

2. Death Camp Dance

“Dancing Auschwitz,” a triptych of Holocaust-themed short films created and posted on YouTube by Australian artist Jane Korman in January 2010, exemplifies the growing possibilities of a virtual memorial—an online object of memory. Korman’s piece includes (1) three generations of the Kohn family dancing at various Holocaust sites across Europe (“I will Survive. Part1”), (2) a film of a home video depicting the Kohn family dancing in a field in Australia (“I will Survive. Part 2”), and (3) a more traditional documentary on the family’s visit to these sites of remembrance (“I will Survive. Part3”). Though it originally appeared in a Melbourne (Australia) gallery in 2009, the triptych went viral after Korman posted the videos on YouTube and grew exponentially with Spiegel’s August 2010 article. According to the artist’s website (janekormanart.com), “Part1,” which is set to Gloria Gaynor’s 1978 disco hit “I Will Survive,” received over 700,000 hits within just two weeks. YouTube has since removed the original posting after a claim of copyright violation, but several iterations of the video have been posted by other YouTube users. The version used for this analysis garnered another 585,594 views and 2,121 comments across the three parts and Korman’s silenced version—a response to the copyright dispute.

“Part1” anchors the project, challenging the accepted convention of remembrance, and inciting the controversy that invited media coverage worldwide—
most notably Germany, Israel, Australia, Poland, Russia and the United States. The four-minute and twenty-second film depicts Korman with her father and Holocaust survivor, Adolek Kohn, and her three teenage children to the backdrop of various Holocaust sites in Europe including Auschwitz. Yet, the video quickly departs from the conventional, somber tones as this Jewish family begins to dance to Gaynor’s “I Will Survive.” The backdrop transitions from one Holocaust site to the next as their attire moves from labeled t-shirts (e.g., Adolek wears “Survivor”), to unmarked clothing and finally to garments featuring the yellow Shield of David forced upon Jews during the Holocaust. The use of the Shield serves as both a visual reminder of oppression as well as a bold repossession of a holy symbol the Nazis had desacralized for their own morbid purposes. They remember Holocaust victims, specifically Jews, by sporting the iconic symbol while also unabashedly reclaiming their Jewish identity. The act shocks but also empowers the Kohn family while inspiring people more generally to take back the reigns of control over their own identity formation. The Kohn family has found a way to remember those who perished while also unapologetically—as supported visually by the eye-level medium-long frontal shot used throughout the film—celebrating their own survival (e.g., Adolek Kohn’s survival of the camps but also his descendants’ who exist only because Kohn survived). According to her website, Korman hoped to reach the younger generation, who have become desensitized to the Holocaust and its images, which she seems to have accomplished. But she also manages to challenge the expectations and proscriptions of guilt and shame in traditional remembrance as belonging to another time and generation.

“Dancing Auschwitz” represents a particularly interactive and discourse-minded virtual memorial that encourages and even chiefly relies on user content and interaction. Virtual memorials possess an additional complexity through the variety of memorialization levels they enable. “Part1” alone presents a memorial (a witness of Adolek returning to Auschwitz 63 years later) within a memorial (Auschwitz and the other locations as Holocaust remembrance sites), which is further memorialized in the online community through the interaction of YouTube comments with the video. In examining this artifact, we are attempting to answer Confino’s (2000) call to explore memory outside the predictable spaces of Holocaust remembrance (e.g., institutional websites, etc.). Exploring remembrance on the everyday virtual space of YouTube provides a unique opportunity to understand how everyday Germans, Jews, Poles and others not affiliated with remembrance organizations or causes partake in remembrance discourse online.

3. Case study: Dancing Auschwitz

Through YouTube, the latest iteration of the post-Holocaust generation seeks to finish the grieving process left incomplete by the bricks and mortar of traditional

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2 Those outside Jewish circles often refer to the Shield of David as the Star of David.
memorials and the institutional remembrance that surrounds them. Kübler-Ross (1969) understands grief as a universal process moving through five common stages: 1.) denial and isolation, 2.) anger, 3.) bargaining, 4.) depression and 5.) acceptance. Though not everyone experiences each stage nor do they necessarily work through the stages in this order, Kübler-Ross’s model elucidates the finite character of healthy grief. In Jewish communities for instance, a proscribed period of ritualized mourning decreases in intensity with each stage. After this eleventh-month period, the individual must begin to move beyond grief and resume a normal life.

Remembrance and mourning are separate, albeit not entirely exclusive, processes. Remembrance, the process of recalling events and memories of people lost, continues long after grieving, the process of overcoming the overwhelming sadness of lives lost. Remembrance does not necessitate reliving what took place but merely the acknowledgment that it did. As seen in Jewish mourning and the Kübler-Ross model, the human psyche cannot endure perpetual grief. Therefore any remembrance culture that perpetuates grief as the singular and reigning emotional experience will precipitate struggles for continued societal interest and support (e.g., the multitude of criticisms of wreath-laying ceremonies). If remembrance can no longer move people in positive ways to access their cultural memory of an event and leads instead only to indifference, it has failed to fulfill its purpose.

Several of those who posted comments to “Dancing Auschwitz” spoke of the inadequacies of traditional remembrance and commended Jane Korman’s video for breaking the mold. The following two posts best highlight the perceived weaknesses of traditional remembrance: stagnant, routine and inauthentic performance, and misplaced aim.

joevierzig
(Germany, 51)

@Lucyannik
You know it is always said we are not responsible for the mistakes of our fathers, and I think no one needs to do so here either. I think it’s simply beautiful that it is not another tasteless wreath laying that we otherwise always get set before us on TV, with raised index finger. We cannot change it but we also shouldn’t forget it.

@Lucyannik
Both comments highlight the languid character of traditional remembrance; to remember the Holocaust has become synonymous with stuffy speeches and insipid wreath-laying ceremonies. Neither poster is arguing that the Holocaust should not be remembered—quite the opposite—but the monotony of Holocaust remembrance in German society on the whole works against its very aim of inspiring remembrance. At best, remembrance of this ilk has become a performance—an ineffectual stage act with a rhetorical checklist. Lasourceyxcvb’s inclusion of the phrase “ta-da” likens the experience to the end of a cheap magic act instead of a sincere effort to advance remembrance, further indicating that the performance of a speech or a wreath is a superficial trick. Rather than viewed as the catalyst to remembrance, the performance becomes “proof” that one has already remembered.

Its disempowerment is evidenced when joevierzig uses the phrase “mit dem erhobenen Zeigefinger,” an idiom to show disapproval of something or more specifically the behavior of someone, often a corrective measure for naughty children. The wreath-laying ceremony is depicted as patronizing, as if the speaker were the adult telling all the children (German people) how bad they have been. Further support includes remembrance as “always set before us on TV.” While he does not go so far as to say that Germans cannot escape these messages, it is clear they do not seek them out. But as joevierzig’s opening statement would attest, the very gesture equated with this form of remembrance is entirely misplaced. If we are indeed not to be held responsible for the sins of our fathers, then the current generation should not be scolded by the raised index finger for actions committed by their forefathers. In essence, joevierzig argues that German remembrance culture has mistakenly mutated a failure of action (e.g., the Germans did terrible things) into a failure of being (e.g., the Germans are terrible people). Though his ethnicity is never directly stated, it is of note that joevierzig posted his first comment in response to “Dancing Auschwitz” in Yiddish. If his use of the language indicates he is Jewish rather than merely strongly interested in Judaism, then joevierzig, like the Kohn/Korman family, may serve as yet another Jewish example of healthy grief.

The YouTube users who viewed “Dancing Auschwitz” expressed a desire to move beyond grief and into remembrance. This healthy grief is what the following YouTube user implies in invoking Adorno’s comments regarding Auschwitz.
Wenn das Adorno sehen könnte, dann wüsste er wie dumb sein Geschwätz über Auschwitz war und wie geringschätzzig seine Meinung über die Menschen über die Menschen und ihren Willen zu leben. Dieses Video ist ganz gross, zutiefst menschlich und mehr wert als alle pflichtschuldigen Sonntags- und Betroffenheitsreden.

If Adorno could see this, then he would know how dumb his blabber about Auschwitz was and how dismissive his opinion about the people and their want to live was. This video is grand, deeply human and worth more than any duty bound Sunday- and concernment speeches.

Weinreporter is most likely referring to the often-cited quote: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, 2003, p. xv). The comment, which was not without criticism, was an argument that something so terrible and horrific as the Holocaust could not be aestheticised. Yet, at those very times is when humanity needs to write poetry most. Poetry, which stems from “poesis,” meaning to create or make, is one of the fundamental ways someone struck by tragedy and grief can regain his/her humanity. So when Adorno criticizes attempts at poetry following such a tragedy he is telling us not to continue with human activity, not to go on living and creating. Instead of completing the grieving process, which by both social scientific and Jewish cultural terms means to resume a normal life, Adorno seemingly could not see an end to grief for a tragedy of the Holocaust’s proportions.³ For him, there was nothing and would be nothing more to be said except in soft, mournful tones. Weinreporter commends “Dancing Auschwitz” for daring to create art (much like poetry) and in his eyes for proving Adorno wrong. In contrasting it with duty-bound remembrance, Weinreporter seems to indicate that “Dancing Auschwitz” succeeds because it is not hampered by the institutionalization of duty-bound remembrance. Because “Dancing Auschwitz” is the result of one family sharing their very real experience, it is able to accomplish remembrance that speaks to the core of our humanity.

³ To give Adorno credit, one must consider when he made these statements. Grieving the Holocaust would indeed take his entire lifetime and much beyond.

For these Germans, Adolek Kohn and “Dancing Auschwitz” represent the final stage of the grieving process, the stage they as part of German society have been unable to achieve. Adolek Kohn can feel and express joy even in the spaces that had caused him so much suffering. In a moment on the subway in “Part 3,” he appears to slip back into grief as he tells his daughter how difficult it was to return to Auschwitz. But this is sadness not grief; sadness refers to the commonplace sorrow that is part of the human emotional life; grief, however, refers to an engrossing level
of sorrow, one that is natural but also exceptional in its penetrating depth. Adolek seems to experience a great sadness, but one that stops short of grief. Having more or less completed his journey of grief, Adolek has accepted the events and his losses as immutable. Though he expresses joy, thereby showing he has completed the natural cycle of grief, he has by no means forgotten the tragedy he endured. Adolek has managed something few have; he has remembered without reinitiating the grieving process. There is an implicit sense of relief on the part of these German YouTube users and a growing sense of hope. After all, if someone who has endured the tragedy first hand can move beyond grief and mourning and experience the joy of life, then German culture can complete its own grieving process and work toward supporting a new form of remembrance.

3.2. Dirty inheritance: Opfer, Täter and remediation

If remembrance does not evolve—turn the task of creating back to the people—it halts grief and leaves today’s generation with few options beyond the agency-robbing roles of the *Opfer* (victim) and *Täter* (perpetrator). The roles were already constrictive for the generation for whom the Holocaust was a lived reality; the severity of this tragedy forcibly transformed everyone’s identity so that one’s action (or perceived inaction[^4] in the case of the *Opfer*) became one’s entire being. These identities become excessively problematic as they get transferred to subsequent generations through cultural memory. Four generations later, action and being are still largely entangled; however, unlike the war generation, the being of contemporary Germans and Jews are being defined by actions that were not their own—not even their father’s actions. We explore the unique ways in which these two identities rob the current generation of their agency before exploring the ways in which virtual memorials enable them to remediate the situation.

To be a victim is by definition to be robbed of agency. Though there were many types of *Opfer* during the Holocaust, Jews, a people who struggled with the *Opfer* identity for several centuries before the Holocaust, are the most cited and their children have inherited this identity in its full force.[^5] While one may argue that many social systems react favorably toward victims and therefore this identity is unproblematic, the *Opfer* role puts the bearer in a position of powerlessness that comes with victimization time and again. For the Holocaust generation, it was a means of validating their experience and rightly bears witness; however, in doing so it inhibits the individual to be anything but a victim. For the post-Holocaust generation, it is a means of validating their cultural history, but it also places on their shoulders the same constraints. Casting a group as the perpetual victim strips them

[^4]: This refers to the cultural narratives that blame the victim for not leaving, not fighting.
[^5]: Poles, who were also targeted by the Nazis, have had a different experience with the *Opfer* identity as a whole. As a group they have not become synonymous with *Opfer*. In fact, sentiments indicate they have not obtained the validation of victimhood the Jews have.
of their humanity of which agency is primary. One is not fully human without the ability to act toward a particular result. The inheritors therefore are robbed of agency twice: 1) through the history of victimization associated with the Opfer and 2) through the labeling process, which inhibits their ability to define the self. There is a fine line between validating a people’s cultural experience as victim and further victimizing them by defining them by nothing else.

Today’s Germans have experienced a similar loss of agency to define the self. Yet, it is hard to recognize hidden by the remnants of the Täter image. Perpetrators exhibit the opposite of a loss of agency; they exhibit an abundance of agency, as perverted as it may be. True human agency, however, cannot be taken; it is given through validation. Global sentiment has a history of invalidating perversions of agency thereby returning balance whether it be through an embargo, war, revolution, occupation, or International Criminal Court. Because modern Germans inherited the appearance of an abundance of agency, their definitions of self struggle against the imprint left by the Täter image. The Nazi image has become the icon of evil in our modern world. It is because of the severity of this image that assignment of the Täter identity or even association should not be taken lightly.

Contemporary Germans continue to deal with the issues of guilt and shame of their inherited Täter identity—a situation that automatically puts construction of self on the defensive. Global others compel the German self to deal with shame, and the responses range from an inappropriate assumption of shame, which is often muddled with guilt, to a frustrated refusal to accept shame.

M Dietrich4711
(Münster, Germany)

Für den Hintergrund dieses Videos schäme ich mich zutiefst & habe gleichzeitig jeglich Achtung. Es tut mir sehr, sehr leid was vor vielen Jahren passiert ist. von noch nie dagewesenen Ausmaßes, das aber 70 Jahre her ist, mit reingezogen werden. Man darf nie vergessen was da passiert ist, aber in 2010 youtube links von tanzenden, wenn auch überlebenden, opas, reinzumachen das ist dann für mein geschmack, doch zu viel.

Tunsler
(Germany, 32)

Ich sehe es außerdem als problematisch an, wenn die Enkel in ein Verbrechen

For the background of this video, I am deeply ashamed & at the same time have a great respect. I am very, very sorry for what happened many years ago, how unprecedented it’s scope, that occurred 70 years ago. One must never forget what happened there, but in 2010 [to run into] youtube links of dancing, even if surviving, opas, is too much for my taste.
Due to the linguistic structures available, Germans default to a slightly stronger linguistic bond between shame and self. “Ich schäme mich,” which literally translates to “I shame myself,” has two references to self, ich (I) and mich (me), unlike the English construction, “I am ashamed.” Furthermore, the act of apologizing for a deed he himself did not commit, likely intended as a means of empathy, fails to distinguish shame—a generalized failure of being or a state of moral wrongness—from guilt—responsibility for the moral wrongness of a singular and specific act (Nussbaum, 2001). Guilt and shame are closely bound in German remembrance discourse and Germans often take on both simultaneously when either is addressed. Identities born in shame face an arduous struggle for self-determination, and the conflation of shame and guilt only exacerbates the problem. As a result, many Germans used this space to reject the shame cast upon them and express their frustration.

Virtual memorials in online content communities provide better opportunity for remediation by cultivating fluid, interactive and creative spaces for self-expression. What takes place online is not so different from the processes taking place in social and cultural life elsewhere. As Rheingold (2000) argues, “People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind” (p. xvii). However, the absence of bodies and rigid physical objects has impacted the vernacular used in remembering the Holocaust. As products of a Read/Write culture (see Lessig, 2008), today’s generation makes full use of remix technology—tools used to mix and meld cultural objects to create new ones—to remember the Holocaust in their language and on their terms. “Dancing Auschwitz” is a prime example of the globally shared, socially constructed objects of remembrance that can be produced through remix. The memorial itself represents one form of remediation, redefinition, while two other means of remediation, role switching and disassociation, appeared in the surrounding discourse.

Role switching, used predominately by those bearing the Täter identity, refers to the process of denying one’s given role and making an argument for one’s membership in the opposite role. Right after the war, Germans sought to shift their Täter (or at best Mitläufer, follower) identity into that of Opfer through tales of victimization—accounts of fleeing, occupation and heavy rationing. Those Germans, while not necessarily denying the suffering of victims of the Holocaust, shifted the emphasis to their own suffering in order to regain membership into humanity. Such attempts were largely rejected and heavily criticized for their deafening silence and dangerous obfuscation of what took place in German society during the 1930s and 40s. The historical backlash pushed Germans to internalize these narratives, and may explain why contemporary Germans limit their use of role switching as a means of remediating their broken identity. The German YouTube users who did, cast themselves as victims not of history but of the continuous retelling of history particularly through media. Traditional media subscribe to the constant confrontations asserted by the non-German German (Moses, 2007), but in
doing so contemporary Germans feel chained to the Täter with little room to define their Germanness as anything else. However, in the remembrance space afforded by “Dancing Auschwitz” everyday Germans can safely express their feelings of being battered by the media. They become the victim of disempowering mediated representations thereby reestablishing their own humanity—they suffer too.

Redefinition accepts the identity assignment, but seeks to change its meaning. Opfer primarily use this strategy to change the perception of what it means to be a victim and reestablish their agency. The victim was not victimized because of some inherent weakness or any failure to fight back; the victim was victimized despite his/her strength. Korman’s “Dancing Auschwitz” works to free her father and his descendents from those old definitions. Adolek Kohn is a prime example of redefinition. In approaching history through joyful dance, he successfully redefines the Opfer, which is given little agency, to one that emphasizes survival, which is laden with agency. Surviving is not accomplished through inaction; it requires human willpower to overcome and he continues to survive in the memory of what happened. With a history of persecution, Jews have a special relationship with the notion of survival. There is no way to count the number of future lives lost as a consequence of the lives taken during the Holocaust. Therefore, each subsequent generation of a Jewish family is by extension a survivor despite the lack of first-hand experience with the Holocaust. For instance, Jane Korman is a survivor because her father survived the Holocaust. Her spirit had the will to be born, as did the spirits of her children. The continuation of one’s lineage becomes a particularly treasured thing when a group has sought to wipe out one’s people. Redefinition, however, is not limited to the first generation. As Jane asks her daughter, Yasmin, what she thought of the whole experience after returning to Australia, she indicates how she and her generation may be in as much need of redefinition. Yasmin replies, “Depression. It was just heavy and I couldn’t hear one more thing about the Holocaust or, especially about how it could happen again.” Her response may speak to a resentment she may feel at once again being pushed into an agency-robbed Opfer role in which she and her community would be powerless to prevent something like the Holocaust from happening again. Korman’s work frees itself from the old scripts of institutional remembrance and dares to redefine the tone (e.g., empowering remembrance rather than solemn grief), the message (e.g., celebrating life rather than disconcerting warnings of “never again”), and the source (e.g., user-generated rather than institutional).

Contemporary Germans, the inheritors of the Täter identity, overwhelmingly seek remediation through disassociation. Disassociation describes the process of accepting the existence of the role one has been labeled with, but defining an entirely new and separate identity thereby denying ownership of the original label.

6 Redefinition is of little use to the inheritors of the Täter role. There is little to redefine in the case of Nazis, the epitome of evil for much of Western society. Those who attempt it either are or appear to be neo-Nazis or Nazis sympathizers, an impression contemporary Germans avoid at all costs.
Unlike simple distancing tactics, which still indicate relationship however remote, disassociation requires a clean break, a clear separation of one identity to the next. The following comment illustrates most directly the strategy of disassociation.

Kaphunk (Germany, 22) You don’t have any clue … comparing german people of 2010 with germans of 1939 would be the same like comparing fruits with animals – it’s nonsense. Of course, the Nazi-regime and the Holocaust is part of the german history but the current people in Germany aren’t responsible for the past and their past doesn’t define them.
Of course, people should always remember this horrible and cruel time, to avoid a retake of this time – Germany as well as Russia and other peoples

Kaphunk’s analogy works to drive the proverbial wedge between Germans then and Germans now. Identifying WWII Germans as animals conveys an aggressively barbaric and inhumane character. Fruits on the other hand bespeak harmlessness; therefore modern Germans appear safe and noncombative. YouTube users seeking disassociation typically draw a distinction between Germans and Nazis in an effort to rescue some aspects of German heritage. Kaphunk, however, is not concerned with protecting previous generations of Germans. Instead, s/he, perhaps unfairly, further solidifies past Germans’ position as Täter. For Kaphunk, no argument can save German identity, but there is a way of regaining a sense of collective belonging—stop conflating past actions with the being of today’s generation. S/he rejects the Täter role as something belonging in the past and an identity contemporary Germans do not use to define themselves. Their ability to reject the role, according to this comment, is in part due to their understanding of responsibility. Responsibility is directly related to action. In other words, modern Germans did not commit the actions leading to and during the Holocaust, therefore they do not bear the responsibility of the Täter. The contrast to the standard understanding posited by global consensus can be explained through a difference in object. Germans hold individuals and groups responsible for the Holocaust (e.g., Adolf Hitler and the Nazis), whereas, global sentiment, as it usually does, equated these ranking individuals and groups to the whole of Germany therein holding the country at fault. Three generations of Germans have since been born and are looking to reconceptualize German identity, but they are living in a nation still repenting for its past sins. The struggles of today’s Germans are due in part to the inability to separate the nation’s crimes from its contemporary citizenry.
3.3. Some obstacles

3.3.1. Destructive identity forces

Not everyone who contributes to online remembrance wishes to support positive identity reconstruction. Flaming is frequently an issue in online communities (see Dery, 1994), and communities centered around virtual Holocaust memorials are no different. Vitiolic speech emerges when faces and the real-world identities they represent are hidden behind screen names. Trolls maliciously goad others to post incendiary responses or they cripple the conversation by other means (e.g., posting off-topic or spamming). They exist solely to undermine the potential for a healthy exchange of ideas (Cambria, Chandra, Sharma, & Hussain, 2010). Beyond these generalized issues is the more specific obstacle of destructive identity forces—those who spew negative energy in a deliberate attempt to damage collective identities. Unsurprisingly, a Holocaust artifact such as “Dancing Auschwitz” provided anti-Semites and Holocaust deniers with an opening to discharge hate speech. Anti-Germans also made a significant showing. Hate speech is never comfortable and anti-Semitic and Holocaust-denying comments would have been immediately censored and prosecuted by German law had YouTube been German owned. But Germans have difficulty in applying their laws to the Internet, which is global and beyond their judicial reach. Existing on a U.S.-owned site, German remembrance is subject to American laws that protect hate speech under the umbrella of freedom of speech. In the landmark case Whitney v California (1927, ¶8), Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis says, “If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehood and fallacies, to avert the evil by the process of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.” In other words, the cure to bad speech is more speech, a strategy YouTube users often implemented. For particularly heinous violations, YouTube provides practical ways for users to remove destructive posts: thumbs down or reporting a post. In order to ensure protection of the self-expression values encoded in U.S. law, a degree of hate speech is permissible in these spaces.

3.3.2. Commercialized space

Virtual memorials found in social media have a host of other perhaps more entertaining/amusing content (e.g., music videos, movie trailers, funny cat videos, etc.) to compete against. They also have to account for the tone of advertising that surrounds them. YouTube’s aim is financial, not moral. But even so, YouTube seems to offer better remembrance for some than other equally commercialized remembrance ventures.

AWB1960 We need more of this and less “merchants of memory” who try to institutionalize this past.

(Germany, 51)
The aim of the memorial itself is not commercial and its innocent display of self-expression is apparent. A group of other posters appear to misunderstand YouTube’s business model and condemned Korman for profiting from the Holocaust. If anyone profits from “Dancing Auschwitz” it is YouTube, through the advertising that surrounds the artifact. “Dancing Auschwitz” is regarded as a departure from commercialized Holocaust remembrance despite finding its home in the commercial world of YouTube.

3.3.2.1. Copyright: Universal, the giant who slew David

Though commercial entities endlessly promote their product hoping that their work will become part of the popular culture lexicon, they mercilessly pursue those who attempt to speak through them. The YouTube generation speaks through remixes of its popular culture, not because of the commercial entities behind the cultural artifacts but despite them. “Dancing Auschwitz” was no exception to this struggle. After the video went viral, Universal Music Group, the rights holder of Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” pursued legal action against Jane Korman, which led to the removal of the video from YouTube even after Korman’s attempt to claim her artwork as parody, which would protect it from the copyright claim. Korman replaced her work with a silenced version. Many YouTube users were incensed by Universal Music’s actions, sympathizing with Korman, cursing media conglomerates and often providing tips to Korman on how to circumvent the copyright claim. Additional copies of the original version have been re-posted and taken down. The last iteration, posted on November 13, 2010, has remained live for now.7 The issue is less about the video itself. Given the girth of content uploaded to YouTube every day, companies of even YouTube’s size find it difficult to control all of the content that is posted to its site. Once a video goes viral people will ensure continued access by repeatedly reposting it via different accounts. Korman may have birthed the idea but rearing it is a collective effort. Unfortunately, a record of the remembrance that occurred with each iteration (e.g., practical viewing data but more importantly the cultural discourse surrounding the memorial) is lost. A select few who are particularly fervent may repost their comments on the new posting but most will not. The community may rise up around the memorial again but perhaps with tempered passions.

3.3.3. Temporal

New media and social media in particular focus on the new, which does not seem conducive to remembrance. Although, “new” is one of journalism’s key tenets, the Holocaust manages perinially to become a cover story even after nearly seven decades. The temporal character of new media both is and is not an issue for remembrance online. Perhaps it does not function as a permanent fixture for

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7 Mid-2012.
remembrance as physical memorials imply, but is constant remembrance even necessary? Content goes viral and then it is forgotten, but the same could be said for any number of media. Remembrance is not invariable; it comes in waves. Humans cannot maintain perpetual remembrance any more than they can bear perpetual grief. Forgetting is both necessary and not as tragic as some would argue. After all, forgetting does not mean the memory is lost but merely out of reach for the time being (Vivian, 2010).

Conclusion

By repurposing the expressive spaces of YouTube as a site of remembrance, “Dancing Auschwitz” has awakened the grand hopes and formidable fears that technology repeatedly inspires. The advancement of technology as well as its uses conjures up fears that an aspect of our humanity or the communities we form will be harmed. With regard to memory, we fear that by remembering for us, technology will encourage the forgetfulness with which human memory already struggles, and the past upon which the self is built will be lost. The great offense of “Dancing Auschwitz” to some YouTube users is based in this fear. For many of them, departing from the culturally accepted mournful tones of Holocaust remembrance presents the first step to forgetting (e.g., forgetting the severity of the Holocaust). They fear that forgetting, which continues to be construed as an irretrievable loss, will shackle Opfer to their mortality (e.g., without communal memory the essence of a person dies with the body). They fear not just for the Opfer whose struggles would cease to exist in our collective memory but also for their own loss of self that would result without a past. The self and our very claim to personhood depend on having memories of a past. The absence of something as profound as the Holocaust from that past would drastically alter the selves we create, particularly for the inheritors of the Opfer and Täter identities.

Yet, as we have argued in this essay, by using social media for the purposes of remembrance, “Dancing Auschwitz” also represents the hope of technology to enhance and strengthen the bonds of community. Technology brings the prospect of expanding the limits and fortifying the fragility of human memory through boundless capacity and an enduring, accessible and open archive. Instead of absolving the responsibility to remember, technology affords a different plane of memory interaction. Virtual memorials have the potential to engender global interaction with a single artifact and a cultural exchange of shared experience that more traditional forms of remembrance are unable to provide. Remembrance becomes a democratic experience, as anyone with Internet access has the opportunity to participate in the construction and development of collective memory. By entering the spaces where modern citizens spend so much of their time, remembrance is kept alive and well. The heightened level of interaction not only has the potential to enrich the remembrance experience but the expressive spaces of sites like YouTube give the participants, especially Germans and Jews, the opportunity
and resources to remEDIATE their identities. Remembrance online becomes the start of identity building rather than a blockade to the individual’s self-determination. Regardless of how advanced technology becomes, humans have a deep-seated desire to remember. People will continue to contribute to the larger human narrative using technology as an aid in that pursuit.

References


