

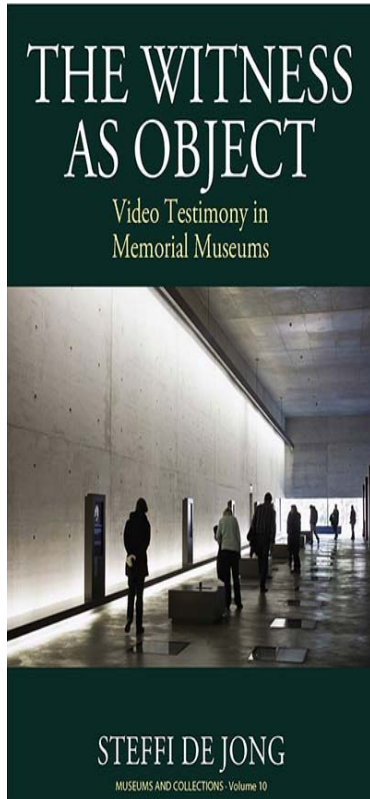


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The Witness As Object

Video Testimony in Memorial Museums



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Steffi de Jong

New York, NY: Berghahn Books, January 2018. 280 pages. \$120.00. Hardcover. ISBN 9781785336430.
 For other formats: [Link to Publisher's Website \(http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/DeJongWitness\)](http://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/DeJongWitness).

Review

The need to document the experience of Holocaust survivors was recognized by some in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe. The American psychologist David Boder, for example, traveled to Displaced Persons (DP) camps in Europe in 1946 to make audio recordings of interviews with survivors, a relatively novel method at the time. The idea of collecting testimonies not only for legal purposes but also as historical documentation and a way of letting survivors speak for themselves has gained increasing prominence since Boder's early recordings. Since the late 1970s, thanks among other things to technological developments and projects such as the Fortunoff Archive in New Haven, which started as a small community initiative focusing on audiovisual recordings of survivors, video testimonies have become an increasingly popular way for museums and archives to preserve, collect, and exhibit survivors' stories.

Much has been written about the viability and problematics of the medium of video testimony. Scholars have noted, for example, how it provides a false sense of unmediated relation between spectator and witness, and how its technical reproduction often mimics that of television documentaries (talking heads on a monochromatic background). In *The Witness as Object*, Steffi de Jong adds an important layer to these discussions by offering a comparative perspective on video testimonies as museum objects that are part of a broader, ideological narrative. Some of the museums discussed by de Jong, for example Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the Imperial War Museum in London, are well known and have been treated extensively in scholarship, while others, such as the Museo Diffuso in Turin and the Neuengamme Memorial in Hamburg, have not received the same media and scholarly attention. Although the focus of this work is on memorial museums—institutions that serve a double function of honoring and mourning the dead as well as communicating historical knowledge (25)—this research has implications for the analysis of many other museum types that utilize video testimonies in their dramaturgy.

Navigating a vast array of theoretical literature, including the work of many of the usual suspects such as Aleida Assmann and Giorgio Agamben, de Jong is able to offer a nuanced discussion of the ethical and theoretical dilemmas inherent in the use of video testimonies. De Jong's work is at its best, however, in the close readings of the exhibitions (prominently in chapter 4). Museum visits are always a spatial and multisensory experience, which makes them hard to communicate in

writing, especially of the scholarly-technical genre, but de Jong's combination of clear text and illustrative photography allows the reader to imagine herself as a visitor. When visiting the museums with de Jong, one learns that video testimonies might be similar to other exhibition objects with which they stand in relation. They can be used, for example, to enhance the aura of other objects, such as when a donor tells the story of the object adjacent to the video screen, or of the narrative as a whole. It is for these reasons, as well as the fact that by now visitors expect them, that some curators turn to video testimonies. Yet de Jong invites us to take a closer look at video testimonies as objects, a perspective that reveals important differences. Video testimonies are always given after the fact, in many cases decades later, and are therefore more often than not out of sync with the museum's chronology and the other objects in space. Furthermore, they literally speak to the visitor in ways that inanimate objects cannot. This forces a different type of spatial relation to it in the context of the exhibition. Video testimonies, notes de Jong, inverse the visitor's relation to the museum space. Instead of the object being static and the visitor dynamic, in the case of video testimonies "the visitor remains static, whereas the video decides the pace and movement of information provision" (164).

What stays with visitors after watching a video testimony in a memorial museum? It is hard to get a clear answer, or any answer at all for that matter, to this simple question because there is a dearth of empirical visitor studies on the subject. One can only surmise that for a growing number of natively digital visitors, these video testimonies might seem as outdated and obsolete as inanimate objects. I am not convinced that [holograms](#) or other innovative technologies, discussed briefly by de Jong in the conclusion (247-48) and in subsequent publications following the book, will change this in the long term. Museums simply cannot—perhaps should not—compete with rapid technological developments and the way people experience them. But this is not a direct concern of *The Witness as Object*, which is not prescriptive but analytical. It does not attempt to give guidance to curators haunted by these questions but rather to offer a guided tour that shows why video testimonies are a fascinating object group that still occupies a prominent place in memorial museums today.

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Date of Review:

October 2, 2018

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Steffi de Jong is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Cologne's Institute for Contemporary History. She obtained her doctorate from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim and has held positions at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin and Maastricht University. Her publications include articles in the *International Handbook of Museum Studies* and *WerkstattGeschichte*.

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