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Témoins Muets/Mute Witnesses: ethnography and archaeology encounter the objects of the Great War

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Résumé

Les « Témoins Muets » sont des objets de la Grande Guerre ainsi qualifiés dans le catalogue d'une remarquable collection accessible au public à Romagne-sous-Montfaucon (Meuse). Au vingt-et-unième siècle, alors que les derniers survivants de la Grande Guerre et leurs descendants immédiats disparaissent, les objets matériels associés au conflit semblent éveiller un renouveau d'intérêt de la part du grand public, se traduisant par la création de musées, de fouilles archéologiques etc... Sur la base d'observations faites au cours de recherches ethnographiques et archéologiques sur l'ancien front occidental (Meuse, France et Belgique), je montre que ces objets sont aujourd'hui valorisés principalement de deux façons. D'un côté, ils sont vus comme des documents historiques et archéologiques permettant une reconstruction dépassionnée du conflit à partir de preuves matérielles, dans la mesure où il n'appartient plus lui-même à la mémoire vivante. D'un autre côté, ils sont valorisés en raison de leur pouvoir de toucher, d'éveiller l'émotion et d'aider les gens à ressentir des choses à propos de la guerre et, en particulier, un sentiment à l'égard des victimes. En d'autres termes, il semble qu'ils facilitent et encouragent un intérêt passionné pour le passé parmi ceux qui n'ont pas connu la guerre ni, en général, ses survivants. Je considère que ces deux aspects sont inséparables même s'ils sont contradictoires en apparence. Le rôle actuel de ces objets peut être interprété à travers le statut de témoin, caractéristique depuis la Grande Guerre des survivants des guerres et des atrocités, et impliquant de leur part le devoir éthique et moral de véhiculer la mémoire de la violence. Cette notion permet de comprendre le double rôle joué par les objets de la Grande Guerre dans la mesure où ceux-ci se sont substitués aux vivants pour perpétuer des liens porteurs de sens avec le passé de la guerre et ses morts en particulier. La disparition des ultimes survivants laisse les vestiges physiques en position de seuls et derniers « témoins » de la guerre et de ses violences.

Abstract

MUTE WITNESSES: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND ETHNOLOGICAL APPROACH TO OBJECTS FROM THE GREAT WAR

“Mute witnesses” are objects from the Great War according to the brochure of a remarkable collection open to the public at Romagne-sous-Montfaucon (Meuse). In the 21st century, as survivors of the Great War and their immediate descendants pass away, physical objects associated with the conflict seem to acquire new public relevance, with the creation of museums, archaeological excavations etc.... On the basis of observations made during ethnographic and archaeological research on the former Western Front (Meuse, France and Belgium), I show that these objects are valued today in two main ways. On the one hand, they are seen as historical and archaeological documents, enabling a dispassionate, evidence-based reconstruction of the war past as it ceases to be a living memory. On the other hand, objects are valued for their power to affect and to elicit emotion, to help people “feel” something about the war and also, especially, feel for its victims: in other words they seem to encourage and facilitate a passionate approach to the past among people who have not known the war nor, usually, its survivors. I argue that these two aspects cannot be separated even if they appear contradictory. The role of these objects today can be understood by drawing on the notion of ‘witness’, that since the Great War denotes survivors of war and atrocity and their moral/ethical duty to carry forward the memory of violence. This notion can today be used to analyze the dual role of Great War objects, because they have come to replace people in perpetuating meaningful links with the war past and the war dead in particular. The disappearance of the last survivors leaves the physical vestiges of the war as the sole remaining ‘witnesses’ to the war and its violence.

Overzicht

STILLE GETUIGEN: ARCHEOLOGIE EN ETNOLOGIE IN VERBAND MET VOORWERPEN VAN DE EERSTE WERELDOORLOG

“Stille getuigen” zijn volgens een brochure van een opmerkelijke openbare collectie in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon (departement Meuse) voorwerpen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog. In de 21e eeuw, naarmate er almaar minder overlevenden van de Eerste Wereldoorlog en hun rechtstreekse afstammelingen overblijven, lijken tastbare objecten die met de Oorlog worden geassocieerd, weer aan publieke belangstelling te winnen, wat blijkt uit de oprichting van musea, archeologische opgravingen, enz. Op basis van waarnemingen tijdens etnografisch en archeologisch onderzoek aan het vroegere westerse front (Meuse, Frankrijk en België) toon ik aan dat deze voorwerpen nu op twee vlakken waardevol zijn. Aan de ene kant worden ze gezien als historische en archeologische documenten waarmee de oorlog, die niet langer een levendige herinnering is, op een onpartijdige en empirisch

onderbouwde manier kan worden gereconstrueerd. Aan de andere kant worden deze voorwerpen gewaardeerd omdat ze indruk maken en emoties opwekken, mensen helpen om iets te “voelen” als het over oorlog en vooral ook de slachtoffers gaat: met andere woorden, ze lijken bij mensen die de oorlog niet hebben meegemaakt en ook geen mensen kennen die hem hebben beleefd, een gepassioneerde benadering van het verleden in de hand te werken en te vereenvoudigen. Ik ben van mening dat deze twee aspecten niet los van elkaar kunnen worden gezien, ook al lijken ze dan tegenstrijdig te zijn. De rol die deze voorwerpen nu spelen, wordt duidelijk als we voortbouwen op het begrip ‘getuige’, dat sinds de Eerste Wereldoorlog verwijst naar overlevenden van oorlog en geweld en hun morele en ethische plicht om de herinnering aan dat geweld levendig te houden. Dit begrip kan worden gebruikt om de tweevoudige rol van de voorwerpen uit de Grote Oorlog te analyseren, omdat ze in de plaats van mensen de betekenisvolle link met de oorlog en de gesneuvelden in het bijzonder in stand houden. Nu de laatste overlevenden bijna allemaal gestorven zijn, zijn de tastbare overblijfselen van de oorlog nog de enige ‘getuigen’ van de oorlog en het geweld.

1 – Introduction

‘Romagne '14-'18 vous montre d'une façon qui va au fond des choses les différents aspects personnels. Derrière chaque objet, témoin muet, se cache une histoire personnelle.’ (<http://www.romagne14-18.com/index.php/fr/>, accessed on 12 December 2012).

In the web presentation of a collection of Great War objects exhibited in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon (Meuse), objects are ‘mute witnesses’ for their power to tell ‘personal stories’ about people who experienced the war, in this case soldiers from the U.S. Army and villagers. Physical objects from the time of the Great War seem to play a growing role in the museum and heritage presentation of the conflict today, reflecting a trend in the historiography of 20th century conflicts that concentrates on the point of view of ‘people at war’ (see Winter and Prost 2005, 205, 209). But how exactly do these objects work to disclose the past? What exactly do people see in and through them? I consider these questions on the basis of observations made during ethnographic and archaeological research in the former battlefield areas¹. The discussion will compare the status and role of objects in a museum display such as that found at Romagne with the apparently quite different archaeological approach to the vestiges of the Great War. I will

1. Ethnographic research was conducted in Argonne in 2000-2002 (sponsored by CNRS), 2005 (sponsored by a Gibbs Travelling Fellowship, Newnham College, Cambridge) and 2008, and in Verdun in 2007-2010 (sponsored by the Commission of the European Communities); archaeological research was conducted in the Somme (2005) and in Wallonie (2007-2011), under the direction of No Man’s Land, the European Group for Great War Archaeology, see <http://www.no-mans-land.info/> and <http://www.plug-street-archaeology.com/>, accessed on 13 December 2012).

also highlight some significant commonalities between the two cases, and argue that in understanding the role of these objects today we can draw on the notion of 'witness'. This term, often used today to refer to objects from the Great War, captures the ambiguous position of these objects in the 21st century, between history and memory. This reflects our current relationship with the Great War and helps to explain why objects associated with it play such an important role in how we approach the war today.

2 – 'Mute Witnesses'

During ethnographic research in the Argonne and in Verdun I found that many among local residents and visitors were passionately interested in the physical vestiges and objects from the time of the Great War, whether as collectors, participants in conservation projects or simply curious. Particularly collectors and those involved in the conservation and valorisation of wartime heritage in the area but also tourists were often very familiar with and knowledgeable about the physical structures and objects left behind by the war in this part of the former battlefield. Their interest was generally expressed in terms of the authenticity of these remains and so of their value as historical evidence of wartime events. However many if not most also commented on the power of physical objects and places to make the war 'come to life' more directly and evocatively than history books or indeed monuments: 'Through these remains you see the war as it was' a frequent comment, or even, as a regular visitor put it to me, 'seeing these places, you realise that the war really happened'. In other words physical remains are not simply seen as additional historical evidence alongside written documents, but also thought to add realism and indeed veracity to what is known historically.

The idea of the evocative power of objects from 1914-18 is at the core of the so-called 'informal museum' of the Great War created by Jean-Paul De Vries at Romagne (Meuse). The exhibit includes thousands of objects mostly relating to the passage of U.S. troops in the area during the Meuse-Argonne offensive of 1918, and as already mentioned its aim is to use objects to reveal the experience of soldiers during the war, their 'personal stories'. This is done through a particular display strategy. As its creator and curator told me in an interview, in conventional museums there is 'too much to read'. By contrast in his display there is nothing to read, even if spoken narratives are given to visitors on request. Broadly speaking objects are displayed thematically (e.g. daily life, the battlefield, weapons, death) but laid out untidily, even chaotically and are not individually labeled, dated or classified. They are also often rusty and dirty and the curator says that he makes no effort to clean or restore them nor to conserve them: instead he allows objects to decay naturally and to be worn down by visitors' touch. As he explained to me during an interview in 2007:

'What really attracts visitors here is that I let them touch the exhibits: a great machine gun, which they have never held, [...] they feel the weight, they can imagine "Wait a minute, if they had to carry this all day it was heavy; 30 kilos, it's not possible" – yes it's possible, you had to carry it or you'll be killed! Or I take them to the forest and make them run up the

slope of a ravine where the Americans lost 3 000 soldiers, and when they are on top and exhausted I tell them “and you don’t have a gas mask, and a 40 kg. ruck-sack, and rounds and shells exploding, barbed wire and 20 hills you have climbed so far, and 30 more to climb! I do it to take them into the subject’.

As this makes clear, to go ‘into’ the subject means to empathise with the soldiers; this is achieved by experiencing a little of what they experienced. For Jean-Paul, this is made possible through objects, that can help people move beyond what they *know*, and *understand* aspects of history. So for instance Jean-Paul explains that he displayed all the mess tins in his collection together on a wall, so that people ‘could see how many of them there were and that they were lives’: instead of simply learning about a number of lives lost, they could visually grasp the enormity of the loss, and through it understand – affectively grasp – the concrete reality of what was lost (‘lives’). As this suggests, objects are held to facilitate understanding (as distinct from knowledge) because they solicit the senses as well as the intellect. This perspective foregrounds the materiality of the objects.

Following Pels, materiality is not an intrinsic quality of objects but resides in the sensuous processes of human interactions with things (Pels 1998, 99-100). The display examined here foregrounds these processes both by letting the exhibits be touched and by deliberately ‘muting’ them. The exhibits here are made to tell their ‘stories’ not by being inserted into a symbolic system of references (date, type, origin etc...) but by removing them from it. By leaving them unlabeled and arranging them in chaotic piles objects are exhibited in their bare physicality, also revealed and foregrounded by allowing them to decay and letting the work of time and use show on their surface. The physicality of the objects in turn is intended to engage visitors’ senses and by it trigger imagination and feeling towards the past, privileging affective responses which are said to help people enter ‘into’ the subject of the war.

De Vries’ ‘museum’ is in some ways unique but its display strategy is not untypical of recent exhibits about the Great War that also aim at eliciting emotion in visitors as they show the ‘experience’ of people at war (for instance in the museum opened in 2011 at Meaux, see <http://www.museedelagrandeguerre.eu/le-parti-pris-scientifique-et-museographique>, accessed on 13 December 2012). More generally, comparable display strategies are common in what Williams has called ‘memorial museums’ (Williams 2007) that exhibit objects associated with past atrocities both to inform about history and contextualize atrocity, and to elicit emotion, empathy and reverence towards the victims. More specifically Young (1993, 132) says of the personal belongings exhibited in untidy piles at Auschwitz that they evoke ‘the brokenness of lives’ engulfed in an atrocity. For Williams (2007, 29) such piles of objects are used as ‘primary evidence’ for the lost lives and as a ‘signifying device’ for the deaths of those associated with these objects: the objects ‘are as close as we get to a person; belongings and images are often all that remain’ (2007, 31). In this context objects stand in for absent bodies, enabling what is impossible to feel when faced with human remains: empathy and identification (Williams 2007, 40). It is in relation to loss of life that empathy turns from museological strategy to means of affirming a moral bond

with or commitment to the victims, as Jean-Paul De Vries made explicit during our interview:

'My aim is to collect everything in a 5 km radius from the village, it's my way to bear a small fraction of their pain – it's my pilgrimage for the soldiers'. 'I used to be a normal collector but now [what concerns me] it's the message: teaching about the war, the madness [of war] and about peace. It happened when I found the bodies of soldiers in a trench, and then it hit me: wait a minute, they were my age, and they were ready to fight on the battlefield – it was then that I understood that they were human beings.'

In this narrative, a 'normal' collector's interest in objects for their own historical interest is radically transformed by the realization that those objects are linked with people who lost their lives in war. After the discovery of bodies, collecting becomes a means of discharging an ethical obligation towards the war's victims created by their suffering and death (cf. Sherman 1999). In short collecting and exhibiting come to be seen as part of the 'duty to remember' [*devoir du souvenir*] that governs war commemoration in France as in other combatant countries since the Great War (see e.g. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2002; Sherman 1999; cf. Dyer 1994; Winter 1995, 2006).

In sum objects here are treated less as historical evidence for the 1914-18 conflict than as relics, touchstones or talismans: less as signs or indices of past reality than as part of it (cf. Da Lage 2012; Pels 1998, 104). Things from the past help to engage the senses and the imagination and so to empathise and to sympathise – share feelings – with people in the past: in this sense they enable both the collector and the visitors to connect in a direct, affective way with the war past and, especially, with the war's victims. This is presented as part of the 'duty' to remember, or in other words of the exercise of memory as an ethical faculty (Margalit 2002; Lambek 1996).

3 – Archaeology: Making the Objects Speak

In apparent contrast with this approach to Great War objects is the archaeological perspective. As many authors have discussed, archaeology is an important actor in shaping 21st century approaches to the Great War (e.g. Saunders 2007; Desfossés, Jacques and Prilaux 2008). Archaeologists conducting excavations on the former Great War battlefields operate following the protocols of scientific archaeology such as stratigraphic excavation and analysis, accurate recording and cataloguing of finds, post-excavation study and conservation of finds etc... (see e.g. Lynch and Cooksey 2007; Schofield 2005, 2009). Through these methodologies, objects are turned into data – measurable, identifiable, object of systematic analysis, that in turn become evidence – material proof for testing a hypothesis about what the past was like. In archeology objects become data and evidence by being counted, weighed, plotted onto space, objectively described. This is so even in Great War archaeology, where many of the objects are immediately recognizable: for instance a tin of meat, easy to identify, is nevertheless initially described and catalogued by its objective, measurable

qualities such as size and shape, material composition, weight and condition; ammunition rounds are counted and classified in relation to type and date, sometimes weighed and plotted onto the space of the excavation. Only later are the data collected through systematic excavation and post-excavation used to construct an 'archaeological narrative' (M. Brown, personal comment, 2009). This starts from the objects and their distribution in the earth to make inferences about their nature and the past contexts in which they were made and used, and finally through this about the people who made and used them (see e.g. Hodder 1999).

So what sort of narratives do archaeologists construct through Great War objects? As with all historical archaeology, in Great War archaeology a central issue is the relationship between objects and texts (cf. Moreland 2001). For the Great War, a huge amount of written documentation is available, apparently covering all aspects of the war. Nevertheless archaeologists claim that they can contribute to how we know the war by making the objects 'speak' about aspects of the war that are not necessarily well covered in the written record. For instance objects in an archaeological context can help to clarify the sequence of events on a particular stretch of the battlefield, integrating a paper record that is often incomplete or contradictory. They can also provide factual knowledge about the war: how trenches were constructed, how they were reused or changed over time, what soldiers ate and so on. In addition, like the curator of Romagne 14-18 archaeologists too consider objects as 'embodiments of, and material witnesses too, the human experience of war' (Brown and Osgood 2009, 191). Here too the term 'witness' is used to say that objects lead to stories and help to uncover and reconstruct the subjective experiences of people in the war. In particular objects lend 'immediacy' to 'the reality of life and death' on the battlefield: so for instance 'by examining the bullets and shell splinters it is possible to divine the nature of the battle': of the danger faced by soldiers, of the violence they encountered and inflicted (Brown and Osgood 2009, 95). The signs of violence are also very obvious both on physical objects and structures and, especially, on human remains (Brown and Osgood 2009, 95). Violence is a (or even the) central aspect of the war experience, but also one that is notoriously badly documented in the written and even photographic record, hard to convey in words and also subject to censorship and silences (see e.g. Sherman 1999, 13-64; Winter 2006: 238-271). It is also not directly represented in monuments and memorials, which in the case of the Great War tended to sublimate and so in effect conceal the brutality and violence experienced and inflicted by the soldiers (see e.g. King 2001; Rowlands 2001). Accordingly archaeological finds may be said to do three main things in relation to the Great War: to help address gaps in the documentary record; to illustrate the day-to-day lives and activities of the ordinary soldiers; and, partly because of this, to 'speak' about soldiers' experiences against the grain of dominant, public and official narratives of the war, by giving physical immediacy to violence and danger, largely silenced but fundamental aspects of the lived reality of the battlefield.

In theory it is only at the end of the archaeological process, when archaeologists begin to reconstruct past lives and realities that imagination and, frequently, emotion come into play. In the earlier phases of research, as

mentioned, archaeologists treat objects in a more dispassionate, detached way as data and evidence. Concern to follow the scientific protocols for creating usable data that define archaeology as an academic discipline and professional practice is particularly strong and explicit in Great War archaeology as a relatively new field. As such, its practitioners are keen to distance their work from the practices of amateurs and collectors, who more or less since the inter-war period have been 'digging holes' and prospecting for bodies and collectibles in the former Great War battlefields. However in my experience the boundary between dispassionate, scientific practice and emotional and imaginative engagement with the past is thinner in Great War archaeology than in other types of archaeology.

First of all contact with Great War objects during excavation lends Western Front archaeology aspects of re-enactment, something that both archaeologists and visitors often comment on more or less seriously. On Western Front battlefield excavations, archaeological trenches and wartime trenches are one and the same, similar tools are used, and the frequent mud and wet weather powerfully call to mind (and body) the iconic images of the war experience received from social memory and history. Archaeologists also experience in a limited way the danger and fear of combat when they come across unexploded ordnance. Meanwhile many buried and decayed items are recognizable and even familiar, such as toothbrushes or cigarette packets, triggering an uncanny feeling of closeness and presence of the past (see Filippucci 2010a, 2010b). Because of this, the thought of the soldiers is never far from the archaeologists' minds. This is also because there is the ever-present possibility in these excavations of encountering the remains of human bodies or human body parts. In addition in my experience very often those who take part in these excavations have a family connection with a Great War soldier and more or less explicitly consider the excavation as a way to pay tribute or remember them (cf. Saunders 2007; Brown 2007). More generally the excavation is widely felt to be a form of commemoration (see Saunders 2002; Filippucci 2010a). So for instance excavation seasons in the Plugstreet archaeological project in which I have participated (see Brown and Osgood 2009) are concluded by depositing a wreath at the British cemetery and monument at Ploegsteert; and more informally on the last night the team might make a toast to the Great War soldiers for instance dedicating the excavation to the missing or to the Fallen.

Importantly, the emotional and imaginative dimension of Great War archaeology does not disturb or interrupt the scientific practice of excavation. Instead, it underpins and justifies it. This is made most explicit in relation to the excavation of human remains. In that case, I was told for instance that an excavator 'owes it' to the fallen soldier to excavate them as accurately and rigorously as possible. This is of course because careful excavation can reveal clues that can lead to identification. But also it is implied that 'excavating properly', following scientific protocols, is a form of tribute and respect towards the dead. By extension, treating finds on a Western Front excavation like any other archaeological finds, with scientific rigor, as historical documents and evidence about the past, is also to do something 'for' the soldiers, to discharge the 'duty of memory' – a duty fuelled by emotion and imagination. So in Great War archaeology objects are approached *at once* in a detached, objective and

objectifying way, in order to produce valid data/evidence about the past and so create critical knowledge about it; and also, more than in other kinds of archaeology, they seem to carry the potential to trigger imagination and emotion, and to bring the past to mind in a very immediate and affect-laden way that leads to ethical engagement with it.

4 – Conclusions: Great War Objects as Witnesses

How to analyse these findings? At first sight the two approaches described here seem opposed. Even if both describe the objects as ‘witnesses’, they treat them differently. In one case their crude physicality is played up in order to elicit affective reactions towards the war past, quite explicitly opposed to critical and contextualised knowledge of it; in the second case the objects are treated with scientific detachment to help to reconstruct the past rather than simply evoke it. These different approaches correspond broadly to the distinction between memory and history as drawn for instance by Pierre Nora (1989): in the first case, Great War objects are made to work a bit like relics, magically ‘bringing to life’ the war past or at least our feelings about it, mediating an enchanted relationship with the past, which is how Nora characterizes memory (Nora 1989: 9). In the second case, objects are treated as material traces of a past that is reconstructed critically, and so mediate a more ‘disenchanted’ relationship with the past that again following Nora we can call ‘history’ (see Nora 1989: 8). In support of this argument one could point out that archaeology has come into the scene in relation to Great War just when the last survivors have disappeared and, as some put it, we enter ‘the time of history’ in relation to this event (Barcellini 2009: 2).

However as also shown the dichotomy is not so clear-cut: archaeologists follow scientific practice as part of the heartfelt ‘duty’ to remember and thus honour the soldiers; while De Vries and others involved with collecting and displaying Great War objects as heritage also subscribe to the idea of historical authenticity. Both are at once concerned with dispassionate historical reconstruction of the real identities and conditions of the life and death of soldiers; and let the physicality of objects affect them, triggering emotions and imagination. In this respect these objects challenge a sharp distinction between history and memory; and similar distinctions such as that between what the ancient Chinese called ‘historical traces’, focus of scholarly research, and ‘remnant traces’: traces that ‘stand for the recent dead’, and require a particular response: ‘neither religious wonderment nor scholarly devotion, but continuous loyalty in the form of prolonged mourning’ (Wu Hung 2012, 85). The term ‘witness’, that as indicated is widely used to denote Great War objects, captures this ambiguity.

The term ‘witness’ contains within it the same slippage or duality that we have noted. On the one hand the witness is a person who provides factual verification of or evidence about an event by virtue of having direct knowledge of it. Such a witness exercises memory as a cognitive faculty, either in a legal context or also in a historical sense, providing a falsifiable account of an event. However Margalit (2002) introduces another connotation of the term witness, associated with exercising memory as an *ethical* faculty in relation to past atrocities (see also Dornier and Dulong 2005). Those whom Margalit calls ‘moral’ witnesses are people who have lived through an atrocity and decide to tell others about it

(2002: 147-182). Through this they help survivors and eventually posterity not just to establish the factual truth of an atrocity but also to formulate a moral judgement about it, by facilitating a social, collective work of *reliving the emotions and sensibilities* associated with the event. It is this affective work that helps survivors and posterity to figure out *how* to live after, and in relation to, such an event (Margalit 2002: 16-17, 62-3, 68-9). Winter (2006) builds on this discussion to argue that the moral witness typically speaks 'against the grain' of official representations, against distorted and sanitized versions of a painful past (2006, 269). The moral witness does not just help to tell a falsifiable history about a past atrocity, but also its 'true' story.

It seems to me that objects from the Great War are 'witnesses' in both senses of the word. On the one hand they provide hard, evidential data about the war, that can be compared with and help to prove or disprove other data contained within written documents and written and oral accounts. On the other hand objects associated with the Great War have the capacity to tell a moral 'truth' about the conflict in the sense that they can help us, as posterity, 'relive' the emotions and moral obligations associated with this event; they can also, as in Winter's characterisation of moral witnesses, reveal aspects such as violence, that go 'against the grain' of documental and monumental narratives. So, on the one hand, objects satisfy our expectation that the past should be known as history, i.e. critically and dispassionately, scientifically, through objective evidence. On the other hand, they are instruments of memory, enabling us to relate to that past emotionally and so, therefore, ethically.

Objects have the potential to produce both types of knowledge of the past, because of their physicality. Recent English-language anthropological theorising on materiality (e.g. Miller 2005; Pinney 2005; see also Spyer 1998) suggests that objects exist at the boundaries of culture: in other words material culture is not purely an expression of a historical, cultural or social context. As Pinney (2005) puts it, material culture is *related to* society and culture but is not simply a reflection of them: in and through their physical being, objects have the power to partially stand 'outside' of society, culture and history and create *their own* contexts: they can 'constitute history' as much as being constituted by it (2005: 266). In the case of Great War objects, this is to say that they can be interpreted as historical data, made to 'speak' of a past time and place, signs of a particular socio-historical context; but at the same time their 'mute' (or intentionally muted) physicality can create its own context: for instance its own temporality, by creating affective intensity that cuts across the historical, chronological distance between past and present and makes a shortcut between them (cf. Sturken 1997: 3). The double task of giving evidence about the past and providing emotional closeness to it was arguably once fulfilled by living 'witnesses' of the war. In the 21st century, with the passing of the last survivors (cf. Offenstadt 2010), it may be suggested that physical objects and vestiges of the war have taken the relay. They have replaced living witnesses in mediating our relationship with an event so atrocious that, even as it enters 'the time of history' in generational terms, continues to demand that we approach it both with critical, scientific detachment and ethically, through the affect-laden route of memory.

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