As we have seen, eyewitness testimony and individual experience have played a significant role in shaping the socio-political debates surrounding collective memory of the GDR and the processes of dealing with its legacy. This chapter seeks to give an overview of the approach to testimony, media and memory that will be taken in my analysis of a selection of these texts, exhibitions and films, as well as introduce two new theoretical terms that emerge from the study and which have wider relevance: mediated remembering communities and complementary authenticities.

However, before I proceed with my analysis, it is important to set out what I understand by the concept of ‘testimony’, as this is not an undisputed term. Testimony has deep historical roots, which John Durham Peters (2009, p. 24) identifies as belonging to three key domains: law, theology, and atrocity. The use of the witness as a form of evidence ‘is ancient and is part of most known legal systems’. In theology, the concept of witness as martyr, developed in early Christianity, is also found in other religious traditions. In the third and most recent context, that of atrocity, we see the ‘witness as a survivor of hell, prototypically but not exclusively the Holocaust’ (Peters, 2009, pp. 24–25). These three forms of testimony have different social, cultural and communicative implications and we might thus view them as being of different genres (A. Assmann, 2006b). So, what are the key differences between these modes of testimony and which is the most relevant to the texts considered in this study?

Aleida Assmann (2006b, p. 266; see also 2006a, p. 85) considers that the legal witness is required ‘to provide factual information that will help to discover the truth’; in this way, the testimony is largely separated from the biography of the testifier. Indeed, the ideal witness...
from the legal point of view is the objective recording of the machine, devoid of the subjectivity inherent to any form of personal testimony (Peters, 2009, p. 33). In contrast, the witness to atrocity is, in Avishai Margalit’s (2002, p. 150) terms, a ‘moral witness’. Margalit uses this term to describe ‘one who experiences the suffering – one who is not just an observer but also a sufferer’. Thus the personal biography and, in particular, the physical experiences of the witness to atrocity are inseparable from the story that s/he tells and his or her social and cultural authority to tell it. Nonetheless, as Thomas (2009, p. 92) notes, if we return to the understanding of the term ‘witness’ in Hebraic law this distinction begins to dissolve: ‘the ancient witness could be both witness in another’s case or the claimant or plaintiff who accuses’. Indeed, Thomas (2009, p. 93) sees recognition of this potential double role as ‘crucial to understanding the contemporary use of witnesses in regard to modern atrocities’.

The distinctiveness of the witness to atrocity is further blurred when we compare this form of witnessing to the figure of the religious martyr. The martyr must also suffer in order to bear witness; however, it is not s/he who will testify; rather, s/he is dependent ‘on someone to witness the suffering, to identify him or her as a martyr […] and to codify the story for future generations’ (A. Assmann, 2006b, p. 268; see also 2006a, pp. 87–88). The witness to atrocity is, in contrast, both ‘the person who experienced the ordeal and the person who testifies to it’ (A. Assmann, 2006b, p. 269) – they are not reliant on the secondary witness in this sense. And yet, if we view witnesses to atrocity as testifying also for those who cannot, that is, ‘for those who died and were forever silenced’, then they too can be viewed as secondary witnesses (A. Assmann, 2006b, p. 269). Moreover, they are reliant on the wider community to act as a further form of secondary witness by ensuring that their testimony finds broader relevance: ‘the appeal in this case is not to a divine authority but to humanity at large, which – to the extent that it registers and memorializes the event – constitutes itself as a moral community’ (A. Assmann, 2006b, p. 269; see also 2006a, p. 89). In fact, the witness is always reliant on the recognition by an audience to carry out the act of witnessing, for it is only in the socio-cultural context that the role of the witness is defined and ascribed: a witness is not a witness unless there is someone to hear his or her story (Thomas, 2009, pp. 101–02).

Moreover, we might consider the complexity of the term ‘witness’ itself, which ‘can be an actor (one who bears witness), an act (the making of a special sort of statement), the semiotic residue of that act (the