

ABSTRACT

My research involves a comparative study of memorial museums, finding discrepancies and similarities; for example confronting strategies of exhibition and their historical and cultural connotations between memorial museums of genocide. It is grounded in concepts and ideas generally recognized by Holocaust representability theorists as crucial for its understanding. My goal is to explore these *lieux de mémoire* from a cultural and aesthetic point of view. The cardinal question that concerns me is - putting it bluntly - how do these museums work? This question concerns certain emotive and aesthetic strategies used in these memorials to influence the audience, contributing to a intriguingly varied, yet at the same time uniform sensibility and form.

RADOSŁAW FILIP MUNIAK

AESTHETICS OF REMEMBRANCE: MEMORIAL MUSEUMS

"Memory must work between the figure of the one who has died and the one disfigured by death."¹

Doris Salcedo

As Lot was escaping from the cities of Sodom and Gomorra, he was warned by angels not to look back. His wife did not abide and turned into a pillar of salt. She was, in a cautionary interpretation, punished for wanting to remember, that which should be forgotten. On the other hand, when Art Spiegelman finds out that his father (Vladek) burned his mother's journals, he calls him a murderer. The ambiguity of remembrance. Should we remember atrocities in hope of understanding them but risk emotional paralysis? Or forget, free ourselves from their burden but destroy a crucial part of our identity and the means of understanding the past both for our generation and the next?

¹ D. Salcedo, *Interview with Charles Merewether 1999* in: *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by C. Harrison and P. J. Wood, Wiley-Blackwell, 2002.

Materialization of social remembrance takes place in the form of a museum or monument. When a monument refers to painful events, rather than valor and greatness, it takes the shape of a memorial - a sculpture, structure or physical marker designed to memorialize and signify mourning and loss. A museum is an institution devoted to the acquisition, conservation, study, exhibition, and educational interpretation of objects with scientific, historical, or artistic value. Whereas a memorial museum is a specific kind of museum dedicated to a historic event - commemorating mass suffering of some kind, often erected in the actual place where the atrocities took place, in which case, they can also be referred to as memorial sites or *lieux de mémoire* (memory places) which Pierre Nora defines as sites or repositories 'where memory crystallizes and secretes itself'. For Nora, *lieux de mémoire* are numerous and varied in form, symbolic value and function, some more normalizing than others, for instance, they can be as intangible as a two minute commemorative silence.

We do not go to a memorial because it is beautiful, novel (unlike art museums) or because we expect it to teach us something about the subject (unlike a standard history exhibit). Instead, we come in respect, bringing with us a sense of history (often loaded with significance); personal conscience becomes the reference point of our interaction. As James Young puts it, "*the aim of memorials is not to call attention to their own presence so much as to past events because they are no longer present.*"² But is this entirely accurate? We expect to be led beyond the materiality of the memorial - back in time to the persons and events that the memorial commemorates - even though our experience is mediated through it. Therefore can we truly be immune to the physicality of the memorial? What is the impact of aesthetic strategies used in constructing such sites on shaping memory and effecting the viewer and his conscience of the past?

This is linked to the concept of 'the Holocaust effect' in art proposed by Ernst van Alphen, as ways to reference the Holocaust, not necessarily directly (connected to the actual historical event), but using such techniques that the viewer is meant to feel as if he was experiencing a certain aspect of the Holocaust; rather than representing it, playing it out in a performative sense, 'doing' the Holocaust³. This is achieved through a series of constant aesthetic strategies: displaying documents, photographs of victims, their clothes, utensils,

² J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, 1993, p. 12.

³ See E. van Alphen, *Caught by history. Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*, Stanford University Press, 1997.

showing torture devices, cells etc. These recurring modes of presenting genocide in memorial museums, strategies of exhibition and anesthetization - by which I don't mean the creation of artistic fiction but placing upon the presented history a filter of perviously used methods (visual effectiveness, emotive strategies) of shaping or framing memory through museum presentation - have their source in Holocaust representation. For example it is known that the creator of Cambodia's Museum of Genocidal Crimes, Tuol Sleng in Phnom Penh, Mai Lam and Ung Pech, travelled to Eastern Europe and the USSR to visit museums memorializing the Holocaust. They specifically wanted viewers to make connections between the Tuol Sleng and the Nazi death camps, both for political reasons and 'aesthetic' ones. Their intention was to put the Cambodian genocide into a wider context of crimes against humankind through exhibition techniques (strategies of anesthetization) in which they are memorialized, becoming the first, out of now many, memorial museums to reference 'the style' of Auschwitz and other European memorial museums marking WWII atrocities.

Displaying the authentic object is the most common strategy. In this sense objects become traces or as Pierce would say - indexes of experiences and presence of the victims. The object becomes the sole survivor, a witness that can reveal the truth. The object gains magnitude and becomes a tool in extracting a certain response and effect in the viewer. Paul Williams concludes, that:

"It is the story that is the object, insofar as it is not the item itself that is distinctive, but the associated history to which it is attached. This point raises the sticky question of authenticity: if the museum conceives of objects as tools or even props supporting a historic story, how necessary is it really that all objects displayed have a provenance definitely known to be of the event, linked to certain person and place?"⁴

The object becomes an individual totem, case evidence and an incisive signifying device. In this sense the object becomes animated - the idea that an object 'witnessed' an atrocity is a rhetorical strategy that aims to humanize something that existed during that period, yet at the same time functions as a artistic momento mori. The transferal of ownership of an item from use-value to signifying-value often involves the loss of intimate knowledge: was that gun exhibited in the display case fired in fear or anger? Did that crude metal bowl

⁴ P. Williams, *Memorial Museums. The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, New York, 2007, p. 33.

contain a vital meal for a prisoner or was it a castoff discarded by a guard? William writes, that:

"At heart, this is a philosophical question about any artifact's simultaneous role as linguistic sign and a plastic element. Trying to judge how objects variously symbolize, represent, connote, denote, constitute, embody, realize, signify or objectify points towards the difficulty in assessing how they can reliably reflect social relations. Given their amplification in the museum context, artifacts can be considered prime contributors to myth-making."⁵

The strategy of space concerns the aspect of authenticity, of the feeling of actually being in the place where these atrocities took place. This connects with the notion of realism in genocide representation, in which many theoreticians place the origins of secondary trauma rather than conscious remembrance or healing of wounds, which is the result of representing genocide, wars and other massive violations of human rights in modes that are themselves traumatizing. Geoffrey Hartman supposes that direct and extremely realistic representations cause desensitization in the viewer, or 'psychic numbing'. "Terrible things, by continuing to be shown, begin to appear matter-of-fact, a natural rather than man-made catastrophe"⁶ comparable to an earthquake or tornado attack. The human element is taken out, therefore the possibility to hold others responsible for these acts is put into question.

Another phenomena which complicates social remembrance in memorial museums is 'post-memory', which Marianne Hirsch describes as the relationship of the children of those who survived or witnessed cultural and collective trauma, to the experiences of their parents⁷. These experiences transmitted through stories or images, are so strong, so monumental, that they conjure up their own memories. This concerns the psychoanalytical concept of 'phantom' or 'crypt', where the trauma is - so too speak - buried alive and haunts the next generation, becoming haunted house/crypt, like in Edgar Allen Poe's famous story *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In my opinion the figure of a haunted house is crucial to understanding such memorial museums.

⁵ P. Williams, *Memorial Museums. The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, p. 30.

⁶ G. H. Hartman, *Public Memory and Its Discontents*, in: "Raritan" nr. 14 (1994).

⁷ See M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer, *War Stories: Witnessing in Retrospect*, in: *Image and Remembrance. Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. S. Hornstein and F. Jacobowitz, Indiana University Press 2003.

Criticism of realistic representation of genocide has focused on the ethics of the portrayal (and hence re-presentation and reproduction) of violence and atrocity (pornography of violence) which is at risk of attracting, seducing the viewer through, something that Inga Clendinnen calls 'the Gorgon effect' which pre-empts the educative or empathic intent of the work. This type of presentation (realistic, iconic) performs a premature movement of closure, enticing the viewer to accept the belief that he or she has now seen the object (the event, the movement, the Holocaust itself):

"This seduction is partly the product of the persistent myth of the transparency of realist modes of representation and of documentary practice, which forecloses for most viewers (who after all, are not trained in critical visual literacy) the recognition that this is in the end only a story - selective, partial, provisional, and highly mediated. It is also the result of the particular invitation of much realism (in whatever medium) to a passive reception, the work of narrativizing and making sense having been undertaken already by the producer."⁸

This effect is linked to the general theory of 'the performing museum', which is the successor to the XIX century 'legislating museum' and XX century 'interpreting museum'. A performing museum 'stages' history in the sense that it uses more theatrical display techniques layered on top of traditional interpretive museum practices. These techniques are based on 'reality effects' and include showing the authenticity of the space or use of personal testimony in other words the total physical environment itself becomes the attraction. Memorial museums are particularly evocative because they usually exist in settings where we can imagine lives being lived out (through the display of objects that function as indexes), rather than those, like cemeteries, that are explicitly markings of death or associated with the afterlife. The memorial itself should not be the object of the visit. It is therefore striking that more memorial museums have been erected in the last ten years than in the past one hundred. This recent 'boom' is linked to a phenomena that A. V. Seaton describes as thanatourism:

"[Tourists] Travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not

⁸ Janet Wolff, *The Iconic and the Allusive: The Case for Beauty in Post-Holocaust Art*, in: *Image and Remembrance. Representation and the Holocaust*, ed. S. Hornstein and F. Jacobowitz, Indiana University Press 2003 p. 157.

exclusively, violent death, which may, to a varying degree be activated by the person-specific features of those whose deaths are its focal objects."⁹

The journey to the most authentic available sites of catastrophe, signals a search for the essence of the person or group at its center, the search for meaning and identity. Visitors are motivated by the need to be illuminated, whether this means a quest for personal understanding or a more general desire for historical information in the form of raw experience or - sadly - by the need to fulfill a morbid curiosity (a form of dark tourism or voyeurism) at seeing ominous and dreadful objects associated with other's suffering. Once a space like this is made accommodating as a tourist facility other forms of identification (personal objects, photographs and recorded testimony) are added to make the suffering of prisoners more readily available, giving the prison greater historical context and emotional texture. But can we as visitors, reconcile the private, confined and unimaginable pain associated with imprisonment and torture with the public historical 'lesson' facilitated by curatorial 'show-and-tell' techniques?

The ritual of visitation is indirectly connected with the concept of trauma. Trauma occurs when an experience or event is so strong, that it escapes understanding because it doesn't fit into any known frame of reference (both symbolic and empirical). When an event 'makes no sense' it can't really be remembered, understood or even truly experienced. Without concrete frames of reference that give cognitive distance a person constantly reenacts the event, repeats it in direct experience. When the human psyche tries to process a traumatic event it will endlessly replay it, struggling to find meaning, or resolution through the replay; re-visit it rather than consciously remember. This form of visitation has nothing to do with memory, whereas memory needs distance, separation from actuality in order to re-present the event, trauma melts reality with representation, diminishes all the differences between them - the event becomes the representation or in the words of Norman Bryson: *The representation absorbs the house*¹⁰.

While the Holocaust is tied to the Second World War, its obvious antinomy to 'conventional warfare' has meant that its memorialization required considerable departures in form and meaning both on a practical and theoretical level. The former is

⁹ A. V. Seaton, *Guided by the Dark: From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism*, in: "International Journal of Heritage Studies" 2 (1996), p. 16.

¹⁰ N. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Harvard University Press 1991.

propelled by the variety and expansiveness of Holocaust memorial sites, situated in diverse places such as former concentration camps, mass graves (pogrom sites), transportation routes, ruined synagogues. Also there is the question of influence, whereas memorials were being constructed in various periods and political and cultural frameworks. For instance, at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Bergen-Belsen, prisoners constructed makeshift memorial towers out of dismantled barracks within days of liberation, Austrian and German Holocaust memorials tended to reflect self-critical national concerns that may have had little to do with the subcultural images held by Jews and other persecuted groups. In postwar Poland and Czechoslovakia, on the other hand the Communist regimes produced Holocaust memorials that had strong antifascist interpretations, that is, Nazis as oppressors of the working class, while former USSR states such as Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia or Ukraine (although sites of Nazi concentration and extermination camps) were foreshadowed by the gulags. An important issue is whether older categories of analysis remain suitable for describing this new commemorative form, the memorial museum which is a compound made necessary by the complication of conventional museological categories. Isn't this a contradiction? A memorial is largely apolitical or at least safe in the refuge of history simply because honest evaluation of the dead is normally seen as disrespectful. On the other hand, a history museum is presumed to be concerned with interpretation, contextualization, and critique. Therefore the binding of the two suggests that there is an increasing desire to add both a moral framework to the narration of terrible historical events and more in-depth contextual explanations to commemorative acts. Yet how does the mission, audience, aesthetic and educational strategies, in short the framing of painful memories change when a memorial has, as its main feature, a museum, or when a museum seeks to function as a memorial? Can it still be a *modi* of remembrance and commemoration without prejudice?

The essay submitted is the work of only the individual whose name appears on the front page as the author; any parts taken from other sources are appropriately referenced in the essay. No co-authorship will be accepted.