Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Darker Tourism

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In an era in which publics have become more demanding of their museological experiences, visual “interpretation” has emerged as a new framework for both museum curators and their scholarly critics (Noussia 1998). This trend towards a more relevant and interactive museum pedagogy has become so transformative that some have posited the “post-museum” as a successor form to the 19th century institution (Hooper-Greenhill 2000). This emphasis on museum interpretation is particularly sensitive when applied to “dark tourism.” The latter entails recreational visitation to sites “associated... with death, disaster, and depravity”, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC (Lennon and Foley 1999). However, there is a difference between sites associated with death, disaster, and depravity and sites of death, disaster, and depravity. If visitation to the former is rightfully characterized as “dark tourism,” then journey/excursion/pilgrimage to the latter constitutes a further degree of empathetic travel: “darker tourism.”

Based on visits to the Washington museum and the (open-air) museum at the former concentration camp site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, this research note intends to underscore the significance of the distinction between “dark” and “darker” tourism (Miles 2000, 2001). Particularly with respect to authenticity, but also in terms of site interpretation, it is a distinction that needs to be recognized and internalized by those charged with commemorating the Shoah. Key to this interpretive function are the differing motivations for Holocaust memorial construction and visitation. Such a paradigm, sensitive to dimensions of authenticity and experience, may also help in assessing the varied reactions by those drawn to such sites. “Darker tourism” is conceptually and linguistically preferable to Young’s (1994) unintentionally reifying polarity between “memorials removed from the sites of destruction” and “sites of destruction” per se. By virtue of their opposite positions in the panoply of Holocaust museums, the State Museum in Oświęcim and the Washington museum represent particularly appropriate case studies for comparison. On account of what happened there, Auschwitz has become a notorious, universal symbol of evil. That it is relatively undeveloped in terms of museum facilities or methods of representation is secondary. The US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, on the other hand, can rightly claim to be the epitome of technological sophistication with respect to Shoah memorialization. Yet, its location on the Washington DC mall bears no connection to the events of the Holocaust per se.

It is useful to adopt a space-time framework in approaching the dark–darker tourism paradigm. While there is little agreement over when the Shoah began, it ended in 1945, whether it is conceived as a distinct event (the more conven-
tional approach) or as a post hoc conceptualization of loosely tied atrocities (Novick 1999). Therefore, any Holocaust memorial must bridge the existential gap between the here-and-now of the tourist and the event (or events) of more than half a century prior. It must convert the memorial thing into a live memory. This is the major challenge for all dark tourism. More than evoking historical knowledge, to be successful, any dark touristic “attraction” must also engender a degree of empathy between the sightseer and the past victim. Stimulating empathy is no less a challenge for darker tourism. However, even if it claims no greater temporal distancing over dark tourism, it does possess a critical spatial advantage. Darker tourism enjoys a locational authenticity that its counterpart does not. Just being there imparts to the darker tourist a uniquely empowering (if spectral) commemorative potential. From the present perspective, the major difference between the Washington museum and the one in Oświęcim lies in the locational authenticity of the latter. Despite the unrivalled technological and exhibitory superiority of the former, the Oświęcim museum, merely by containing the actual sites of Auschwitz and Birkenau, evokes unparalleled emotion through name and location (Świeboka 1993). At Birkenau, in particular, locational authenticity informed the early debate over installing any actual monument: “Why construct a monument at a former extermination camp? Is not the historical site itself a monument?” (Spielmann 1994:171). In chillingly incarnating the locus of death, however, Oświęcim does not provide the kind of historical contextualization that the Washington museum does (Bollag 1999).

As destinations, both museums are enormously popular. Approximately half a million persons visit the Oświęcim annually, thus 25 million have visited since the Holocaust’s end (extrapolated from Webber 1993:282). The museum is Poland’s premier destination, especially for foreigners who constitute one-third of the total. The Washington museum, for its part, which received 2 million persons in its first year and hosts 5,000 daily, can boast “the largest attendance figures in history for a national museum” (Flanzbaum 1999:96). In Washington, nearly two-thirds of people viewing the Holocaust museum are not Jews; in Oświęcim, the proportion of non-Jewish tourists is likely to be even higher.

Is it proper to label both of these institutions “museums”? Technically they both are; but Auschwitz-Birkenau is also something else. For sure, heritage theme parks and other sites of historical significance also serve multiple functions; they, too, have given rise to the question “What is a museum?” Yet on account of the massive extermination that was conducted in Birkenau, Oświęcim takes the question to another level. Beyond being a museum, it is also a mass graveyard. Yet, on account of the ruthlessly efficient manner in which even corpses were eliminated (burning in the crematoria), this is a cemetery without tombstones, a graveyard without graves. In this respect this museum is unique, both by housing a museum-cum-exhibition and encompassing the locations where the dead literally went up in smoke.

What lies beyond darker tourism? If its counterpart encompasses visits to commemorative sites associated with death and holocaust, and darker tourism constitutes travel to actual sites of barbarism and genocide, darkest tourism would transcend both the spatial differences that distinguish dark from darker type and the time gap that separates both dark and darker from the remembered tragedy. Constraints to darkest tourism are less conceptual than technological. Electronically interactive media of Internet and new generation television may pave the way to darkest tourism. Unmediated access to videotaped and online Holocaust survivor testimony already constitutes a new mode in connecting post-millennial youth directly to the disappearing generation of Shoah eyewitnesses (Salvo 1999). Already, one can take “virtual tours” of
museums via the World Wide Web. In darkest tourism, museum cyberguides and curators will take their virtual tourists on real time tours of active detention camps, killing fields, death rows, and execution chambers. The dark cybertourist is thus a mere click away from baudy (sic) participation in the museum sites so “hit.” For sure, cybertourism does not physically bridge the spatial distance which this researcher has argued distinguishes dark from darker tourism. As sensory cognition evolves in relation to progressive computerization, however, longstanding psychological distinctions between real and virtual, here and there, subject and object may themselves loosen. If so, then the dark cybertourist may not in fact sense a substantial difference between walking and browsing through Auschwitz. Darkest tourism is a chilling prospect, but one which museum curators (dark and not) will eventually have to confront. In the meantime, the dark–darker tourism framework should help sensitize museum creators, curators, and consumers about the meanings and motivations of their respective missions, helping them all to fashion, in the words of one Auschwitz museum scholar, their most appropriate “philosophy of sightseeing” (Webber 1993:286).

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**REFERENCES**


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