

Research Report

Exploring the representation and interpretation of Auschwitz-Birkenau

In the 20th century, Lowenthal (1998: xiii) famously stated that heritage is everywhere, suggesting that heritage is not just about the past, but also about the present. Moreover, the 20th century saw the rise in heritage sites which ‘purported to be representations of the past’ (Walsh, 1992: 94). However, as Smith (2006: 77) states, heritage sites are more than a thing, it is also an event which represent a sense of identity and belonging for particular individuals or groups. These places will still continue to negotiate, construct and reconstruct identities and social and cultural meanings and values, thus creating a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present (Smith, 2006: 3). Therefore, not all heritage sites may demonstrate a positive nature, as some sites may harbour unpleasant memories that may be of discomfort because of the ideologies they represent (Logan & Reeves, 2009: 1). This report will aim to explore Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp, discussing the various issues in its representation, interpretation, heritage management and development.

Heritage places act as ‘time marks’ which exists in the present but represent a temporal depth which gives them a special meaning (Walsh, 1992: 12). As places harbour memories because of the events took place there, heritage places could be celebrated as a unifying force. However, it could also work to divide and articulate differences with other groups (Kisić, 2016: 49). Therefore, it is important to understand how people would be affected and whose past is being presented by the commemoration of places. It is the product of present practices that organise and maintain the frame of these sites which bear cultural marks (Bennet, 1994: 130). The heritage experience of people are being defined

and managed (Smith, 2006: 2) by those who are involved in the process of its management, development and conservation. Therefore, it is important to represent heritage places appropriately, especially sites that may still be of discomfort to those who are experiencing and interpreting it.

Heritage sites that bring a sense of discomfort can be labelled as negative heritage places, which are usually sites of human atrocities (Smith, 2006: 81). Almost all societies would have scars of history resulting from involvement in war which was based on intolerance, racial discrimination or ethnic hostilities (Logan, Reeves, 2009: 1) which would also mean there would be heritage sites that represent these painful periods. The term ‘difficult heritage’ was coined by Sharon Macdonald (2009: 1) to describe sites that are affiliated with contested and awkward pasts. Difficult heritage deals with sites that are ‘wretched, ruined, nauseating or painful’ (Samuels & Rico, 2015: 11) as they are usually places where individuals or a group of people met their death (Sharpley, 2009: 9). These places are concerned with unsettling histories which is difficult to represent, therefore difficult heritage could be referred to the practice of heritage - the ways in which these sites associated with violence or trauma were being preserved and memorialised - rather than the event or site itself (Samuels & Rico, 2015: 11).

Moreover, there has been a recent growing interest in visiting these sites of death and disaster, which John Lennon and Malcolm Foley (2006) labelled as ‘dark tourism’. It has become both diverse and widespread as a result of tourists being attracted to places and events associated with disaster, suffering and death (Sharpley, 2009: 5). Despite its popularity, dark tourism has been accused of commodifying and exploiting tragedy for political gain (Stone, 2009: 71). Moreover, dark touristic experiences have been criticised for ethical and moral reasons due to its voyeuristic nature. Nevertheless, all such sites require effective

and appropriate management, representation and promotion (Sharpley, 2009: 7). As death is being commodified and commercialised for touristic consumption, it is important to consider ethics in terms of development and management. In addition to the historical knowledge, dark tourist attractions must also demonstrate a degree of empathy between the sightseer and the past victims, which is a major challenge for all dark tourist sites (Miles, 2002: 1176). The commemoration of such sites may work to alienate a group of people based on their nationality, ethnicity and community, therefore sensitivity in its representation is an important consideration for heritage managers. Holocaust tourism can be considered to be the epitome of dark tourism (Stone, 2009: 58), as it represents one of the worst chapters in the history of the modern world and human history (Breitman, 1992: 208). Moreover, Holocaust tourism is considered highly controversial and inappropriate as the visits may be motivated by voyeurism and even enjoyment (Hodgkins, 2013: 24). Therefore, a great deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the representation and interpretation of Holocaust memorial sites in various disciplines (Sharpley, 2009: 11).

The mass murders and atrocities of the Holocaust were committed under the Nazi rule of Germany, therefore they took place beyond the borders of Germany including the puppet regimes which it controlled (Beech, 2009: 215). The camps within Germany itself were usually considered as ‘transit camps’ while the death camps were usually located in Nazi occupied Eastern European countries such as Poland (Beech, 2009: 215). Concentration camps have been used as a method to terrorise groups identified as the enemy, and the Nazis perfected the concept of concentration camps making it a murderous machine (Niven, 2002: 10). The Holocaust is hard to forget as it took place over a long period than any other genocides in human history (Beech, 2009: 215).

The largest and most famous of these death camps is Auschwitz, which has come to be the symbol of the Holocaust death camps (Hodgkins, 2013: 26). Lieberman, 2013: 130) states that it was more than a death camp, it was ‘a kind of macabre city comprised of an array of labour sites and main camp as well as an extermination centre at Birkenau’. Adding to this, Miles (2002: 1176) state that it is also a ‘mass graveyard without graves’. The Nuremberg laws were introduced in 1935 which removed all Jewish nationals from the community and they were no longer considered citizens as they became state subjects (Lieberman, 2013: 117). The Jews in the concentration camps in Germany was deported to camps in Poland such as Auschwitz where they imposed forced labour (Niven, 2002: 11). This unravelled the bigger plan of the Nazis to make Germany a ‘Jew-free’ nation and turn Poland into a Jewish reservation (Breitman, 1992: 202). However, in 1942, the phrase ‘Final Solution’ was used by the Nazi officials to avoid using words such as murder or extermination and the aim of the program was to completely eliminate the Jewish race from the Earth (Breitman, 1992: 198). As a result, almost one million Jews were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Moreover, during the Second World War, it extended to other victims where tens of thousand of Poles, Gypsies, Soviet prisoners of war and prisoners of many other nationalities were also murdered (Lieberman, 2013: 1). Rudolf Hös, the Commandant of Auschwitz opted to exterminate the millions of Jews and others using chemical Zyklon B (Lieberman, 2013: 131) which is commercially used as an insecticide. It was installed in the gas chambers in the concentration camps which demonstrates the inhumane ways that the Nazis used to kill.

The Polish Communist Government created Auschwitz State Museum in 1947 to commemorate the ‘martydom’ of the Polish nation and its resistance against fascists (Young, 2009: 51). For the first time in the early 1990s, groups of

people were able to visit the museum to mourn the loss of their friends and family (Young, 2009: 52). It later rebranded as Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial, in which the title reflected the importance of the camp complex as a whole (Young, 2009: 52) as it was both a forced labour and death camp. The fact that it was a ‘forced’ labour camp is reflected from the sign at the entrance gates which reads ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ which translates to ‘work sets you free’. The sign was made by the prisoners by an order from the SS, therefore they seized the opportunity to place a hidden message in the word ‘Arbeit’. The letter ‘B’ is placed upside down which symbolised the courage of the prisoners, and their will to survive and overcome fear (International Auschwitz Committee, n.d).



<http://jewishnews.com/2015/06/25/auschwitz-museum-theft-teen-boys-sentenced/>

Today, more than a million tourists visit the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps annually as a result of the increase in dark tourism. In 1979, the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camps were included in the World Heritage List, therefore its popularity increased even more. Moreover, it was no longer just a concern for Jews or Germans who were attempting to come to terms with the past, but for all of humanity (Maaz, 2018:

5). The visitors are able to take tours which includes seeing the red brick three storey barracks (Young, 2009: 53), the gas chambers, objects and personal belongings of the prisoners and even their pictures. Admission to the museum is free, and the visitors are advised to spend about three hours exploring the sites visiting both the camp and the site of mass extermination (Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, 2010).



<https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/poll-suggests-a-third-of-europeans-know-little-or-nothing-about-the-holocaust/>

The question arises again, ‘is it ethical to develop, promote or offer them for touristic consumption?’ (Sharpley, 2009: 8). Heritage places will invoke memories, and there may be some memories that are not necessarily good (Smith, 2006: 58) and may create tensions, such as the ones at Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps. Moreover, giving public recognition to the suffering endured by many might ignite social tensions (Macdonald, 2009: 6). However, not giving recognition could also be problematic in the eyes of the outside world. The tourist industry continues to exploit and commercialise these

dark sites by presenting narratives of national tragedies (Wight, 2009: 143), as a consequence of the rising popularity of dark tourism. Hodgkins (2013: 31) state that these sites have to accept their roles as popular tourist attractions, therefore, practical planning and management of these sites of atrocity must be done properly. Although tourism is an attractive source of income, sensitivity is required in the representation and management of these sites. This shows respect for the victims and their relatives, and furthermore ‘ensure that any reconciliation process is not hindered or diminished by the commercial exploitation of the sites’ (Beech, 2009: 212).



<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11835760/Tourists-horrified-by-showers-at-Auschwitz-entrance.html?fbclid=IwAR2v9hi2SzOPr0UhIkzYm9PDheZFvaSRUQsV8NsMpYaEvg-z-HRg8AVrywg>

It is evident that dark tourist sites are often commodified as a result of tourism. Site or museum managers are faced with the pressure of dealing with the consequences of increasing tourist numbers. One issue is the maintenance and representation of the buildings themselves. Young (2009: 50) observed how the camp buildings of Auschwitz-Birkenau is in need of desperate protection as its poor condition is being further accelerated after it became a tourist hot-spot. In recent years, site and museum managers have made controversial decisions in

order to meet tourist demands. For example, there was an incident when water mist sprays were installed in the summer months with the aim to cool off tourists and visitors. However, the mist sprinklers heavily resembled the Nazi gas chambers (Crilly, 2015). While some joked that the museum should not take authenticity so seriously, others were left truly horrified. This is one of the many examples of issues that could revolve around the importance of representation. Its context, history and emotions of visitors must be taken into consideration when making future developments in the name of improving the museum.

Furthermore, as a result of tourism, the authenticity of the sites may be challenged (Cole, 2007: 3). In the interpretation of sites such as Holocaust memorials, the history and the event of the sites could be altered or distorted if not represented properly to the visitors. As a result, they are distanced from their authenticity and their meanings (Sharpley & Stone, 2009: 112). Therefore, Sharpley & Stone, 2009: 112) emphasise on the importance of the interpretation of dark sites which should authenticate the events they represent. Moreover, they state that 'it is the link between an attraction and its visitors: without interpretation, a site remains meaningless to the visitor (2009: 113). Moreover, dark tourism enjoys a locational authenticity (Miles, 2002: 1176), therefore Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps remain highly relevant amongst dark tourists today.

Heritage sites offer the opportunity to rewrite the history in order to provide particular interpretation of past events (Sharpley, 2009). This is evident especially in dark tourist sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps. Smith (2006: 3) argues that it performing acts of remembrance and commemoration, it offers the chance to negotiate new ways of expressing or recreating identities. During the Holocaust, the individuals had no choice in how they were identified, it was up to the perpetrators. For instance, under the

Nuremberg laws, a Jew was defined as someone with three Jewish parents (Lieberman, 2013: 149). Therefore, today, it gives a chance for the victims and those who are related to the victims to express their own identities by challenging the received identities (Smith, 2006: 44).

In its representation, these sites must also work to accommodate increased visitor numbers whilst trying to meet demands of visitors (Hodgkins, 2013: 29). As mentioned before, heritage sites represent a sense of identity and belonging for particular individuals or groups (Smith, 2006: 77), therefore, heritage managers must be careful not to alienate any groups of people. Moreover, the emotions felt by the visitors must also be taken into consideration. Hodgkins (2013: 32) writes:

‘Visiting former concentration camps is a very personal and individual experience. It is not generally ethically appropriate to approach visitors at the site as it is difficult to ascertain what personal and emotional connection they may have to the events that happened there. Even for those with no personal connection, the events of the Holocaust resonate with all of us, and confronting this darker aspect of human nature can be a deeply upsetting and emotional experience. This makes research in this area challenging and subject to complex sensitivities.’

Therefore, potential visitors and their different motives must be analysed. Beech (2009: 212) suggests that there are three potential audiences who would visit these memorials; victims or relatives of victims; the perpetrators and the tourists. For some visitors, it might be motivated by a general interest in history, with a specific interest of the Nazi period. Moreover, for some visitors, it might be a mean through which they perform their own commitment to remembering the atrocities to avoid this bad chapter of human history being repeated

(Macdonald, 2009: 168-169). However, the tourists with no personal connection to the Holocaust or its victims may be seen as intruders in a national process of grieving, in their reconstruction of social identities (Beech, 2009: 212). However, it could be argued that this atrocity was felt globally, and everyone across the world wants to take part in the grieving, by visiting these memorial sites. Either way, the visitor experience must be understood in light of the experiential approach between the individual and death on display (Biran et al, 2011: 837). This approach will acknowledge the visitor's emotions, furthermore, helping the visitors help interpret the history associated with the site and event better.

In addition to being exploited and commodified, these sites of atrocities are also used to convey political messages (Sharpley, 2009: 146). The Holocaust itself can be considered a political movement, as it reflected Hitler's political thinking through his hatred for the Jews (Lieberman, 2013: 114). Moreover, prisoners of the Second World War from many countries, or whoever was identified as 'the enemy' were exterminated along with the millions of Jews, further reflecting political tensions of the time. The political context in which they are placed is reflected in the interpretation of Holocaust memorials (Sharpley, 2009: 55). The memorial of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp is such an example. For instance, during the era of the Polish Communist Government, it was named 'Auschwitz State Museum', however, it was later renamed 'Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial' which demonstrated political correctness as it acknowledged the diversity of the whole complex, and not just the suffering of the Polish people (Maaz, 2018: 6). Furthermore, Lowenthal (1998: 20) notes how Poland restored Nazi-related monuments felt to be a crucial part of Polish national identity, but it has changed today as they are now concerned with the thoughts and memories associated with these buildings. It is evident that these sites exploited for a particular interpretation or political purpose were now promoting ideas of peace and reconciliation (Beech, 2009:

212). It must be the responsibility of the site managers and also the governments to address the interest of all the groups associated with the site and also the event, especially when representing places of political ideologies, history and public policy together (Sharpley, 2009: 162).

In conclusion, it is evident that a number of issues arise in the representation and interpretation of a heritage site. Dark tourist sites are even more complex in its representation and interpretation for a number of issues. Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp was analysed to explore such issues. The unsettling history and atrocities of the Holocaust is heavily reflected in the buildings at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Although all heritage places is uncomfortable to someone (Smith, 2006: 81), the Holocaust memorials reflect atrocities that are uncomfortable to everyone, thus being labelled as one of the worst chapters in human history. Moreover, heritage sites create national identities and a sense of belonging, thus providing opportunities to construct and reconstruct identities. Therefore, heritage can be understood as a cultural process which creates ways to understand and engage with the present (Smith, 2006: 44).

In recent years, heritage tourism has been getting increasingly popular, especially dark tourism. Dark tourism refers to the growing interest in tourists visiting sites of human suffering, disaster and death. As a consequence of increased tourist interest in these sites, they are being exploited and commodified to meet the demands of tourists. As a result, issues of authenticity and morality are raised. Some scholars have questioned the ethical morals of commercialising places such as Auschwitz-Birkenau for touristic purposes due to its voyeuristic nature. Undoubtedly, with the increased amount of tourists visiting the site every year, it is left in poor conditions in dire need of proper management. Moreover, authenticity and accuracy is necessary in dark tourist sites in order to honour those who suffered, and their loved ones (Young, 2009: 63). While different visitors may have different motives for visiting Auschwitz-

Birkenau, be it for historical and general knowledge, commemorating the loss of loved ones, or merely as a tourist, the representation and interpretation of the site must remain authentic. Moreover, if it were to be made attractive to diverse audiences, the interpretation of the tourist perceptions must be acknowledged, as museums have now accepted these sites as tourist hot-spots. Although they are still managed as heritage sites and emphasise the educational experience (Biran et al, 2011: 838), emotional involvement must also be taken into consideration. Therefore, it is evident that new issues arise in heritage management, especially in their representation and interpretation as past meanings are challenged and renegotiated in the present every day. Thus, all the issues mentioned above must be acknowledged with moral and ethical considerations.

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