

Using an example of your choice, discuss the issues that arise in the presentation of a site or collection which could be termed 'difficult heritage.'

This essay will discuss the potential issues that may emerge when presenting a heritage site that may be perceived as difficult heritage. This essay will focus on the Auschwitz concentration camp as an example to examine and analyse such potential issues. I will explain what difficult heritage is, why it is important, reflect upon the questions and concerns that arise when displaying this kind of heritage, and what that means for the site's visitors. By the end of the 20th century and the start of the 21st, reminders of the past started to appear; these included memorials, museums, plaques, and bulletin boards informing the reader of the location's history. The decline of stately homes, largely due to inheritance taxes and the death of male heirs during World War One, resulted in these country estates being purchased or bequeathed to conservation organisations and charities, such as the National Trust, Cadw, and Historic Houses. These places became sites of heritage preserved as they were in the 19th and 20th centuries for future generations.

Difficult heritage is a history that is acknowledged as significant in the present; however, it is also disputed and uncomfortable for public reconciliation with a constructive, self-affirming modern identity.¹

The term 'difficult heritage' was first coined in 2009 by Sharon Macdonald in her book 'Difficult Heritage'. She states that:

'A past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity.'²

By examining heritage that is disturbing and uncomfortable instead of heritage that can be commemorated or, at the minimum, easily recognised as part of a country's valued past, my goal is to examine a range of issues regarding its public representation and reception. Museums and heritage locations have developed into key elements of 'image management' and 'place marketing', and cultural tourism has

¹ Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond*, (London: Routledge, 2009), p.1.

² Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage* (2009)

greatly increased, frequently bringing tourists from around the world to locations that are able to claim sites of great heritage importance.³

Auschwitz was the foremost and the most infamous of the six concentration and extermination camps created by the Nazis to execute their final solution policy to exterminate the Jewish population in Europe. The camp was constructed in Poland under the Nazi occupation originally as a concentration camp for the Polish and afterwards for prisoners of war from the Soviet Union and it shortly became a prison for different nationalities. Between 1942 and 1944, the camp became the principal mass death camp where Jewish people were abused and murdered due to their race. In addition to the mass slaughter of more than one million Jewish people, including children and tens of thousands of Polish casualties, Auschwitz, it functioned as a camp for the genocide of thousands of the Romani people and as a prison for other European nationalities.⁴

Auschwitz-Birkenau was the biggest concentration camp complex that the Nazis constructed and was the camp that integrated extermination with forced labour. The camps complex consisted of 115 brick and wooden buildings, 57 of them in Auschwitz and 98 in Birkenau, and around 300 ruins. Additionally, in Birkenau, there are ruins of the gas chambers and the crematorium, which were exploded in January 1945. At the core of a vast landscape of human enslavement and anguish, the remnants of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau, along with its Protective Zone, were added to the World Heritage List in 1975 as an exhibit of this barbaric and inhumane systematic endeavour to refuse human dignity to sectors of society that they deemed inferior, resulting in their methodical massacre. The camps are graphic evidence of the homicidal nature of the racist and anti-semitic Nazi policy that caused the extermination of over 1.2 million human beings in the crematorium; Jewish people accounted for 90% of them.⁵

³ Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage* (2009)

⁴ Unesco, *World Heritage Convention* (2024) <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31/#:~:text=At%20the%20centre%20of%20a,considered%20inferior%2C%20leading%20to%20the%20ir>> [accessed 23rd February 2024]

⁵ Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, *Auschwitz* (2024) <<https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/unesco/#:~:text=At%20the%20centre%20of%20a,human%20dignity%20to%20groups%20considered>> [accessed 23rd February 2024]

The remnants of barracks, fortified walls, gas chambers, barbed wire, railway sidings, and the crematorium distinctly display how the Holocaust and Nazi policy of mass homicide and forced labour took place.

The collections on display at the Auschwitz museum preserve the evidence of the people whose murder was premeditated, in addition to exhibiting the systematic mechanism by which this was conducted.



Victims of Auschwitz / source: news.bbc.co.uk

The personal belongings are a testament to the victims' lives prior to being forced into the extermination camps. Within the exhibition, there are many displays to show the enormity of the belongings taken from the victims, ranging from glasses, hair, and teeth to clothing and belongings. Everyone who entered Auschwitz took their prized possessions, from cooking equipment to religious items, as they thought they were moving to a new life. Today, these are on display.



A large pile of victim's Shoes.
www.auschwitz.org.



A Large pile of victim's clothes.
www.auschwitz.org.



Confiscated suitcases

Victims Suitcases
www.auschwitz.org.

On display is a section piled high with shoes belonging to both adults and children, another with clothes, and a mass of the victim's suitcases. These may be distressing to some visitors, particularly if a visitor recognises a name or address on a suitcase.

The camp and its surrounding area possess a great degree of authenticity and integrity, as the original evidence has been painstakingly conserved with the absence of any unneeded restoration.

An issue that arises during the presenting of a site that has a dark and morbid past is the question: is this ethical and acceptable? The thriving mainstream pursuit of exploring sites of devastation and death commonly trades regard to memory for financial gain. In 1920, Austrian writer Karl Kraus published an article, 'Tourist Trip to Hell', following reading an advertisement in a Swiss newspaper for 'Battlefield excursion: trips by car' that assured a luxurious tour of World War One battlefields in northern France. The First World War had only just ended two years ago, and feelings were raw. Returning soldiers had to come to terms with permanent bodily damage, whilst the families of those who never returned were experiencing deep grief. Kraus declared:

'I have in my hands a document that surpasses and seals the shame of this age and would warrant assigning a place of honour in a cosmic boneyard to this money-hungry mess that calls itself mankind.'⁶

Kraus believed that by commercialising sites of mass murder as an enjoyable family day out, the lives and sacrifices of those who perished were being desecrated. Kraus makes the following observation: 'The passage of time enables trauma to turn into history, then into,

⁶ Darran Anderson, 'Dark tourism: questioning how we memorialise tragedy', *The Architectural Review*, (2020) <<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/dark-tourism-questioning-how-we-memorialise-tragedy>> [accessed 25th February 2024]

sometimes profitable, heritage.'⁷ In the past few years, tourism to 'difficult heritage' locations has increased and flourished; this has created many issues, specifically the staggering amount of visitors, their requirements, and, notably, how they conduct themselves.

How visitors behave whilst visiting difficult heritage sites is one of the biggest issues they face. It is a commonplace occurrence for Holocaust memorial sites; in 2019, the Auschwitz Museum released a statement via Twitter due to the rise in the amount of disrespectful and undesirable posts of smiling selfies and inappropriate behaviour at a site where the train tracks that brought innumerable people to their murder. Their post stated:

'When you come to @AuschwitzMuseum, remember you are at the site where over 1 million people were killed. Respect their memory. There are better places to learn how to walk on a balance beam than the site which symbolises deportation of hundreds of thousands to their death.'⁸



A photo of a woman posing at Auschwitz has gone viral. Picture: Twitter/Maria Murphy



Three youngsters performing a salute at Auschwitz, October 2018 (via Instagram)
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/polish-teens-probed-over-photo-of-nazi-salute-at-auschwitz/>

In the majority of cases, the flippant, self-absorbed and diminishing nature of social media reinforces the more inconsiderate actions of human beings.

An essential issue is whether these sites of historical importance and events can be respectfully remembered. The Architectural Review uses the example of tourism regarding Jack the Ripper in London. The unresolved killings in the East End of London linger in the collective culture, powering its tourist incarnation. Jack the Ripper is frequently regarded as a Victorian fictitious figure, similar to Sherlock Holmes's

⁷ Anderson, 'Dark tourism: questioning how we memorialise tragedy' (2020)

⁸ Auschwitz Museum, 'Respect their memory' [Twitter], <<https://twitter.com/AuschwitzMuseum/status/1108337507660451841?lang=en>> 20 March 2019 [accessed 26th February 2024]

character Moriarty, and not a deranged killer of endangered poor women of the 1800s.⁹ The most crucial issue is the avoidance of exploiting these places and events for financial gain.

A crucial issue when presenting a site is authenticity. In Auschwitz, one of the most notable attributes of the site is the 'Arbeit Macht Frei' gate, which visitors first come across on their tour. It 'stands as a potent symbol of the suffering millions endured at the camp.'¹⁰



Auschwitz famous gates www.szymonkaczmarczyk.pl.

In 2009, Poland's Prime Minister stated, 'The sign is of profound historical significance both for the Jewish people and the entire world'¹¹; this was as a response following the sign being stolen. Nevertheless, the position and prominence of the gate are controversial on various grounds. The gates were relocated during the war, and they do not depict the true boundary lines of the camp as is assumed by many. As one walks through the gates, they are, in reality, already quite far within the camp's boundaries. The camp's tour route, including the exhibit of the gates, implies that the Auschwitz camp is the beginning of the Holocaust story, although most of the prisoners were taken straight to Birkenau, their stories being blatantly different from prisoners in Auschwitz. Between 1942 and 1944, the initial influential experience that the Auschwitz prisoners had with the camp was initiation and processing

⁹ Anderson, 'Dark tourism: questioning how we memorialise tragedy' (2020)

¹⁰ Kate Connolly, The Guardian (2009) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/dec/18/auschwitz-arbeit-macht-frei-sign>> [accessed 28th February 2024]

¹¹ Connolly, (2009)

in the prisoner reception centre, not passing through the 'Arbeit Macht Frei' gate.¹²

An issue that has arisen for Auschwitz is whether Auschwitz's history after the end of World War Two should be exhibited. In 1947, the Polish Communist Government established the Auschwitz State Museum. The legislation that authorised the creation of the museum asserted that the camp would principally celebrate and memorialise the 'martyrdom' of the Polish country and its citizens. Its directive was that it would be a blunt reminder of the intrinsic perils of fascism and a consoling reminder of the 'freeing' occupancy of the Soviet Union. In formulating its exhibitions, the museum integrated and obscured the history of the two camps, allowing Auschwitz to adopt the identity of Birkenau as a site of complete annihilation. While numerous Polish people were killed in the camps, this actuality was overstated by rhetoric and ill-conceived research, such as the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission's death toll of four million people. In the Auschwitz State Museum, the stories of numerous communities incarcerated and murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau, particularly the Jewish people, were either not exhibited or disregarded. The state museum did not completely disregard the slaughter of the Jewish people at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but their suffering was not viewed as distinctive, their outcome being identical to the Polish prisoners. Therefore, the presentations were vehemently nationalistic, were restricted in scope, and restrained the history of the Holocaust.¹³

As the Cold War ended during the late 1980s, the museum was investigated, and a working group was created to examine the future of the site in 1989. It was determined that the site would continue to be a state institution under the charge of the Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage. The site was renamed the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial, reflecting the significance of the site as a whole. Throughout the early 1990s, numerous global visitors and stakeholders came together at Auschwitz. For a lot of communities, it was the first time they were able to visit the camps to grieve their loved ones. They came to discover that the sites were a far cry from the accounts that they had been taught and, for the survivors, far from the nightmare that they had endured. One of the initial attempts to revise the Cold War rhetoric at the site was to correct the inaccurate death toll exhibited to

¹² Katie Young, 'Auschwitz-Birkenau: The challenges of heritage management following the Cold War', in *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'*, ed. By William Logan and Keir Reeves (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), pp. 50-67 (p.55)

¹³ Young, 2009

visitors. Conceived by the Soviet state, the statistics were significantly different from international statistics. It was estimated that '1 to 1.4 million fatalities; with 960,000 Jews, 70-75,000 Poles, 21,000 Gypsies, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and 10,000-15,000 other nationalities.'¹⁴

A considerable issue is the respect for these sites when implementing tourist facilities. The prisoner reception centre portrays a vital means to comprehending the camp's past; nevertheless, its purpose has never been completely exhibited and interpreted. In addition, it supplies context to the gates. Restricted by insufficient funds, the Auschwitz State Museum, controlled by the Soviet Union, renovated the building to accommodate administration offices and tourist reception facilities, an arrangement that continues today. Debórah Dwork and Robert Van Pelt propose that the renovation of this building ideologically suited the Auschwitz State Museum and aided the museum to centre its presentation on Polish suffering and resistance attempts. For countless prisoners, the process of initiation of tattooing, head shaving and losing their personal possessions was distressing and traumatic; it distinguished their optimism and strength. If this experience had been displayed in the reception centre, it would have taken away from the resistance theme exhibited throughout the site. The continuing exclusion of the centre from the museum's guided tour denies a thorough and extensive exploration of the experience for tourists.¹⁵

The building is often overcrowded as a visitor reception centre as tourists buy tour passes, take refreshments and use the restrooms. The building has 'silently become the place of Auschwitz land's tourist initiation'¹⁶ Its past repressed, the building today shields tourists from their prompt tour of the camps. In addition to accommodating national pavilion exhibitions, other Auschwitz buildings also house archives, memorials, and conservation workstations. The Auschwitz Museum's insistence for workable areas has exceeded the consideration of the camp's preservation, in doing so affecting the site's authenticity and long-lasting preservation. This issue persists, with the potentially favourable news that the museum's proposals to amend and redevelop

¹⁴ Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: from Auschwitz to Schindler: How history is bought, packaged and sold*, (New York: Routledge, 1999)

¹⁵ Debórah Dwork and Robert Van Pelt, *Auschwitz, 1270 to the present*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996)

¹⁶ Cole, 1999

its exhibitions being complicated by its plans to utilise the site's barracks instead of a new purpose-built building to accommodate the exhibition.¹⁷

An issue that the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum faces is the protection of the site from not only time but also from visitors. Most of Birkenau's architecture was demolished by Nazis when they abandoned the camp in 1945, followed by the Soviets when they liberated the camp. The Auschwitz State Museum's ideological indifference to Birkenau saved it from restructuring and refurbishments that took place at Auschwitz. While the lack of interference has meant that Birkenau appears more authentic, there are numerous preservation difficulties at the camp, such as the camp's barbed wire and concrete fence posts are decaying and it is a substantial job to preserve the remains. The vastness of Birkenau's remains and fields astounds visitors. Exploring the camp alone can be an intense experience when looking beyond the crowds. Birkenau has a lack of barriers and attendants. This arrangement, though beneficial for the visitors, introduces a serious threat to the preservation and authenticity of Birkenau. For example, when a journalist was touring the site, he was informed by the museum representative that the bumpy ground was not made of stones but bones and other human remains.¹⁸ Some visitors take things and infrastructure from the site, so correcting this issue is the most crucial matter.¹⁹

To conclude, these sites are both historically and morally important as millions of individuals suffered and were persecuted because of some evil people who thought they had the right to do unimaginable things for their own agenda. Santayana once said, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'²⁰ Therefore, it is imperative that we never forget; hopefully, if we remember, we will not let it happen again.

These sites are essential for generations today and for the future to be able to show respect and increase one's understanding. Although all visitors must show respect and sensitivity as these are places where horrendous crimes have been committed and are the last resting places of their victims.

¹⁷ Young, 2009

¹⁸ Chris Johnson, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2007) <<https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/fight-against-time-to-preserve-auschwitz-20070131-gd9b.html>> [accessed 2 March 2024]

¹⁹ Young, 2009

²⁰ George Santayana, *The life of Reason Vol. 1: Reason in Common Sense* (London: London Constable, 1905)

Auschwitz is presented well and sympathetically tells the story of an important but hard and emotional time in history. It is a surreal place where no birds or wildlife are present; there is no sound, just an eerie silence. One can feel the torture and loss as one proceeds around the site. It is a feeling that one will never forget.

Reference Page

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