

Difficult Heritage

Museums, Heritage & Representation



<http://www.documentarytube.com/articles/secrets-of-auschwitz-what-you-don-t-know-about-the-infamous-death-camp>

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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’

Heritage can be considered as a performance that ‘embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place, belonging and understanding in the present’ (Smith, 2006: 3). It is also an important tool which represents the social standing and the identity of communities, reflecting set values or principles which relate to the past (Harrison, 2010: 3). Heritage places therefore, harbour memories and give a sense of belonging that serve to maintain a group’s sense of connection with its root in the past (Logan & Reeves, 2009: 2). Smith, moreover describes a place as ‘more than a thing’ as she suggests that it is also an event and has a ‘particular meaning because of the place of its doing (2006: 77). However, not all heritage places exhibit a positive nature. Some places are considered to be negative heritage places or ‘dark sites’ which is by definition, ‘places where individuals or numbers of people met their death’ (Sharpley, 2009: 9). Moreover, Smith (2006: 81) argues that all heritage is uncomfortable to someone, ‘as it has a particular power to legitimise someone’s sense of place and thus their social and cultural experiences and memories’. Like most heritage sites, these sites of atrocity are becoming popular as tourist sites, consequently increasing atrocity or dark tourism (Ashworth & Hartmann, 2005). Therefore, like all heritage sites, there is the need to manage such places of atrocity appropriately (Sharpley, 2009: 9). For the purpose of this essay, the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp will be used as an example of a dark or difficult heritage site. It will aim to discuss the issues relevant in its presentation, interpretation, management and development.

The term ‘difficult heritage’ was coined by Sharon Macdonald (2009: 1) describing it as the heritage concerned with dealing with the ‘contested and awkward’ past. Tunbridge and Ashworth’s introduced the term ‘dissonant heritage’ to academia, and it has recently become a hot topic as a consequence of ‘the need to come to terms with remains of the past that can be actively uncomfortable, embarrassing, traumatic and contested’ (Kisić, 2016: 52). Difficult heritage also describes ‘the ways in which sites, time periods or events

associated with violence and trauma are being preserved and memorialised' (Samuels & Rico, 2015: 111). 'Dark tourism' was then coined by John Lennon and Malcom Foley in 2000 to describe the 'growing interest of the tourists in visiting sites of death and disaster' (Hodgkinson, 2013: 24). There are various reasons why people visit dark sites; being attracted to places associated with disaster, death or suffering (Sharpley, 2009: 5); a general interest in history (Macdonald, 2009: 168); or being related to the victims who suffered the atrocities. On account of the atrocity tourism boosting as a result of increasing visits, these sites require affective and appropriate management and presentation. Unquestionably, heritage managers are faced with several issues in dealing with such sites, especially when they become tourist attractions. Ashworth (2008: 231) asks why past human violence with the resulting consequences in human trauma and suffering should be deliberately selected for memorialisation. Giving public recognition to suffering endured by minorities would undoubtedly result in igniting social tensions (Macdonald, 2009: 6), however, not giving recognition would also be problematic especially because of the growing interest in dark tourism. Dark tourism is often accused of 'trivialising death and exploiting tragedy for political gain' with dark touristic experiences being 'dismissed as unethical and voyeuristic (Stone, 2009: 71). Sharpley (2009: 8) raised the question: Is it ethical to develop, promote or offer them for touristic consumption? He states that the 'rights of those whose death is commodified or commercialised through dark tourism represent an important ethical dimension deserving consideration' (2009: 8). The interpretation of dark sites, therefore, should authenticate the events they commemorate which would acknowledge the emotions of visitors to these sites, simultaneously maintaining the dignity of those people that are being commemorated (Sharpley & Stone, 2009: 115).

Most societies have scars of history resulting from involvement in war and civil unrest based on intolerance based on intolerance, racial discrimination or ethnic hostilities (Logan & Reeves, 2009: 1). The Holocaust can be considered as the epitome of dark tourism (Stone, 2009: 58) and probably the worst chapter in the history of the modern world, and worst in all human history (Breitman, 1992: 208). The atrocities of the Holocaust that took place was not just limited to the borders within Germany, but also in the occupied puppet nations (Beech, 2009: 215). Whilst the camps within Germany were usually used as transit camps, the

death camps were clustered around the east, often in countries occupied by the Nazis (Beech, 2009: 215) such as Poland. One reason for the recent increase in the literature on the Holocaust, grew as a result of Holocaust deniers such as Neo-Nazis, Nazi apologists, and anti-Semites denying the systematic murder of Jews (Breitman, 1992: 197). With the growing literature, and an increasing world wide interest in the history of the Holocaust and its atrocities, Holocaust tourism could easily be considered as having the largest number of visitors to any genocide sites that took place. As a result, this is no longer just a concern for Jews or Germans who are attempting to come to terms with the past (Breitman, 1992: 197), but for humanity in general. This has impelled heritage managers to collect and preserve the original documents and artefacts to carefully present the findings (Breitman, 1992: 197). Stone (2009: 58) however, suggests that the representation of the Holocaust is often accused of being trivialised or merchandised through the touristic consumptions, thus raising questions about the 'morality of both producing and consuming the Holocaust at various sites' especially the 'Auschwitz-land' at the former Nazi concentration camp in Poland.

Auschwitz can be considered as the site symbolising the Holocaust 'death camps' situated within the Polish town of Oswiecim (Hodgkinson, 2013: 26; Young, 2009: 50). Lieberman, 2013: 130) describes it as more than just a death camp: 'it was a kind of macabre city compromised of an array of labour sites and main camp as well as an extermination center at Birkenau'. What proves the lasting notoriety of Auschwitz is the fact that it was both a killing center and a labour camp complex (Lieberman, 2013: 130). Concentration camps has been a method of terrorising groups, but it was the Nazis who institutionalised and perfected the concentration camp system, making it a murderous machine (Niven, 2002: 10). After the Nuremberg law was introduced in 1935 to remove Jews from national and racial communities, or rather, eliminate the entire Jewish race from the Earth, the mass murder of over a million Jews took place in Auschwitz-Birkenau along with thousands of other victims including Poles, Gypsies, Soviet prisoners of war, and prisoners of various nationalities (Niven, 2002; Liberman, 2013; Young, 2009, Brietman, 1992). To refer to the extermination of Jews, the phrase 'The Final Solution' was used by the Nazis, and Breitman (1992: 198) suggests that this allowed the Nazi officials to 'avoid dirtying their lips with words like mass murder of extermination'. Moreover,

Brietman (1992: 197) also suggests that although books and various media transmit information about Nazi mass murders in an attempt to reduce the tendency to disbelieve, they do not do justice to the atrocities that took place as they were 'so far removed from what we think of as normal human behaviour'. For instance, unlike other death camps, Auschwitz-Birkenau was precise in the killing agent, as Rudolf Hös, the Commandant responsible opted for Zyklon B which is a pesticide to carry on the exterminations. Therefore, Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camps can be considered as the very core of the Nazi Party's Final Solution policy (Young, 2009: 50).

In 1947, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was created by the Polish Communist government, and this site was used to glorify the Poles' partydom and resistance against fascists (Young, 2009: 51). Later on, it was rebranded as the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial, and the new title reflected the importance of the campus complex as a whole (Young, 2009: 52) as it included both death and extermination camps as well as forced labour camps. Its use as a forced labour camp is reflected from the sign at the entrance gates to the complex 'Arbeit Macht Frei' which translates to 'work will set you free'. The memorial plaques were written in nineteen languages which recognised the diversity of the victims of the camps (Young, 2009: 52). The early 1990s marked the time where many communities had their first opportunity to visit the camps to mourn and remember their lost loved ones who suffered the atrocities of the camp. Today, it is visited by millions of people every year with the rise of atrocity tourism. After the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camps were included in the World Heritage List in 1979, 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. The western civilisation was primarily concerned as the Nazi policies of mass murder rejected the western moral standards (Breitman, 1992: 197).

With the growing interest in Holocaust history, the memorial sites started becoming commodified which raises several issues. For instance, Sharpley & Stone, 2009: 116) state that with the consumption of dark tourism sites or attractions, it may be driven by the need to contextualise it within the individual tourists' own world, and therefore, it might no longer be just to commemorate the suffering of the people. Presenting narratives of national tragedies to suit

tourists is a way in which the tourism industry is exploiting and commercialising the 'unique' for the distinguished customer (Wight, 2009: 143). Moreover, the motives of those visiting the sites would be different, therefore, as a commodified site, it has to be modified to meet demands of the visitor and their different motives (Hodgkinson, 2013: 31). Although tourism is an attractive source of income, sensitivity is required in the management and presentation of these sites 'both out of respect for the victims and their relatives and to ensure that any reconciliation process is not hindered or diminished by the commercial exploitation of these sites' (Beech, 2009: 212). The camp buildings of Auschwitz-Birkenau is in need of desperate protection as deterioration is further accelerated by the endless stream of visitors (Young, 2009: 50). Consequently, heritage managers are then faced with this issue as they have to balance the needs that these sites are places of remembrance, as well as a place that is transparent and open to everyone (Hodgkinson, 2013: 31).

Smith (2006: 44) states that whilst heritage can be understood as a tool in defining one's identity or a sense of belonging, it could also be used as an important resource to challenge the received identity and social values. It could be used to construct, reconstruct and negotiate a range of identities (Smith, 2006: 3). Dark tourism sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau offer the opportunity to rewrite or rewrite the history or to provide particular interpretations of past events (Sharpley, 2009). Heritage always works to disinherit, divide and articulate differences with 'other groups' (Kisić, 2016: 49) therefore, it cannot be considered that identity is shared or universal. Wight (2009: 143) for instance, argues that post modernity has no place for such a thing as a universal truth, and 'the moral panic that comes with the production and consumption of dark heritage only adds to the appeal of these sites as visitor attractions'. Therefore, even within a single society, pasts, heritages and identities should be considered as plurals (Graham & Howard, 2008: 1). Concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau have become a dominant symbol around which guilt and identity cohere in the national imagination of the post-war German state, therefore, the post Holocaust memory formations remain a critical issue (Linke, 2002: 232).

In conclusion, it is evident that a number of issues arise in the presentation of a site that is termed difficult heritage. After analysing the issues and case studies written by different scholars, it could be said that the term ‘difficult heritage’ refers to the practice rather than the site or event itself (Samuels & Rico, 2015: 113). For instance, Holocaust tourism can be considered highly controversial as the sites are commodified, moreover the visitors have different motivations and it is impossible to meet the demands of every individual. Moreover, the issue of identity, authenticity and political agendas were also analysed as issues that arise in the presentation of such a site. Therefore, it is a challenge faced by heritage managers to balance the issues in presentation.

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