

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' - Gwenllian Anthony 1404702

What issues arise in the presentation of 'difficult heritage' sites and collections, such as those linked to Nazi Germany and the holocaust? This essay will be delving into the moral dilemmas that emerge when sites of significant events, tragedy and death are commercialised and marketed as tourist sites.

The tourism and global travel sector is a steadily growing market that contributes trillions of dollars towards the global economy yearly, as well as moving over 1.2 billion people every year (World Bank Group, 2020). In 2024, travel and tourism's total contribution was 11 trillion U.S dollars, making up a 10 percent share of the total global GDP (Statista, 2025). Within this sector, there is a growing percentage of tourists that have their eyes set on an emerging market: tourism to places of atrocity, disaster and death (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

Difficult heritage, dark tourism or thanatourism is a surging subcategory of cultural tourism, which the Institute for Dark Tourism Research (2015) defines as "the act of travel to sites, attractions and exhibitions of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre". These include sites such as battlefields, prisons, the Chernobyl exclusion zone and Nazi concentration camps. One of the main elements of difficult heritage destinations is that they allow the public to be within a close proximity of historical sites which often initiates a process of self reflection, at times existential (Stone and Sharpley, 2008). The visitation of sites that are associated with a macabre history has been a part of human history for centuries, with the battles of gladiatorial Rome attracting crowds from across Europe, the medieval European pilgrimages to Christian relics of death sites and tourists visiting the Parisian morgues in the nineteenth century (Wills, M. 2020). The study of dark tourism within academia only became popular in the early twenty-first century and it reflected the surge of interest in sites of disaster and death among post-modern societies. The conversation was started by the sociologist Chris Rojek, who in 1993 coined the term 'black spots' which he reports as 'the commercial developments of grave sites and sites in which celebrities or large numbers of people have met with sudden and violent death' (Hartmann, R. et al. 2018). Rojek suggested that the obsession with the morbid was 'widely shared' and was propelled by the blurring of reality by post-modernists, where death becomes neutralised, mediated and rendered less threatening (Durkin, 2003). This essentially closes the gap between the real and its representations, commodifies tragedy and turns disaster into a consumable experience. In a subsequent monograph, John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, who introduced the term 'dark tourism' also reports on the surge of popularity for difficult heritage sites as 'an intimation of post-modernity', but as a reflection of the increasing anxieties around scientific, political and industrial progress, using dark tourism sites to help visualise the dangerous consequences of new technologies and ideologies (Hartmann, R. Et al. 2018). Anthony Seaton, who created the term 'thanatourism', suggests that the rumination of death is usual in all cultures, but it has become more noticeable now that modern society has successfully concealed death and has made it taboo, therefore suggesting that the rise in dark tourism is led by the human fascination with the unknown and the forbidden (Hartmann, R. Et al. 2018). The rise of visits to dark tourism sites also reflects the increased understanding of the international community to the importance of such events for national identities, the direction of their history, as well as the nations themselves

(Liyanage, S. Et al. 2015). Having a body of history as well as its material traces are an integral part of 'having an identity'. Identifying a long and distinctive history, and supporting it through material culture has become the presiding mode of identity performance and improves legitimacy (Macdonald, 2009).

Cultural tourism, which includes sites that are deemed 'difficult heritage' sites, represents 40% of overall tourism in Europe (McKercher and du Cros, H. 2002), with World War II concentration camps being an important element of European dark tourism (Liyanage, S. Et al. 2015). After the initial debate around the necessity of preserving and curating Nazi concentration camps, the European Union introduced legislation in 1993 to fund the conservation of these camps (EUR-LEX, 2004), although the ethicality is still debated amongst scholars. Lynn Meskell (2002) states that touring Nazi buildings may provide the most effective strategy of emotional and economic adjustment so that tourism may represent the ultimate past memory, especially for Germany as it still struggles with the choice of cleansing the Nazi past or mobilising it as a didactic way to learn from past mistakes. As the Nazi past is still relatively recent, it is understandable that the debate around whether it is ethical to make these sites available to the public is still very much at the forefront as it affects living survivors and their families. Ignoring, silencing and destroying past monuments and histories may not always be an option, especially when the events are still being felt within the local communities and internationally. This is clear with regards to 'memorial entrepreneurs' that focus on public remembrance because of the fear of forgetting the past and the possibility of the events recurring in the future (Macdonald, S. 2009).

What are the ethical concerns with making Nazi concentration camps available for public visitation? With Auschwitz-Birkenau welcoming 2,600,000 visitors to the site in 2019, it is clearly become a major tourist destination for national and international visitors (Panstwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2025) due to it being one of the main sites associated with the holocaust. Many scholars have written about their concerns with the desensitisation of such sites of tragedy. These issues arise the questions about what are the right and wrong sides of visiting places that are tied to the moral implications of turning such sites into tourist attractions (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Lennon and Foley examined the socio-cultural aspects of the behaviour of tourists in dark heritage sites and discovered that the ethical dimension of tourist conduct is dominant, with multiple inappropriate actions by tourists within the space. This included insensitive conversations and disrespectful photography, which can endanger the sanctity of these difficult heritage sites. It is also important to discuss recent online trends such as the 'holocaust trend' on the social media platform, TikTok. The trend encouraged visitors to share clips of themselves with fake bruises and wearing clothes that Jews were ordered to wear by the Nazis. The videos shared were not commemorating any of the victims but solely created to become a part of online trends and to go viral (No Author, 2020). This behaviour suggests a desensitisation and an emotional detachment from the horrors that occurred at sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and it highlights the importance of responsible management and respectful visitor engagement to maintaining the dignity of these difficult heritage sites (Udas, B and Gurung, T.M. 2024). There are multiple theories on why this may be, one of them being a lack of reflective time whilst visiting. Thurnell-Read (2009) reports on the value of guided tours around concentration camps. Although he admits that guided tours are important and can help with gaining knowledge about the space and the events that occurred, he explains that his research showed that young tourists felt that the tours did not allow them the space to process the information they were fed. Reflective thinking enables learning and space is needed for that to take place. According to Phuong Phan (2008), there are four stages of reflective thinking: habitual

action, understanding, reflection and critical reflection. The habitual actions refer to actions that are done without thinking and are habitual. Understanding represents reading and learning without relating it to another situation. The stage of reflection represents the reflection of assumptions and beliefs. Finally, critical reflection is a later stage of reflection where analysis helps visitors think about why we feel and perceive things in a certain way. When relating these steps to dark tourism and the visitation of concentration camps, it can be said that these four stages allow visitors to understand what a concentration camp is and what occurred there, whilst visiting and the stages of reflection post-visit (Liyanage, S. Et al. 2015). The speed that tour guides and visitors are made to travel around the site may be reflective of another issue raised with regards to the ethicality of holocaust tourism, which is the commercialisation of sites of tragedy and the excessive risk of transforming human pain and suffering into a form of entertainment for visitors and cashflow for the business.

The ethical dilemma around dark tourism sites always revolves around the incredibly delicate balance between the educational value of such sites and the preservation of the memory and dignity of victims. The argument some scholars put forward is the ethicality of earning money from tragedy and death, which is disrespectful towards the victims and their families (Udas, B. And Gurung, T.M. 2024). Although Auschwitz-Birkenau doesn't charge an entry fee to visit the site, there is an extra cost for parking, refreshments, guided tours and to buy items at the souvenir shop. The revenue is put into the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation and is used to carry out conservation works such as the upkeep of brick and wooden barracks and the on-going conservation of museum artefacts and archival materials (Auschwitz-Birkenau. 2025). Although the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation is set up to not make profit from the tragedy and suffering of the holocaust victims, there are plenty of other touring and holiday companies and local businesses actively making a profit from the visitation of the concentration camp. It's possible to book Auschwitz-Birkenau day trips and package holidays from multiple different sites and they're all competing for that sale and for consumer's money. Wills (2020) reflects on one example of a Polish tourist company that is promoting concentration camp stag parties which include 'quad bikes in the morning then a visit to one of the world's most haunting museums'. This circles around to the ethical dilemma that is profiting from tragedy, suffering and death, but also the desensitisation of visitors. Is it ethical to host a 'party' at the site of mass death? Is it ethical that major holiday companies, many of which might have no direct links to the tragedy, are making profit from the million victims that died at Auschwitz-Birkenau?

Although the ethicality is very much at the forefront of scholar's takes on visiting dark tourism sites, there are some that argue the benefits of conserving and visiting such sites. One of the most prominent arguments is that it gives survivors and their relatives a physical space to connect with their past and history. Kidron (2011) identified that there is a growing number of survivors and families that visit places of personal suffering, sacrifice and survival. Although Foley and Lennon (1996) argue that families and friends that visit places where their loved ones have suffered isn't dark tourism, it is expected that their experiences will be highly emotional and more intense than a regular tourist. Some may say it is their right to visit places that caused them and their families so much suffering, but should that right also be given to tourists that do not fully understand the intensity of the tragedy? The visitation of survivors to Auschwitz often revolves around anniversary commemorations, where they share stories, describe the horrors they faced and to warn against intolerance and discrimination. It becomes a political statement as well as being a time of remembrance and a chance to educate. It is a chance to warn of similar tragedies happening again in the future, although David Lowenthal (1985) argues that the

preservation of such monuments alone can serve as both reminders of the past and harbingers of the future.

As one of the biggest forms of material culture, buildings are usually much more durable over considerable periods of time and are more likely to be used as evidence of presence or claimed continuities of people and identities (Macdonald, S. 2009). What is unique about conserving buildings is that it presents the opportunity to consciously construct places to enhance reactions and experiences (Martin, A. & Buda, D.M. 2018). The heritage workers that are involved in the public presentation of the past put together ideas about how the effects of material culture such as buildings can heighten or downplay certain physical suggestions, making the visitation an immersive experience instead of it being one-dimensional (Macdonald, S. 2009). Visiting a site of mass death such as Auschwitz-Birkenau can give visitors a chance to engage with representations of death, which Anthony Seaton suggests has been rendered taboo (Hartmann, R. Et al. 2018). These immersive experiences might unsettle visitors and trigger anger and shock, but it also can induce feelings of wonder and excitement. Studies on concentration camp visitors in the Netherlands reported that the main reason of wanting to visit was curiosity, the need to see with their own eyes and to see a place 'different' from the usual tourism sites. Another motivator was the expected feelings of pain, sorrow and empathy, all of which are expected feelings when visiting a site of tragedy (Martin, A. & Buda, D.M. 2018). Immersive experiences can create emotional connections. It can turn stories from books into reality and can allow deep reflection of the past, but it could be argued that it isn't enough to allow the profiteering and the exploitation of victims and their suffering.

Outside of the concentration camps, there are many Ex-Nazi buildings and complexes that are available to visit seasonally. The Reichsparteitagsgelände, or Nazi Party Rally Grounds, in Nuremberg is an example of a space that has significant meaning and history but is not a location where suffering was directly inflicted (Macdonald, S. 2009). The Reichsparteitagsgelände, was given the name 'City of the Nazi Party Rallies' by Hitler in 1933 and was directly linked to Nazi crimes by being the place the 'Nuremberg Laws' were declared and where Nazi criminals were trialed post-war (Macdonald, S. 2009). With the focus being on power, propaganda and Nazi ambition when visiting, it can be argued that visiting such sites can present less ethical dilemmas than visiting a space where direct tragedy and mass death has occurred. Although it may not be as harrowing, it could still offer time and space to reflect, to learn and to remember the horrors of the regime.

There is an ongoing careful balance needed when conserving and visiting dark tourist sites. It is possible for companies and visitors to exploit and profit from tragedy, mass death and suffering, but it also gives survivors and their families the opportunity to grieve, to feel connected and to learn about their history. It is impossible to police every tourist's actions, to make sure they are being respectful, when there are 2,600,000 visitors a year. It is also impossible to police tourist's reasonings and motives for the visitation. Some might want to connect with family history, some might want entertainment, some perpetrator admirers might treat the visit as a pilgrimage. Without major changes to the accessibility of concentration camps, there is little that can be done about the small group of people that show signs of disrespect and desensitisation whilst visiting. With regards to the majority of tourists that are respectful, the immersion in a harrowing space such as Auschwitz-Birkenau can become a life changing experience. It can realise stories, histories and victims. It can be an important tool to minimise detachment from harrowing histories and can be a space for reflection and understanding. There are, however, many Nazi related buildings across Germany that hold significant and historical importance that

are not related to mass death. These are complexes that hold little ethical dilemmas and would cause little upset, but are also places that can teach, that can fuel the imagination, that can connect tourists to the history of the Nazi party. Humans have been fascinated with the macabre for centuries and sites of mass death from millennia ago are still visited today. Pompeii, the catacombs of Paris, the Colosseum are all major tourist sites, but are seen as less controversial than visitation to sites such as concentration camps. Maybe due to the time passed and how removed we are from the effects of such events. Does it seem more ethical to visit the Colosseum than a site of the holocaust? Perhaps it does. Maybe one day, after enough time has passed, the ethical dilemmas of visiting Nazi sites will dissipate along with its label as a 'dark tourism' hotspot.

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