

Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead

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This paper looks at a type of tourism visit which inhabits an ambiguous and relatively unmapped territory of meaning, crossing boundaries between the conceptual domains of pilgrimage, commemoration and pleasure-seeking. These visits and activities have developed in response to traumatic histories, and also reflect the growth of secular forms of spiritual experience, in which the pursuit of revelation is personal rather than hierophantic. Sites of Holocaust memorialization raise questions of memory and forgetting, guilt and redemption, meaning and ownership, with particularly acute force. However, even these most consecrated and highly cathected sites are experienced through the mediation of mimetic forms and processes of representation which significantly re-order testimony and evidence. Furthermore, the grounding of collective memory in sacralized locations and structures tends towards the distancing, externalizing and disarming of traumatic memory. Under these conditions, visitor motivations and experiences are polysemic: fractured, ambivalent, unstable, and resistant to paradigms of either the sacred or the profane.

Key words: Auschwitz, memory, Holocaust, tourism, museum.

Introduction

A distinction can be drawn between behaviours within certain forms of tourism or sightseeing, a tension between polarities that can be described as, on the one hand, festive, playful, hedonistic or pleasurable in one sense or another, and on the other, as serious, revelatory or transcendental; perhaps also sombre, commemorative or funereal. The distinction expresses itself clearly in the field of cultural or heritage tourism, and particularly in the case of sites of high collective significance, items of the built, cultural or

natural environment, which are rich in symbolic meaning and which both reference and ground collective memory, continuity and identity (Halbwachs 1992). Visits to these sites combine serious purpose with recreation, or exhibit a gradual transformation of meaning from serious to non-serious (Nolan and Nolan 1992).

These items of collective significance have been characterized as having been subjected to a process of 'sacralisation' (Rojek and Urry 1997). Such objects or locations are iconic points of shared reference, filled with symbolic value. They are approached with highly

articulated expectations, and perceptions of them are absolutely framed by graphic or narrative representations. It has been suggested that repetitive representation—in films, texts and images, corrupts the sacralized nature of the object or location, or at least adulterates perceptions of it, producing feelings of disappointment when confronted by the original, which is smaller, or shabbier, or somehow more banal than expected (Benjamin 1999; Rojek and Urry 1997). However, although the absolute familiarity of representations of the Roman Colosseum profoundly alters the experience of seeing it, this does not necessarily turn down the force of the encounter, nor the status acquired by having been there. Hence the need felt by visitors to take their own photographs, or to buy postcards in Rome, forms of proof that they have actually been there, along with souvenirs brought back, mnemonic objects that perhaps bring with them some sense of the auratic force of the place.

Such visits have frequently invited the comparison with pilgrimage (Smith 1992). In fact, a tension between secular and transcendental, sacred and profane, is present in the very notion of tourism and leisure (Graburn 1989). Etymologically, the term 'holiday' derives from the term 'holy day', establishing a sense, common to both, of time set aside and dedicated to a special purpose, separated from a person's normal life. Historically, the observation of religious feast days represents a disjunction from the pattern of everyday life, specifically a break from the routine of work, a fact which forms a conceptual link between the notion of holiness, and the notion of leisure. The derivation of the term 'leisure' from 'license' suggests freedom, but also parallel senses of license as in 'permit' or 'authorization' or 'permission,' terms which go towards the notion of a specific task, a sense

of purpose and directedness. So the notion of leisure contains elements of purposefulness and dedication, while pilgrimage, the pursuit of the transcendent, also carries with it senses of travel, excitement and adventure, an ambience evoked with great clarity in the *Canterbury Tales*. A consequence of this, in the context of mass travel, is the tendency for shrines to become tourist attractions (Nolan and Nolan 1992).

Pilgrimage sites are clearly sacralized in the sense of being 'extraordinary'—highly saturated with meaning and symbolic or actual power. Within many religious traditions, pilgrims to significant sites derive quantifiable benefits, from physical cure to a variety of spiritual gains; and relics, badges, emblems and souvenirs brought away from the site may continue to resonate with some of the power of the location (Eade 1992). As Grimes (1999) points out, objects may continue to be sacred even when they have been displaced from a sacred location, a proposition which underlies many controversies over ethnographic collections in Western museums. Equally, these sites are framed in a precise set of expectations, formed by pilgrim narratives and descriptions, and by widespread dissemination of images of the site. Modern tourist sites have been extensively prefigured, but so were medieval pilgrimage sites. Medieval travelers to Jerusalem or to Santiago de Compostela would have been exposed to many representations of both the journey and the destination, and would have had a clear sense of what to expect from the experience, and of what was expected of them as participants. The pilgrim fell on his knees and cried *Mon Joie!* when he finally saw the towers and spires of Santiago (Frey 1998). His emotions were not diminished by having been anticipated.¹

Narratives of catastrophe

Significant sites are represented within a context of cultural and social tradition. They are items of collective memory, and visits to them form part of the social construction of rituals of remembering, and the grounding of both personal and collective memory in physical place (Halbwachs 1992).² These visits are a form of memorialization of the past, whether this memorialization is enacted within a religious or a secular discourse. In either case, explicitly or implicitly, rituals of remembering which access the collective past also commemorate the dead. It has been suggested that interest in sites associated with the dead, and more generally with disaster and traumatic history, forms a subset of tourism visits, a proposed category of 'dark tourism' or 'thanato-tourism'—the tourism of death (Lennon and Foley 2000; Seaton 1998; Slade 2003), but this phenomenon has so far been inadequately described, and lacks a theoretical relationship to wider studies of violence and by-standing.

If there is a fascination with narratives of catastrophe and trauma, this needs to be disaggregated across a range of diverse states into theoretical categories. These might include the 'joy' of the survivor (Sofsky 2003), including the survivor-as-unimplicated-passer-by, gripped by the impulse to turn and stare at a car crash passed on the motorway; perhaps the motive that drew visitors to the crash-site at Lockerbie, a case of prurience rationalized as commemoration, as *paying their respects* (Lennon and Foley 2002). The element of commemoration may be more explicitly present in a category including activities such as visits to war graves in Flanders, and may well involve symbolic actions such as the laying of wreaths, though visitor behaviour will be subject to taxonomic

distinctions between survivors, relatives, those with cultural, regional or historical interests, school visits, and so on.

By contrast, social rituals of remembering, though they may not be entirely absent, are much less noticeable at visits to sites whose association with traumatic history has become highly attenuated over time (Seaton 1998), as in mass-tourism visits to the Colosseum in Rome. Such visits are informed by architectural, social or cultural history, but where the catastrophic past is referenced, it is in a playful and ironic form: visitors pose for photographs with an appropriately dressed gladiator who 'threatens' them with a sword or trident. Does this festive, carnivalesque atmosphere, which contrasts with the much more sombre behaviour of visitors to war graves, suggest that tourists in Rome are imaginatively engaging with the spectators rather than with the victims of the spectacle,³ or that the horrors are much further removed in time, or simply that the weather is generally better in Rome than in Flanders? It has been proposed that items of dark tourism are characterized by the 'sense of unease' they generate, in particular, unease about the project of modernity or progress (Lennon and Foley 2002). 'Unease' can be taken to mean the sensation of cultural and historic certainties being challenged by the traumatic rupturing of the social narrative (LaCapra 2001), in which case tourist interest represents a response to a paradigm-shift. Memory and commemoration resist the loss of the past through traumatic disruption (Langer 1991), but the threatened past can perhaps also be eventually reabsorbed into the narrative by the more ludic forms of remembering found in tourism. If tourism is a means of reassimilating trauma on the level of the collective, this might be because such activity is a mode of commodification and, ultimately, of reassurance, of normativeness,

of value-transformation. However, this does not account for the process whereby some events and locations become iconic 'general signs' (Seaton 1998), and therefore major objects of tourism interest, while others do not.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

In any case, the set of tourism visits which are informed by some element of memorialization can also be mapped on to more general tourism topographies. Sites such as cathedrals, castles, battlefields, catacombs, cemeteries and mausolea frequently exhibit aspects of the partial or gradual transformation from the commemorative to the celebratory, and visitors' expectations and behaviours will display elements of both the festive and the serious. They are sightseeing in the mansions of the dead, and nowhere are the dead concentrated more closely than at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As the Holocaust stands as a general sign of catastrophe, so, more than any other site, Auschwitz represents the Holocaust—historically for the scale of the atrocities committed there (Gilbert 1986), and symbolically for the way it haunts the modern imagination.

Auschwitz I—the base camp—was set up in 1940 in the suburbs of the Polish town of Oswiecim; the original buildings on the site formed part of an Austro-Hungarian barracks for migrant workers (Charlesworth 1994). Auschwitz I was planned as a concentration camp, and Polish political targets were the first prisoners to be sent there (Gilbert 1986). In 1941, building work began at Auschwitz II—Birkenau—3 km away from the base camp (see Figure 1). Birkenau, from the planning stage onwards, was intended as an extermination camp, the centre of the *Endlösung der Judenfrage*—the 'Final Solution of the Jewish

Question' explicitly formulated at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. Both camps lay within the Auschwitz *Interessengebiet*—a 40 km² 'Interest Zone' under the direct control of the SS garrison and the camp commandant (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum 2003). There were more than forty sub-camps within the Zone; the largest of these was at Buna-Monowitz—Auschwitz III—the giant IG Farben chemical works, built and run by slave labour, and harrowingly described by Primo Levi in *If this is a Man* (Levi 1987). Between 1940 and 1945, 1.4 million people were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum 2003). In January 1945 the camps were liberated by the Red Army, and in 1947 the Polish Government established the Auschwitz State Museum by Act of Parliament (Charlesworth 1994).

It is, to say the least, distasteful to think of Auschwitz as simply an item on a tourist itinerary, as a location for sightseeing or mass tourism, whether dark or not. However, upwards of 400,000 people visit Auschwitz every year (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum 2003), the majority of whom will be visiting other sites in Poland, and often other countries in Central Europe. The camp is a two-hour journey to the west of Krakow, a city which is an important tourist destination in its own right, and a good base for touring. Krakow has a fine medieval city centre, an important university, and many features of artistic, architectural, cultural and historic importance. The city's former Jewish Quarter of Kazimierz, which represents the demographic vacuum created by the pull of Auschwitz 70 km away, the loss and absence of the Jewish population in modern Poland, has occupied an important place on tourism itineraries since Steven Spielberg's use of the locality in the film *Schindler's List*—a process

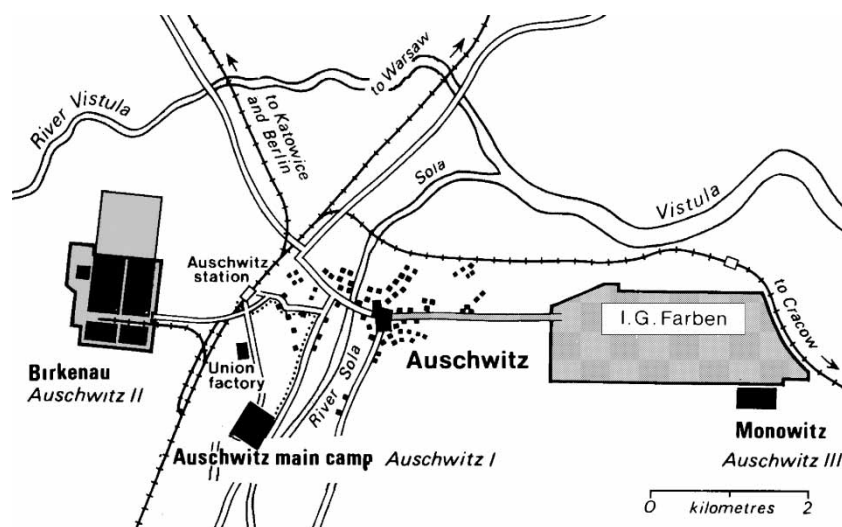


Figure 1 Auschwitz, Birkenau and Monowitz (After Gilbert, 1986)

involving a series of visual and narrative transformations which have framed and conditioned subsequent visitor experience (Charlesworth 2002; Rojek and Urry 1997), triggering much tourism-based economic activity, and widespread regeneration of the area. 'Schindler Tourism'—the *Schindler's List* Guided Tours advertised in café windows—combines commemoration and commercialization in a distinctively post-modern mix (Kugelmass and Orla-Bukowska 1998).⁴ All these elements increase the visitor cachement for Auschwitz-Birkenau, and increase the number of tours on which it features as a point on the itinerary.⁵

There are, of course, substantial numbers of people who may well think of their visit to Auschwitz as a pilgrimage, as a journey of commemoration and witness. These would include survivors, and the families and descendents of survivors and victims. In addition, it has been said that, as the usual purpose of commemorating disaster is to emphasize new beginnings, so for some Jewish

groups, visiting Auschwitz represents a secular ritual of renewal, a means of experiencing 'the mythic birthplace of the postmodern' (Kugelmass 1994: 178), not unlike the way, for millenarian state socialism, the Holocaust revealed the darkest possibilities of capitalism, and therefore pointed the way to the future (Bauman 2002; Charlesworth 1994; Novick 2001). However, if the majority of visitors are not enacting personal rituals of remembering, it is also the case that the collective meaning of Auschwitz, the role it plays within Western consciousness, is highly unclear. Visitors bring to Auschwitz, and perhaps expect it to confer on them, a certain solemnity,⁶ though this in itself does not amount to typological distinctiveness. Most visits to Holocaust sites do not fit easily into the notion of pilgrimage. Visitors may bring with them pilgrim-like expectations of liminality (Turner and Turner 1978), the sense that to enter the KZ universe will be to cross a major experiential threshold into the transcendent, but this reconfigures the symbolism of the penitential in pilgrimage.

The dynamic relationship between physical suffering and spiritual gain is one of the defining characteristics of pilgrimage, but the objects of veneration at Auschwitz invoke the suffering of others without embodying any sense of the penitential in ourselves. Again, pilgrimage is associated with the accrual of benefits to the pilgrim, as noted above; but the deaths of millions cannot be supposed to bring any benefits to anyone. The notion of 'atonement'—a significant driver for medieval pilgrimage—does not fit comfortably into a description of visitor motivation, especially for younger visitors. Certainly the term 'unease' is quite insufficient; Auschwitz darkens the future, and defeats both religious and secular theodicies (Neiman 2002).

The State Museum authorities—administrators, tour guides and so on—see their role as educational; they do not feel they are involved in running a mass-tourism enterprise, nor in providing religious or philosophical aspects of interpretation (State Museum tour guide, personal interview, 8 July 2003). Their job is to present the history of the place. Certainly, large numbers of secondary school and other students visit Auschwitz. A majority of Polish children visit the place at some point during their education, and there are numerous youth-groups from Israel and America. The Museum's Education Department conducts seminars, conferences and workshops for teachers and students, and organizes three- or four-day study visits on special subjects such as the symbolism of Auschwitz (State Museum Director of Education, personal interview, 5 May 2004). In addition, there are government-sponsored visits organized for students from Scandinavia, as well as school and youth trips from many other countries (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum 2003). For these groups, as for adult tour groups, Auschwitz is a point on the

tour, and they will visit a number of other sites of general cultural and historic interest in the region (State Museum tour guide, personal interview, 8 July 2003).

For all visitors, there are behavioural norms that impose themselves within the confines of the camp, ways of being that derive from the many representations of the place, and which form part of the general set of expectations that visitors bring with them. This is reflected in the repositioning of the notional point of entry into the camp (Dwork and van Pelt 1996). The block where, in the 1940s, new prisoners entered the camp, now houses the Museum reception, information points, book-stalls and a café. On a busy day, the place is bustling: people call over to friends, make enquiries and arrangements, order coffee. The moment when modern visitors truly enter Auschwitz now comes as they pass through the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate, well within the original confines of the camp, a liminal moment, marking the descent into memory, and triggering the clicking of innumerable cameras. So the psychic topography of the place, the way it is mapped in our imagination, has been transformed. Visitors, in tours led by guides, or in small groups, or as individuals, go from one block-house to another, from one horrifying installation to another. And yet, despite the barbed wire, the mixed realities of life for modern visitors overlay some of the claims of memory and the past.

Auschwitz, in summer, with many people around, particularly on a hot day, people drink water or other drinks, and sometimes eat cakes, they have children with them, children scream, they throw stones, you know, little children don't realize where they are, and the parents do not necessarily know how to deal with this, so my point is that in summer Auschwitz I becomes, maybe it's not yet a park and a picnic place, but it's approaching this

atmosphere. (Auschwitz State Museum tour guide, personal interview, 8 July 2003)

This assertion, placed against the proposition that ‘we can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is preserved by our physical surroundings’ (Halbwachs 1992: 146), suggests that memory at Auschwitz is in the process of being re-ordered. In the same way, the dissonant physical space at the interface of the Museum complex and the modern semi-urban locality which surrounds it, where commercial development or recreational use threatens to trespass on what can be described either as contaminated or as consecrated ground, records a similar process of change or contestation (Charlesworth 2002), the violation of contemporary space by memory (Young 1993). This dissonance could of course equally be expressed as the violation of memory by current concerns, exemplified by the post-war Communist regime’s de-Judaization of the site—the characterization of the dead as ‘victims of fascism’ rather than as Jews—and, in the 1970 s, by Polish attempts to ‘Catholicise’ Auschwitz (Charlesworth 1994). Conflicted readings are perhaps inevitable in a space that embodies a number of collective identities within a narrative of such affective intensity.

Monumentality, framing and intrusive fragments of the past

The extent and complexity of the physical remains at Auschwitz I both grounds and orders visitor experience there. The brick barracks and electrified barbed wire form corridors down which guided tours are led, following signposts through gateways and other symbolic arrangements of space in a progress which is formal and prescribed—the

enactment of a ritual which both responds to the perceived sacredness of the place, and reinforces that seclusion (Grimes 1999). There are also high levels of visual and textual information and interpretation; the site is an educational centre, and a locus of testimony, frozen in written, photographic, archival and artifactual forms. To Primo Levi, returning after the war, Auschwitz I seemed: ‘a museum—something static, rearranged, contrived’ (Levi 1987: 390).

This perhaps illustrates the way in which the physical structures and arrangements at Auschwitz I act ambivalently on visitor sensibilities. On the one hand, they may function as a lightning rod for our emotions about the place and the events associated with it, making the Holocaust ‘imaginable, if not imagined’ (Gordon 2003: 75). However, the camp, or what remains of it, re-ordered as monument-museum, cannot do any more than *stand for* the events which it represents. It is a sign of the events, and as such tends towards replacing or displacing them—the memorial may ‘bury’ (Young 1993) what it memorializes.⁷ At the very least, memory or memorialization may cease to be internal and dynamic, and instead be externalized in monuments and memorial locations—an instance of distributed consciousness, analogous to the way in which our personal memories are externalized in our photographs. As a way of cutting the psychic cost of keeping material in dynamic memory, what was fluid and interactive becomes fixed and monosemic. This process is both physical and psychological: memory, whether personal, or cathected mythological-collective, is distanced, externalized and perhaps also disarmed when it is embodied in physical or symbolic structures, locations and representations. The monument-museum cools and fixes memory in two ways: firstly because visiting such a place is, at

least in some cases and to some extent, a mode of leisure, and secondly because memory is externalized; it is made safe by being displaced and framed. The experience has clear edges, which prevent any gross intrusions into the sense of self. The framing of what is selected and represented, through physical distance and seclusion—often behind glass—reinforces a visitor-role which is semi-passive, semi-leisured, comfortable. Even within ritual or sacramental behaviour among serious and dedicated visitors, the distance between participant and location is maintained. The ‘dialogic’ quality of memorial space (Young 1993) is constrained by a key process within ritual: the assignment of more or less fixed and retrievable roles and meanings. This structural relationship between monument and visitor, formed by separation, framing and the establishment of a primary reading, can be illuminated by cases in which it is absent, as in the following instances:

1 Some of the Museum’s administrative functions are housed in a block that visitors do not enter, though they pass near it. The building used to be the SS canteen for the camp, and over the doorway, above the light-fitting, is the curious figure of a merry Bavarian drinker, a statuette in cast iron, about eighteen inches high (Figure 2). He’s sitting astride a beer-barrel, in pigeon-spotted lederhosen, waving a raised right arm which once held a foaming tankard, though this detail has since been stolen or vandalized. His left arm gestures towards Gas Chamber I, just a few yards away across an access road. This figure is not framed, or labelled, or presented, or exhibited, or documented; it simply exists, as an unmediated fragment of the past, unnoticed by the majority of visitors.

2 Between 1942 and May 1944, ending with the construction of the railway spur into Birkenau itself, prisoner-transport for Auschwitz-Birkenau were unloaded at the *Alte Judenrampe*—a railway siding roughly halfway between Auschwitz I and Birkenau (see Figure 1). This location does not form part of the State Museum (although proposals have in the past been made to incorporate, develop and interpret it (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum 1999). The site, which is surrounded by low-investment agriculture, includes a number of semi-ruinous structures—formerly administered by the SS and used as temporary guard-houses for the *sonderkommando* while they waited for the next transport, and also as storage for the potatoes which from time to time made up a back-load for the trains (Charlesworth 2004); it would have been a waste to let the trucks return empty. The railway track, as well as points and signals mechanisms, are intact, although smothered in weeds and undergrowth. The buildings are severely delapidated and vandalized, their shattered arcaded interiors splashed with multi-coloured hip-hop graffiti. As with the figure over the SS canteen doorway, these objects and locations are authentic *traces* of the past; they intrude directly into the present, as unframed and un-reordered survivals.

They do not refer to the past: they are elements of the past itself. They neither reveal, nor conceal, the hinterland of terrible narrative that lies behind them: the brutal cacophony of arrival at the *Judenrampe*; the windows of the SS canteen framing, as entertainment for the beer-drinkers inside, the lines of prisoners waiting outside Gas Chamber I. Of course, these narratives are not accessible without

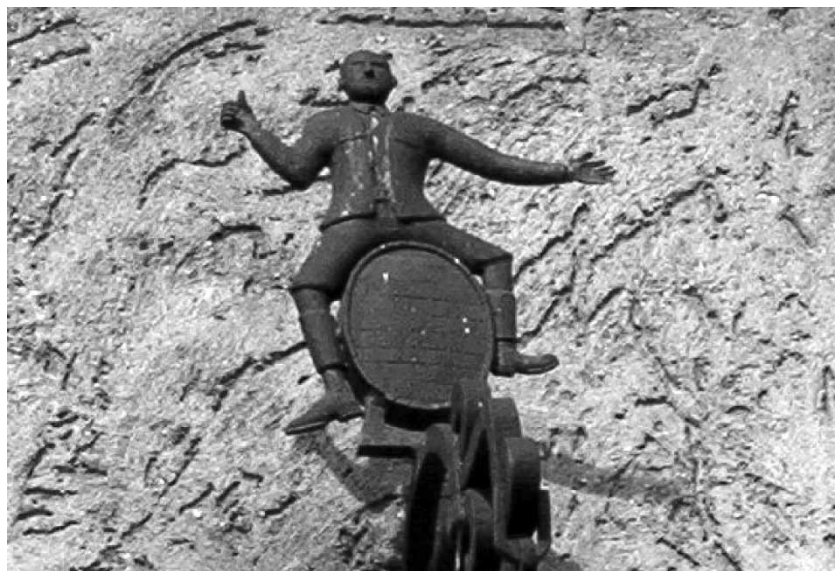


Figure 2 SS Carteen, Auschwitz (author's photograph)

a process of documentation and explication. This framing and exposition reveals the historical narrative, but re-orders the object's relationship to time. The museum-object is locked in the present, its traumatic power contained within barriers of representation; it refers to the past, but it is no longer of the past.

Dislocation: photography

These unmediated traces can be thought of as lying at one end of a scale which runs on through preserved and interpreted remains, such as the physical structures at Auschwitz I—objects and locations whose relation to time has been re-ordered by a series of mimetic processes—to sites, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, where displacement, reproduction, facsimile and symbolic representation form the major modes of presentation.⁸ At USHMM, visitors find themselves walking on

authentic, re-laid, Warsaw cobble-stones, or confronted by a resin cast of a section of ghetto wall.⁹ The Museum contains a vast collection of displaced artifacts, as well as very extensive archives of video and audio testimony from survivors now living in the USA. In addition, it employs a number of strategies for symbolic representation, the best known of which is the issuing to visitors of 'ID' cards, which link their progress round the Permanent Exhibition to the life-history of a survivor (or non-survivor) of the Shoah.¹⁰ The problematic re-ordering of meanings around displaced artifacts is illustrated by the issue of the human hair collected by the Nazis at Birkenau as an industrial by-product of mass murder. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum donated 9 kg of hair to USHMM (the State Museum holds seven tons), along with many other objects—shoes, suitcases—associated with the victims (Linenthal 1995). The hair at Auschwitz, left behind in the detritus of liberation and arguably justified by its survival there, has

nevertheless generated intense disputes around issues of respect and sacrality, as well as problems of physical conservation. The hair donated to USHMM has never been put on display in Washington, where its dislocated re-reading as museum display-installation—as *illustration*—was felt to be unacceptable.

Similar issues surround photography, the central conduit of our perceptions of the Holocaust. The primary iconic representation of the Shoah is a black-and-white photograph, an object which seems to hold out the possibility, however tenuous, of re-peopling the absence and emptiness of the camps, of making contact with the past. As Levi said: ‘the survivors are not the true witnesses ... whoever looked at the Gorgon’s head did not come back to tell the tale’ (Levi 1989: 83). In the face of this silence, we are left with ‘difficult ... mediations between the dead, the survivors and us ... between past, present and future’ (Gordon 2003: 12), or with Webster’s sepulchral lines:

O that it were possible we might
But hold some two days’ conference with the
dead,
From them I should learn somewhat, I am sure
I never shall know here. (Webster 1996: 167)

The central significance and *credibility* of photographic images is reflected in the importance that both perpetrators and victims of the Holocaust attached to them. Staines (2002) tellingly contrasts the composed, dispassionate and formal tableaux of killings and executions shot by the murderers, with the blurred, fragmentary images of burning bodies, taken clandestinely by prisoners at Birkenau, framed only by the doorway in which the photographer is hiding. One of the descriptors of this contrast is the issue of authorship and intention, the photographer’s

original purpose in taking the image, which informs relationships between elements within the image, and relationships of meaning between the image and the setting in which it was originally placed. These interleaved semiotic systems are utterly disrupted when the image is displaced temporally, spatially or purposively.

The dislocation of the image has ethical consequences (Staines 2002). Many images of the Holocaust, particularly those of executions and mass killings, locate the events they record in the field of *spectacle*, the victims surrounded by an audience of murderers and bystanders, a spectacle whose style is morbid, frenetic, ecstatic, an atmosphere of primitive sacrificialism; what LaCapra called ‘the incredible excesses of brutality, cruelty and at times carnivalesque or “sublime” elation in Nazi behaviour towards Jews’ (LaCapra 2001: 137). When these images are displayed in a museum, visitors become the back row of an enormously expanded audience, raising significant questions for any study of ‘dark tourism’.¹¹ There are other broader, if perhaps shallower, ethical implications when photographic images are relocated. In the setting of a museum-memorial, an image becomes a visual element of that setting; that is to say, at least a part of its new reading is as *décor*, as elaborated wallpaper. Once the image is uncoupled from the circumstances in which it was originally taken, and used for purposes external to those circumstances, then there is no real point of disjunction between its use for serious purposes of education, evidence or testimony, and its use in the visual articulation of space.

An SS photograph of 1944 (Figure 3) shows women and children from a Hungarian transport walking to the gas chambers after selection. A tall woman, her head shrouded in a scarf, raises a hand to her neck, her gaze inward and distracted. Behind her, a small boy in



Figure 3 SS photograph from 1944 (Auschwitz-Birkenau state Museum, after yad vashem).

a peaked cap stares at the photographer. These figures are crossing the line of sight from left to right. The image appears in displays at a number of points in both Auschwitz I and Birkenau. However, at certain locations in the Museum, the image is reproduced not as described, but reversed, so that the people appear to be walking from right to left, rather than from left to right.

The disposition of these two versions of the image appears to correspond¹² to the preferred direction of visitor-movement through the Museum. Individual visitors who are not part of a guided tour are free to move about the Museum as they choose, but there are chronological and conceptual sequences within the displays, which guided tours follow. If the orientation of the image is intended to encourage visitors to follow those sequences, then this SS documentary record, of people on their way to the gas chambers and the crematoria, has now been at least partially re-ordered as *signage*.

Birkenau

In contrast to Auschwitz I, Birkenau, three minutes away by taxi or tour-bus, is a place

where the past appears to intrude on an unprecedented scale. The site is so vast that it seems empty. Everything contributes to the sense of absence and loss. The sight-lines are overwhelmingly horizontal, electrified barbed wire and rows of low huts receding to vanishing points. This flat expanse of desolation is interrupted only by signs of absence: the brick chimneys of the vanished wooden huts cannibalized for firewood after liberation, and the tumbled ruins of the crematoria. Vacancy and loss is articulated not only by signs of absence, but by the absence of signs, by the apparent lack of interpretation or presentation. The doors to the surviving huts stand half open. If you are not with a tour, there are no signs telling you where to go, or whether the huts are open to visitors or not. Inside, the barracks are dark and filthy. The walls carry fading notices, barking prohibitions stencilled in black paint:

Wassertrinken verboten! Sauber seine ist deiner pflicht!¹³

The highly charged atmosphere of the place frames visitor behaviour, and tends people towards ritual—symbolic actions that mark out and sacralize time and place (Kong and

Yeoh 1997), or are enacted as a response to space that has been prefigured as sacred. These rituals may be relatively formal and defined, as in the lighting of memorial candles in the ruins of the gas chambers, and other ceremonies by organized groups, or may involve more personal invocations of memory: visitors carry away fragments of blackened brick from the crematoria as souvenirs, or relics. Memory has been thought of as mediating between ritual and non-ritual domains (Grimes 1999), but in this instance it seems more illuminating to suppose that it is ritual that mediates between memory and present consciousness. In any case, these behaviours cross boundaries of nationality, age, and engagement with the past (State Museum tour guide, personal interview, 8 July 2003); it is not necessary to have a personal share in memory in order to participate in rituals of remembering and to derive meaning from them (Halbwachs 1992).

However, even in this infinitely sombre place, it is important to note that the sense of dread evoked at Birkenau, the sense that the traumatic past could erupt at any moment through the texture of experience, as though time had become transparent, is to a significant extent an artifice created by Museum management policies, the result of many decisions about conservation, interpretation and presentation (Charlesworth and Addis 2002). Visitors' experiences at the death camps are mediated, firstly through the expectations they bring with them, but secondly through mimetic forms and processes of representation at the site (Mönch 2001; Young 1993). At Birkenau, the visitor is confronted with a series of simulacra. In the sixty years since liberation a cold, wet climate has acted on materials that were never designed to survive their useful life. So barbed wire has rusted and been restrung, the wooden guard towers overlooking the

railway spur have been rebuilt. The brick barracks have been reroofed and fitted with guttering, timber window frames have been replaced; some of the stencilled notices have been repainted so as to show up more clearly on film. The few remaining wooden barracks have to be dismantled every four years; the timber is impregnated, irretrievable pieces are replaced, and the structure is then reassembled (State Museum Education Department, 5 April 2004). The ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria are subsiding into the ground. They are held up by steel beams put in by the Museum, but these are also sinking. The half-open doors, the absence of signs, the apparent lack of interpretation, precisely reflect decisions about representation. In many cases, what appear to be unmediated fragments of the past are in fact *installations*—structures which have been selected, conserved and interpreted, and which now *represent* a past from which they have been sequestered.

This process began immediately after the war, with the decision not to 'get rid of everything, raze it to the ground' (Levi 1994: 185), but instead to preserve the ruins, to let the remains speak for themselves, to become a monument. At Auschwitz and elsewhere, the very first sites of memorialization were the sites of destruction (Young 1993). These sites appear to collapse the distinction between themselves and what they point at, but the semiological fissure cannot really be closed over. The place cannot stand as a monument to itself without the mediation of a mimetic stratum. The traumatic history of Auschwitz cannot be seen, but only approached through representation (LaCapra 2001; Langer 1991). Moreover, the attempt at halt time at Birkenau, to sidestep the processes of decay and delapidation that the ruinous is also subject to, involves the artful and conscious construction of illusion, the elaboration of

mimetic effects which are designed to conceal themselves, in a discourse, certainly of aesthetics, and in some cases also of ethics. 'Just as memory is continually reworked and reorganised, memorial sites never stand still' (Farmer 2000: 11).

Conclusions

Into this Hall of Mirrors, a half-world between history and art (Langer 1975), visitors bring their own fragmented and ambivalent sensibilities. As one of the most symbolically charged and highly cathected places on earth, Birkenau exists within a nexus of densely layered narrative and expectation which shapes, defines and prefigures experience. As traumatic and dynamic modes of remembering fall away over time, a re-ordered and mimetic landscape offers access to a represented past, a collective memory which, since it deals in symbolism, tends towards mythopoesis. Many visitors believe that the birds don't sing at Auschwitz-Birkenau (State Museum tour guide, personal interview, 8 July 2003). They do, of course,¹⁴ but the imaginative demand for silence and absence overrides the evidence of the senses. As tourists, visitors to Auschwitz have stepped outside the routine of their lives into 'exploratory time' (Graburn 1989)—time that has been set aside and dedicated to purposes in which the festive is structurally mixed with the serious. Their trip may have included seeing the Leonardo portrait at the Czartoryskich Palace, or sightseeing round the Royal Castle on Wawel Hill, or listening to *klezmer* music in a Kazimierz night-club. But even at Birkenau, at the most sombre and portentous moment of their journey, after an hour or two, visitors will get in their cars or tour buses, drive back to Krakow, and think about what they are going to have for dinner. They

are, after all, on holiday. Auschwitz-Birkenau is a shrine, but it is also a point on a tourist itinerary. Though it is hard to imagine that the temperature of memory there will ever reach the cool detachment of a visit to the Colosseum (where architectural, aesthetic and cultural elements entirely absent at Auschwitz allow the building to function within a variety of economies of engagement) the meaning of the place has been held under tension for sixty years, and is likely to remain no more stable over the next sixty than the structures and artifacts in which that meaning is embodied.

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Notes

- 1 The case of Santiago is interesting, in that the medieval pilgrimage has evolved in its modern form into a hybrid journey, in which religious and secular motives and behaviours are closely and explicitly related. See Frey (1998) and Murray and Graham (1997).
- 2 This process of 'grounding' is ambivalent: individual or collective memories attach cathectically to structures and locations; but memory, and especially traumatic memory, may be distanced and disarmed when it is embodied in the physically or symbolically external. See below.
- 3 Thanks to Ridley Scott and others, we are as entertained by images of blood and death in that arena as the citizens of Domitian's Rome were. It is worth noting that death is not collateral to the functioning of the Colosseum, but its *raison d'être*.
- 4 The film-making process introduced a major re-ordering of evidence: Spielberg filmed in the former Jewish Quarter of Kazimierz, from which the Jewish population was expelled by the Nazis, forced out of their homes and across the river to Podgorze, the actual site of the wartime ghetto. Podgorze is a fairly

delapidated working-class suburb, in contrast to Kazimierz, where the housing stock is better and the area more picturesque. So Kazimierz has experienced tourist regeneration while Podgorze has not. Tourists in Kazimierz, viewing what they may take to be sites of historical significance, are looking at movie locations. See Charlesworth (2002).

- 5 Research, interviews and personal observations derive from a study visit to Krakow and Auschwitz made by the author during July 2003, and a field-trip to the same locations in April 2004.
- 6 'While in Poland, the England team, led by David Beckham, visited the World War II concentration camp Auschwitz. The players, so often criticised for their behaviour ... and arrogance ... walked solemnly round the camp' (Chilton 2004: 56).
- 7 In the case of the 1967 monument at the far end of the ramp at Birkenau, between Gas Chambers and Crematoria II and III, the location is quite literally buried under vast and obscurely symbolic slabs of granite.
- 8 This scale is perhaps analogous to the transformation of memory from involuntary traumatic reliving, through to distance, reflection and syncretism.
- 9 Research, interviews and personal observations derive from a study visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC in July 2004.
- 10 There is a widespread mythopoeic belief that many visitors throw away these ID cards on leaving the Museum, and that they can be seen spilling out of dustbins or blowing about in the gutter—a second, symbolic destruction of identity. This story originates in worries expressed by a member of a focus group taking part in early Museum planning-stage discussions (see Linenthal 1995). It has since been frequently cited as fact (Lennon and Foley 2002). However, personal observation and interviews with Museum staff failed to reveal any sightings of discarded cards. In fact, many visitors are 'surprised and pleased that they can keep the cards as mementoes of their visit' (personal communication with member of Museum administration, 7 July 2004).
- 11 At USHMM, some video installations of killings and medical experimentation are set behind 'privacy walls'—screens set low behind a rectangular frame which shields them, so that people lean over the edge to watch, as though staring into a well, the flickering light playing up on their faces.
- 12 Personal observation at Auschwitz-Birkenau, April 2004.
- 13 Water-drinking forbidden! His health is your responsibility!

- 14 I have a recording, made at Birkenau on 5 July 2003, of a skylark, singing his head off above the ruins of the crematoria.

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Abstract translations

Une visite touristique dans les domiciles des défunts

Cet article porte sur un type de tourisme qui existe dans un territoire de signification ambigu, relativement peu cartographié et qui traverse les limites entre les domaines conceptuels du pèlerinage, de la commémoration et de l'hédonisme. Ces visites touristiques et les activités qui s'y rattachent ont été conçues par suite d'histoires traumatisantes, et sont également le reflet de la montée en importance des formes laïques de l'expérience spirituelle par lesquelles la quête de la révélation est centrée sur soi plutôt qu'être hiérophantique. Les sites commémoratifs de l'Holocauste soulèvent avec force des interrogations sur le souvenir et l'oubli, la culpabilité et la rédemption, et la signification et l'appartenance. Toutefois, même ces sites hautement consacrés et chargés d'émotions intenses sont vécus par la médiation de formes mimétiques et de processus de représentation qui reclassent témoignage et preuve de façon significative. Par ailleurs, l'enracinement de la mémoire collective dans les lieux et dans les structures sacralisées a tendance à distancer, externaliser et désarmer le souvenir traumatique. Dans ces conditions, les motivations et les expériences du visiteur sont polysémiques tant qu'elles sont fracturées, ambivalentes, instables et

résistantes aux paradigmes relatifs au sacré ou au profane.

Mots-clefs: Auschwitz souvenir, Holocauste, tourisme, musée.

Una excursión por las mansiones de los muertos

Este papel estudia un tipo de visita turística que ocupa un territorio de significado ambiguo y poco estudiado; traspasa las fronteras entre los campos conceptuales de peregrinación, conmemoración y la búsqueda del placer. Estas visitas y actividades han desarrollado como respuesta a historias traumáticas y también reflejan el aumento de formas seculares de experiencia espiritual en que la búsqueda de revelación es algo personal en vez de hierophantic. Sitios de memorialización del Holocausto plantean,

de modo contundente, cuestiones sobre la memoria y el olvido, culpabilidad y redención, y significado y propiedad. Sin embargo, hasta estos sitios tan consagrados y de efecto catártico están experimentados por la mediación de formas y procesos de representación miméticos que cambian considerablemente testimonios y pruebas. Además, el cimentar del recuerdo colectivo en lugares y estructuras hechos sagrados tiende a hacer que el recuerdo traumático sea distanciado, exteriorizado y desarmado. Bajo estas condiciones las motivaciones y experiencias de los visitantes son polisémicas: fracturadas, ambivalentes, inestables y resistentes a paradigmas tanto de lo sagrado como de lo profano.

Palabras claves: Auschwitz, recuerdo, el Holocausto, turismo, museo