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Historisch Erfgoed

The just-add-water Holocaust experience

Creating instant historical experiences in Holocaust museums and memorials with authentic historical objects

In this article Katie Digan discusses the use of the authentic objects of Auschwitz in contemporary Holocaust museums in attempts to create an experience of the past. She uses Walter Benjamin's writings on 'aura' to argue that purposely creating a 'direct' experience of the Holocaust is not only impossible, but that it is also undesirable. This article is an adaptation of the BA-thesis that she wrote last year under supervision of dr. Jan Drentje.

Are you in the mood for a bit of time travel? No problem. I know a charming little place in Los Angeles where you can take a trip to the past. You will be in and out within a couple of hours. The place I am referring to is the Museum of Tolerance, the Californian hyper-modern museum built by the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Although not a Holocaust museum by name, it focuses a great deal of its exhibition on taking visitors back in time to put them in the shoes of Holocaust victims for a while. Visitors expecting to have a leisurely yet educational day out may be in for a bit of a shock as they are led into a fake but realistically built train wagon and out again into a gas chamber replica as part of the guided tour.¹ The museum requires a lot of participation from its visitors, from asking them to make difficult choices (just like people in the Holocaust had to do!) to giving them fake passports from victims that can be scanned in various places in the museum (to find out whether 'your' person has survived or not).

It would be too easy to dismiss this lively representation of the Holocaust

- 1 For those of us for whom a trip to Los Angeles to see the museum is not in the budget, the 2003 documentary 'The Holocaust experience' by Oeke Hoogendijk paints a picture of the kind of experience created in the Museum of Tolerance.

as ‘typically over the top American’, made in the country that brought us Disney World and Hollywood. The idea behind an exhibition like this – history needs to be felt or experienced in order to be learned or remembered – is a much broader trend, one that has increasingly been popping up in European Holocaust museums and memorial sites as well. The European approach generally contains fewer fake gas chambers or train wagon replicas (partly, perhaps, because we have the real old things to work with), but the attempts to make visitors engage in and experience the past are roughly based on the same principles.

American and current day European museums have one thing in common, though in different ways. They both are distanced from the historical event, be it in time or geographical location. It seems to be that the further one is removed from the historical event that is the Holocaust, the stronger the urge is to make it come to life. This observation is hardly a new one. Many historians have written about attempts to make the past present and tangible for a broad public. In this article, I will mainly focus on the role authentic historical objects play in the creation of these ‘just-add-water’ historical experiences. By virtue of their ‘having been there’, authentic sites and objects present evidence of events that took place in the past. They are the embodiment of the past, the tangible leftovers of a past that is generally believed to be fundamentally out of our reach.² Historical artifacts are, quite literally, pieces of the past that are present in the present. Because of this, authentic historical objects are often believed to have special status, or what Aleida Assmann has called *Magie der Dinge*. I will take a closer look at this *Magie* by analyzing the status of historical artifacts and how they are used in the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, now a hugely popular memorial site and museum for people who want to get a sense of the Holocaust.³ People expect something out of a visit to Auschwitz that they cannot find in books or movies. While expectations may differ from person to person, generally people go to authentic memorial sites to find a connection with the past.⁴ They can get the story anywhere,

2 This idea, that the past is irrevocably gone and that people put safeguards in place to ensure the past is not forgotten, is further developed in Pierre Nora’s introduction of his monumental work *Les lieux de mémoire* (Gallimard 1984-1992).

3 The latest (2009) official museum report claimed the museum welcomed 1.1 million visitors in 2008 alone.

4 Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (München 2006) 218.

but when confronted with the material remains, it becomes tangible.⁵ I will argue that purposely creating a 'direct' experience of the past is not only impossible, with or without authentic historical objects, but that it is also undesirable.

On objects and auras

It does not take long for any discussion about the meaning of historical artifacts to mention the term 'aura.' This concept was famously coined by the philosopher Walter Benjamin in his 1935 essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.' Though this essay is often and enthusiastically used in discussions about authenticity of historical objects, it must be noted that it primarily concerns art, its reproduction, and its politics. A reading of 'The work of art' to illustrate the aura of historical artifacts necessarily means stretching and twisting it around a bit, but nevertheless it is very useful.

Benjamin's explanation of 'aura' begins with a discussion about reproducibility of art. All works of art, he says, are reproducible.⁶ It has always been possible to imitate a work of art, by looking at the way it is made and copying it. This process of copying art changed drastically when reproduction became a technical or mechanical process rather than handiwork. This concerns Benjamin a great deal, for the mechanical process does not only change the act of reproducing art, it changes art itself as well. When it becomes possible to mechanically reproduce art, the work of art loses what Benjamin calls its aura. So what is this aura? Benjamin gives several partial definitions that for the sake of clarity can be summed up in three concepts: authenticity, tradition or ritual and 'distant closeness'.

Authenticity, first of all, has a prerequisite: presence.⁷ One can only see or experience something authentic when it is physically present in the same time and space as the audience perceiving it. It is possible to reproduce an artifact, but it is not possible to reproduce authenticity. The impossibility of reproducing authenticity is not an altogether difficult thing to understand. Copies of a thing are simply not the same as the original, even though they might look similar and have the same function. Most people would agree that there is a difference between an old and authentic Auschwitz

5 Ibidem, 223.

6 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' in: *Illuminations* (New York 1968) 220.

7 Ibidem, 222.

barrack, and a perfectly copied, albeit new one. Authenticity, Benjamin says, is ‘the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced’.⁸ So on one hand authenticity lies in what the object has gone through over the years. Its ‘duration’ or its age has an effect on both the look and the meaning of an object. On the other hand, the object’s testimony to its history is part of its authenticity. A historical artifact was present during historical events, so it is material proof of what has happened. It is the unique life time or tradition of an object that gives it its authenticity.

This brings us to the importance of tradition. This tradition is especially important when dealing with historical artifacts, because it is the tradition of an object rather than its aesthetic value that interests the historian. A barrack in Auschwitz is not of interest to the historian or the visitor because of its architectural structure, but because of its place in the historical tradition of the Holocaust. Moreover, it is also this tradition that separates the original use of the object from its meaning today. When the barracks were built, they served as prisons. Today, the barracks of Auschwitz serve as a place of memory, as material proof of the horrific crimes committed some 70 years ago. It is because of tradition and tradition alone that we know these meanings and can separate them. This is what Benjamin means when he says ‘the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value’.⁹

While the authenticity and tradition of an object describe *why* the historical object has an aura, it is the concept of ‘distant closeness’ that describes how one experiences this aura, how it feels. Benjamin describes experiencing an aura as ‘the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be’.¹⁰ This feeling of distant closeness is probably familiar to people who have visited historical sites or seen historical artifacts up close. The object itself may be close in proximity, but at the same time there is a sense of distance, of knowing that whatever the object once stood for is gone now.

So far, these three elements of the aura tell us some important things about the status of the historical artifact. It becomes clear now that, even though a historical artifact is unique and authentic, it is not the material object itself that tells you a story of the past. Rather it is the tradition in

8 Ibidem, 223.

9 Ibidem, 226.

10 Ibidem, 224.

which the object is embedded that gives the object its meaning.¹¹ The substantive duration of the object gives it authenticity, but not a voice. And though the object bears testimony to the history it has gone through, it is of course the historical story that allows it to be a testimony. No matter how authentic, a stone is a stone, and not a storyteller. Moreover, the aura seems to lean on both experience and knowledge. The aura really can only be experienced as a feeling of distant closeness, that is how we know it is there, but we would not have this experience if we did not know about the tradition and authenticity of the object.

Inszenierung in Auschwitz

Of course this is only a short and simplified account of Benjamin's ideas about 'aura', but it is clear by now that the *Magie der Dinge* is not so much in the *Dinge*, but in the context and the eye of the beholder. This is not to say authentic historical objects are worthless old rubbish, but it does make for an interesting switch in perspective. The objects no longer radiate a historical story into the present through their aura, they can only support a narrative that exists outside of them. This narrative is constructed by whoever designs the memorial or museum and does not emerge seamlessly from the past. In its status as a museum, Auschwitz has lost part of its immediate and obvious presentation of the past, and has turned into a representation of the past with a certain perspective. The process of turning a historical site into an exhibition of the past is referred to as *raumliche Inszenierung* (spatial staging).¹² Though the site and objects are historically authentic, they are arranged, conserved and presented to their audience in a specific way.¹³ The way in which the objects are presented, the conservation work on the site, the (restricted) access to the site, the signs, pictures and guided tours shape the story a site tells its visitors.

11 Ibidem, 225.

12 Aleida Assmann, *Geschichte im Gedächtnis. Von der individuellen Erfahrung zur öffentlichen Inszenierung* (München 2007) 153.

13 The conservation of authentic objects is an interesting problem on its own. Preservation is one of the main concerns of the Auschwitz museum, since the objects on the site are very perishable. Any preservation work done on an object, no matter how professionally done, alters the physical state of the object. Does that make the object less authentic? This problem is a variation on Theseus' Paradox, a philosophical problem that can be summed up in the following question: when you replace all the parts of an object, is the object still the same?



A team of experts work in the laboratories of the Auschwitz museum to ensure that the historical objects are persevered as 'authentically' as possible. Source: digital archive on the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum site.

In Auschwitz, a lot of emphasis is placed on painting a picture of the past. In its function as a memorial, it focuses on the present (mainly through stressing our current day self-understanding in the light of the Holocaust), but a larger part is dedicated to bringing the past to the present. This is mainly done through exhibitions in the former barracks. A lot of the exhibitions are filled with authentic objects, evidence of what went on at the site during the Holocaust. These objects are mainly presented in an attempt to show visitors what the lives of the prisoners in Auschwitz were like. Clothing, objects made or used by prisoners and 'sanitary' facilities provide small glimpses in the daily lives of the prisoners. Other parts of the exhibitions are dedicated to the workings of the camp. These parts of the exhibitions are filled with fragments of the gas chambers, containers of Zyklon B, and items used during the registering process of the prisoners. The objects are all presented in clean, typical museum showcases, accompanied by texts and stories. They are taken out of their original context and then presented to the visitors in a new way, as museum objects. Rather than presenting big gruesome stories about the suffering of the victims first, most exhibitions focus on things that would seem trivial in life in times of peace and safety, yet carry enormous weight in the story of Auschwitz.

The amount of text and explanation varies per room. Several rooms



Infamous collections of human hair or artificial limbs (as pictured here) placed in the context of Auschwitz remind the visitor the victims were human beings – and how little that meant during the Holocaust. Source: digital archive on the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum site.

contain displays of heaps of human hair, glasses or prosthetic limbs, all taken from prisoners. The objects, intimate parts of people that are familiar to almost everyone, represent both the dehumanizing that took place in Auschwitz, as well as the enormity of the killings. Stories of violence and murder are not really personally familiar to a lot of people. Hair and glasses are. Presenting the prisoners' stories in small pieces like this makes it more likely that they resonate within the visitors. The same strategy goes for objects that represent the daily lives of the victims. Beatings, torture and hunger are (thankfully) not conditions every visitor of Auschwitz has experienced. It is, however, highly likely that most visitors of Auschwitz have used a toilet before. Sanitary facilities are fairly well-represented in the exhibitions of Auschwitz, again to appeal to experiences almost everyone has had, only to put them in the terrible context of the death camp.

Objects used by or taken from prisoners are not the only items used to make the visitors relate to the victims.¹⁴ Photographs and names are

14 Throughout the exhibitions in Auschwitz, the story of the Holocaust is told from the perspective of the victims. Of course victims imply perpetrators (bad things did not just happen to the victims, they were done to them), but in Auschwitz the perpetrators only loom in the background. This choice of perspective is understandable, but it is a choice nonetheless, not a given.



Hundreds of photos taken of prisoners upon their arrival in the camps make the visitor look the victims in the eye. Source: digital archive on the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum site.

other highly effective means to create a bond between the two groups. Many Holocaust museums and exhibitions use photographs to make the visitors identify with the victims and create a feeling of empathy.¹⁵ Whereas prisoner's belongings and daily experiences are used to translate the horror of the acts committed in Auschwitz, the photos and names are used to give the enormous and impersonal numbers of victims a dose of reality. Giving the victims their faces and names back is really a way to bring people back into a story of mechanics and numbers. Reading facts is one thing, looking in the eyes and reading the names of the people it happened to quite another.

To recap, the Auschwitz site in its function as a museum uses the authentic objects of the site to create an environment in which the visitor does not just learn about the past, but experiences part of it too. By suggesting that the past is tangible through authentic objects and trying to create empathy and identity between victims and visitors, the museum goes beyond informing and enters into the territory of creating experiences of the past. I have briefly tried to show how this is done in the Auschwitz museum, but as I have mentioned in the beginning, it is done in more extreme ways in many other

15 Jeffrey Karl Ochsner, 'Understanding the Holocaust through the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum', *Journal of Architectural Education* 48 IV (1995) 242.

museums and places of memory as well. This trend raises two important questions. First of all; are the types of experiences created in museums and memorials historical ones? Do you actually experience the Holocaust when you enter the Auschwitz site? Of course not. The barracks of Auschwitz are not Narnia-like doors to the past. Across the board, there seems to be a fairly strong consensus that understanding – and with that, re-experiencing – what happened in the Holocaust is impossible.¹⁶ Associating an experience with the past (sadness, horror, or as evidenced by some visitors of Auschwitz, a strong urge to play hide and seek in the barracks) is not the same as an actual historical experience.

Another, and perhaps more important question is: is it at all desirable to re-experience the Holocaust? Is it fair to the historical event and the victims to present a watered down version of the past and claim that ‘this is what it was like’? No amount of gas chambers, authentic or fake, can give the visitor even the slightest idea what it felt like being in the actual working camp. In order to give a representation of the Holocaust that does justice to the event, there should be no illusions about the character of representation. What is shown in museums and memorials is not the past itself, but what we know of it and what is left of it. Andreas Huyssen suggests a ‘mimetic approximation’ that recognizes both the totality of the Holocaust as well as the individual and personal stories and memories is the best way to approach the core of the Holocaust for those of us who were not there.¹⁷ The approximation of the past in museums and memorials should be mimetic, not identical, to avoid the suggestion that the past is actually present or ready to be experienced. Attempts to re-build ‘the past’ as is done in the Museum of Tolerance but as is also planned in the renovations for Dutch former camp Westerbork do not do the past justice and really do nothing else than provide a pseudo-experience of the Holocaust. Similarly, over-identification with victims should be interrupted. Leaving people out of the historical story is like removing history itself, but focusing too much on details of personal

16 This idea has been expressed in various degrees by many authors, most famously by French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann. Lanzmann, who made the famous documentary *Shoah*, feels that the Holocaust is so fundamentally impossible to understand, that one should never even try to. He has expressed this view in much of his work, notably in a short manifesto titled *Hier ist kein Warum*, published in translation in: Stuart Liebman ed., *Claude Lanzmann's Shoah. Key essays* (Oxford 2007).

17 Andreas Huyssen, ‘Monuments and Holocaust memory in a media age’ in: Michael L. Morgan ed., *A Holocaust reader. Responses to the Nazi extermination* (Oxford 2000) 362.

stories leaves the door open for misplaced feelings of understanding what it must have been like to be a prisoner in a concentration camp. In short, it is essential to 'recognize the otherness' of the Holocaust.¹⁸ Only then is it possible to learn about it and commemorate it in a way that does not diminish its horror or turn it into a very elaborate haunted house.

¹⁸ Ibidem.