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Britta Timm Knudsen

Aarhus University, Denmark

Abstract

This study looks at difficult heritage tourism as a form of visiting that to a great extent happens through the tourist's body as locus. Actual tourists are craving for real experiences in order to feel alive and difficult heritage sites offer this experience of presence to excess. In addition tourists are also interested in witnessing the past and its victims, and the establishment of the witnessing relationship depends on the interactive design present at the site. The difficult pasts in question are situated on site-specific locations in Northern America and Europe and represent classic thanatourist sites bearing on Holocaust, totalitarian communism and terrorism. Through an analysis of the multimodal and interactive design at each site, the article outlines various ways that place designs relate actual tourists and victims of the past.

Keywords

affects; Auschwitz-Birkenau; body; difficult heritage tourism; experience designs; Ground Zero; in situ museum landscapes; labour camp re-enactment; Vilnius; witnessing

Introduction

In the Norwegian novel *The Tourist*, Erik Bakke Olafsen portrays a war zone tourist:

It happens that the afflicted body you try to hide behind is not dead. The object will then try to get hold of you . . . Many war tourists consider that experience to be among the greatest. You cannot get any nearer to the suffering. . . . You just have to repeat to yourself: I am not here to help. I am here for the experience . . . Remember: you are a tourist not a participant. (2007: 114–15)

Corresponding author:

Britta Timm Knudsen, Department of Communication and Aesthetics, Scandinavian Institute, Jens Chr. Skousvej 7, 467/324, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus Denmark.
Email: norbtk@hum.au.dk

In this cruel and satirical excerpt from the novel we see the war zone tourist seeking to be part of the ongoing event: live and direct. The stereotyped war zone tourist is seeking a thrill and a personal experience at the expense of the afflicted other; the quality of his experience is a matter of closeness to the event (the closer the better), using the other as a stage prop with the adventurous aim of feeling alive.

This portrayal corresponds to a general criticism of mass tourism (Urry, 1990) and to a general attitude of indifference in modern man towards the suffering of others following the rules of early Simmelian sociology (Rojek, 1997; Sontag, 2003). This attitude is challenged by more constructivist and relational identity theories, as well as by conceptions that go beyond simple gazing towards more performative and interactive ways of understanding tourists and their behaviour. The main interest in these theories is that tourists and postmodern subjects are not just distanced viewers. Tourists and people in general are also bodies who understand sites and events at a bodily and sensuous level (Baerenholdt et al., 2004; Crouch, 2005; Crouch and Lübbren, 2003; Edensor, 2001). My aim here, following the perspective of performative and relational theories of identity and place-making, is to investigate how the materiality of landscapes and tourism designs stage relations between actual tourists and victims of difficult pasts in various ways, how tourists are witnesses of the past, and how their witnessing depends on the site-specific designs in use.

Although human fascination with death seems constant, thanatourism has expanded within the last 200 years thanks to the influence of the media. The primary feature of thanatourism is 'less a fascination with death per se, than feeling for the particular people who have died (personal, nationalistic, or humanitarian)' (Seaton, 1996: 243).

As a phenomenon thanatourism has grown more common within the last 25 years. A shift in the general cultural mode can partly explain why such activities have increased. Some call it a return to the real (Foster, 1996) or a hunger for the real (Knudsen and Thomsen, 2002; Žizek, 2002); while others claim that this new longing for authenticity is a reaction to the fact that the media are our central point of access to social reality (Pine and Gilmore, 2007), or that thanatourism is just a way of producing *authentic feelings* (Knudsen and Waade, 2009). In this respect going to thanatouristic sites is a way of triggering emotions and affects (just as we use melodramas in order to cry). The sites thus become media that we use for specific – dramatic – purposes. But this is not all there is to it. Going to thanatouristic sites is also a way of relating to and witnessing the past and its victims. In this article thanatouristic sites are regarded as places that encode the past differently through their specific more or less developed site designs. The article investigates how witnessing depend on the site designs in question.

Thanatourism and difficult heritage tourism

The phenomenon that I call thanatourism in this article has many different names: black spot tourism (Rojek, 1993, 1997), dark tourism (Foley and Lennon, 1996; Sharpley and Stone, 2009) and thanatourism (Seaton, 1996, 2009). Seaton has defined thanatourism as an interest in the representation, symbolization and material evidence of death, regarding it 'as travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death, particularly, but not exclusively, violent death, which may,

to a varying degree be activated by the person-specific features of those whose deaths are its focal objects' (Seaton, 1996: 240). Whether gazing at death is viewed as a romantic urge inherent in mankind, that evoke 'feelings for the particular people who have died (personal, nationalistic, or humanitarian)' (Seaton, 1996: 243), or thanatouristic activity is regarded instead as consumer behaviour commodifying events, places and persons (Cole, 1999; Foley and Lennon, 1996; Sturken, 2007), it seems to play an increasingly significant role in contemporary global culture(s).

Any places and any hideous crimes are potential destinations for thanatourists. Even the deserted home of the 'family' of Josef Fritzl in Amstetten, Austria, in which Fritzl kept his daughter and the children he incestuously fathered with her imprisoned in a cellar for 23 years has become a tourist attraction (Newser 13 May 2008, Mail Online World News 16 June 2008).¹

In this article thanatourism is understood as tourism to globally recognized places of commemoration. Although all kinds of reasons may be involved in the urge that motivates any individual thanatourist, I classify tourism to these places as difficult heritage tourism. Defined as 'a heritage that the majority of the population would prefer not to have' (Macdonald, 2006a: 9), difficult heritage tourism focuses on sites in the aftermath of slavery, apartheid, Nazism, fascism, communism, genocide, terrorism and extreme poverty. I propose to look at difficult heritage tourism as a way – again for various reasons – of *relating to* and establishing a dialogue with the past (Antze and Lambek, 1996; Knudsen and Waade, 2009); a way of remembering the past, activating lived or prosthetic memories in order to become part of the *social making* of these places (Landsberg, 2004; Sather-Wagstaff, 2011).

More importantly, while Antze and Lambek situate heritage tourists as morally obligated eyewitnesses of the past: 'Memories are eyewitness accounts . . . if the emphasis is put on the witnessing, a moral act, rather than on the eye' (Antze and Lambek, 1996: 248), this article regards tourists who visit difficult heritage sites as individuals actively seeking to be part of a larger history. They actualize the past in the present, using the distinctive typology that Gumbrecht proposes between a 'meaning culture' and a 'presence culture', the latter having the body as a dominant point of self-reference and considering the body to be part of a cosmology (Gumbrecht, 2004: 80). The witnessing happens through various subject positions and modes of relations that the difficult heritage sites encode as frames, and that the tourists for their part decode in order to take part in the production of the past.

Thanatouristic sites encode specific events differently. The encoding happens through the site's materiality, through the use of communication strategies (guides, tours, texts, visual repertoire), and through technological devices and site designs. This article proposes an analytical framework from semiotics and media theory (Hall, 1999; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001) in order to analyse site designs and their ability to position the tourist in relation to the event being commemorated and its victims.

The article starts with a theoretical discussion of the important category of witness, leading to the proposition that witnessing is a performative act relating actual witnesses to past victims. Then follows a presentation of semiotic tools to analyse tourism designs as communicative media. In particular, the article investigates aesthetic modes, media and experiential meaning potential. After a short introduction to different thanatouristic

genres, three cases are presented: Ground Zero in New York, USA; Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland; and *Deportation Day* in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Witnessing as embodied practice

The category of witness has normally been connected with the question of truth: in the field of jurisprudence witnesses are indispensable in order to help establish the truth, and even if the truthfulness of testimonies can be questioned (and has been questioned extensively from the perspective of psychoanalysis, deconstruction and constructivist theories), witnesses still seem to be important bystanders of events. With the pervasive character of digital and mobile media, we can all become witnesses to events. Connectivity, proximity and engagement can be produced across great distances thanks to digital media (Anderson, 1983; Appadurai, 1996; Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Falkheimer and Jansson, 2006; Tomlinson, 1999), and the possibility of transforming yourself into a witness seems to be a constant technological possibility in the mobile media. Being a tourist at difficult heritage sites constitutes a form of witnessing that is often institutionalized, encoded, self-imposed or educational.

Thanks to the dissemination of global electronic and digital media, we now see and know much more about close and distant parts of the world as well as close and distant others than ever before. As a result of this knowledge we develop a responsibility towards many others (Ellis, 2000). But there are differences in the recent scholarly literature regarding the effects that this knowledge has. The increase in proximity produced by globalization has crystallized two main reactions. The first reaction represents an *aesthetic view* of the others: we become or remain immune towards the others, suffering from compassion fatigue, as Susan Sontag terms it (Sontag, 2003), keeping the others at a proper distance so we can consume them with our tourist gaze (Urry, 1990). The second reaction represents an *ethical or moral attitude* according to which we relate to the others, reacting and acting with the greater responsibility that globalization entails (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2007).

In the witness literature the focus has been on who can witness (Blocker, 2009) and on how processes of witnessing have re-established the lost or damaged subjectivity of first-hand witnesses (Caruth, 1995). I would like to pursue the idea of witnessing as a *performance of testimony* (Antze and Lambek, 1996; Knudsen, 2003; Oliver, 2001) through which relations to past events and victims are re-confirmed, created and/or transformed. To stress the performative character of testimony means stressing that the dialogue with the past is one of embodiment: past events are felt and worked through physically. As Kelly Oliver states, the 'performance of witnessing is transformative because it re-establishes the dialogue through which representation and thereby meaning are possible' (2001: 93). Oliver understands witnessing as the linguistic act that a former annihilated, tortured and traumatized subject performs in order to regain subjectivity. I would suggest that difficult heritage tourists receive different material, linguistic, visual testimonies from the past. The *performance of witnessing* thus depends on the degree of investment and the nature of the response and responsibility perceived and lived through by any particular tourist.

I would like to draw attention to two important aspects of the performance of witnessing that concern the relationship between witnesses and historical events. The first aspect is the notion that performances of witnessing are equivalent to the emotional and affective impact a certain event has on a tourist. What the tourist performs is first and foremost a feeling, not an action. Oliver cites a testimony from a woman who was an eyewitness to the Auschwitz uprising in which prisoners set fire to the camp. According to her testimony, four chimneys were in flames. However, this statement disqualifies her entire statement in the eyes of the historians who know that only one chimney could have been set on fire. Oliver points to this example as a performance of testimony expressing the impossible – what did not happen – and this expression had the effect of making the impossible possible (Jewish resistance and the woman's survival) (2001: 1). It is thus possible to argue that the four chimneys seem to express the *perceived impact of the event* on the woman.

The second aspect concerns how the performance of witnessing can become a moral act. The title of Kelly Oliver's book *Beyond Recognition* points to the fact that primary witnesses not only demand to be seen and recognized (2001: 8). Taking up the notion of responsibility from philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, humans have an ethical obligation 'to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others' (Oliver, 2001: 18). I use the categories in the following way: while the first aspect has to do with how actual tourists perceive and feel thanatouristic sites, the second aspect deals with how the performance of witnessing expresses responsibility in relation to atrocities in the past.

The performance of witnessing is something that happens as a result of various mediated experiences. Sites are both materially, discursively and technologically enriched by various media (Kress and Van Leuwen, 2001). Tourists experience sites through the body as medium. Following embodiment theories and the performative turn in tourism studies (Baerenholdt et al., 2004; Crouch, 2005; Crouch and Lübben, 2003; Edensor, 2001) the body must be considered a medium through which we can expand our knowledge of the world and initiate transformations.

Accordingly, two kinds of media are present here: on the one hand the tourists' body as a medium through which knowledge is sensed, perceived and understood; and on the other hand the concrete landscapes and tourism designs in particular places, which are also regarded as media in my perspective.

Witnessing at mass death sites involves witnessing violent historical events at the actual scene of the crime, and a certain level of staging the events at the sites. Key questions for the following paragraphs focus on the way in which different forms of witnessing unfold at specific places and the way in which they are dependent on material, discursive and technological textures of difficult heritage sites.

Multimodal communication at sites

Methodological tools

I will make use of semiotic tools and communication models in order to understand how sites communicate and invite interaction (Hall, 1999; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Hall

suggests a system of dynamic circulation of meaning that stresses the relative autonomy of audiences in the communication relation between producers and receivers of television broadcasting. Hall outlines three *decoding* positions towards the *encoded* message: a dominant-hegemonic position, a negotiated position and an oppositional position. Tourists at difficult heritage sites perform various witnessing positions according to the design at hand; but how independent from or tied to these designs are these tourists? Extending the decoding positions to multidimensional experiences of tourist sites, it is especially interesting and instructive to regard the designs as closed or open scripts in order to encode the witnessing positions. Are closed scripts more frequent at difficult heritage sites in order to prevent people from mythologizing the bad guys? (Macdonald, 2006); and in what ways does closeness/openness influence the witnessing process.

In order to analyse the encodings of difficult heritage sites in greater detail, I draw on the multimodal semiotic model of Kress and Van Leeuwen, which I adapt to my purpose. This model entails four important components in order to analyse site designs.

- **Place designs as signified representations and as signifiers.** As signifiers designs are particular (inter)actions that invite users to participate through various semiotic modes. The design as signified representation bears on its referential status: What is commemorated and how? I propose here three ways of representing an event. A site design can either be indexical (in situ of the event), iconic (a simulacral version of the event) or symbolic (representing the event). In situ designs are designs at the very place of violent past events. Such sites have inherent design restrictions. I claim that the in situ character of a historical place limits the possible design of any concrete site. It is *not* possible to make a theme park at the very place at which horrible events took place. Any symbolic representation is much more free regarding the mode of representation. Grutas Park in Lithuania 130 km south-east of Vilnius is a sculpture park consisting of pieces gathered from all over Lithuania after 1989, and is called ‘Stalin World’. Such a theme park is a symbolically compressed representation of former totalitarian times.² One example of an iconic site at a difficult heritage place is the staged apartment at Nowa Huta on the outskirts of Krakow in Poland. This staged or simulacral apartment – recreated in the image of an apartment from the Nowa Huta of the 1950s – is one of the tourist gems of Crazy Guides Communism Tours in Krakow.³ The feeling of authenticity in the tourists’ experience is naturally enhanced by the fact that the staging takes place literally within a natural environment. An apartment in the residential area of Nowa Huta is not a thanatouristic site in itself, but more an illustration of everyday life during communism. So no moral restrictions apply to the degree of staged-ness on display here. As signifiers designs are particular (inter)actions that invite users to participate through various semiotic modes. Designs may either follow well-trodden paths of habit, convention, tradition or prescription, or they may be innovative and groundbreaking (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 5).
- **Modes** are semiotic resources that allow the simultaneous realization of discourses and types of (inter)action. Mode is the aesthetic form through which a thanatouristic site communicates a past event to the tourist. Telling modes such as

narratives by guides constitute one very common mode, while showing modes such as in situ landscapes that are re-invented constitute another. Performative modes such as re-enactment and role-playing are yet another mode. The experiential meaning potential that different modes possess 'refers to the idea that material signifiers have a meaning potential that derives from what it is we *do* when we articulate them' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 22).

- **Media** are different materialities used to realize discourses and modes in the context of a given communication situation (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 5–6). Thus we must conceive very diverse cultural signs in landscapes as media (such as watchtowers, disused railway sleepers, the linguistic representations of guides, staged environments with original props and so on) and we must take into consideration that place designs always offer multimedia and often mixed media experiences (incorporating texts, photographs, documentary materials, relics, sign boards, various digital media). These categories will be used to analyse the encodings of difficult heritage tourist sites.

Sites

The sites that I want to explore are: (1) Ground Zero, the in situ site of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) in 2001 in New York, USA; (2) the in situ site of the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau commemorating the death and suffering of millions of European minorities during the Second World War (1939–1945) under the Nazi totalitarian regime; and (3) a staged–iconic–symbolic site design – named *Deportation Day* – 25 km outside Vilnius in a bunker commemorating the totalitarian past of Lithuania under Soviet communism for a long period (1944–1990). The three cases represent three different ways of witnessing the difficult past. At Ground Zero the thanatourist is put in the position of being an audience for the testimonies of live witnesses; at Auschwitz-Birkenau the tourist performs his/her witnessing by strolling through the iconic landscape; and in the *Deportation Day* design the tourist plays an active part in a re-enactment play. The following paragraphs will contain analysis and comparisons of these three different forms of witnessing and how the designs at each site play a role in the way various difficult heritage sites are experienced by tourists.

Ground Zero

A mediated experience

As a thanatouristic in situ destination,⁴ Ground Zero is emblematic. Nearly 3000 people died a violent death as a consequence of a terrorist attack on 9/11 2001, and millions of people witnessed the event globally in all kinds of mediated representations.

To analyse the encodings of Ground Zero as a site of difficult heritage, one has to begin with the endless loops of media images on the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre that morning. The mourning of the site began that day. The images immediately put the viewer at the centre of the event, witnessing it in real time. The presentational logic means that the viewers were immediately involved in the affective and symbolic

construction of the event.⁵ Ground Zero is a site of mourning not only for the local or national community but also for the global community. Large audiences have seen the eternal looping pictures of the second plane crashing into the second tower, of the burning towers, of the first tower falling. So before coming to Ground Zero after 2001, the imagination of the tourist is already inhabited by the iconography of the burning towers, a more powerful image (Baudrillard, 2002) than all the other representations with which we are acquainted: the WTC towers as icons of economic and symbolic power are well-known motifs in innumerable movies and television series, immediately locating the scene and branding New York as the set of the stage. The mediated images of the WTC burning mythologize the place (Couldry, 2005), and tourists going there re-experience the power of the images on the site itself. I claim that what many tourists are consciously searching for is the same feeling again: the intensity of the images and the symbolic and affective involvement that they produced back then.

The site design is highly developed and uses various media. It consists of three important elements: the memorial centre; the tour to different memorial points surrounding the ground; and the tour guide performed by volunteers who are first-hand witnesses of the event, survivors at work that day who escaped the towers, widows of perished fire-fighters, people working nearby, former employees at the WTC, neighbours, citizens of New York and so on. At the memorial centre a poster calls the visit a tribute and invites everyone to reflect on and connect to the event. In the memorial centre the visitor is confronted with the material traces of the former site as well as the chaotic post-catastrophic scenery itself. The victims are present everywhere: they are listed by name, they are shown on photos, and a whole section of the centre shows all the tributes that the victims have already received from schoolchildren all over the US.

Telling and showing modes

The modes used in the guided tour involve both telling and showing. The tour has five viewpoint stops: beginning in front of the memorial with a bronze memorial to the fire-fighters, proclaimed true heroes of 9/11; and continuing to the marble memorial listing all the names of the victims. In front of the Winter Garden the personalized narratives are given by the volunteer guides of the day: a low-voiced account of a widow recounting how her hope of ever seeing her husband again had slowly disappeared . . . and the very detailed, calm and sober narrative of Christopher (who worked on the 82nd floor) relating the story of how he managed to get down.

The telling and the showing modes interact in the design of Ground Zero. The narratives performed by the endangered first-hand witnesses have one predominant feature: they are all different from each other. They are individualized and tell the story of the attack from various positions. There is no endeavour to give a standardized version of this event. Even though the narratives are not melodramatic, the prosaic narratives – due to the enunciation positions of the guides as survivors of the attack – are intimate and personal. The survivors are very obviously amateurs, something that enhances the encoded authenticity in the design. By contrast with the individualized narratives of the guides, there are a number of stops on the tour at which the telling mode is employed. The stops at the reconstruction site, at the memorial to the fire-fighters, at the Winter Garden, and at

the individualized memorial of the American Express Company, are all expressions of an official response to the attack, stressing the ability of the injured party to rise again. Not in order to gain revenge, but in order to commemorate the event properly.

A third feature of the guided tour as a mode and discourse is the strong linguistic marker of community-building in the 'we' offered by the guides, a 'we' including all potential victims of terrorism and catastrophic events. This 'we' is not followed by a 'them' signalling the guilty party that is excluded from the 'we' community. Instead, it seems all-inclusive, open to anyone who wishes to commemorate.

Witnessing testimonies

When it comes to the discursive construction of the event at the site, one is struck by the absence of naming and talking about the perpetrators. The only focus is on the innocent victims of the terrorist attack. Marita Sturken has called tourism to Ground Zero history tourism and sees it as part of a souvenir culture that testifies to the visitor's pilgrimage there and provides comfort. In her opinion Ground Zero 'produces a narrative of innocence' that is underlined by the opportunity to buy kitsch objects at the site itself (2007: 218). Sturken sees no attempts to contextualize 9/11 within broader historical contexts, and sees kitsch as the key aesthetics at this symbolic site (2007: 18). The linguistic marker of the 'we' mentioned above, as well as the absence of perpetrators, villains and any political context, may underline the point that innocence is what you get out of a visit to Ground Zero.

What is striking in this design is the strongly individualized ways of encoding and decoding the event. The witnessing positions offered are strongly individualized in a very unusual manner at this site of mass death. The tours take only a limited number of persons each time (the maximum being 15 people). The tourists are regarded as visitors and have to announce their names and nationalities to the two guides accompanying them on the tour in order to establish a semi-personal relationship. Thus the tourists are individualized and nationalized in order *to relate* to victims and survivors. Visitors witness the event as addressees of live testimonies by first-hand endangered witnesses at Ground Zero.

The design of this site relates the story of the fear, grief, heroism or simple survival of the victims of 9/11. Tourists are not invited to re-enact or experience the event itself, but are invited into the various perspectives of other people who have had the experience. The invitation primarily involves testimonies and a community of individualized narratives (some suffered severe losses, some had a lucky escape) and of sameness (we are all terrorist targets). This design thus seems to produce and actualize a global community of potential victims of catastrophic events. The tale told at Ground Zero, taking the position of victims and the personalized relations created between witnessing tourists and primary witnesses, tends to turn this event into a natural disaster and avoids the possible disagreements that any political framing would evoke. The design invokes empathy and not political action.

Auschwitz-Birkenau: Museum and in situ landscape

When it comes to thanatourism, Auschwitz-Birkenau has unquestionably become the most symbolic and mythological site in Europe, signifying the absolute nadir of European

civilization. In this respect the encoding of this site seem unambiguous. It is not the meaning of the site that is questioned, but the fact that it has now become a tourist site on a relatively large scale instead of being a site of mourning for the families, nations and ethnic groups who were directly involved.

Like *Deportation Day* (see below), Auschwitz-Birkenau has an educational role to play. School groups from all over Europe visit the site. In 2005 – the year of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz – the site had the largest number of visitors since 1979, the year of its appearance on the World Heritage List and the year of Pope John Paul II's visit. During the first 6 months of 2005, 370,000 tourists visited the site.

Auschwitz-Birkenau is divided in two. The Auschwitz part is a museum framed by the well-known sign 'Arbeit macht frei' marking the entrance. The curved posts holding the barbed wire that have been used innumerable times in documentaries and movies surround the astonishingly well preserved buildings constituting the museum, which is only partly open to the public. This part of the heritage site is highly iconic and the experience of the site is strongly controlled. As a visitor you are not allowed to stroll around on the green lawns: guided tours are obligatory. I will focus on the second part of the museum: Birkenau. Birkenau has fewer material traces: only a few dormitories with the characteristic wooden bunks and mattresses of straw, the remains of chimneys on the decayed wooden barracks, but first and foremost the characteristic entrance with the rails disappearing into the horizon and the watchtower rising above the only pathway to extermination.

Whereas Auschwitz is to be understood as a traditional in situ museum, Birkenau is more like an in situ landscape. In the Auschwitz part of the memorial site, the encoding and interactive modes both tell and show: a great deal of material evidence in the form of relics and remnants is on display, and the obligatory guided tours although using different strategies strongly encode the visitor to distance herself from this regime.

In the Birkenau part of the memorial site, the scarred landscape itself offers a platform for communication with the past. The mode is performative because the visitor strolls around and gets the experience of the place in a quite traditional phenomenological manner. The design is not staged like the design of *Deportation Day* in Lithuania (see below), but has to be categorized as a performative and imaginary mode: the witnessing position is achieved through bodily interaction with the landscape using your own imagination.

Witnessing the landscape

In her suggestive essay on the site, Griselda Pollock (2003) argues that making a site out of this nadir of European civilization raises two ethical questions: on the one hand this is a place that you can visit and leave, a *concrete* site and not just a symbolic kernel in the minds of all Europeans and Jews. On the other hand it becomes a concrete mass-death tourist site, and how can that happen without losing an ethical responsibility towards the victims of the Nazi regime? According to Pollock, an excessive distance is thereby created between the tourist and the victims of the past. Pollock indirectly implies that the empathetic feeling is prevented or reduced because the site is open to mass tourism.

By contrast with this view, I claim that it is possible to detect a high degree of responsibility towards the site as a place of solemn mourning among the tourists I have

observed here. Visitors speak in low voices, no mobile phones can be heard, nobody runs around or uses the site for typical outdoor activities. Auschwitz-Birkenau seems to be a place of pilgrimage, (MacCannell, 1999 [1976]) of difficult European heritage. How is this expressed through the performances of the tourists at the site? Being an in situ landscape without any encoded restraints except for the moral ones the visitors are expected to possess, Birkenau has a relatively open design. This openness seems to be dependent on the iconic and symbolic character of this site as one of the most important in European history. Auschwitz-Birkenau is a place you are impressed and overwhelmed by, not a place you express yourself through or by.⁶ It is not a place you appropriate but a place you try to embrace. On two occasions these rules were violated during my visits, and on both occasions the moral condemnation was immediate by the group of tourists I was watching.

At one place, just beside the punishment cell in the Auschwitz part of the site, a few people left their signatures on the wall as a physical inscription. This common way of signing places caused serious objections amongst the group of people I was observing.⁷ Their spontaneous objections seemed to contradict the tendencies of co-creation and self-direction characterizing the involvement of the users within the experience industries (Boswijk et al., 2007). Another transcending behaviour in the Birkenau part of the site was performed by a noisy group of Israeli high-school youngsters, equipped with boom boxes and flags, breaking all the rules implicitly present at this pilgrimage site. It is possible to see this behaviour as an active appropriation of the place, highlighting the question of who has legitimate rights to it. Owing to their kinship and common ethnicity with the victims, they claimed their right to the place and to the status of victim.

The rest of us wandered quietly around the Birkenau site. An important part of the phenomenology of this particular place is the sense of a felt presence of ghosts (Bell, 1997).⁸ Two particular spots within the site capture the interest of many visitors. One is placed at the end of the rails on a ruin that you can sit on, facing the entrance tower. This spot is particularly significant because this is where the prisoners arrived at the camp. A spot of symbolic dimensions, as Pollock describes it, because it signified the end without any new beginning. The Holocaust tourist becomes witness by imitating the victim's perspective but now prolonging it into the future.

The second perspective offered at the material site was the bird's-eye view from the camp guard tower, from where several visitors came down feeling upset because the perspective from up there is that of the prison guards. The experience of having touched the same stair handrail as the Nazi perpetrators was impressive and produced a number of comments expressed with some degree of horror by the tourists concerned. Many, myself included, did not venture up there.

In other words, tourists relate to the cultural memory of Auschwitz-Birkenau at different levels. At Auschwitz the visitor is offered a more ordinary museum experience with material traces, plenty of information, photos and texts; while the Birkenau area has two particular perspectives to offer. These two perspectives are not framed or staged (as in *Deportation Day*) – they are merely present as experiential possibilities of the site. Embodying the perspective of the inmates at the site combined with the possibility of leaving the site safe and sound represents exactly the kind of freedom that the prisoners at the camps did not experience. Embodying the inmates' perspectives is a way of

prolonging them into the present, and leaving again is a way of performing the future they were denied. Witnessing at Birkenau thus involves imagining the presence of the historical past; the community performed between dead victims and actual visitors is a community in a subjunctive mode, performing how *it should have been* and opening the camp experience to a new future.

Deportation Day: The future of the past

One rather elaborate tourism design of a cultural heritage event is to be found in Lithuania,⁹ involving a re-enactment play that recreates former totalitarian power relations between the people who were empowered and the people who were subjected to the power as an unambiguous relationship that hardly anyone escapes.

*Deportation Day: Live History Lesson*¹⁰ takes place in a 3000 m² two-level relic from the Cold War: a bunker placed 25 km outside Vilnius in a spruce forest. A bunker is naturally a war relic and contains events and narratives that confirm the materiality of the place. *Deportation Day: Live History Lesson* has had many participants: Lithuanian school pupils, Russian school pupils, European students from European exchange programmes at Lithuanian universities, and a wide variety of Lithuanian students. Thus, the concept is based on an *exchange* principle stressing the European identity of Lithuania as a young EU member as opposed to a Russian identity. The principle of exchange also focuses our attention on the 'otherness within', that is to say the special case and the double victimized status of nearby nations and regions that were occupied by the Nazis and the Soviet Union.

The *Deportation Day* experience begins with a 1-hour visit to *The Museum of Genocide Victims*, Vilnius, established as recently as 1992. Housed in the former KGB headquarters, this museum visit is a site-specific experience. There were 25,000 prisoners here from 1944 to 1953.¹¹ My own re-enactment began with a 35-minute bus ride to a secret place in the woods. We stopped and had to walk a short distance until we saw and heard a dog barking and caught sight of two men in Russian uniforms: a short, grey-haired man with a growling German shepherd dog on a short leash, and a tall, voluminous, bald Russian soldier with a fierce look. We were ordered to stand in three lines with our hands around our necks and asked alternately to squat and stand up. We were addressed in Russian with a summary translation into English, and we were taught to respond yes and no in Russian, the official language. We were finally directed towards a combat vehicle and all successfully squeezed into it. After a short ride, we had to run through the woods to finally reach the bunker. A third guard was waiting for us there. We stood in two lines facing each other in a small corridor, and were randomly asked to squat and stand, squat and stand.

We got to know different aspects of camp life through the different sequences of the *Deportation Day* re-enactment: the interrogation, the distribution of equipment (dark blue padded coats with numbers written on the back, hat and gloves, shovel and broom for snow clearing), a long sequence of snow shovelling (males) and sweeping (females) while it was still snowing. We caught a glimpse of the dormitories with iron bunk beds and we had our thin onion soup in the canteen served in jam jars and eaten while we sat on wooden benches looking at Lenin and Stalin on the walls; and last but not least we experienced the long, endless corridors resounding with barking, screaming, running

footsteps and shooting. The original soundtrack announcing Stalin's death was broadcast as we were eating the thin soup. Finally, we left the labour camp experience through a staged Russian shop hosted by a Russian actor (normally a puppet theatre actor) presenting commodities such as vodka, toilet paper (always in short supply in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries), giant ladies' bras and non-sexy underpants –joking and laughing over/at these ridiculous relics from the past. Afterwards we returned to the canteen to have tea, snacks and crisps, the role-playing faded out and a photo-shoot began, placing guards and prisoners in new more friendly constellations.

Re-enactment mode and stage props

Deportation Day takes the form of a historical re-enactment, staging historically correct elements in a mixture of theatrical and documentary elements. If it is difficult to believe in the reality of the re-enactment, this corresponds exactly with the fantasy-like surreal character of communist totalitarian regimes, which is the impression that *Deportation Day* offers to visitors.

The medium used in *Deportation Day* involves authentic Soviet equipment gathered from all over Lithuania such as gasmasks, uniforms, batons, medals, small statues of Lenin, propaganda posters, and so on. The materiality of the landscape, for example, the subterranean bunker, is also a medium used in the communication situation. So are the Russian actors who perform an improvization without a manuscript. The Russian language – which many of the tourists do not understand – is also a strong medium in this situation because it illustrates the feeling of being subjected to an invading foreign power.

Deportation Day uses the mode of *theatrical staging* and imitation of particular *iconic* scenes in totalitarian regimes, for example, the interrogation scene, masses of people directed through unlimited tunnels with no explanation and no aim, the inherent use of random punishments, all getting punished for individuals attempt to escape. The theatrical staging is for real, which is to say that there is no exit during the play. The experience takes place not in a historical campsite but in surroundings built by the Soviet regime that connote war and siege. The surroundings are historically real, but they are not the setting of any particular known event of mass death. This feature is important because the real occurrence of mass death here would limit the possibility of theatricality at the site.¹² This slight dislocation within a real setting connoting similar events is what makes *Deportation Day* as theatrical a re-enactment as possible.

Witnessing as kinetic empathy

The experiential meaning potential of *Deportation Day* is its central value. The tourists have to go through the design using their bodies, senses and affects as media in order to get the point, so to speak. Because they do not understand the language in which they are addressed, the communication works through direct physical actions that can be instinctively understood based on the situations in question and the affects and emotional states into which these situations bring the visitors. As an educational tool, *Deportation Day* mimes the totalitarian regime it portrays and recreates the terror of former times. The experience is supposed to create understanding between the tourists – who are

presumably citizens of free democracies – and the former citizens of the Soviet regime. *Deportation Day* produces *kinetic empathy* (Thrift, 2008: 237) between the contemporary tourist and the millions of people subjected to communist totalitarianism.

Organizer Vanagaitė says: ‘Anyone can be broken. This is a very educational point for young Lithuanians and foreigners alike. You are no different from Lithuanians. If you find yourself in a place from which there is no escape, and if you are shouted at in a language you don’t understand, you quickly start to feel that you are nobody – which is exactly the feeling we had.’ The design explicitly stages anybody as a victim subjected to totalitarian power and the camp experience. The labour camp re-enactment could be regarded as a camp according to Agamben (1995), with its fundamental features being: (1) that of the camp being a space opened when a state of exception begins to become the rule (1995: 168–69); (2) the camp being the hybrid of law and fact (1995: 170), which means that there is no longer any distinction between what ought to be (the law as written text) and what actually is the case (what representatives of the law practise): what happens *is* the law; and (3) the camp reducing the inhabitants to bare life, stripped of every political status (1995: 171). The technology of power performed in the camp subjects everybody to the rule of the guards: the power exercised is arbitrary (squat, stand, squat, stand . . .); the lack of distinction between individuals is translated into common punishments for individual attempts to escape; and new distinctions are made between the people who are rewarded in the ‘new’ system (more soup if they work harder, for instance) and the people who are picked out for ‘special’ punishment.

The reduction of the inmates to bare life is obvious: normal distances between bodies are not respected (crowding during transport). More than once Ruta Vanagaitė had seen participants faint in the interrogation room – an adequate bodily response to the perceived real threat and angst in the staged environment.

By setting the stage for a totalitarian experience in the form of a re-enactment for several hours, *Deportation Day* aims to recreate the same *feelings* that Lithuanians had during the Soviet political regime. The obvious critical scope of the tourism design works by creating *affective empathy* between the contemporary visitor and the citizen subjected to communist totalitarian regimes.

Conclusion

Looking at the communication between an event, a site and an actual tourist through what I have called the site’s tourism design and its use of media, modes, discourses and experiential meaning potential, I have made an analysis of three very different sites for the purpose of investigating the relations and witnessing positions that each site’s specific tourism design produces between tourists and victims of the difficult past.

I have already pointed to the importance and the limitations that an in situ quality poses with regard to tourism design. The least developed tourism design is to be found at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is the most important and best-known site of the three. It is as if the site speaks for itself. The most highly developed design is to be found in the concept of *Deportation Day*, due to its symbolic status. Any tourism design is regarded as part of the reconstruction of the sites and events that the specific designs commemorate, and in that respect they are never innocent but always partaking.

Ground Zero addresses the tourist in two modes: a showing and a telling mode. Both modes individualize victims, and the use of primary witnesses as guides categorizes the interaction of this design as intimate. The tourist is invited to relate personally to victims and survivors, and the witnessing at Ground Zero is a pure witnessing of the testimonies of primary witnesses. The highly individualized narratives make the design rather closed, and the tourist is regarded as part of a strong emotional community (Dovey, 2000), a 'we' beyond political differences.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau the tourist guides frame their tales slightly differently, stressing either the status of the victims or the fact that surviving Nazi criminals have still not been brought to trial, with the consequence that the tourist is positioned between empathy for the victims and a more political arousal. Nevertheless it seems to be the concrete places themselves – especially the in situ landscape of Birkenau – that offer the most significant possibility of witnessing. The remarkable experience here involves walking through the landscape, possibly viewing the scene from the perspective of a guard in a tower, and feeling the places and their ghosts. Due to the openness of the site design – here negotiated and oppositional decodings appear – the quality of the experience depends on the imaginary power, knowledge and legitimate/illegitimate rights of each individual tourist. The remarkable feature here is that even in a relatively open landscape, thanatourists relate in an adequate manner to the difficult heritage past and its victims.

Deportation Day is a performance of the totalitarian communist regime in the former East Bloc that involves the tourist in a rather direct way. This re-enactment stages the feeling of being subjected to communist totalitarianism, and in this perspective the design is rather closed, echoing the political system it wants to denounce. The tourist witnesses and experiences a camp experience in order to feel what is was/is like to be subjected to totalitarianism.

It is certainly true that thanatourists are interested in feeling alive and in feeling the past; but they also want to relate to the difficult past and not least to its victims.

Notes

1. See www.newser.com/story/27379/ghoulish-tourism-develops-in-amstetten.html and www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1026710/Smile-Sick-tourists-turn-Fritzls-sex-dungeon-house-ghouls-paradise.html.
2. Significantly, it is possible to make a Stalin theme park, while a Nazi theme park would be unimaginable. Among other things, this is due to differences in the discursive constructions of Nazism and communism.
3. For a more fully developed analysis of this tourism concept, see Knudsen (2010).
4. I have been to Ground Zero after 2001 twice: 6 November 2007 and 5 July 2008, and have taken two tours involving participant observation.
5. I have elsewhere pointed to the different ways in which the immediate images of the event affectively influenced the viewer in the perspective of how a politics of pity was an immediate result of the images shown, while the discursive formations of enemies and allies pointed to the troubled after-life of the event (Knudsen, 2003).
6. One site of pilgrimage through which one can express oneself is the balcony of Romeo and Juliet at Via Capello 23 in Verona, Italy. This is said to be the home of the Capulet family, although historians say there is scant evidence to back this up. In accordance with the city's image of romance and love, it is possible to hire the balcony for weddings. The balcony in

Verona is regarded as Juliet's balcony in Shakespeare's fictional account and has thus become a popular cultural phenomenon. Visiting the place in 2005 it was remarkable because of the amounts of colourful chewing gum adorning the entrance to the courtyard. Via Capello 23 is obviously a place in which visitors can inscribe themselves both in a concrete-ironic manner (putting chewing gum on the walls) and in an imaginary way (getting married there). This kind of dialogue with the fictitious past is allowed in the case of the balcony, but totally unthinkable in the case of thanatouristic sites. The more horrible the historical events, the more silent and invisible must the tourists be.

7. 31 March 2008.
8. Bell argues that the felt presence of ghosts of places gives a sense of social aliveness to a place. However, one significant feature of thanatourism involves making pilgrimages and worshipping at places where people died.
9. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=Az9OLDr8tCw.
10. Ruta Vanagaitė, dramaturgist and theatre critic, is the producer of *Deportation Day*. From December 2009 to March 2010 the play took place nine times. The play *1984. Survival Camp in the Soviet Bunker* was also produced by Ruta Vanagaitė and was conceived to celebrate the choice of Vilnius as European Capital of Culture 2009. On 18 February 2010 we were a group of 43 mixed European students (German, French, Spanish, Dutch, Lithuanian, and so on) the organizer Ruta Vanagaitė and the team of actors around her (three in all and a dog), an interpreter interpreting from Russian to English and a special journalistic team from RFI (Radio France International) joining that day to report from the event.
11. The striking feature of *The Museum of Genocide Victims* in Vilnius is the focus on the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviet Union, while the history of the Jews in Lithuania is totally absent, although 90 percent of Lithuanian Jews were murdered during the Second World War (one of the highest victim rates in Europe). The near extermination of the Jewish population in Lithuania by 1945 (250,000 people or 10 percent of the population) was accomplished by the Nazis with the considerable cooperation of Lithuanian auxiliaries. See www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005444.
12. Staging at site-specific death sites has its limits, as mentioned above. One could not imagine staging a camp experience at a real death site and the reason why the re-enactment of Gettysburg is tolerable is because we are dealing with acts of war and its different set of rules and not acts of internment in camps/prisons characterized by the fact that 'the camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule' (Agamben, 1995: 168–69).

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Britta Timm Knudsen is Associate Professor (PhD) of Aesthetics and Communication at Aarhus University, Denmark. She is currently researching difficult heritage tourism, experience culture and economy, event and memory culture, and documentary genres. She is the co-editor (with Anne Marit Waade) of *Re-investing Authenticity, Tourism, Place and Emotions* (Channel View Publications, 2009) and 'The Past as Staged-Real Environment: Communism Revisited in The Crazy Guides Communism Tours, Krakow, Poland' in the *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* (November 2010). Address: Department of Communication and Aesthetics, Scandinavian Institute, Jens Chr. Skousvej 7, 467/324, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus C, Denmark. [Email norbtk@hum.au.dk]