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**Experiencing 'Dark Tourism': the real Auschwitz?**



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# **Experiencing ‘Dark Tourism’: the real Auschwitz?**

**UNIT CODE: HIST33101**

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## Introduction

Although as MaCannell has argued, tourists ‘embody a quest for authenticity’,<sup>1</sup> our ‘experience’ and what we ‘gaze’ upon is not only socially and culturally constructed by our own history and circumstance, but also framed by what the tourist industry wants us to see. Whilst traditionally tourists stood ‘in awe’ of grand spectacles, the increasing importance of the real lives of ‘ordinary people’ has widened the scope of what ‘ought’ to be seen. The ‘museumification’ of everyday objects from the past has fuelled this intrigue.<sup>2</sup> History is now perceived as something individuals can ‘at times hold in their hand, change in their own way, or experience in a variety of mediums’.<sup>3</sup>

If new museology is changing the ‘relationship’ between the museum or memorial and the visitor then it becomes necessary to consider how the visitor is ‘constructed’ through the exhibit.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, ‘the constant give and take between memorials and viewers’<sup>5</sup> ensures that the perception of the individual is equally as important as that of the initiators of the memorialisation. ‘Monuments without visitors have lost their function’,<sup>6</sup> and as ‘there is no evidence that sites are uniformly read and passively accepted by visitors’,<sup>7</sup> I will argue that the perception and understanding that the tourist takes away from an historical site has serious repercussions for the study of history. Further, as ‘visitor experience’ begins to supersede the importance of ‘educative impetus’,<sup>8</sup> tourists believe that the *feeling of being* can be practised as the ‘feeling of doing’.<sup>9</sup> I hope to illustrate how the tourism industry is responsible for bypassing historical fact in favour of simulating the ultimate ‘visitor experience’.

Having the ‘wealth and freedom to travel’ is considered to be a product of late industrialism. However, the antithesis of this serene ‘escapism’ is beginning to dominate the tourist industry. An increasing fascination with, and ‘commodification’ of, locations associated with death and disaster attracts visitors to sites such as the ‘former battlefields of

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<sup>1</sup> D. MacCannell, *The Tourist* (London, 1976) as cited by J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, (London, 2002) 9

<sup>2</sup> Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 118

<sup>3</sup> J. De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Abingdon, 2008) 4

<sup>4</sup> De Groot, *Consuming History*, 234

<sup>5</sup> J. Young, *The Texture of Memory, Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, 1993) ix

<sup>6</sup> J. Spielmaan, ‘Auschwitz is Debated in Oswiecim. The Topography of Remembrance’ as cited by E. Jilovsky, ‘Recreating Postmemory? Children of Holocaust Survivors and the Journey to Auschwitz’, *Text Theory Critique*, 25 (2008) 154

<sup>7</sup> C. Rojek and J. Urry (eds), *Touring Cultures: Transformations of Travel and Theory*, (London, 1997) p. 14

<sup>8</sup> De Groot, *Consuming History*, 233

<sup>9</sup> D. Crouch, ‘Spatialities and the feeling of doing’, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 2:1, (2001) 62

northern France' and the 'Killing Fields of Cambodia'.<sup>10</sup> The term 'Dark Tourism' coined by Lennon and Foley in 1996 and followed by an abundance of inter-disciplinary literature came to encompass travel to sites 'associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre'.<sup>11</sup> However, the actual idiom 'dark tourism' is merely the culmination of other such terminology including 'thanatourism' (Seaton), 'atrocities heritage' (Beech) and 'black-spot tourism' (Rojek).<sup>12</sup> Although Foley and Lennon's thesis, introduced some original perspective, it is by no means conclusive. Indeed, whilst the historiography on the subject appears vast and extensive, little has been done to consider the implications of the tourists' motivations and perceptions.

Debates surrounding this fascinating subject have developed since the original thesis, with scholars now arguing that there are primary and secondary sites of dark tourism, 'dark' and 'darker' tourism.<sup>13</sup> Miles states there is a 'crucial difference between sites *associated with* death and suffering, and sites that *are of* death and suffering'.<sup>14</sup> In accordance with this idea, 'the product (and experience) at the death camp site at Auschwitz-Birkenau is conceivably darker than the one at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC'.<sup>15</sup> Ironically the Washington museum, does, in historical terms contextualise the history of the holocaust in ways that the camp at Oswiecim does not. However the 'locational authenticity' of Auschwitz-Birkenau 'imparts to the darker tourist a uniquely empowering (if spectral) commemorative potential'.<sup>16</sup> It again seems that the notion of 'being there' and 'experience' are essential to the dark tourist, regardless of historical contextualisation.

Although there is nothing to suggest that the 'experience' of the tourist is in anyway universal.<sup>17</sup> Urry notes that our 'gaze' is constructed by socially and culturally formulated 'signs', often fuelled by media and advertising. Tourists may search for 'typical' behaviour or 'traditional' landmarks in a foreign land. 'When tourists see two people kissing in Paris they capture in the gaze 'timeless romantic Paris''.<sup>18</sup> As will be explored later, the development of photography has added to this 'capturing' a 'typical' moment. Searching for the postcard

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<sup>10</sup> P Stone, 'A Dark Tourism Spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions', *Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 54: 2 (2006) 146

<sup>11</sup> Stone, 'A Dark Tourism Spectrum', 146

<sup>12</sup> C. Wight, 'Philosophical and Methodological Praxes in Dark Tourism: controversy, contention and the evolving paradigm' *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 12 (2006) 119

<sup>13</sup> Wight, 'Philosophical and methodological praxes in dark tourism' p. 120 see also W. Miles, 'Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Darker Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 29:4 (2002) 1175-78.

<sup>14</sup> W. Miles, 'Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Darker Tourism', 1176

<sup>15</sup> Miles, 'Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Darker Tourism', 1176

<sup>16</sup> Miles, 'Auschwitz: Museum Interpretation and Darker Tourism', 1176

<sup>17</sup> Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 1

<sup>18</sup> Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 4

picture enables the gaze to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured.<sup>19</sup> However, I will argue, that the tourist's quest to meet his/her expectations of a 'dark touristic' site may mean they reject the visual and indeed historical reality.

In the western world where death has seemingly become 'a commodity for consumption in a global communications market',<sup>20</sup> it is imperative to question whether our desensitised attitude to atrocities impinges on our understanding of the past. The media has contributed to this normalisation of death as the proliferation of visual images of disaster and destruction has inevitably meant that contemporary society is hard to shock. In some instances historical representations themselves desensitise viewers. Machines such as tanks, displayed as 'technological marvels', in Museums are one example of the presentation of a 'safe, sanitised version of war',<sup>21</sup> whilst an exhibit at the Imperial War Museum, offers both The Trench and the Blitz 'Experience', by replicating the conditions of the Second World War.

These exhibitions also exemplify how 'modern technology' such as virtual simulation has stimulated the dark tourism industry. However, 'within the project of modernity... [The Final Solution] should be morally inconceivable, politically impossible and economically unsustainable'.<sup>22</sup> Thus the destruction and brutality that typifies the history of the majority of dark touristic sites conflicts with the ideal of an enlightened society. As Keil illustrates, this type of tourism is characterised by a 'sense of unease'... about the project of modernity or progress'.<sup>23</sup> Atrocities such as the Holocaust suggest a 'regression to barbarianism',<sup>24</sup> not a progression to a brighter future.

Although literature on the trend of dark tourism seems ostensibly novel, as Seaton has noted, visitation 'to battle sites, to the graves of the famous, the infamous... is by no means a phenomenon associated with the modern world'.<sup>25</sup> 'With death and suffering at the core of the gladiatorial product, and its eager consumption by raucous spectators, the Roman Colosseum may be considered one of the first dark tourist attractions'.<sup>26</sup> Whilst the academic

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<sup>19</sup> Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 3

<sup>20</sup> G. Palmer, *Death: The Trip of a Lifetime* (New York, 1993) as cited by M. Foley, J. Lennon, *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*, (London, 2000) 5

<sup>21</sup> C. Wight, 'Philosophical and methodological praxes in dark tourism' 124

<sup>22</sup> Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism*, 11, 22

<sup>23</sup> C. Keil, 'Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 6:4, (2005) 481

<sup>24</sup> D. LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Cornell University Press, 1998) 3

<sup>25</sup> A. V. Seaton 'Guided by the Dark: from Thanatopsis to Thanatourism' *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2:4 (1996) 234-44

<sup>26</sup> Stone, 'A Dark Tourism Spectrum', 147

world is struggles with the uncomfortable idea that as humans we seem attracted to sites of atrocity, there seems little study on how this notion affects our perceptions of the past.

The most persistent examples of dark tourism relate to the Holocaust. Exhibitions, memorials, houses of victims and concentration camps annually attract hundreds of thousands of tourists. Whilst the ‘national memory of...the Shoah varies from land to land’,<sup>27</sup> a whole industry has developed around Holocaust tourism where it seems that the ‘connection between past and present... [is] usually provided by the place’.<sup>28</sup> In an age where becoming a Holocaust tourist may be ‘something akin to a moral imperative’,<sup>29</sup> I will argue that for Auschwitz, the dedication to the dark touristic experience has distorted our understanding.

Though seriously under researched, the motivations for visiting sites of death and destruction are many. Keil points to one example, ‘the ‘joy’ of the survivor, asserting the ‘survivor-as-unimplicated-passer-by, gripped by the impulse to turn and stare at a car crash passed on the motorway’.<sup>30</sup> However, other suggestions seem far less extreme; ‘rationality, progress and historicism stress the educative elements of the offerings’.<sup>31</sup> So the past becomes an instrumental learning tool for the future. It is this sense of posterity that has led some scholars to assert that the Holocaust and Auschwitz in particular has ‘retroactive’<sup>32</sup> qualities, suggesting we must assess the past in order to move forward. As Lawrence Langer notes in relation to Anne Frank, ‘many of us seek and find the Holocaust we need’.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to ‘educative’ impetus, there is a sense of moral obligation to visit Holocaust sites. Whilst this inevitably differs for the individual (as will be discussed in chapter one) there appears to be a common discourse that one must view sites of such atrocity in order to both pay tribute to its victims and ‘witness’ what humanity is capable of. Indeed, it has been asserted that merely ‘stepping inside a historic house’ can change the visitor, making him or her ‘a better man or woman’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, viii

<sup>28</sup> Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 123

<sup>29</sup> T. Cole, ‘Holocaust tourism’, *Keynote lecture delivered at ‘Journeys through the Holocaust’ University of Southampton* (December, 2006)

<sup>30</sup> Keil, ‘Sightseeing in the Mansions of the Dead’, 481

<sup>31</sup> J. Lennon, M. Foley, ‘Interpretation of the Unimaginable: The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D.C., and ‘Dark Tourism’’, *Journal of Travel Research*, 38 (1999) 46

<sup>32</sup> C. Meier, *From Athens to Auschwitz: The Uses of History*, (Harvard University Press, 2005) 162

<sup>33</sup> L. Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 2006) 29 as cited by E. Jilovsky, ‘Recreating Postmemory?’ 154

<sup>34</sup> E. Naulty: *Historic Harewood, of Pleasant Memory and Patriotic Association* as cited by D. Lowenthal, ‘Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory’, *Geographical Review*, 65:1 (1975) 14 see also C. Meier, *From Athens to Auschwitz*, 162



Of all the locations on the Holocaust tourist's itinerary, Auschwitz has emerged as the 'most significant memorial site of the Shoah'.<sup>35</sup> As Cole notes, 'not only is the word 'Auschwitz' virtually synonymous with 'Holocaust', but the word has become virtually synonymous with generic 'evil''.<sup>36</sup> Those who live in Oswiecim, see Auschwitz in the context of their present lives. 'By contrast...memory-tourists tend to see not only Auschwitz through the lens of its miserable past, but all of Poland through the image of Auschwitz itself'.<sup>37</sup> With hundreds of thousands of visitors each year,<sup>38</sup> the museum and memorial site at Auschwitz-Birkenau has also come to epitomise the concept of Dark Tourism. However as I will attempt to establish, the very nature of Auschwitz's history makes its relationship with dark tourism thoroughly disturbing. As Pollock flippantly observes 'Auschwitz is 'certainly a 'heavy' thing to see on an itinerary...dispersed between travel, eating and shopping'.<sup>39</sup>

Despite being recognised as 'by no means ideal' by the SS in 1940, only two years later, the concentration camp at Auschwitz had become the largest under the Third Reich.<sup>40</sup> Unbeknownst to most tourists, the complex comprised three main camps and over forty sub-camps. The first and oldest, 'Auschwitz I' was established on the grounds and in the buildings of pre-war Polish barracks.<sup>41</sup> As Van Pelt and Dwork note in their seminal study of the site, 'the history of the camp in Auschwitz thus began with used buildings and second-hand barbed wire'.<sup>42</sup> The construction of Auschwitz II, or Birkenau, began in 1941 a few miles to the west of the original camp, bordering the village of Brzezinka. The majority of Polish victims were 'killed at Auschwitz I, and the majority of Jews and Gypsies at Auschwitz II'.<sup>43</sup> Auschwitz III, the labour camp supplying workmen for the IG Farben works has disappeared and is 'not part of any tourist itinerary'.<sup>44</sup> It is important to distinguish between the different parts of the Auschwitz complex as often representation amalgamates the camps, blurring together location and historical fact.

Following the liberation of the camp in early 1945 by the Soviet army, Auschwitz quickly made the transition to 'memorial site'. From its conception in 1947, the Polish

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<sup>35</sup> D. Dwork and R. Van Pelt, 'Reclaiming Auschwitz', in G. Hartman (ed) *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory* (Oxford, 1994) 232

<sup>36</sup> T. Cole, *Images of the Holocaust: The Myth of the 'Shoah Business'* (London, 1999) 98

<sup>37</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 144

<sup>38</sup> Attendance at the Museum 1959-2007, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum website*, [2 January 09]

<sup>39</sup> G. Pollock, 'Holocaust tourism: being there, looking back and the Ethics of Spatial memory' in D. Crouch and N. Lübbren, *Visual culture and tourism*, (Oxford, 2003) 177

<sup>40</sup> S. Steinbacher, *Auschwitz: A History*, (London, 2005) 22

<sup>41</sup> History of the Camp, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum website*, [16 January 09]

<sup>42</sup> R. Van Pelt, D. Dwork, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, (1996, New York) 169

<sup>43</sup> Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, 107

<sup>44</sup> Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism*, 50

government's initiative to manage the site at caused controversy. They alleged it represented 'the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other peoples' sidelining the Jewish victims and favouring a discourse purposefully aimed at the contemporary evils of fascism.<sup>45</sup>

In the west, the focus was on Dachau and Buchenwald, Auschwitz rarely featured in the media and it was not until the 1990s it became 'the universal symbol for the Holocaust'.<sup>46</sup> The site was thus originally situated within an Eastern discourse, as Young notes 'memory is never shaped in a vacuum; the motives of memory are never pure'.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the 'Catholicisation of Auschwitz'<sup>48</sup> following the canonisation of Father Maximilian Kolbe in 1982, fuelled a new religious debate about the authority of Auschwitz. This brought painful questions to the fore, the nexus of which asking, to whom does Auschwitz belong?

The so-deemed 'Jewish Dimension' remains a pertinent issue within the politics of representation at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Traditional representation at the site shunned Birkenau as the 'fate of the Jews did not have an important place on the national agenda of post-war Poland'. The transportation of victims' shoes, clothes and other personal items from Birkenau to Block 5 in Auschwitz I highlighted the preservation of 'Polish – not Jewish – history'.<sup>49</sup> The controversy culminated in Lech Walesa's comment in 1989, 'Auschwitz belongs to the world. It does not belong to any cardinals, it does not belong to Walesa, it does not belong to the Jews'.<sup>50</sup>

Following this, a newly appointed Auschwitz council 'composed of Jews from Poland, Israel, and other Western nations and of Polish Catholic intellectuals and government ministers' convened to discuss how 'literally to reshape, both memory of the Holocaust in Poland and its contested historical significance'.<sup>51</sup> These discussions at Yarton were the first time that 'Jews had actually sat down to define the memory they wanted preserved at Auschwitz'.<sup>52</sup> After the convention, the Museum acknowledged that of the revised estimate of 1.5 million victims 'the very great majority of them were Jews'.<sup>53</sup> However, the issue of Jewish representation remains contentious and Birkenau is continually favoured by Jewish visitors often because of the way in which Auschwitz I is presented. The developments of the

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<sup>45</sup> Lennon and Foley, *Dark Tourism*, 47-8

<sup>46</sup> J. Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence* (London, 2004) 149

<sup>47</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory, Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, 2

<sup>48</sup> A. Charlesworth, 'Contesting places of memory: the case of Auschwitz' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 12:5 (1994) 579-93

<sup>49</sup> Dwork and Van Pelt, 'Reclaiming Auschwitz', in Hartman (ed) *Holocaust Remembrance*, 240

<sup>50</sup> Lech Walesa, *New York Times*, 18 Nov 1989 as cited by Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 149

<sup>51</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 159

<sup>52</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 152

<sup>53</sup> As cited by Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 187

1990s also recognised that memorials themselves are provisional, ‘each is shaped and understood in the context of its time and place, its meanings contingent on evolving political realities’.<sup>54</sup>

Thus the process of historical representation is continually influenced by conflicting political, religious and personal ideologies. As with all Holocaust commemoration, representation is exercised with sensitive decorum. ‘Holocaust etiquette’ does in many situations define how the tourist both witnesses and reacts to memorialisation thus ‘to analyse such sites as tourist attractions presents obvious problems, not the least being the necessity for ethical considerations’.<sup>55</sup> As Young has argued, alongside the will of the state to preserve its past, ‘these sites of memory begin to assume lives of their own, often as resistant to official memory as they are emblematic of it’.<sup>56</sup> Thus to view Auschwitz from the perspective of the initiative behind its representation only considers one side of the story. Memorial camps alone, are essentially meaningless. We derive significance from their ‘explanatory inscriptions’ and the ‘knowledge we bring to them’.<sup>57</sup> Subsequently, it is impossible to discern whether Auschwitz would retain such significance if no one visited.<sup>58</sup> I intend to show that it is not only the museum’s presentation of the past that defines our perceptions of an historical event, that in the case of ‘dark tourism’ the visitor’s understanding is inextricably linked to his/her expectations of the site. ‘Perhaps it is this quality that we must recognise more than any other in Auschwitz: its diversity of function, history and meaning’.<sup>59</sup> In order to analyse visitor perception and understanding it is fundamental to understand that ‘Auschwitz-Birkenau is a shrine, but it is also a point on a tourist itinerary’.<sup>60</sup>

The early 1990s to the present day has seen an influx of Western tourists to Auschwitz and is therefore the period on which I shall concentrate.<sup>61</sup> The typical tourist’s journey consists of three linked but distinguishable sections and these will provide the premise of my thesis.

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<sup>54</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 154

<sup>55</sup> J. Beech, ‘The Enigma of Holocaust Sites as Tourist Attractions – the Case of Buchenwald’, *Managing Leisure*, 5, (2000) 29-41

<sup>56</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 119

<sup>57</sup> Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Indiana, 1988) 175

<sup>58</sup> Jilovsky, ‘Recreating Postmemory?’, 154

<sup>59</sup> J. Ashworth ‘National Perspectives in an International Setting: the Exhibitions of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 1945-1955’, *Presented at Jagiellonian Centre for European Studies*, (Krakow, May 2003)

<sup>60</sup> Keil, ‘Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead’, 491

<sup>61</sup> The shift from eastern to western visitors can be seen as especially pertinent since the decision of the Polish government to take trips to Auschwitz off the compulsory school curriculum.

Chapter one will focus on the preliminary stage, the planning, how the visitor prepares for his/her 'Auschwitz experience'. This comprises two elements, the 'general' preparation that is undertaken by most visitors, and the 'personal' which is tied to the motivations of the individual. As 'general' preparation includes background research into the destination, I will consider how the narrative of the Holocaust is transmitted to the potential visitor prior to his/her visit by analysing the way in which guidebooks present the historical site of Auschwitz and consider whether this has changed over time. Guidebooks can provide fascinating insight into what is considered, at the time, as worth seeing.

It is also vital to explore the motivations of the individual. No matter how sites are presented, the 'meaning they communicate to those who visit them is dependent on their actual connection with what happened there. The role of the visitor in shaping the meaning of such sites is key'.<sup>62</sup> Chapter one must therefore include recognition of the different 'types' of Holocaust tourist. What do the terms 'traveller', 'tourist' and 'pilgrim' mean and does this influence visitor expectation? I will look at the 'March of the Living' scheme to explore the motivations of Jewish 'pilgrims' and consider why Auschwitz retains a decisive role in the establishment of Jewish identity. I will also analyse the 'Lessons From Auschwitz' programme run by the Holocaust Educational Trust. This government-funded scheme offers UK A-level students of any religion an opportunity comprising an orientation seminar, one-day trip to Auschwitz, a follow-up session and a progress report.<sup>63</sup> By going to both the preliminary and reflective seminars I intend to discern whether expectations are fulfilled and historical understandings realised.

Chapter two concerns the visit itself. When visitors arrive, what confronts them? This section will focus on the contemporary memorialisation and 'museumification' of the camp itself. The layout and the content of the exhibit determine how the committee and curators want the visitor to receive and understand the site. *Generations Should Remember*, written in 2003 by Bohan Rymaszewski<sup>64</sup> helps to provide such insight. By using this source as well as the 'official guidebook' I shall explore how Auschwitz's managers wish it to be seen since

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<sup>62</sup> Jilovsky, 'Recreating Postmemory?', 154

<sup>63</sup> The 'Progress Report' is part four of the programme and is designed to encourage participants to document their experiences and present the 'lessons from Auschwitz' to their school and local communities. Completion of all four stages of the course makes participants eligible for a 'University of Hull Award' equal to 10 Level-4 Undergraduate CAT points, HET 'Lessons From Auschwitz' Preliminary information pack and Seminar (Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2009, Jury Doyle Hotel, London)

<sup>64</sup> Bohan Rymaszewski has been a 'counsellor and expert' of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for over 30 years. As stated by Jerzy Wroblewski, Director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. B. Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim, 2003)

the changes initiated in the early 1990s. Chapter two will thus also look at the idea of ‘appropriateness’ of the presentation and how this reflects on the historical content displayed.

Chapter three will analyse reflections on the visit; what did the individual learn from the site? Furthermore and perhaps more importantly, what impact has the experience as a Holocaust tourist had on their understanding of historical narrative? With what is the visitor left, is it history or simply an experience of the darkest form of tourism? In this, the most important chapter I will work with two mediums, photography and written accounts via internet ‘blogging’.

I will use photographs taken by Auschwitz tourists to analyse how they have understood the historical site. Photography is both an intrinsic part of the visitor experience and a valuable historical source. Indeed most tourists seem almost enslaved by the dutiful act of photographic recording.<sup>65</sup> The ‘Kodakization’ of tourism ‘includes the clearly marked site from which to see, the direction of view, even the framing in a circuit of visual culture’.<sup>66</sup> Thus the tourist ‘appropriates’ the thing photographed by choosing which frame is photo-worthy.<sup>67</sup>

Since its development in the mid 1800’s, the traditional view of photography secured it as ‘a vessel of accuracy, authenticity, verisimilitude, and truth’.<sup>68</sup> This notion that ‘Seeing is Believing’ was particularly important in exposing the tragedies of the Holocaust. Following the liberation of the concentration camps, ‘atrocities photos’ flooded the western media.<sup>69</sup> The presumption of photographic truth was intrinsic to the public’s response ‘I believe it’s true. I can see with my own eyes. Pictures don’t lie’.<sup>70</sup> The contemporary perspective of photography as an historical source is more tenuous. Whilst in no way seeking to dispute the horrific images that emerged from the liberated camps, the notion that a photograph can, in isolation provide a reliable tool to impart knowledge has to be challenged. A photograph ‘proves little more than that the scene has actually existed. Any other meaning is extraneous’.<sup>71</sup> The same photo can possess a multitude of meanings depending on the context it is placed in; photographs ‘are fragments. They illustrate stories, they do not tell

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<sup>65</sup> Tim Edensor ‘Performing tourism, staging tourism: (re)producing tourist space and practice’ *Tourist Studies*, 1:1 (2001) 75

<sup>66</sup> D. MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (California, 1999) p. 123-4

<sup>67</sup> S. Sontag, *On Photography*, (London, 1978) 4

<sup>68</sup> B. Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera’s Eye* (London, 1998) 9

<sup>69</sup> After the liberation, tours of the camps were organised and actually encouraged for dignitaries, on the premise that seeing *was* believing. Furthermore, ‘Seeing is Believing’ provided the title of an exhibition of atrocity photos organised by the *Daily Express* which opened in May 1945. As cited by Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 125, 130

<sup>70</sup> As cited by Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 125

<sup>71</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 211

them.<sup>72</sup> In this sense the photography proves a ‘woefully inadequate way of imparting information’.<sup>73</sup>

The perspective I will adopt however, differs from this traditional methodology. I will use photographs to analyse *what* the visitor is making notable to determine whether the Auschwitz tourist is representing reality or merely capturing a photographic cliché. The visitor accepting the traditional notion, that truth *can* be captured with the click of a button and that ‘seeing is believing’ presents two potential difficulties. The first is that the tourist and indeed anyone else who sees these photographs believes that they are seeing Auschwitz *as it actually is* or worse, *as it actually was*. The second is that in merely *being* at the site and *capturing* it on camera, the tourist believes that he/she has entered some sort of gateway to the past.

Flickr.com is a website allowing an online community to share photographs over the internet.<sup>74</sup> In an era, dominated by social-networking sites, it is no wonder that ‘photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something’.<sup>75</sup> The idea of travelling without a camera seems preposterous the modern tourist and Sontag’s prophetic stance that ‘everything exists to end in a photograph’<sup>76</sup> is increasingly relevant to the ‘online’ generation.

Lastly but perhaps most importantly, I will work with internet blogging, another mode of online expression. Blogger.com defines a blog as ‘a personal diary. A daily pulpit. A collaborative space. A political soapbox. A breaking-news outlet. A collection of links. Your own private thoughts. Memos to the world’.<sup>77</sup> In 1998, there were less than ‘50 known blogs worldwide’. By October 2006, ‘the Technorati blog search engine was tracking 57.4 million’.<sup>78</sup> Those who use blogs, often do so as ‘an online journal, similar to a traditional diary, to record their activities, thoughts and feelings’. Thus ‘the blog’s focus is on spontaneous, authentic, personal and subjective content from an individual’s perspective’.<sup>79</sup> On this premise I will use blogs in a similar way to how historians analyse memoirs and diaries.

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<sup>72</sup> ‘It has been left to curators, film-makers, historians and propagandists to determine how they are interpreted’ Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 15

<sup>73</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 212

<sup>74</sup> Flickr.com’s catchphrase is ‘Share Your Photos. Watch The World’ <<http://www.flickr.com>> [March 2009]

<sup>75</sup> S. Sontag, *On Photography* (London, 1978) 10

<sup>76</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 24

<sup>77</sup> Blogger (TM), *What is a Blog? Blogger Website*, [11 January 09]

<sup>78</sup> (Figures as given on 23 October 2006 at <http://www.technorati.com/about>) S. Ho ‘Blogging as popular history making, blogs as public history: the Singapore case study’ *Public History Review*, 14 (2007) p. 65

<sup>79</sup> S. Ho ‘Blogging as popular history making, blogs as public history: the Singapore case study’ *Public History Review*, 14 (2007) p. 66

I intend to reflect on how Auschwitz tourists understand and transmit their knowledge and experiences through this online phenomenon, in order to address an integral question; ‘what do people who visit those camps...‘see?’<sup>80</sup> One of the major attractions for bloggers is the potential for anonymity providing for more truthful assessments with no inherent responsibility.

‘It remains unclear...precisely how the internet will radically transform, if at all, the nature of historical scholarship’.<sup>81</sup> The realm of digital history is characterised by controversy. Whilst ‘online history has not—and indeed may never—rival the gold standard of the book’, historians will never realise this apparent inability ‘unless we work harder to capitalize on the advantages of the web’.<sup>82</sup> Indeed as new source types become available online, new ways of analysing them must be developed. I believe that the blog provides an extensive, untapped source demonstrating personal interaction with historical memory. The possibilities of this sort of engagement with the internet could prove invaluable to historians. Digitalisation in this manner forces us to ‘revisit age-old questions about what history is and how we should engage in it’.<sup>83</sup> ‘Most historians have not embraced this vision in which everyone becomes his or her own historian’.<sup>84</sup> However it must be realised that this expansive technological arena could provide exciting new opportunities for forums of debate and the collation of public history.

As with any historical source, blogging has its limitations. In the same way that an historian ought to be wary of a memoir in that it only provides one persons account, caution should be exercised towards blogging. Furthermore, within such an expansive genre, it is potentially possible to find anything to support any contention. However, it is possible to avoid these pitfalls if aware of them from the outset.

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<sup>80</sup> Pollock, ‘Holocaust tourism’ in D. Crouch and N. Lübbren, *Visual culture and tourism* 177

<sup>81</sup> L. Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London, 2000) 189

<sup>82</sup> D. Cohen, ‘History and the Second Decade of the Web’, *Rethinking History* 8:2, (2004), 294

<sup>83</sup> Cohen, ‘History and the Second Decade of the Web’, 299

<sup>84</sup> R. Rosenzweig ‘Scarcity or abundance? Preserving the past in a digital era’ *The American Historical Review*, 108:3 (2003)

## Chapter One: 'Europe's Must-See'

Urry argues that the tourist 'gaze' and indeed experience, commences before arrival and may be shaped by 'anticipation'.<sup>85</sup> Preliminary information such as travel programmes, brochures and guidebooks provide 'a means of preparation, aid, documentation and vicarious participation'.<sup>86</sup> I will argue that further to *instructing* the visitor, this initial preparation actually *constructs* the experience ensuring the meaning that the visitor takes from the site is ultimately determined by his/her motivations. Are touristic experiences individually established or are they prescribed prior to departure, and is our behaviour when we arrive, our own or pre-determined?

The 1830s saw the growth of the types of publications which now dominate the tourist trade,<sup>87</sup> aiming not only to provide concise descriptions but influence what 'ought to be seen'<sup>88</sup> at each destination. Thus there are 'larger meanings' within the guidebooks 'practical tips and anodyne itineraries' which relate to why tourists travel and what they see.<sup>89</sup> Whilst Koshar and Parsons agree that guidebooks often characterise the cultural attitude of their readers, little has been done to explain how such literature fuels touristic expectations, subsequently modifying what is seen and experienced. The Rough Guide and Lonely Planet have come to dominate the 'backpacker' market. Interestingly, both series affirm McCannell's notion of a quest for authenticity as they stroke the ego of the reader 'savvy, cool, penurious, not like *them*' (the tourists).<sup>90</sup> Thus guidebooks like these aim to convey 'the cultural authenticity' of sites, as opposed to something 'laid on for the tourists'.<sup>91</sup>

As Cole notes, the 'visitor to contemporary Poland, is encouraged to engage in 'Holocaust tourism',<sup>92</sup> often through the medium of guidebooks. Auschwitz is frequently

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<sup>85</sup> Also fuelled by a variety of 'non-tourist practices, such as film, TV, literature, magazines, records and videos, which construct and reinforce that gaze' Urry, *The Tourist Gaze* 3 See also Keil, on 'Schindler Tourism' 'Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead', 483 and Pollock for detailed analysis of how 'The touristic is both actual and vicarious through films' in 'Holocaust tourism' in Crouch and Lübbren, *Visual culture and tourism*, 188

<sup>86</sup> Edensor 'Performing tourism, staging tourism', 71

<sup>87</sup> The 'Murray' handbook and the 'Baedeker' guidebook are frequently cited as the earliest forms of guidebooks as we understand them today N. Parsons, *Worth the Detour: A History of the Guidebook*, (Gloucestershire, 2007) xiii see also R. Koshar, 'What Ought to Be Seen: Tourists' Guidebooks and National Identities in Modern Germany and Europe', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33:3 (1998) 323

<sup>88</sup> Koshar, 'What Ought to Be Seen', 323

<sup>89</sup> R. Koshar, *German Travel Cultures* (Oxford, 2000) 6

<sup>90</sup> Parsons, *Worth the Detour*, 261, 265

<sup>91</sup> Such guides are also famous for their 'telling it like it is' attitude. The earliest titles of Lonely Planet were 'strongly countercultural, with *Africa on a Shoestring* offering tips on how to get hold of marijuana, while another volume even advised on the obtaining of fake student ID cards' N. Parsons, *Worth the Detour*, 261, 265

<sup>92</sup> Cole, 'Holocaust tourism', 3



cited as a ‘must see’ attraction and ranks number Seventeen in the Rough Guides things to see in Poland.<sup>93</sup> Such advertising exemplifies the normalisation of Holocaust tourism as it rates Auschwitz alongside more conventional tourist attractions. However, this standardisation of the site coupled with the famously blasé attitudes of publications like Lonely Planet is potentially at odds with the macabre nature of Auschwitz’s history, ‘visit as many of the exhibitions as you want (or can) in the prison blocks, then go to the gas chambers and crematorium’.<sup>94</sup>

Although the purpose of the former-camp is hinted at on occasion; ‘both sites are as much living memorials as museums’,<sup>95</sup> any explicit reference to Auschwitz’s significance is excluded. This highlights a fundamental problem of Auschwitz as a tourist site, why would you *want* to visit and do you become morally obliged to? The only reason for visiting offered by the guidebooks is that of Auschwitz’s transformative potential, as the 2005 edition of Lonely Planet claims, ‘few who come here will be unchanged by the experience’.<sup>96</sup> Thus, before the tourist even arrives, he/she is imbued with expectation, firstly that the visit constitutes an ‘experience’ and secondly that they will leave a different and, potentially better person.

Expectations of Auschwitz are also fuelled by prescriptions of behaviour. Perhaps, ‘most striking are the ways in which the camp is explicitly constructed as a place to be visited differently’.<sup>97</sup> Visitors are advised not to ‘cram’ too much in and to ‘be discreet when using [photography] equipment’.<sup>98</sup> Practicalities about how to visit the camp are also offered ‘walking the whole circuit (train station – Auschwitz-Birkenau – train station) can be time-consuming’ and ‘bear in mind...that you’ll be walking along unshaded asphalt all the way – not particularly comfortable in high summer’.<sup>99</sup> Whilst it can be argued that offering such suggestions is within the guidebooks’ remit, it also pinpoints the need to maintain a sensitive balance between practicalities and historical subject matter.

It can be argued that guidebooks not only establish how you must behave but also go some way in determining how you ought to feel. Whilst this has already been alluded to with reference to the transformative nature of the site, it is also crucial to note the emotive

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<sup>93</sup> M. Salter and G. McLachlon, *Poland: The Rough Guide* (London, 2005)

<sup>94</sup> Lonely Planet Website <[www.lonelyplanet.com/poland](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/poland)>, [31 March 2009]

<sup>95</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (2005) 448

<sup>96</sup> It is also worth noting that such references to the life-changing potential of the site are not included in earlier editions of the same guide book thus suggesting a transformation in the way in which Auschwitz is portrayed and its purpose as a dark touristic attraction see Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (2005) 448

<sup>97</sup> Cole, ‘Holocaust tourism’, 15

<sup>98</sup> Lonely Planet Website <[www.lonelyplanet.com/poland](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/poland)>, [31 March 2009]

<sup>99</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (2005) 448

emphasis on the horror that one will encounter on visiting Auschwitz. Birkenau is described as ‘unfathomably shocking’<sup>100</sup> and ‘the shock of the visit...is likely to affect you for a long time’.<sup>101</sup> The visitor is advised ‘to go with friends rather than alone’,<sup>102</sup> that he/she will be deeply saddened by the visit ‘there’s a cheap hotel...in the entrance building to the camp if you are emotionally up to staying here’.<sup>103</sup> An early edition of the Lonely Planet mentions ‘if you want to leave flowers, there are flower stalls outside the camp’.<sup>104</sup> Not only is the notion of a flower-stall positioned in a lucrative spot, outside the entrance to Europe’s largest concentration camp nauseating, it is also problematic for Holocaust tourism. Before the visitor has even arrived, expectations have been emotionally determined, ‘visitors bring to Auschwitz, and perhaps expect it to confer on them, a certain solemnity’.<sup>105</sup>

Interestingly, the 1993 edition of Lonely Planet describes Auschwitz as ‘possibly the most moving sight in Poland’<sup>106</sup> whereas the most up-to-date version asserts it to be ‘Poland’s most moving sight’.<sup>107</sup> Whilst one could sardonically question what the other contenders for ‘Poland’s most moving site’ were in 1993 and what has changed since then in order for Auschwitz to gain superiority, perhaps more noticeable are the implications for Auschwitz as a dark touristic site. The superlative nature of the language used, ‘the *most* moving site’ suggests that not only is appeal based on Auschwitz’s ability to generate sombreness but also that it is very much a touristic ‘experience’ as opposed to an historical site.

The Rough Guide seemingly explores the problem of representation, ‘there are two victim nations demanding recognition: Poles and Jews’<sup>108</sup> and notes that in early editions of the site’s official guidebook, the words ‘Jew’ and ‘Holocaust’ were rarely used.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps, the most in-depth analysis of Auschwitz’s ‘museumification’ is in the 1996 edition of the Rough Guide. Not only do the authors actively encourage visitors to question the representation of the site; the Jewish dimension may be ‘one aspect...of the camp that you may feel has still not been fully addressed’,<sup>110</sup> but also, they suggest how the visitor can be misled by the exhibitions. This edition engages with Holocaust historiography and notes the

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<sup>100</sup> M. Salter and G. McLachlon, *Poland: The Rough Guide* (London, 1991) and (1996) 214, 419

<sup>101</sup> K. Dydyński, *Lonely Planet: Poland Travel Survival Kit* (First Edition), (London, 1993) p 308

<sup>102</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (1991) and (1996) 214, 419

<sup>103</sup> Dydyński, *Lonely Planet* (1993) 309

<sup>104</sup> Dydyński, *Lonely Planet* (1993) 309

<sup>105</sup> Keil, ‘Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead’, 483

<sup>106</sup> K Dydyński, *Lonely Planet* (1993) 308

<sup>107</sup> Lonely Planet Website <[www.lonelyplanet.com/poland](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/poland)>, [31 March 2009]

<sup>108</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (1991) 215

<sup>109</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (1991) 216

<sup>110</sup> Specifically related to barrack number 27, ‘labelled simply ‘Jews’’ Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (1996) 422

use of the non-original entrance for visitors as well as the reconstructed crematoria at Auschwitz I. The authors even offer some interesting commentary about how museum artefacts are ‘chosen, arranged and displayed with a purpose’.<sup>111</sup> These enlightened reflections are unexpected in a guidebook but their omission from later editions is interesting. This critical information has either been purposefully left out to mislead the visitor or, discarded as unimportant. Either way, historical accuracy has been ignored.

That this vital information was omitted for lack of relevance could be a consequence of the normalisation of Auschwitz as a tourist site, for example by 2002, the cafeteria was no longer considered grotesque by guidebook writers.<sup>112</sup> In fact, by 2005, amenities are no longer seen as morally problematic. The ‘tourist office...in the shopping mall/restaurant complex opposite the entrance to Auschwitz camp, can help you with transport information’.<sup>113</sup> If the attitude of travel writers towards Auschwitz has become increasingly normalised, a corresponding liberalising of ‘Holocaust etiquette’ may be inferred.

However, on reading the guidebooks the prospective visitor is still presented with several dilemmas. The first surrounds the ‘inexplicable’ horror of the Holocaust. Whilst there is a vast historiography debating the extent to which (or whether at all) one can understand, explain and indeed represent the atrocities of the Holocaust, the guidebooks seem to affirm that seeing, or perhaps even more controversially ‘experiencing’ Auschwitz as it is *now* allows the visitor to understand the atrocities of *then*. This blurs the corporal boundaries of past and present where the visitor can ‘wander round the barracks and...soon begin to imagine the terror’,<sup>114</sup> ‘you don’t need much imagination to take in what happened’.<sup>115</sup>

Additionally, visitors are confronted by instructive guidebooks that render Auschwitz an ordinary tourist ‘site/sight’ simultaneously signalling it as ‘quite unlike other sites/sights’.<sup>116</sup> Literature also stipulates how differently one ought to behave and feel at Auschwitz, whilst advertising it like any popular tourist attraction. [Auschwitztours.com](http://Auschwitztours.com) offers ‘Auschwitz Tours in comfortable vans’<sup>117</sup> whilst the Krakow-shuttle website recommends you ‘save time and visit’ both Auschwitz and the Salt Mine near Krakow ‘in

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<sup>111</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (1996) Author recommends Dwork and Van Pelt, ‘Reclaiming Auschwitz’, in Hartman (ed) *Holocaust Remembrance*

<sup>112</sup> ‘Rather grotesquely, there’s a hotel and a large cafeteria inside the Auschwitz camp’ Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (1991) see also T. Cole, ‘Holocaust tourism’, 17

<sup>113</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (2005) 448

<sup>114</sup> Salter and McLachlon, *Poland* (1991) 216

<sup>115</sup> Dydyński, *Lonely Planet* (1993) 309

<sup>116</sup> T. Cole, ‘Holocaust tourism’, 14

<sup>117</sup> <[www.auschwitztours.com](http://www.auschwitztours.com)> [4 February 2009]

one day with no compromise on your trip itinerary’, guaranteeing your return by ‘dinner time’.<sup>118</sup>

Whilst traditionally tourism was seen as an ‘eviscerated form of early modern travel’, many scholars have tired of this distinction between “‘good’ travel and ‘bad’ tourism”.<sup>119</sup> However, the ‘inverted snobbery of today’s itinerant observer, who is equally contemptuous of package tours’ still exists to some extent.<sup>120</sup> This is further complicated by the notion that pilgrimage provides a distinctive subsection of travel. Is it fair to assert that the pilgrims visit differs from that of the ‘tourist’ and if so how does this affect his/her relationship with Auschwitz?

The March of the Living was set up in the late 1980s to provide a unique opportunity for North-American Jews to participate in a pilgrimage to Europe, visiting Auschwitz and concluding in Israel.<sup>121</sup> A plethora of literature attempts to distinguish this sort of visitation from other forms of travel. Scholars focus on what motivates these ‘pilgrims’ and how their perceptions of the site differ from the ‘tourist’. Keil argues that such visits are a ‘form of memorialisation of the past’. These sites are framed within a ‘precise set of expectations, formed by pilgrimage narratives and discriminations, and by widespread dissemination of images of the site’.<sup>122</sup> Thus as noted with reference to the ‘tourist’, the ‘pilgrims’ motivation again determine how he/she visits the site.

There are numerous reasons why Jews, especially from North America choose to visit Auschwitz. Some make the trip for personal or familial reasons. Kugelmass notes that the tours are ‘structured around the themes of destruction and redemption’ with the participants seeing ‘nothing quaint about the local culture either Jewish or non-Jewish; their interest is in the dead rather than the living’.<sup>123</sup> It can be argued that this distinguishes these visits from those of ordinary tourists which are ‘a balance between leisure and learning in which leisure...has the upper hand’. Since American Jews are known to be strongly biased against

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<sup>118</sup> ‘An iced coolbox of complimentary mineral water, fruit juices and sodas is also provided’, you can add lunch for an extra €5. Website also offers a ‘November special’ of 10% off if you book the combined trip in before the end of November 2008 <[www.krakowshuttle.com](http://www.krakowshuttle.com)> [29 November 2008]

<sup>119</sup> Koshar, *German Travel Cultures*, 4

<sup>120</sup> This particularly relates to the ‘Rough Guide’ and ‘Lonely Planet’ audience who seem intent on ‘discovering’ authenticity. See also N. Parsons, *Worth the Detour*, 267

<sup>121</sup> Part of what has been deemed the Jewish ‘going home’ phenomenon. March of the Living are not the only organisation to sponsor this sort of pilgrimage, American synagogue groups such as the Conservative movement’s United Synagogue Youth and the Orthodox movement’s B’nai Akiva also encourage this sort of activity. See J. Kugelmass ‘Missions to the Past: Poland in Contemporary Jewish Thought and Deed’ in P. Antze, M. Lambek (eds) *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, (London, 1996) 200, 404

<sup>122</sup> Keil, ‘Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead’, 480-1

<sup>123</sup> J. Kugelmass, ‘The Rites of the Tribe: The Meaning of Poland for American Jewish Tourists’ *YIVO Annual*, 21 (1992) 404, 411

Poland, Kugelmass questions their motivation for going.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, although familial ties may provide a driving force for visitation, most do not know precisely where their ancestors were from, rendering the visits ‘less to do with memory culture that is specific to particular family’ more to do with a ‘much larger collectivity’.<sup>125</sup>

If Jewish pilgrims are not specifically motivated by familial ties, they may be driven not by ‘feelings of guilt but rather by the need to fulfil a moral obligation to the dead’.<sup>126</sup> For many Jews visiting the former-camps has become obligatory, ‘as if there were no other way to really know the past’ and it has been argued that it is the ‘very seriousness of such visits that distinguishes Jewish travel to Poland from tourism’.<sup>127</sup> Thus visiting Auschwitz for them is both ‘experience’ and knowing oneself in the midst of past devastation. One of the motivations for participants is ‘seeing it with our own eyes’.<sup>128</sup> One pilgrim stated ‘today we go to Auschwitz. By the time we enter, I have changed from being a ‘surviving grandson’ to being equal, arriving at the gates from the past in the past’.<sup>129</sup>

However, although the continuing appeal of pilgrimage seems to be a desire to ‘re-experience culture as fully three-dimensional, as real’, Stier notes ‘ironically, it is rarely reality that the pilgrims see’.<sup>130</sup> As will be explored in Chapter three, the visitor’s gaze is very much determined by what he/she wishes to see which is often not consistent with the visual reality. Indeed Pollock’s refusal to visit Auschwitz is based on the problematic assumption that ‘seeing’ is ‘knowing’,<sup>131</sup> further complicated by the actual omission of historical fact. Stier noted that during his visit with a group of American Jews, there was no mention outside the crematoria at Auschwitz I of the ‘reconstructed nature of the space in which the participants were being asked to act symbolically’.<sup>132</sup>

As already alluded to, for many, the visit is as much about the affirmation of individual identity in the present as it is about understanding the past. As one March of the Living participant understood ‘I have always been told that visiting the concentration

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<sup>124</sup> Kugelmass, ‘The Rites of the Tribe’, 411

<sup>125</sup> Kugelmass, ‘The Rites of the Tribe’, 415, 417

<sup>126</sup> Kugelmass ‘Missions to the Past’ in Antze, and Lambek (eds.) *Tense Past*, 208

<sup>127</sup> Kugelmass ‘Missions to the Past’ in Antze, and Lambek (eds.) *Tense Past*, 201

<sup>128</sup> O. Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, (2003, Massachusetts) 157

<sup>129</sup> J. Dekro ‘First Time Home: Poland Leaves Its Mark on a Visitor’ *Reconstructionist* LIV (Oct-Nov) 11 as cited by J. Kugelmass ‘Missions to the Past: Poland in Contemporary Jewish Thought and Deed’ in P. Antze, M. Lambek (eds) *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, (London, 1996) 202

<sup>130</sup> O. Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, (2003, Massachusetts) 157 see also Kugelmass, ‘The Rites of the Tribe’, 417

<sup>131</sup> Crouch and Lübbren, *Visual culture and tourism*, 15

<sup>132</sup> Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 158

camps...is a necessary part of being Jewish'.<sup>133</sup> Kugelmass believes that those who go on these pilgrimages, particularly those who travel in tour groups 'do so to participate in a secular ritual that confirms who they are as Jews and, perhaps even more so, as American Jews'.<sup>134</sup> I believe this idea of finding oneself and understanding the world by visiting Auschwitz or other sites of dark tourism is no longer unique to those with religious or familial connections. The way in which Auschwitz is described by its preliminary literature and portrayed by the media, along with a general utilisation of the 'lessons of the Holocaust' means that visiting Auschwitz has now become not only a moral imperative but also a panacea for self-discovery.

Thus it is not only the pilgrim who feels this sense of obligation. The widespread references to concentration camps in guidebooks, which include for example a mention of the camp at Dachau in Frommer's '500 Places to Take Your Kids Before They Grow Up',<sup>135</sup> fuels the compulsion. Furthermore, the motivations of many tourists are heavily self-prophetic and often very similar to those of the pilgrims. Several of the HET teenagers at their preparatory seminar, agreed that their reason for visiting was 'to experience what it was like',<sup>136</sup> a similar motivation to that of many of the March of the Living participants. Other responses included a desire to see the 'true evil in the world', a heavily prevalent theme within dark tourism. Wanting to 'pass the information on to the next generation',<sup>137</sup> was also mentioned, which is intrinsic to the idea that lessons from the Holocaust can be utilised for posterity. To this day it seems that going to Auschwitz has become a method of redemption for individuals as well as a way to cure the ills of a society<sup>138</sup>.

Many maintain this erroneous belief, that seeing Auschwitz is crucial to preventing atrocities like the Holocaust from happening again. A forum called metafilter.com provides a weblog of free discussion amongst its users.<sup>139</sup> One member, a descendant of a Holocaust survivor, asked whether he should visit Auschwitz during a trip to Europe. Many responses from both Jews and gentiles included phrases such as 'bear witness' and 'never again' and the 'monstrous things that humanity is capable of'. One even remarked 'if I were in your

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<sup>133</sup> March of the Living Participant as cited by Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 155

<sup>134</sup> Kugelmass, 'The Rites of the Tribe' 419

<sup>135</sup> H. Hughes, *Frommer's 500 Places to Take Your Kids Before They Grow Up* (2006, San Francisco) 310

<sup>136</sup> Answers from Students at HET 'Lessons From Auschwitz' Preliminary Seminar (Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2009, Jury Doyle Hotel, London)

<sup>137</sup> Answers from Students at HET 'Lessons From Auschwitz' Preliminary Seminar

<sup>138</sup> C. Arnot, 'The Stuff of nightmares: Can trips to Auschwitz help tackle racism and hate crime among troubled young people?', *The Guardian*, (Wednesday 21 January 2009)

<sup>139</sup> From its own description 'This website exists to break down the barriers between people, to extend a weblog beyond just one person, and to foster discussion among its members' <<http://www.metafilter.com/about.mefi>> [March 2009]

shoes it would be disrespectful *not* to go.’<sup>140</sup> Others also affirmed visiting as obligatory, ‘it’s really heavy going, but it’s one of those things that you just *have* to do’, and ‘my sister felt she *had* to witness it’<sup>141</sup> whilst many explicitly pointed towards our ‘responsibility’ for ‘the future’ and ‘think about *what it will mean to your grandchildren*.’<sup>142</sup>

Motivations fuelled by obligation coupled with the promise that visiting will be life-changing feeds into the tourists expectations of what the site will look like; ‘we shape landscapes and artefacts to conform with illusory histories, public and private, that gratify our tastes’.<sup>143</sup> A State Museum tour guide at Auschwitz purported that ‘many visitors believe that birds don’t sing at Auschwitz-Birkenau’. This is erroneous, but as Keil notes ‘the imaginative demand for silence and absence overrides the evidence of the senses’.<sup>144</sup> The expectations of other potential tourists confirm this assertion, both students and teachers at the preliminary HET seminar expected the site to have ‘no birdsong, no animals, no flowers’, be ‘barren’, ‘brown or no colour’. They determinedly believed that the sky would be ‘grey’ or ‘dark’ and that the area would feel ‘abandoned’ and ‘desolate’ whilst smelling ‘old’ or ‘musty’.<sup>145</sup> Not one participant considered that the weather could be stunning or that their visit would be affected by the swarms of visitors that enter the site each day. As I will explore in the final chapter, this expectation of solitude and devastation that destroyed the lives of so many during the Holocaust ultimately defines the way in which the contemporary tourist sees and perceives Auschwitz-Birkenau as an historical site.

Whilst for many, the ‘pilgrimages’ provide ‘rehearsals of what American Jews are intent on becoming or, perhaps more accurately stated, intent on not becoming’,<sup>146</sup> as previously argued this is no longer a specifically Jewish phenomenon. If the notion of different ‘types’ of visitors is a fallacy, what are the implications for dark touristic sites and their educative potential as historical sources? It can be asserted that there are actually similarities between pilgrims and tourists in their quest for the ‘authentic’.<sup>147</sup> Steir argues that the tourists visit is ‘phenomenologically analogous to a pilgrimage’.<sup>148</sup> Although it is often claimed that ‘pilgrims’ visits are more personal, this can be disputed. Every journey is

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<sup>140</sup> ‘Visiting Auschwitz: Good or bad idea?’ Question asked June 18, 2007 12:12 AM AM  
<<http://www.metafilter.com/about.mefi>> [March 2009]

<sup>141</sup> (emphasis added) ‘Visiting Auschwitz: Good or bad idea?’ [March 2009]

<sup>142</sup> ‘Visiting Auschwitz: Good or bad idea?’ [March 2009]

<sup>143</sup> D. Lowenthal, ‘Past Time, Present Place’, 36

<sup>144</sup> State Museum tour guide, personal interview 8 July 2003 as cited by Keil, ‘Sightseeing in the Mansions of the dead’ 492

<sup>145</sup> Answers from Students at HET ‘Lessons From Auschwitz’ Preliminary Seminar

<sup>146</sup> Kugelmass, ‘The Rites of the Tribe’ 433

<sup>147</sup> MacCannell, ‘Staged Authenticity’ 593

<sup>148</sup> Steir, *Committed to Memory*, 182

personal in some respect, regardless of familial or religious affiliation and in many ways Auschwitz has become a place for anyone and everyone to mourn.

For nearly two decades Auschwitz-Birkenau has increasingly been portrayed as a touristic site, experience or even attraction. Both the content and mode of expression adopted by the preliminary literature support this assertion, with the 2009 Lonely Planet encouraging visitors to ‘climb the tower at the entrance to get the full effect’.<sup>149</sup> The pressure put on tourists to have the prescribed Auschwitz experience is further complicated by the expectation of transformative potential. As one student during the HET seminar tentatively suggested ‘I hope to see all the things I want to see. I don’t know what that is yet but when I see it, I’ll know’.<sup>150</sup> Is there a ‘correct’ way to visit Auschwitz? Does it really matter why we go? I believe that the boundaries between those with religious or family connections to the Holocaust and the general ‘tourist’ have become, for better or worse, increasingly blurred.

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<sup>149</sup> Lonely Planet Website <[www.lonelyplanet.com/poland](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/poland)>, [31 March 2009]

<sup>150</sup> Answers from Students at HET ‘Lessons From Auschwitz’ Preliminary Seminar



## Chapter Two: 'Wish You Weren't Here?'

Auschwitz-Birkenau is approximately two hours west of Krakow, a city which is an 'important tourist destination in its own right, and a good base for touring'.<sup>151</sup> Upon arrival in this historic city, the tourist is bombarded with advertising encouraging visitation of the site.<sup>152</sup> As asserted in the introduction, the discourse of the camp since its liberation is both complex and extensive, particularly in relation to the 'Jewish dimension',<sup>153</sup> thus my focus will remain on the period from the early 1990s. Although this narrows the focus, it is nevertheless vital to remember that the way in which Auschwitz portrays itself to the visitor, is never static.

The 1990 meeting at Yarnton sought not only to move 'toward a definition of the present role of Auschwitz',<sup>154</sup> but also to establish practicalities to assist the tourist influx. This included setting up a shuttle bus between Auschwitz I and Birkenau and standardising the training of tour-guides.<sup>155</sup> Members of the newly appointed committee also highlighted some interesting issues to do with the appropriateness of behaviour at the site. As with the guidebooks these instructive guidelines determine tourist behaviour (sometimes subconsciously) and create norms which ultimately affect the way in which a visitor understands an historic site. Although the suggestion of a dress code was rejected (after all 'who has the right to determine what appropriate dress of tourist practices are?'),<sup>156</sup> as a compromise, the committee agreed to post an 'ambiguous invitation to decorum', so as to remind visitors that the site is not 'just another tourist haven'.<sup>157</sup> In line with the guidebooks, the committee reaffirmed that the site actively sought solemnity. The suggestion to use wax dummies to depict people in areas of the camp was rejected on the basis that it 'would violate the solemn atmosphere',<sup>158</sup> again affirming the behavioural norm of grief.

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<sup>151</sup> Keil, 'Sightseeing in the mansions of the dead'. p 482

<sup>152</sup> We had barely left the airport when our Taxi-driver started asking us about whether we wanted him to take us to visit Auschwitz the next day. Own visit, January 2009. See also Krakow in your Pocket: Mini-Guide to the City (December 2008 – January 2009)

<sup>153</sup> For reading on the camp from 1945-1990 see 'Owning and Disowning Auschwitz' Van Pelt and Dwork, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present*, Chapter four, Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, J. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland and the Politics of Commemoration 1945-79* (Athens, 2003 ), on the 'Catholicisation' see I. Wollaston 'Sharing Sacred Space? The Carmelite controversy and the politics of commemoration' *Patterns of Prejudice* 28:3-4 (1994)

<sup>154</sup> B. Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim, 2003) 71

<sup>155</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 152

<sup>156</sup> Cole, 'Holocaust tourism', 22

<sup>157</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 153

<sup>158</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 91

The way in which the complex, specifically the museum at Auschwitz I, presents itself is troublesome for the scholar seeking historical relevance. Firstly, developments in the field of museology have noted the significance of the way in which information is displayed and presented. ‘The archivists’ traditional veneration of the trace is tied directly to their need for proof and evidence of a particular past.’ However, as Young notes, ‘they too often confuse proof that something existed with proof that it existed in a particular way’.<sup>159</sup> Often, visitors confuse ruins for the events they have come to represent, ‘we must continue to remind ourselves that the historical meanings we find in museums may not be proven by artefacts, so much as generated by their organisation’.<sup>160</sup> Archivists and curators frame objects which they deem to be important or representative of a certain idea, whilst others are discarded thus defining what is seen and understood.<sup>161</sup> If the organiser’s motivations are fuelled by touristic impulse rather than historical venture, the visitor is ‘at the mercy of the way the encounter is stage-managed as a memorable visit, rather than a visit of memory’.<sup>162</sup>

However, the role of museum is not the only position that contemporary Auschwitz seeks to fulfil; the camp is ‘a cemetery, a historic monument, a museum and a place of remembrance’.<sup>163</sup> Rymaszewski argues that the ‘the former camp is a vital piece of evidence’, providing ‘material proofs supplementing and authenticating the accounts and re-constructions of past events...it helps our contemporaries understand the tragic truth’.<sup>164</sup> Thus by extension, Auschwitz serves to fulfil the tourist’s desire for ‘authenticity’. ‘Here, nothing needs to be added or invented. Everything is tangible and painfully real’, thus it ‘cannot be a place of architectural reconstructions, but solely of preservation and adaption’.<sup>165</sup> However, as will be explored later, not only is the author’s vehement rejection of reconstruction thoroughly misleading, his notion that ruins can serve as ‘material proofs’ is also problematic.

The site is also presented as a place of remembrance and preservation for the future. Time will not erase the events of the Holocaust, it merely endows them ‘with new significance’ and thus the ‘mission of the museum [is] to pass down to future generations the

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<sup>159</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 127-8

<sup>160</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 127-8

<sup>161</sup> Scholars such as Charlesworth have noted that representation at Auschwitz omits many details of camp life. Evidence tends to focus on diet, personal circumstances and duties in camp. The landscapes often go unnoticed ‘the rivers they bathed in – go for nothing’ A. Charlesworth ‘The Topography of Genocide’ in D. Stone (ed), *The historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke, 2004) 217

<sup>162</sup> Pollock ‘Holocaust tourism’ in Crouch and Lübbren, *Visual culture and tourism*, 177

<sup>163</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 14

<sup>164</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 70

<sup>165</sup> Rymaszewski constantly reaffirms this principle of ‘conserve, not restore’ throughout his thesis on the meaning of the site, Rymaszewski *Generations Should Remember*, 81, 85, 90

real picture of the death camp'.<sup>166</sup> Here Rymaszewski refers to the utilisation of lessons from the Holocaust and the importance of preserving these lessons for posterity. He also describes the camp as a 'great cemetery' which 'naturally encourages contemplation and prayer'.<sup>167</sup> This emphasises the notion of locality. As suggested, 'being there', at the site of mass genocide is a fundamental tenet of dark tourism.

It is clear that the former concentration camp, specifically Auschwitz I has a duty to impart 'the history of the place'. As Keil discovered, 'the State Museum authorities – administrators, tour guides and so on – see their role as educational'.<sup>168</sup> Whilst, the interviews of only two guides cannot be representative of the collective management team, it is clear from the layout of the museum itself and the official guidebook that it wishes to be an educative body, 'explanatory descriptions, photographs, charts, diagrams, and show cases are provided'.<sup>169</sup> The guidebook suggests that 'the most important constructions and objects in Birkenau are: the remnants of the crematoria, gas chambers and cremation pits and pyres, the special unloading platform where the deportees were selected and also a pond with human ashes'.<sup>170</sup> This is a specific example of the tourist being directed to what is framed by the authorities and it is perhaps unsurprising that these suggestions recommend the 'darkest' sights at Birkenau. The guidebook is actually much less historically biased than the personal guides. Whilst occasionally including emotive terms such as 'a terrible sight'<sup>171</sup> it remains more succinct and factual than spoken guides.<sup>172</sup>

It can also be asserted that Auschwitz actively portrays itself as a tourist attraction. Visitors 'want to see the actual scene of the tragic events...visit real buildings and the machinery of the death factory' and 'experience the unquestioned'.<sup>173</sup> This raises two important points, the first being the linking of tragedy, death and tourism and the second, the idea of 'experience'. It would seem that the design of Auschwitz as a memorial site and museum reiterates ideas presented to the tourist in preliminary literature such as the guidebooks. 'Smell and hearing cannot currently recognise the original nature of the camp's

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<sup>166</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 13, 120

<sup>167</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 72-73

<sup>168</sup> State Museum tour guide, personal interview 8 July 2008 in Keil 'Sightseeing in the Mansions of the Dead', 484, affirmed by my own findings during visit, January 2009

<sup>169</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 100

<sup>170</sup> *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim Guide-Book* (translation by Stephen Lee) (Oświęcim, 2008) p. 4-5

<sup>171</sup> *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum* 14

<sup>172</sup> The personal guides also control the time that the visitor spends at each exhibit, whereas the guidebook does not. The guides tended to pause purposefully by the most shocking images and artefacts, especially those featuring children. Own visit, January 2009

<sup>173</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 81-82

reality. It is only sight that can recognise it, aided by the conscience of the past events,<sup>174</sup> once again affirming a concept intrinsic to the idea of ‘dark tourism’; that seeing, is believing.

This is problematic. It assumes that witnessing a contemporary site can facilitate an understanding of the past. Whilst these ‘material proofs’ apparently provide key insights into the horrors of the Holocaust, the museum management seem to assume they are being used by tourists to reinforce historical knowledge. What is unclear is where this historical knowledge originates. The notion that the museum provides it is tenuous because of the glaring omissions in the information offered. That the visitors bring this knowledge with them to the site is presumptuous. If the historical context is incomplete, as I believe it is in the case of Auschwitz, the ‘material proofs’ supersede their role as a material manifestation of the facts, providing nothing but extraneous relics.

Lack of context is not the only criticism that can be levelled at the former camp. The multiple meanings and roles assigned to the complex can be confusing for the visitor. ‘What precisely does the sight of concentration-camp artefacts awaken in viewers? Historical knowledge? A sense of evidence? Revulsion, grief, pity, fear?’<sup>175</sup> The official guidebook offers ‘it is difficult for us to imagine the tragic scenes which took place daily in the camp’,<sup>176</sup> seeming to revert to traditional Holocaust historiography rather than following the guidebook view that once you are there it is easy to imagine the atrocities. However, the presentation at Auschwitz confirms the guidebook expectations in some ways, most particularly through the provocation of emotion. That the Holocaust was inexplicably horrific is undisputable, yet the museum’s decision to invoke emotional response over and above historical knowledge is objectionable. Visitors ‘respond more directly to objects than to verbalised concepts’, but as Young argues ‘beyond affect, what does our knowledge of these objects – a bent spoon, children’s shoes, crusty old striped uniforms – have to do with our knowledge of historical events?’<sup>177</sup> Perhaps the most emotionally shocking exhibit is one of the last stops of the guided tour. Room six, Block six is solely dedicated to the children of Auschwitz. Sadly, ‘these remnants remind us not of the lives that once animated them, so much as the brokenness of lives’.<sup>178</sup> Regrettably, yet perhaps predictably, these displays of

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<sup>174</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 92

<sup>175</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 132

<sup>176</sup> *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum* 15

<sup>177</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 132

<sup>178</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 132-3

personal items are the ones often recalled by the tourists, with the theme of death and destruction at the focus.

Another problem with the current presentation of Auschwitz is the way it contrasts with its contemporary setting. ‘One’s first visit to the memorials at Majdanek and Auschwitz can come as a shock: not because of the bloody horror these places convey, but because of their unexpected, even unseemly beauty’.<sup>179</sup> As will be explored in Chapter three, the notion that Auschwitz is actually aesthetically pleasing, and often at odds with what the tourist wants to see means that the photographs they capture do not reflect the true nature of the site as it stands now. Even the authorities at Auschwitz recognise this dichotomy, ‘the regions where ashes are buried are now covered with greenery...The camp area seen in beautiful weather looks peaceful and does not remind one of the previous grimness’, ‘The sky is no longer covered with smoke from chimneys of the crematoria, and nature softens the horrible pictures of the past’.<sup>180</sup> Birkenau, through its landscape ‘appears to want to package its historical evidence neatly’ for the tourist<sup>181</sup>. This site, which ‘ought’ to be seen as horrific is, in reality pristine in its presentation and visually pleasing to the visitor.

Perhaps the most problematic issue is that of reconstruction. Whilst Rymaszewski seemed to present a view strongly opposing any sort of restoration a thorough analysis of the site proves that such a process has already occurred. Auschwitz I, although ‘apparently unchanged, is quite different from the camp the Soviets liberated in 1945’. Dwork and Van Pelt note that as it stands today it is more like it was when the Germans began their original program 1940-42. There is, for example, ‘no indication that the pleasant, yellow stucco structures’ that the visitor encounters on entering the car park of the site was part of an ‘extension of the protective custody camp’.<sup>182</sup> Thus, ‘a misconstruction of history begins right in the parking lot: visitors think they have arrived at the periphery of Auschwitz I; in fact they are already in the middle of the camp as it existed in 1945’.<sup>183</sup> Furthermore, the reception centre which the visitors pass through before reaching what they believe to be the original

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<sup>179</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 119

<sup>180</sup> It is actually a fallacy to believe that during the Holocaust there was no greenery at all at the site, Kitty Hart-Moxon spoke of an area near ‘Kanada’, where she worked, of a grassy hill-bank that the women workers would sunbathe on, HET Lessons From Auschwitz see also B. Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 68, 90

<sup>181</sup> At Birkenau, first example of systematic mowing of grass in the ‘barrack area’ seems to have not taken place ‘until 1979, in advance of the Pope’s visit’, However it was not, until 1993 that the Museum appointed an ecologist to take charge of the landscape see A. Charlesworth and M. Addis, ‘Memorialisation and the Ecological Landscapes of Holocaust Sites: the cases of Plaszow and Auschwitz-Birkenau’, *Landscape Research*, 27:3, (2002).239, 248

<sup>182</sup> *Schutzhaftlagererweiterung* Authors note that these buildings are currently used as both low-income housing and military quarters for the Polish army Dwork and Van Pelt, ‘Reclaiming Auschwitz’, in Hartman (ed) *Holocaust Remembrance*, 234

<sup>183</sup> Dwork and Van Pelt, ‘Reclaiming Auschwitz’, in Hartman (ed) *Holocaust Remembrance*, 234

entrance to the camp was actually built in 1941 and provided part of the complex through which prisoners would enter. Thus despite the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate remaining as a ‘fixed point in our collective memory’ and the ‘canonical beginning of the tour through the camp’, in actuality ‘very few of the Jews deported to Auschwitz ever saw that gate’.<sup>184</sup> This proves the point that behavioural norms are symptomatic of the context of a locality. Whilst a respectful silence befalls tours entering the camp through the famously inscribed gate, because the context is unknown, it remains acceptable for the tourist to laugh with friends, use their mobile and eat lunch in the reception centre.

The Crematoria at Auschwitz provides another example of reconstruction. The official guidebook notes ‘some of the constructions destroyed by the Nazis were rebuilt from the original elements – for instance the ovens in crematorium I’.<sup>185</sup> Whilst this is more than is offered verbally by tour guides, it is still not factually complete. The gas-chamber in Auschwitz I ‘functions as a solemn conclusion for tours through the camp. Visitors are not told that what they see is a post-war reconstruction’, as one visitor commented ‘the crematoria, eternally ominous, preserved, unchanged’.<sup>186</sup> Because the guides ‘remain silent’ about this, visitors presume this ‘palpably intact’ building...to be the place where *it happened*’.<sup>187</sup> In many respects it is hard to know whether we are ‘encountering the physical relics of the Holocaust, or a subtle combination of original artefacts and restoration’<sup>188</sup> and regrettably the ‘inauthentic contemporary representations’ plays into the ‘hands of deniers’.<sup>189</sup>

Is it thus fair to conclude that ‘the ‘tourist Auschwitz’ is little more than a post-war Polish creation’?<sup>190</sup> The representation at Auschwitz is problematic at best, manipulative at worst. The site’s specifically prescribed presentation of horrific yet incomplete facts of the past with a contemporarily pristine site leaves the visitor unsure of what they are meant to be seeing, feeling and experiencing. As will be explored in chapter three, these problems can

<sup>184</sup>The reception centre now provides a ‘multi-use building to meet tourists’ needs’, including a cafeteria, cinema, and book shop Dwork and Van Pelt, ‘Reclaiming Auschwitz’, in Hartman (ed) *Holocaust Remembrance*, 237

<sup>185</sup> Later notes that ‘The ovens were rebuilt by the Museum from the original German metal elements’ *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum* 5, 21

<sup>186</sup> ‘Auschwitz’ entry by seibpa <http://www.travelblog.org/Europe/Poland/Lesser-Poland/Auschwitz/blog-254840.html> February 29th 2008 [January 2009]

<sup>187</sup> ‘The committee felt that a crematory was required at the end of the memorial journey’ and so the reconstructed Crematorium I is intended to speak for the history of the four crematoria at Birkenau. Dwork and Van Pelt, ‘Reclaiming Auschwitz’ in Hartman (ed.) *Holocaust Remembrance*, 239

<sup>188</sup> I. Wollaston, *A War Against Memory? The Future of Holocaust Remembrance*, (London, 1996) 41

<sup>189</sup> T. Cole ‘The Holocaust Industry? Reflections on a History of the Critique of Holocaust Representation’ in K. Kwiet and J. Matthäus, *Contemporary Responses to the Holocaust* (London, 2004) 54 see also Wollaston, *A War Against Memory?* 41

<sup>190</sup> Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, 110

leave the tourist with a reflection and understanding of the site that is so far from the contemporary reality, that the visit itself was superfluous.

### Chapter Three: 'Postcards from Auschwitz'

This final chapter is concerned with the tourist's response to, and understanding of, Auschwitz-Birkenau as both a tourist attraction and historical site. If Young's assertion is correct and new generations of visitors 'invest' new meanings<sup>191</sup> into memorial sites, it can be argued that its significance can only be determined by analysing visitors' responses. By looking at how tourists have come to understand the former concentration camp, is it possible to infer a broader collective knowledge of the Holocaust? Through the mediums of photography and travel blogging I intend to show how the visitor's perceptions of Auschwitz reflect both their pre-established expectations, and the confused 'de-contextualised' narration offered by the site's management. At present, 'it is hard to disassociate the camp from the coach parties',<sup>192</sup> but the way in which tourists are continuing to portray the site as different from this reality is problematic for Auschwitz as an historical site.

Perhaps one of the most obvious continuities from the prescribed expectations dictated by the guidebooks is the notion that visiting the site should be both emotionally disturbing and life-changing. In response to the film shown before the guided tour, one visitor commented 'if you can watch it without being moved to tears by so much torment you have a heart of stone'.<sup>193</sup> Another blogger wrote of the exhibition at Auschwitz I 'to come here and not be touched by what you see means that you either have no heart or that you must already be dead'.<sup>194</sup> This seems to raise an emotive consciousness which dictates that one ought to be passionately moved by the visit and not to be so is in some way disrespectful or to put it another way, that there is a 'right' and 'wrong' way to visit Auschwitz.

This is further enhanced by the sense that visiting the site can affect change in a person. 'We can get a glimpse of the human reality - and come out the end of it different people'.<sup>195</sup> This implies that the transformative nature of the site lies in exemplifying atrocities committed by human beings. It is reiterated by other comments, 'I used to think everyone was good at heart' and 'I don't think I have ever felt more ashamed to be human before'.<sup>196</sup> However, dark tourists seem reluctant to give details of their 'life-changing' encounters. Whilst these alleged epiphanies appear frequently on travel blog sites, the writers rarely mention *how* their life has changed, many offering hollow idioms such as 'I went

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<sup>191</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 3

<sup>192</sup> Cole, 'Holocaust tourism', 16

<sup>193</sup> 'Riding Rocinante IX: Auschwitz (Kms 5891)', entry by Marcoelitanliano

<sup>194</sup> 'Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau' entry by Cockle

<sup>195</sup> 'Auschwitz' entry by KenandAlison

<sup>196</sup> 'Auschwitz' entry by Katenian,



because I knew that if I did, my life would be changed. My life has changed'.<sup>197</sup> This is furthered by a sense of moral obligation with many writers heralding the visit as 'one of the best things' they have 'ever done' and claiming 'it was heart-breaking, but something that everyone *needs* to see' and 'everyone *should* at some point in their life go'.<sup>198</sup> This encouragement of others to visit perpetuates obligation.

Another theme concurrent within many touristic responses is the focus on the individual items displayed in Auschwitz I. As suggested in Chapter two, these arrangements have a strong impact and as such often induce reaction.<sup>199</sup> Items such as hair, suitcases and particularly shoes dominate the tourist's memory of the visit. Flickr.com currently offers '326 photos'<sup>200</sup> of shoes at Auschwitz, with many red ones placed as the central feature. Interestingly, two of the three photographs exemplified below have comments relating to *Schindler's List*.<sup>201</sup> Thus seemingly non-touristic enterprises such as film can influence visitor perception. We will never know whether the photographers intended to invoke Spielberg's movie, but the fact that they many have done so unwittingly reiterates the potential of visual imagery.



Photo by Tintage22, from Flickr.com<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> 'A Life Changing Experience' entry by Megsy22,

<sup>198</sup> (emphasis added) 'Auschwitz Concentration Camps' entry by Hc02sa

<sup>199</sup> Answers from Students at HET 'Lessons From Auschwitz' Follow-Up Seminar (Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2009, Jury Doyle Hotel, London)

<sup>200</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=auschwitz+shoe&m=text>> [April 2009]

<sup>201</sup> Beneath Tintage22's photo, a viewer comments 'Presumably you were thinking of Schindler's list?' whilst under tbortor1's image someone else has written 'nice, echoes of 'Schindler's list''

<sup>202</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/tintage22/2464659072/>> taken on July 12, 2007 uploaded on May 4<sup>th</sup> 2008 [January 2009]



Photo, by Timoluege from flickr.com<sup>203</sup>



Photo by tbertor1 from flickr.com<sup>204</sup>

The representation of artefacts in this way is problematic. As Young notes ‘Remnants of our historical past have long come to stand for the whole of event’.<sup>205</sup> One of the comments about the photos reads ‘it truly brings the perspective of the horrific events of that time’. This of course, is untrue as it is the historical context which explains the nature of the image, without which it is merely a photograph of shoes. Photos ‘do not explain, they

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<sup>203</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/timol/12280529/>> taken on May 1, 2005, uploaded May 3 2005 [April 2009]

<sup>204</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pawelsawicki/2813345754/>> date take unknown, uploaded November 27, 2005 [April 2009]

<sup>205</sup> Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 127

acknowledge<sup>206</sup> and thus it becomes important to echo Benjamin in 1931, ‘will not the caption become the most important part of the photograph?’<sup>207</sup> Another remark reads ‘Interesting, I got a very similar capture of the very same shoe.’ It is perhaps, not strange that many tourists capture the same shots when objects have come to epitomise the entirety of the site.

A further theme of Auschwitz tourist-photography is to crop pictures to focus on archetypal camp ‘furniture’ for example the watchtower, barbed wire fence, barrack or gas chamber.<sup>208</sup> Imagery of barbed wire is, like the personal items, ultimately irrelevant without its due contextualisation. Whilst the barbed wire of the camp fences is ‘often used symbolically to represent the specific barbarity of the Shoah’ it is misplaced in its deemed uniqueness having been used since its invention in the 1870’s to mark territory and even national boundaries.<sup>209</sup>



Photo by Hero and Keira, from Flickr.com<sup>210</sup>

There is much truth in Buruma’s assertion that ‘accounts of visits to Auschwitz rarely fail to mention the weather’.<sup>211</sup> Bloggers frequently comment on the specific conditions and how that influenced the visit. ‘I couldn’t help but think that it didn’t seem appropriate for the weather to be so nice at such an awful place’<sup>212</sup> and ‘the weather is lovely. Does that make it

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<sup>206</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 111

<sup>207</sup> W. Benjamin from ‘A Short History of Photography’ in D Mellor (ed) *Germany: The New Photography 1927-33* (London, 1978) 75 as cited by Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 212

<sup>208</sup> Charlesworth and Addis, ‘Memorialisation’, 231

<sup>209</sup> Charlesworth ‘The Topography of Genocide’ in Stone (ed), *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, 224

<sup>210</sup> <<http://www.travelblog.org/Europe/Poland/Lesser-Poland/Auschwitz/photos-page-2.html>> [March 2009]

<sup>211</sup> I. Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (London, 1994) 70

<sup>212</sup> ‘Auschwitz’ by katenian,

harder to imagine the atrocities committed against Jews and others in this place of hell?’<sup>213</sup> Conversely tourists who visited during poor weather assert that they had a more authentic experience, some even believing that it helped them relate to the victims ‘I think the rain helped to show the harsh realities and genocide that occurred here.’<sup>214</sup> Similar assertions were made by students on the HET visit who agreed that the ‘really miserable weather’ had ‘made it more real’.<sup>215</sup> Again, the emphasis is on the ‘experience’ of the tourist, and the notion of differing authenticity, even when, like the weather these circumstance are beyond their control.

Even the opening page of Auschwitz-Birkenau’s official website<sup>216</sup> features black-and-white photographs of ‘camp furniture’, through heavy mist and a dark sky, reflecting visitors’ expectations. As Sontag professes, ‘photograph’s create the beautiful’,<sup>217</sup> however the idea of reconciling ‘mass murder with places that appeared to deny the horror, ordinary landscapes that sometimes seem to be too beautiful’<sup>218</sup> seems both unnatural and disrespectful. Thus visitors ‘prefer to take photographs of Auschwitz when it is snowy or raining or has leaden skies. If it does not match our expectations, then we may regard the site as out of place’.<sup>219</sup> In the context of dark tourism, if reality does not match expectations it can be deemed not only as ‘out of place’ but also, morbidly as disappointing.

Black-and-white effect can be used to give a photograph a more sombre tone and to add a sense of nostalgia, bringing ‘continuity to images taken at the time of the camp’s operation’.<sup>220</sup> Indeed the idea of ‘experiencing the past’ frequently accompanies visitor descriptions; ‘today I ventured into a part of history’<sup>221</sup> and ‘we came into contact with the physical reality of an historical event’.<sup>222</sup> In a similar vein, belief about photographs accessing the past seems not to suggest that Auschwitz is a site with a tragic and complex history but rather a gateway to the past. This links to the notion of tourist ‘experience’. One visitor comments ‘as we took the bus ride into town I was already not feeling well. Some of that was from the bus ride, and the rest of it was from the reality which I was about to

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<sup>213</sup> ‘KRAKOW AND AUSCHWITZ’ entry by Debby

<sup>214</sup> ‘Auschwitz Concentration Camps’ entry by Hc02sa

<sup>215</sup> Answers from Students at HET ‘Lessons From Auschwitz’ Follow-Up Seminar

<sup>216</sup> The weather is actually so bad in the official photo, that barely more than a silhouette of Birkenau’s watchtower is recognisable <<http://www.auschwitz.org.pl>> [April 2009]

<sup>217</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 85

<sup>218</sup> Charlesworth ‘The Topography of Genocide’ in Stone (ed), *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, 218

<sup>219</sup> Charlesworth ‘The Topography of Genocide’ in Stone (ed), *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, 218

<sup>220</sup> Charlesworth and Addis, ‘Memorialisation’, 231

<sup>221</sup> ‘Auschwitz’ by katenian

<sup>222</sup> ‘Auschwitz’ entry by KenandAlison

experience'.<sup>223</sup> It is unclear which 'reality' the writer is pre-empting, that of the contemporary presentation at Auschwitz-Birkenau or of the Holocaust. Another blogger notes, 'these experiences have made it real'<sup>224</sup> without defining what has been made real. Similarly, by making vague assertions such as 'we walked inside a gas chamber and you could sense the terror in the air',<sup>225</sup> this writer hints at the fear of the tourist and the fear of those who perished in the gas chambers.

Thus it becomes clear that within the tourist 'experience' of Auschwitz there is a blurring of corporal boundaries. Visitors seem to believe that by visiting an historical site they are actually stepping back in time and in some instances even empathising with the victims, distorting their understanding to the point where they reject reality. The following inevitable photographs of Birkenau's iconic watchtower were all uploaded to flickr.com in 2007. Figure one is the most contrived of the four images, not only is it in black and white but the perspective has been manipulated to give the foreground clearer prominence than a normal shot. It has received '459 faves'.<sup>226</sup> Figure two has also been engineered for effect. Like the latter it is in black and white, with the addition three red roses in the forefront, but unlike figure one the perspective of the piece is more faithful to reality. This photograph has '46 faves' and features comments underneath including 'sobering image', 'wow, that's very sad.' and 'moving image...but we need images like this...to remember'. Figure three features Birkenau watchtower in the snow. It is the first colour photograph of the four and has '19 faves'. Underneath are comments similar to those of figure two including 'hope we will never forget' and 'this photograph really emphasises the despair and hopelessness that the people must have felt as they arrived'. The final image shows the tower in glorious sunlight, full colour, with tourists wandering around the grounds. Despite having been on the site for the same amount of time as the other images, figure four has received '0 faves' and '0 comments'.

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<sup>223</sup> 'Memorable Auschwitz' by Charliekelli

<sup>224</sup> 'Auschwitz' entry by KenandAlison

<sup>225</sup> 'Auschwitz' by katenian,

<sup>226</sup> A 'fave' as explained by the flickr website is when another user chooses it as their 'favourite'



Figure one: Photo by confusedvision from flickr.com<sup>227</sup>

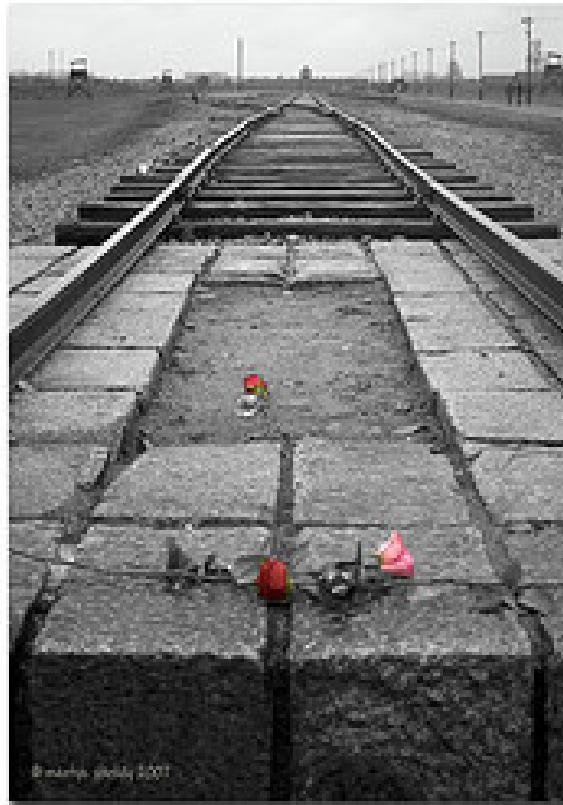


Figure Two: Photo by Martyn Starkey from flickr.com<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/confusedvision/1873687001/>> taken on November 2 2007, uploaded November 5 2007 [April 2009]

<sup>228</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/martynstarkey/1971819937/>> taken on November 9 2007, uploaded November 11, 2007 [April 2009]



Figure Three: Photo by Andrea Cassani from flickr.com<sup>229</sup>



Figure Four Photo by Stevesheriw from flickr.com<sup>230</sup>

<sup>229</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/cassani/351813079/>> taken on December 12 2001, uploaded January 2007 [April 2009]

<sup>230</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/8177037@N06/727285805/>> taken on July 5 2007, uploaded July 5 2007

Whilst this analysis may not be infallible,<sup>231</sup> it does provide insight into the way people relate to and understand Auschwitz-Birkenau. The ‘favourite’ imagery is both a rejection of how the site looks today and concurrent with a prescribed (even where manipulated) darkness. Figure four very clearly shows what the Birkenau watchtower looks like on a normal business day and yet it is rejected because it does not match the emotional and distressing nature of the Shoah. Perhaps more interestingly, the contrived images provoke emotive responses about how it was *back then*. It seems as if we need darker images, to express views on the tragic nature of the Holocaust.

Quintessentially, despite best efforts the visitor cannot enter the past. The apparent willingness of dark tourists to overlook this truth is problematic to historical study. Visitors cannot imagine what it was like for victims of the Holocaust when there is ‘no lice...no mud...no crying...no cursing, above all no fear’,<sup>232</sup> and one must question why they want to ‘It is tempting to take on the warm moral glow of identification – so easily done and so presumptuous – with the victims’,<sup>233</sup> but ultimately we can never comprehend what the prisoners of Auschwitz endured.

What we know about the Holocaust ‘colours our expectation of the landscapes and topography we will find’. Charlesworth notes that ‘just as we both expect and want the perpetrators to look evil, similarly we wish to invest the landscapes of the Holocaust with evil and tragedy’.<sup>234</sup> Thus the visitor is yet again confronted by a dichotomy, the inherent notion that the site should in every respect look and feel horrific against the reality normalised through touristic enterprise. As with many ventures, ‘it seems that matters have been decided for us by qualities inherent in the places themselves or by hard-wiring in our psyches’.<sup>235</sup> During the HET follow-up seminar, visitor comments about how they actually found the site were revealing. A few of the teenagers hesitantly remarked they had expected it to be ‘more horrific’ and one student tentatively asked ‘is it ok to say I was bored?’<sup>236</sup>

The dilemma thus becomes; what is Auschwitz now? Can it be classified as an historic site or is it just part of a mediated itinerary? Some of the bloggers seamlessly combine a discussion of their visit with other travelling exploits ‘it was a strange transition from seeing Auschwitz in the morning to seeing the beautiful city of Krakow...Just as we

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<sup>231</sup> It is important to note that the site does not show whether it specifically promotes images or how it dictates its search results

<sup>232</sup> Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, p 70

<sup>233</sup> Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, p 72

<sup>234</sup> Charlesworth ‘The Topography of Genocide’ in Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* 218

<sup>235</sup> A. De Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London, 2002) 186

<sup>236</sup> Answers from Students at HET ‘Lessons From Auschwitz’ Follow-Up Seminar



returned to our car, it began to hail and rain. Our timing seems to have been right'.<sup>237</sup> As Keil notes sardonically, visitors are given something to think about in the car on the way home for dinner, 'they are, after all, on holiday'.<sup>238</sup> The concept of eating either during or immediately after visiting Auschwitz is commonly-raised surrounding the idea of 'appropriateness'. One blogger notes, 'As I ate my dinner I thought about the many who died of starvation and disease'.<sup>239</sup> Another writes, 'that night we all ate together at a restaurant that Helene and Dan recommended... The dinner was very relaxing – eased us back from the difficult day. The pierogis were amazing. Mine were stuffed with mushroom/cabbage filling'.<sup>240</sup> One cannot help but be reminded of Auschwitz Kommandant Johann Paul Kremer who despite witnessing atrocities at the camp detailed his 'excellent' dinner consisting of 'tomato soup, one half chicken with potatoes and red cabbage...and magnificent vanilla ice-cream'.<sup>241</sup>

However, it is unfair to condemn the tourist for making blasé comments about their trip when tourism at Auschwitz has become so 'normalised'. Photography has inevitably stimulated this process. Margaret Bourke-White, famously claimed when photographing the newly-liberated camps that 'using a camera was almost a relief. It interposed a slight barrier between myself and the horror in front of me'.<sup>242</sup> If a situation is viewed through the lens of a camera it is often not fully appreciated. Struks declaration that 'images anaesthetise'<sup>243</sup> is reiterated by many of the flickr comments which make juxtaposing statements like 'striking, horrifying. Great photograph'.<sup>244</sup> Furthermore the very nature of photography allows a kind of de-sacralisation of a site which many feel ought to be consecrated ground. As one comment advises 'there are very strict photo restrictions everywhere, but people were still taking photos, I guess it all depends on the tour guide'.<sup>245</sup> Stier notes that even the March of the Living participants 'broke rank'<sup>246</sup> to photograph themselves amongst the famous sites of the camp such as the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign. Indeed many have commented on how this

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<sup>237</sup> 'Oswiecim (Auschwitz) and Krakow' by bchloupek

<sup>238</sup> Keil, 'Sightseeing in the Mansions of the dead', 491

<sup>239</sup> 'Memorable Auschwitz' by Charliekali,

<sup>240</sup> 'KRAKOW AND AUSCHWITZ' entry by Debby

<sup>241</sup> J. Kremer 'Diary' in Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim, *KL Auschwitz seen by the SS*, 167 as cited by R. Van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Indiana, 2002) 281

<sup>242</sup> V. Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White, a Biography* (London, 1987) p. 291 as cited Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 124

<sup>243</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 132

<sup>244</sup> < <http://www.flickr.com/photos/pawelsawicki/2813345754/>> date take unknown, uploaded November 27, 2005 [April 2009]

<sup>245</sup> <<http://www.flickr.com/photos/pawelsawicki/2813345754/>> date take unknown, uploaded November 27, 2005 [April 2009]. It would be unfair to suggest that none of the entries recognise the touristic influence on the site. One writer specifically recognised the gate as 'a picture opportunity which in turn devalues the enormity of what took place here' 'Oswiecim aka Auschwitz I' entry by bebop

<sup>246</sup> Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 159

iconic gate has become a 'bottle-neck' as crows pause to photograph or video each other underneath as not to do so 'would be like leaving Pisa without having been photographed with the leaning tower'.<sup>247</sup>

But within this process of normalisation, what happens to these photographs? Struk argues that photos such as those taken under the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign are establishing shots, 'a way if making sure friends and family back home know that you were really there'.<sup>248</sup> Do these photos appear in family albums, becoming 'uncomfortably reminiscent of the photo albums the Nazis made'?<sup>249</sup> What *is* known is how they appear on the internet. Many blog entries carry a nonchalant tone 'so, this entry is pretty depressing – just wanted to give a quick warning',<sup>250</sup> whilst photos appear alongside advertisements.<sup>251</sup> Visiting Auschwitz has become so normalised that it appears on 43Things.com<sup>252</sup> under the heading '50 people want to...visit a concentration camp'. Alongside various comments sits the caption 'people doing this also wish to: learn to cook healthy vegetarian dishes, ride a horse, make new friends'.<sup>253</sup>

Thus the touristic nature of contemporary Auschwitz poses a dichotomy. On the one hand its normalisation threatens to trivialise the enormity of the Holocaust and encourage the site to manipulate history to provide a better visitor 'experience'. On the other, expectation of a site with such a horrific past demands something very 'un-normalised', something dramatic, something dark. The following four photographs show a different, yet perhaps more real portrayal of how the camp is now.

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<sup>247</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 189

<sup>248</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 189

<sup>249</sup> Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 190

<sup>250</sup> 'A Life Changing Experience' entry by Megsy22

<sup>251</sup> Interestingly, though possibly coincidentally, one of the advertisements that appeared during my research was for ancestry.co.uk offering a 'Free 14-day trial to find your ancestors'. See also Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 209

<sup>252</sup> 'List your goals, share your progress, cheer each other on' 43 Things website connects you to a global community where you share ideas and goals. <<http://www.43things.com/>> [March 2009]

<sup>253</sup> On the 'visit the concentration camp' page, there are two hyperlinks 'I want to do this' and 'I've done this' <<http://www.43things.com/>> [March 2009]



Tourists underneath *Arbeit Macht Frei* Sign (the woman in the foreground to the right is on a mobile phone). Own photo, January 2008



Group tour in Auschwitz I by drbexl from flickr.com<sup>254</sup>

<sup>254</sup> <<http://www.travelblog.org/Photos/Popped/2730199>> taken 8<sup>th</sup> August 2008



Photograph dictating 'appropriate' behaviour for tourists outside Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Own photo, January 2008



Photograph of Birkenau shop, in-keeping with 'appropriateness' it features educational books, batteries and films for cameras, water bottles and packs of tissues. Own photo, January 2008.

## Conclusion

It is interesting that the debate surrounding the ‘appropriateness’ of behaviour at the site itself feeds discussions about preservation. Following controversy stimulated by an article in the *timesonline.co.uk*, Digg.com, a social networking and debating forum, featured the topic ‘the macabre debate on preserving the Auschwitz death camp’. The website invites users to comment on the posted article and rate it with positive or negative ‘Diggs’ accordingly. The most negatively rated response receiving ‘minus 23 Diggs’ stated ‘personally, I’d rather see it drenched with a highly flammable substance and set on fire by its survivors’. This comment caused uproar within the forum presumably because people felt it to be inappropriate and insensitive. Ironically it bears a striking resemblance to Auschwitz-survivor Primo Levi’s initial response to the liberated camp when he said ‘get rid of everything, raze it to the ground’.<sup>255</sup> Indeed many ‘favoured complete destruction of all evidence of that nightmare’.<sup>256</sup> This exemplifies how a sense of prescribed appropriateness dictates our thinking and understanding of sensitive matters surrounding the Holocaust, even when it leads us away from thinking individually or facing reality.

Whilst the highest rated comment<sup>257</sup> was predictably in-keeping with the idea of ‘experiencing history’ and lessons for the future, ‘preserving the infrastructure used in that horror, and thereby enabling it to be visited and seen, helps make it more real to people’<sup>258</sup> another negatively rated comment sardonically remarked ‘I don’t think they should let it fall into disrepair. Perhaps they should add ample parking and a gift shop?’<sup>259</sup> Interestingly, whilst people felt strongly enough to disagree with this, it is perhaps the closest representation of the Auschwitz of today. Scarily, the majority of these dark tourists fail to see this, one blogger wrote ‘I am glad I went...it’s not like the other landmarks I have seen that have become a sort of conversation piece’.<sup>260</sup> Yet, I would argue that this is exactly what Auschwitz has become, though the implications of this are another matter.

With reference to the introductory citation of Urry and the ‘gaze’ theory, it is certainly fair to assert that what we ‘see’ is socially constructed, often dictated before we even arrive at our destination. The problem with this in relation to Auschwitz, or indeed any historical site,

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<sup>255</sup> Primo Levi ‘Revisiting the Camps’ (1986) in J. Young (ed.) *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (New York, 1994) as cited by Keil ‘Sightseeing in the Mansions of the Dead’, 490

<sup>256</sup> Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 58

<sup>257</sup> It received + 45 Diggs *The macabre debate on preserving the Auschwitz death camp* <[http://digg.com/world\\_news/The\\_macabre\\_debate\\_on\\_preserving\\_the\\_Auschwitz\\_death\\_camp](http://digg.com/world_news/The_macabre_debate_on_preserving_the_Auschwitz_death_camp)> submitted 7<sup>th</sup> December 2006

<sup>258</sup> *The macabre debate on preserving the Auschwitz death camp* <<http://digg.com>>

<sup>259</sup> *The macabre debate on preserving the Auschwitz death camp* <<http://digg.com>>

<sup>260</sup> ‘Auschwitz’ by katenian

is that it can cloud the visitors understanding of the actual history and context of the location whilst simultaneously imbuing the opposing notion that by *being there* they are ‘experiencing’ the past. The initiative that ‘visiting the relics of history brings the past closer is actually an illusion’<sup>261</sup> and can be misleading and problematic for sites of mass atrocity. Whilst I disagree with traditionalists who assert that all historical endeavours ought to pursue objective truth, it is essential to recognise the dangers of inadequate contextualisation. The contemporary representation at Auschwitz for example can potentially be utilised by Holocaust-deniers ‘they dismiss the ‘Auschwitz’ of the present, and then by extension dismiss also the Auschwitz of the past’.<sup>262</sup>

Thus the marriage between Auschwitz and ‘dark tourism’ remains problematic. The risk is that the merit of the visit will ultimately be defined by the touristic ‘experience’ to such an extent that Auschwitz’s meaning will rest solely on its ability to fulfil the expectations of tourism. To some extent, as argued, this is already true. Visiting Auschwitz has become something of a ‘moral imperative’, not only for those with religious or familial connections but for anyone who wishes to ‘understand humanity’. However, motivations of visitation can fuel a false reality which is further inhibited by a prescribed ‘appropriateness’. As one student on the HET programme exclaimed ‘it feels wrong to see it in colour and with birds’.<sup>263</sup> Thus many visitors reject the present and capture a ‘gaze’ (both in their minds and in photographs) which fits more comfortably with the general knowledge of the Holocaust, even when this means eschewing historical understanding.

The biggest tragedy comes with the realisation of a compulsion to make things ‘darker’. People respond **most** to the depictions of death, the contrived black-and-white photographs and even wish to visit on a day with depressing weather. This is not just true of sites, as Struk notes, Nazi photo albums, ‘which occasionally turn up in auction houses, will fetch higher prices if they contain atrocity photographs’.<sup>264</sup> This sense of a distorted past is being fuelled by an insatiable need to learn from the ‘lessons’ of the Holocaust. As Novick succinctly argues ‘if there are lessons to be extracted from encountering the past, that encounter has to be with the past in all its messiness; they’re not likely to come from an encounter with a past that’s been shaped and shaded so that inspiring lessons will emerge’.<sup>265</sup> This is increasingly relevant with regard to tourism where the Holocaust it is not only ‘shaped

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<sup>261</sup> Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt*, 70

<sup>262</sup> Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*, p 109

<sup>263</sup> Answers from Students at HET ‘Lessons From Auschwitz’ Follow-Up Seminar

<sup>264</sup> J. Struk, *Photographing the Holocaust*, 193

<sup>265</sup> P. Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York, 1999) 261

and shaded' but packaged and presented into a succinct but morally fulfilling day-tour. The Holocaust 'does not by itself teach anything, does not, at the extreme, *mean* anything',<sup>266</sup> in fact as many have argued, the insistence of remembrance may have led us to 'forget contemporary atrocity'.<sup>267</sup> The history of the Holocaust, accounts for one of the darkest times of the modern age, and yet knowledge of this history alone does not seem to satisfy contemporary audiences. Ironically, this search for 'touristic experience' deviates from historical fact and plays straight into the hands of deniers.

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<sup>266</sup> Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 217

<sup>267</sup> Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget*, 13

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