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A Memorial as Virtual Traumascape: Darkest Tourism in 3D and Cyber-Space to the Gas Chambers of Auschwitz

Tourism to traumascapes has as its destination sites associated with trauma (dark tourism), sites where disaster and tragedy actually occurred (darker tourism), or virtual recreations of such sites, particularly of the latter type (darkest tourism). A destination of darker tourism, Auschwitz attracts many visitors each year. Whereas the physical site is difficult to reach and contains remnants of the past that have either disintegrated or been substantially reconfigured, or are physically inaccessible, virtual Auschwitz tours exist that allow a different appropriation of an obliterated traumascape. Distinguishing between tourism online, online tourism, and virtual tourism as different types of site appropriation, this article focuses on the virtual visitation of actual and recreated Auschwitz gas chambers as a form of darkest tourism. It describes and analyzes the ways in which virtual tours in 3D and cyber-space create and recreate past trauma, and how they engage the senses.

Key words: Dark Tourism, Virtual Tourism, Traumascape, Tourism online, Online tourism

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Introduction

Places that evoke the trauma of past events are popular destinations of "dark tourism" (Foote 2003; Lennon and Foley 2000; Stone 2006). These traumascapes (Tumarkin 2005) include places associated with death, disaster, and depravity, such as traditional museums. They also include places where atrocity actually happened as the destination of "darker" tourism (Miles 2002). Increasingly, both types of places can be explored not only through embodied travel but also in cyberspace. Web sites offer tourists guides and other information, act as virtual depositories of local knowledge that is difficult to obtain elsewhere, and take them on virtual tours. While some scholars raise legitimate questions concerning the efficacy of online experiences compared to those offline (Cowan 2005; Dawson 2005), others see in the expansion of journeys into multi-media generated hyper-reality the current frontier of post-Fordist travel and consumption of space, particularly as technology begins to blur the boundaries between experiences in embodied travel and cyber-tourism (Ritzer 2005; Kaelber 2006a, 2006b). Traumascapes offer particular opportunities for cyber-tourism when the original sites of atrocity are difficult to reach, have been substantially altered, or no longer exist, and sensory inputs exist online that may not be available on site. Auschwitz as the ultimate traumascape of industrialized murder and the destination of darker tourism is arguably such a case. Referring to media-enhanced and virtually mediated tourist experiences, William F. S. Miles (2002) uses the term "darkest tourism" to Auschwitz to allude to the appropriation of the museum and memorial via non-traditional, off-site means of experiencing and appropriating tourist space. As tourism turns virtual, in Miles's words, "museum cyberguides and curators will take their virtual tourists on real time tours of active detention camps, killing fields, death rows, and execution chambers," and, ultimately, "the dark cybertourist may not in fact sense a substantial difference between walking and browsing through Auschwitz" (2002: 1177).

While some will undoubtedly be quick to dismiss Miles's provocative notion of "darkest tourism" to museums and memorials as mere hyperbole, others may all-to-uncritically accept the premise of Miles's view that the technological features of virtual tourism will enable cyber-tourists to engage the senses in ways that transcend the experience of physical travel. It thus seems appropriate to caution against adopting either of these perspectives, and to ask instead: Is darkest tourism to Auschwitz already happening in virtual space and 3D animations, and, if so, what are the similarities and differences between it and its traditional counterpart, darker tourism? The objective of this study is to provide an empirical answer to this question. In the context of actual and emerging virtual traumascape tours through Auschwitz, specifically of the crematoria, this study describes and analyzes the extent to which darkest tourism is currently realized and the kinds of experiences it offers or might offer in the very near future.

Auschwitz-Birkenau's Gas Chambers as Virtual Tourist Space

For many, Auschwitz stands for a moral universal *sans pareil*. The killing of Jews and others there is no longer perceived merely as a crime of an enormous magnitude. Rather, via memorialization and commemoration of historically unprecedented atrocity it has become a generalized symbol of human suffering and moral evil and provides an opportunity for humanistic learning (Alexander 2002: 7). Traditionally, memorialization and commemoration have been embodied activities and occurred through visits to the museum and memorial site. Part of a larger phenomenon to which some scholars refer as Holocaust pilgrimages and tourism (e.g., Stier 2003, ch. 5), these visits continue at a large scale, as in 2005 the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum grounds received almost one million visitors (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum 2006). Yet the museum faces a continuing problem of representation, for today most of it looks nothing like it did in the famous 1944 Allied aerial

pictures. The part of it that still does, at least somewhat, Auschwitz I, has been recreated in a

political process (Huener 2003) and labeled by critics as "Auschwitz-land"—a Holocaust

theme park and thus contrived tourist attraction (Cole 1999: 110). In contrast, Auschwitz II,

the main physical locus of extermination, embodies the rhetoric of ruins dominated by blown-

up and partially sunken-in gassing facilities and crematoria (Young 1993), even though in

debates about what to do with the facilities not all participants rejected a reconstruction of

the vast gas chambers out of hand (see Weissman 2004: 172-6). The main artifacts are in

such a state of disintegration that Holocaust deniers have repeatedly attempted to make their

existence and purpose a point of contention (Evans 2002), and it takes elaborate forensic

investigations to reconstruct the details of their original construction and functions (Keren,

McCarthy, & Mazal 2004). In either case, the condition of the museum and memorial is such

that no unmediated encounter with the past is possible, if it were conceivable at all (Keil

2005).

For visiting a physically obliterated traumascape that is difficult or even impossible to

access physically, pilgrims and tourists can engage in alternative, technologically mediated

appropriations of darkest tourism sites. These appropriations take three principal forms:

tourism online, online tourism, and virtual tourism (cf. Helland 2000; Cowan 2005: 18-19).

Tourism online relies on Internet sites that supplement physical travel by providing

information about the place, how to get there, and so forth. Such information can be very

useful but is only an accessory to the appropriation of physical space. For Auschwitz, the

official website of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum informs about the place's history

and current status in great detail in Polish, English, and German. Compared to traditional

means of disseminating information such as brochures or books, the main advantages of

tourism online lie in its currency and easy access. In online tourism, the main journey or a

significant part thereof is meant to take place online. It is often reflective of a person's

memories or experiences with the physical site. For example, the Holocaust cyber library Remember.org (2006a) "shares art, discussion, photos, poems, and facts to preserve powerful memories…to millions of visitors since 1994." It includes not only interactive maps, but also personal reflections and photo-tours. Online tourism can facilitate communication among the tourists and engage them in or provide them with a wider range of activities and experience than might be possible on site.

Whereas these forms of darkest tourism remain more or less tied to visits to real site, virtual tourism does not. Here, sites are (re-)constructed virtually. This typically requires the use of high-tech technology, as tours are not confined to two-dimensional space. In virtual tourism's 3D space, the tourist/pilgrim can engage not only sight and hearing, but also the equilibrioceptive (balance, direction), proprioceptive (movement), and nociceptive (pain/wellness) senses. This is typically done in the form of Virtual Reality, Quick Time, or Flash movies, allowing viewers panoramically to scan the site and zoom in and out.

The State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau's website offers a virtualized Auschwitz, hosted on Remember.org (2006b). The remnants and surroundings of two large Birkenau crematoria can be explored, with hotspots depicting adjacent elements in the landscape. Textual explanation is provided to the side. The Florida Center for Instructional Technology at the University of South Florida's website (2006) offers a slightly more elementary form of virtualizing Auschwitz, providing VR movies of crematoria and other facilities from more limited perspectives and at reduced resolutions. Bars at the top and bottom of each screen link to further information. The Block Museum of Art's online exhibit "The Last Expression" (2006) offers a third type of virtual tour. Site visitors begin it by clicking on an interactive map of Birkenau, which brings up QuickTime movies on the right side of the screen, including one with a 360 degree bird's eye view of two crematoria. A menu on the left provides links to additional information.

These virtual reality tours of the Auschwitz crematoria focus on ocular exploration. Unlike physical visitors prohibited from roaming through the remnants of the crematoria, virtual visitors can get a close-up look of the facilities from the outside, the inside, and above. The panoramic views give virtual visitors a good sense of direction, especially if additional textual and visual information is provided, which also tends to engage the nociceptive sense. However, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting are not engaged, and the sense of movement is rudimentary. These limitations are severe enough to circumscribe the appropriation of the depicted spaces significantly.

A virtual tour closer to the cutting-edge of technology is offered in BBC's documentary "Auschwitz" (BBC 2005). Including a three-dimensional recreation of virtual gas chambers and crematoria, it provides a "sensescape" (Urry 2002:152), though disembodied, for a differently sensed and sensing consumption of space than through corporeal travel (which is no longer possible inside those facilities). Parts of the documentary tour the virtually reconstructed death factories, following the victims' path. The computer-generated three-dimensional images are stunningly realistic, with great attention to detail and conveying a good sense of depth and location. The outside of the buildings is rendered in color tones, while the insides are kept in a flat gray. The first "gas chamber tour" is given in episode 2 and repeated in episode 4, where it is alternately overlaid with a double narrative, one by an Auschwitz survivor and one by the series' narrator herself: "The Jews were ordered to undress, and then forced towards a room further down the building and told they would take a shower" (PBS 2005a). Accordingly, the viewer proceeds from the outside down some stairs into a large undressing room and further on into the gas chamber, where the tour concludes with the view directly toward an air shaft for the release of the hydrogen cyanide. In episode 3 (and before in episode 2), the viewer enters a smaller, earlier type of gas chamber, again taking the victim's perspective, to the following words: "The children from France were

transported . . . onto one of two cottages in the far corner of the complex. Here the Nazis had improvised gas chambers. The children were locked in a room and crystals of the poisonous insecticide, Zyklon B, thrown in through a hatch high in the wall" (PBS 2005b). The scene ends precisely with that sequence–the door to the room being closed from the outside and the view directed to the hatch. In taking a first-person perspective of a victim, the experience of the gas chambers goes far beyond the approximations of gassings in well-known films such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (see Weissman 2004: 176-82, 199-201).

Conclusion and Outlook

The BBC production offers what is still the only virtual tour of a seemingly *operative* extermination facility, capable of engaging sight and hearing. They also, in an utterly realistic way, engage the equilibrioceptive, proprioceptive, and nociceptive senses—beyond anything that would be possible on site today. The production does not include avatars of victims nor virtually recreates how these facilities had actually worked. Nor, as a non-interactive medium, does a movie allow viewers to direct the tour. While these limitations are severe, they should not lead to a facile dismissal of virtual appropriation of traumaspace as impossible. Nor should they be cast aside as an ephemeral form of tourism seeking to evoke morbid titillation—after all, as literary and media scholar Gary Weissman has poignantly noted, when it comes to represent the Holocaust in its horrors and brutalities, the "actual problem facing us … is not that the Holocaust is unrepresentable, but that it is only representable" (2004: 209). In other words, for those who are not victims or witnesses extreme collective trauma can neither be relived nor be vicariously experienced but only encountered in its *mediated* and *imagined* forms. Similar to the present state in the sphere of religion (see O'Leary 2005), in tourism the technology for generating these mediations and

image-representations is rapidly developing while the actual realization of the possibilities for a virtual appropriation of space continues to lag behind. Yet if 3D modelers emulated existing computer games, touted for their realism and sensumotoric engagement, and replicated the facilities in true virtual space, Miles's envisioned darkest tourism would be within reach: "browsing through Auschwitz" could easily feature virtual gassings and other forms of mass extermination. The means to do just that certainly exist already. The latest iteration of the globe mapping program Google Earth supports textured 3D buildings. This technological innovation allows traumascape models—of which currently exist, for example, rudimentary models of a Nazi concentration camp outpost and the WTC under attack—to be much more realistic, particularly since major CAD software companies have announced the development of Google Earth extensions available to the wider public. In a scenario that may give some pause, if the software's future versions were to provide the integration of sound as well as enhanced multi-user interactivity, forms of darkest tourism to the gas chambers of Auschwitz and other (virtually recreated) places of atrocity could be only a few mouse clicks away.

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