

ResearchSpace@Auckland

Suggested Reference

Willis, E. C. (2015). Dark Tourism: Dramas of Absence. In "Hitler Oaks, Dark Tourism, Holocaust Memorial Spaces: Ann Shelton, Emma Willis, Miri Young. City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://citygallery.org.nz/events/talk-and-film-screening-hitler-oaks-dark-tourism-and-holocaust-memorial-spaces>

Copyright

Items in ResearchSpace are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated. Previously published items are made available in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher.

<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/docs/uoa-docs/rights.htm>

Dark Tourism: Dramas of Absence

Address given at City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand, 6 October 2015

<http://citygallery.org.nz/events/talk-and-film-screening-hitler-oaks-dark-tourism-and-holocaust-memorial-spaces>

What is dark tourism?

I first heard the term dark tourism, defined as travel to sites of death and disaster, in 2006 while listening to an interview with scholar Malcolm Foley. He spoke about bus tours through the devastation of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, crowds at New York's Ground Zero, and the increasingly popularity of Auschwitz as a stop on the tourist trails of Europe. What is it that we hope to see, feel and understand at such sites, I wondered. What are the ethical obligations that arise from the part we play as belated-bystanders at the scene of either man-made or natural calamity?

In many ways dark tourism is an invention by some clever scholars to designate and carve out a field of research inquiry. The term is catchy, edgy, and has been picked up by mainstream media. *The Guardian* online has a dark tourism tag within its travel section, which includes articles such as, "Forget Disneyland kids, we're off to Colditz," "Checking into the Bangkok Hilton" and, "Strange and unsettling: my day trip to Chernobyl." And yet we have long visited sites of death and suffering, with examples ranging from the theatrical spectacles performed prior to gladiatorial battles in ancient Rome, in which slaves fought to the death with wild beasts and with each other, to religious practices such as pilgrimage, to the eighteenth century mania for spectatorship to the extreme: the popular practice of viewing patients interned in London's notorious Bethlehem Hospital - Bedlam, for example, or nobility sitting on the sidelines of the battle of Waterloo.

It is perhaps partially the visibility of dark tourism due to our ability to share experiences online that enhances its profile. Equally, however, memorialization has become an increasingly important part of the establishment of national narratives, particularly in post WWII Europe. As the Western world is forced to grapple with its past deeds, it is increasingly forced to remember past deaths and disasters and indeed to apologize for them on a public stage. Art critic Lucy Lippard suggests that sites of

remembrance are ‘the battlegrounds in a life-and-death struggle between memory, denial and repression’ (119). Like James E. Young, who has written extensively on memorial practices, she expresses ambivalence about memorials that at once both keep past tragedies visible in the present and at the same time render their histories mute. That is, victims are ultimately absent from such sites and however much we wish, they cannot speak to us. It is therefore not for their sake, they we attend their graves, but for our own.

Dark tourism as a so-called phenomenon, unlike dramatic representation, is generally, though not always, un bodied. While representations and sometimes simulacra of bodies are evoked, the impact of dark tourism sites comes from the ways in which they dramatize absence. But what is the nature of this drama, and what is its appeal? How do we distinguish between the political commitment of ‘never again,’ and the solipsistic aspect of dark tourism described by Australian writer Bryoni Trezise when she writes of what she calls the ‘memory affect,’ a kind of generic sentimentality that allows us to purchase a sense of ourselves as ethically engaged citizen by doing nothing more than engaging with a sort of free-floating melancholy?

To begin to answer, I will offer two of my own experiences as a dark tourist: Choeung Ek in Cambodia, more commonly known as The Killing Fields, and Murambi in Rwanda which is best known for its affecting display of the exhumed bodies, hundreds of them, of genocide victims. Kellee Caton writes:

Tourism is an ideal metaphorical context for the messy collision of Self and Other in life [...]. It is a practice in which self-gratification, self-exploration, and social engagement all take centre stage, often at the same time.

I hope that the brief reflections on my own messy collisions, particularly at Murambi, will illustrate some of the terms of the encounter between self and other when that absent other needs to be both evoked and invoked, both imagined and called forth.

Listening to the voices of the past

Two of the most popular tourist sites in Phnom Penh in Cambodia are the former Tuol Sleng prison, notorious for its torture of political prisoners, and the nearby Choeung Ek memorial where those same prisoners were in almost all cases executed. The first thing visitors encounter at Choeung Ek is a large memorial stupa, a tall Buddhist structure located on a concrete platform from which descend steps. Visitors climb these steps to enter its base. Inside, the structure is mostly filled with a tall glass case that reaches up towards the building's pointed top. This case is filled with skulls from the exhumed graves. Visitors are requested to remove their hats and meditate for five seconds. Signage states: 'with the commemorative stupa in front of us, we imagine that we are hearing the grievous voice of the victims ... we seem to be looking at the horrifying scenes and the panic.' The skulls within the stupa are endowed with the capacity to speak to us; our role is to listen and to affirm our acknowledgement of the suffering that the imagined voices proclaim.

The stupa and other evocative devices at the site attempt to 'bring to life' the voices of those who died at Choeung Ek as well as at other sites. By 'hearing' them, we express both sympathy and solidarity: as a plaque on the stupa asks: 'would you please kindly show your respect.' What happens at Choeung Ek through the Stupa and the various others signs that provide a narrative to the site – often beginning with the refrain, 'here was the place' – is a dramatization of absence, in which a dialectical conflict is played out between fundamental silence and imagined voices. An awareness of both is necessary – an imaginative invocation of the voices of the past alongside the recognition of their definitive absence. Indeed, we must first hear their silence in order to hear the voices that follow.

There is an ethical imperative urged in the invocation of the voices of the dead at Choeung Ek. In *Theatre of Genocide* Robert Skloot remarks that theatrical performances dealing with such crimes give an important 'theatrical life to those whose voices have been silenced because they were marked for exclusion from a place among humanity where they rightly belonged' (*The Theatre of Genocide* 6). As Jacques Rancière, Judith Butler, and others have argued, such 'voice' is ethically important in the way that it affirms the identity of victims. What is most intolerable is not images that show suffering, but rather, as Rancière argues, systems of representation that render suffering bodies as nameless, as 'incapable of returning the

gaze that we direct at them [...] bodies that are an object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak' (Rancière *The Emancipated Spectator* 96). Memorial sites – and the kinds of theatrical performances the Skloot is referring to – attempt to belatedly restore the voices of the dead as a means of affirming the value of their lives.

And yet, there is a qualitative difference between the representations of an actor – who is external to us – and our own imagination – or inability to imagine – for which we only have our own internal landscape to draw upon. I say inability to imagine because this is precisely what I experienced at so many of the sites I visited. Representation fails. We fail as auditors: we cannot hear the dead and between us there is only impossibility.

Murambi

The first thing that hit me was the smell. Inside the small dark rooms acrid lime conspires with the shock of the bodies. I cannot help but recoil. The remains are entirely white save for some small patches of dark hair on a few of the skulls. There are adults and children, all tucked in tightly together as they would have been in the hastily dug mass graves. The figures are frozen not so much in the moment of their death as in the process of their visible disappearance – their decomposition. Bodies appear shriveled, flesh lost from bones, expressions impossible to decipher. Their presence unsteadied by gravitational centre. The bodies serve us by remaining suspended between death and rest and in doing so shame us. Who are we to look upon them, to unearth them? Writing of this suspension, James Thompson employs the image of an archeological dig within which tourists take on the role of forensic investigators:

These bodies ... seemed to suspend traditional investigatory modes of memory and reconciliation. They were presented as a provisional, half-finished exhibition: a mid-dig display. They appeared to be a frozen, epistemological project, stuck in a limelight, ready for a case to be made, but with no evidence that a case was being made.... Here the bodies did not

appear to be coerced into a narrative or easily co-opted into a memory programme (93).

Unlike the exhibition that visitors view before seeing the bodies, which provides context and explanation, the bodies themselves thwart understanding and disturb the normative rules of displaying death by exposing its materiality and its persistence. As Gertrude, my guide, lead me through the rooms I was overwhelmed by questions. How do we conduct ourselves in the presence of the bodies? Do we stop and acknowledge each figure? As we progressed from room to room it became more difficult to enter each one. I wondered what it was that I might see in one that I had not already seen in another – that is, my repeated looking seeming excessive. But at the same time, I thought, did this perceived similarity of room upon room not reflect the fact of the destruction of the individuality of each of the victims? Should I not honour this – but how? After a time I began to feel hesitant as the question – what do you hope to see? – made itself more pressingly felt. We perceive that something is expressed through the bodies that is more than the work of representation, but what is this ‘more than’? Via embalmed remains, the dead are at once both powerfully present, viscerally demanding, and at the same time silent, signifying a fundamental absence. The ‘presence’ of the dead – that element of their materiality and situation that brings us to tears, as it did indeed me – derives not so much from an auratic quality that the corpses possess, but rather from the palpable affect we map onto the bodies as a way of combatting the absolute senselessness of their death. My feeling upon leaving Murambi was deeply conflicted: these bodies stir us and call us to account, and yet it is right to ask them to do this work? Is it right to ask them to carry out the work of their own remembrance?

The living part of death, the mortal part of life

A few years before *Dark Tourism* was published, a bid was made for the term, argued drawn from the word thanatopsis, meaning a meditation on death. Its author, Anthony Seaton, defined five different categories of activity: ‘travel to witness public enactments of death’ (240), ‘travel to see the sites of mass or individual deaths after they have occurred’ (241), ‘travel to internment sites of, and memorials to, the dead,’

‘travel to view the material evidence, or symbolic representations of death’ (242), and ‘travel for re-enactments or simulation of death.’ In creating this taxonomy, Seaton argued for contemporary thanatourism to read as part of a continuity of human behavior. And building upon this premise, other scholars have suggested that because death has become sequestered within contemporary society, tourists, searching for the kind of ontological security absent in modern life, now seek it out at sites such as concentration camps. This argument prevails within the field.

But is this really the case? What do these scholars mean when they say that death is hidden away from us, such that we need to seek it out? Are we not in the grip of a cultural death drive, surround by imagery of death at all turns? What kind of catharsis or relief might dark tourism offer? When I reflect on my own experiences I am drawn to say that I think the scholars have it upside down. As I said earlier, I think there is only impossibility.

And yet we must acknowledge both the dead and the causes for their death. As Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas writes: ‘I think that the human consists precisely in opening itself to the other of the other, in being preoccupied with his death.’ These sites should and do shake us, effecting a kind of derealization or perhaps re-realisation of the world. But for this to be ethically effective, if we can speak in such terms, then these sites shouldn’t console our sense of ontological anxiety, rather they should make clear the very precarity of our identity when such an identity fails to recognize the responsibility that we bear for others.

The kind of opening or openness that Levinas describes is limited at memorial and dark tourism sites. What I began to crave when I visited such sites were affirmations of life, affirmations powerful enough to thwart the endless repetition of violence that so many of the sites perform. When I visited Sachsenhausen Memorial and Museum on the outskirts of Berlin, it seemed to me that the tour was, albeit somewhat unwittingly, a carefully detailed account of Nazi ingenuity. In the endless explanations of exactly what and how atrocious acts were carried out, it was the enterprise of death that ultimately took centre stage, rather than the lives of those who suffered there, whose presence was strangely effaced. I wondered if some other strategy of remembrance was required, one that focused on the *lives* of those who

were captive there, rather than the means by which their suffering and death was made possible.

We ask the dead to perform for us so that we may know ourselves before them. But whose dead, and why? Lucy Lippard points out that while tourists might be comfortable seeking out distant and foreign tragedy, it is much more difficult to confront histories of violence and death that are closer to home (119). It is perhaps easier to ask the dead to hold us to ethical account for they cannot really hear us, nor reply to us. To ask the living, is much much more difficult.

Posthumous Rehabilitation
by Tadeusz Rozewicz

The dead have remembered
our indifference

The dead have remembered
our silence

The dead have remembered
our words

The dead see our snouts
laughing from ear to ear

The dead see
our bodies rubbing against each other

The dead see our hands
poised for applause

The dead read our books
listen to our speeches
delivered so long ago

The dead hear
clucking tongues

The dead scrutinize our lectures
join in previously terminated
discussions

The dead see stadiums
ensembles and choirs declaiming rhythmically

all the living are guilty

little children
who offered bouquets of flowers
are guilty
lovers are guilty
guilty are poets

guilty are those who ran away
and those that stayed
those who were saying yes
those who said no
and those who said nothing

the dead are taking stock of the living
the dead will not rehabilitate us

