

Thanatourism: Journeys to the Dead

by Jörg Skriebeleit

The phenomena of journeys to the dead

The concentration camps and other sites of death left behind by National Socialism attract an increasing number of visitors every year. In 2015, a record 1.5 million people from around the world visited at the former concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz. The price for a booked WWII tour in Nuremberg, which includes the former Nazi Party rally ground and the courtroom No. 600 of the Nuremberg trials against the Nazi criminals, has increased from 39 euros to 69 euros within only a year – a reflection of this rising interest and demand.

Horror is fashionable. Concentration camps and prisons, battlefields, locations of natural disasters and human-made atrocities and attacks, dungeons and torture chambers, and ghost towns are now among the most sought-after travel destinations booked by established tour guides and travel agencies. Among the most popular are Auschwitz and Alcatraz, Gettysburg and Ground Zero, Pompeii and Chernobyl, the wreck of the Costa Concordia, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, and the war tunnels of Sarajevo.

Even without the thrill of violence, such disturbing sites possess great attraction. Cemeteries are now an integral part of city tours. The Highgate Cemetery in London, Père Lachaise in Paris and, of course, the Vienna Central Cemetery – often booked as a package with a visit to the Imperial Crypt or with a “The Third Man” tour – are listed in every local travel guide as must-see destinations.

Visits to sites of death have also become an increasing focus of journalistic reports. Even though the journalists themselves find it difficult to resist the gruesome fascination of this topic, the reports often do ask whether such visits are defensible on ethical grounds, or whether they might be in poor taste.

The concept of “dark tourism”

For the past two decades, the field of “dark tourism” has been the subject of scholarly research, mainly among Anglophone academics. The original concept, described as “black spot” tourism, was developed by Chris Rojek, a sociologist at the City University London. In

his definition, “black spot” tourism refers “an actual place of death or deaths” as well as “disaster sites and places where famous people died.”¹ Three years later, the British scholars John E. Turnbridge and Gregory J. Ashworth introduced the concept of “dissonant heritage tourism”, which has become firmly established in scholarly debate. The cultural historians John Lennon and Malcolm Foley then subsumed this concept under the collective term of “dark tourism”, which they describe as the “presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites.”²

Also in 2006, Philip R. Stone, who is the founder and currently also the director of the *Institute of Dark Tourism Research* at the University of Central Lancashire, extended the scope of “dark tourism” to include “the act of travel to sites associated with death, suffering and the seemingly macabre.” It is this definition which is in most common use today. Stone went on to develop a typology of “death and macabre related tourism sites.” His “dark tourism spectrum” distinguishes between “sites of death and suffering” and “sites associated with death and suffering.”

“Dark tourism” and Stone’s concept of the “spectrum”

Stone’s typology distinguishes both by type of travel, and by travel destination. Stone thus distinguishes between morbid tourism (which includes grief tourism and visits to graveyards) and atrocity tourism, prison tourism, slavery heritage tourism, disaster tourism and – as the darkest form of dark tourism – genocide and Holocaust tourism. On the other end of the spectrum lies the categories “dark fun factories,” which Stone describes as the “lightest form of dark tourism” (for example, Madame Tussaud’s Chamber of Horrors). Again moving along his spectrum, his sites also include dark exhibitions, dark dungeons, dark resting places, dark shrines (such as spontaneous memorials for victims of terrorist attacks), dark conflict sites and, again as the darkest form of dark, dark camps of genocide.

The “darkometer”

Before I turn to examine how useful and helpful such forms of systematization and categorization might be, I first want to take a look back in time. Specifically, I wish to ask whether such “journeys to the dead” are truly a contemporary and postmodern phenomenon.

¹ Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape*, 1993, Palgrave Macmillan p. 6.

² Lennon/Foley 1996

In other words, are these “journeys to the dead” a response to the increasing taboo surrounding the topic of death in the contemporary world? And has this taboo now given rise to the commodification of death in various settings, including in the media and within institutions such as our own?

Dark tourism: a new phenomenon?

Research on the phenomenon of “dark tourism” is *relatively* recent, beginning slightly over two decades ago. Its focus has mainly been on the Anglo-Saxon realm. But “dark tourism” itself is not a new phenomenon. As Tony Seaton, formerly a professor of marketing and tourism at the University of Bedfordshire, has stressed, “death, suffering, and tourism have been related for centuries.”

As early as 1921, the Austrian author Karl Krauss railed at an advertisement for a tour of the battlefield at Verdun that had been published in the *Basler Nachrichten* daily, which Krauss described as “promotional tours to hell” and “disgrace to humanity.” In Krauss’s words: “They visit the battlefield ensconced in their comfortable cars, while those [who died there] arrived in cattle cars.”

However, the religious practice of pilgrimages to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre began in the fourth century. Later practices would include the cult of relics of Christian saints in their richly decorated chapels, the political cult of the dead from the nineteenth century onwards, the ideological battlefield and trenches tourism of the First World War, the mourning processions to the mass graves of both world wars, the pilgrimages to former concentration camps, and tourism to cemeteries and graves of famous individuals. All of these phenomena are anything but new. And they all could be situated within Stone’s “dark tourism” spectrum. But to what end?

About 20 years ago, the media belatedly discovered the phenomenon of dark tourism. The tenor of the reports ranged from uncritical affirmation of new travel destination to a macabre fascination with strange and disturbing sites (for example, a T-Online travel article of April 15, 2016, titled “Sieben Orte an denen schwere Jungs einsaßen,” which can be roughly translated as “Seven places where the bad guys did time.”) In some instances, the reports also include a note of irony or moral discomfiture (see, for example, a report by Deutschlandfunk

dated June 5, 2015, called “Dark Tourism, Vergnügungsreisen ins Grauen”, which translates as “Dark Tourism: Pleasure trips to sites of horror.”)

As a major German weekly asked not long ago: What is so fascinating about visiting sites of suffering? (Die Zeit, March 4, 2016). Or, as another publication asked, is there something akin to a desire for horror that is lodged deep within the human psyche? (source missing here). Are tourists simply seeking thrills by traveling to sites and regions of crisis, or are they motivated by a voyeuristic desire to see zones of death, places which stand under some form of taboo? Or might some even be motivated by historical interest?

The “performative turn”

Since the 1990s, most Anglo-Saxon studies have worked with a definition of dark tourism that focuses on the destination of travel. Meanwhile, however, social and cultural historians have been demanding that research on “dark tourism” also undertake a performative turn. Critics such as the cultural anthropologist Geoffrey White have argued that it is not the character of the destination which must be analyzed, but rather the social and cultural practices which are linked to this form of tourism. Calling for scholarship within the larger field of “dark tourism” to take a *performative turn*, White has stated: “It is therefore inevitable that historians and other scholars will pay increasing attention to the ways in which people construct their sense in of history by performing their past.”³

Within such a *performative turn*, the focus would necessarily shift away from comprehensive studies of the topic, and away from attempts to define the topic of thanatourism with ever-increasing precision. Instead, in the future scholars should focus on facets and fashions and on questions of cultural-historical and social-psychological structures. Among the topics for future investigation are the quest for “authenticity”, the construction of morality, the relevance of feelings of empathy, and the lust for death. Last but not least, this performative turn should include studies that take a critical and cultural perspective on the “commodification” of – violent – death and its transformation into a marketable product. Among the topics to be explored within this latter framework are the concepts and practices of *living history* and of *re-enactment*. These studies will thus also explore events that exist within a kind of grey zone, located somewhere between *edutainment* and leisure activity,

³ Geoffrey White (2015) S. 6.

which are at times almost indistinguishable from a touristic visit to a fun fair or theme park. In some cases they are almost reminiscent of a Monty Python sketch (such as D-Day events, Gettysburg reenactments, and World War I reenactments in France and Belgium).

In these studies, it will also be important to examine the multi-layered motivations of visitors and participants, and to examine the institutional milieu of the establishments which are the sites of these visits and which are offering these programs. And with this, I arrive at my final point:

Dark tourism as a challenge to us as institutions

If current media reports and scholarly studies are to be believed, the colleagues who have gathered here at this conference are currently enjoying rising numbers of visitors at their home institutions. Albrecht Steinecke, a geography professor at Paderborn who is one of the few German researchers in the field of dark tourism, has predicted a further expansion of the “dark tourism sector”. This expansion, according to Steinecke, has its origins in two larger tendencies: first, a general lowering of reticence when it comes to the atrocities of the past, and second, a rising interest in precise information and background information regarding historical events.

What does this mean for the institutions which we represent? First of all, I should state from the outset: I believe we must critically examine this competitive urge to outdo one another when it comes to rising annual visitor numbers, which we document in our annual institutional reports with pride as well as some measure of arrogance. It is not my aim to dampen our pleasure at the empirically verifiable increase in public interest and attendance, but rather to contextualize it with a few critical and qualitative considerations.

But first, I will describe three examples, chosen almost at random, that serve to illustrate my own rather skeptical stance.

In Auschwitz, the ever-increasing number of visitors coming from all over the world have forced the memorial administration to limit access to the former main camp. Individual visitors are no longer granted access to the former main camp; instead, visitors who wish to

view the site must join a group, which also means that visitors now spend a pre-determined and set amount of time at each individual exhibit, for example the suitcases or human hair.

A second example: the Dachau Memorial has repeatedly been forced to postpone a badly-needed overhaul of its permanent exhibition, which opened ten years ago and is now showing signs of age in various respects. Instead the Dachau Memorial will spend an estimated 4.5 million euros to renovate its car park and to construct new restroom facilities. Without this infrastructural work, the memorial will be unable to cope with the rising numbers of visitors, and complaints from visitors will increase.

A third example relates to my own institution, the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial: I recently had a final meeting with a student of tourism studies, who just completed one month of field studies and visitor surveys as part of her doctoral research. This student described to me, almost euphorically, what her preliminary findings showed – both in terms of the deficits cited by visitors, and in terms of suggestions for how we might improve the appeal of our site. However, the fact that the Flossenbürg memorial does not feature a gas chamber is simply a matter of historical reality and *unfortunately* something which at this late date we are no longer able to change. The rather subdued camp grounds, which are lacking barracks and barbed wire, was also cited as a deficit, as was the poor positioning of the camp gate – none of which can apparently be entirely compensated for by the exhibition, which received universal praise. But, it was noted, the deficits cited by visitors could – and should – be remedied: for example by building at least one reconstructed, quasi “historical” barrack, and by relocating the former camp gate to its original site. (In 1946, Polish survivors who were establishing the first memorial at Flossenbürg decided to move the pillars of the camp gate to a location near the crematorium.)

Based on these three examples I will now formulate a few unsystematic considerations which we must take into account – not only as scholars but also as practitioners and historical brokers in our field.

For many years now, Auschwitz had been an international icon to the Holocaust, and thus a fixture on the international travel scene. It is a “must-see”, which commercial tour operators package together with visits to Krakow’s historic district and the salt mines of Wieliczka. It is

a phenomenon which the journalist Henryk M. Broder has with some cynicism described as a “Disneyland of death.”

As a “must see” location, and a location where visitors feel the urge to record their own “being there”, the gates of Auschwitz, bearing the inscription “Arbeit macht frei”, have become something akin to the Spanish Steps of Rome or the Eiffel Tower of Paris. The glass cases filled with human hair are almost the “Mona Lisa” of Auschwitz – the place and the moment in which visitors encounter the site’s most holy of symbols. Its character as an icon, and the moment of encounter with the inner sanctum, the most holy of relics, must be documented: in pictures, which today usually means selfies, as well as in a variety of forms of communication. Recent studies of Holocaust selfies have examined the forms of communication elicited by the “sharing” of these thoughts and images on social networks, which tend to relativize what is almost a reflexive expression of outrage.

For our colleagues at Auschwitz, this massive number of visitors also poses some very practical necessities with respect to visitor guidance – also in terms of preserving the piety and the dignity of the human artifacts and remains at the site.

Turning again to the second example: Dachau. Like Auschwitz, Dachau has become a fixture within international tourism and travel culture. And like Auschwitz, Dachau is not exclusively marketed as “dark” tourism. As many studies have shown, a visit to Dachau is embedded within what are very conventional tours, which might also include Munich’s Hofbräuhaus and Neuschwanstein Castle, for example. Although some might regard such package tours as disrespectful, this kind of “embedded destination” also presents a significant opportunity. A visit to Dachau (or to Auschwitz, or to Berlin’s Topography of Terror) plays a very important function within a holiday itinerary. Exploring this reality and developing concepts that are effective for this audience is a more appealing prospect than merely complaining about the supposedly superficial nature of what is dismissively called “historical window shopping”, or focusing solely on how to finance the necessary infrastructural measures, such as parking spots and restrooms. When it comes to such concepts, what I seek are concepts that are international and multi-perspectival in societal terms, and which include thoughtfully developed content. With respect to our exhibitions, this content should seek to elicit constructive discomfort and to encourage communication, while always retaining a sense for the entirety of the opportunities presented by site.

The phrase constructive discomfort brings me to my third example, Flossenbürg. As shown by the disappointment and criticism expressed by visitors, Flossenbürg does not visually or in tactile terms live up to the expectations of its visitors. The desired authenticity is no longer evident, and none of the mental images which visitors have brought with them are confirmed. For this reason, Flossenbürg achieves only a 7 of 10 on the “Darkometer” – and for this reason, conversation and communication about this site is also different. And Flossenbürg also elicits conversation within the site, for example in the museum café, which is run by people with disabilities. As a result of its concept and its architecture, within just a few months the museum café developed into a kind of open space, a zone of encounter which has been shaped by locals, visitors to the memorial, and tourists, who together have created a space in which historical as well as ethical and moral topics are negotiated and discussed – topics which, inevitably, are also of very contemporary importance and interest.

The “performative turn” is thus not only important to research on dark tourism – but also to our own institutions. Our analyses of visitors must not focus only on their numbers, expectations and motivations. We must also hermeneutically investigate their social practices, which will in turn help us to develop innovative and sustainable concepts. In light of the ever-increasing numbers of visitors, this is more than simply an end in itself. Rather, it will help us meet the task we have set ourselves the International Memorial Museums Charter adopted by the IC MEMO in October 2011. I will close today by quoting its opening sentence:

“Memorial museums are responsible to protect the dignity of victims from all forms of exploitation and to ensure, beyond conventional history lessons, that the interpretation of political events inspires critical, independent thinking about the past.”