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The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The permanent exhibition at the U. S. Holocaust Memorial Museum is intentionally a multi-media sensory experience for visitors. The museum uses architectural design, material artifacts, eyewitness testimonies, films, and photographs in an exhibition that attempts to emotionally connect visitors with an experience that even survivors find hard to comprehend.

The museum's goal, as summarized by journalist Philip Gourevitch, is "to serve as an ideological vaccine for the American body politic. A proper dose of Holocaust, the thinking goes, will build up the needed antibodies against totalitarianism, racism, and state-sponsored murder." Gourevitch's question, which I share, is whether viewing images of genocide – graphic photographs and films of violence and death – makes viewers more compassionate and more likely to prevent other instances of genocide. Or does viewing these images, especially in a controlled multi-media environment, become either perversely seductive or simply cause "empathy fatigue"?

It is apparently a wrenching museum to tour; one I have yet to bring myself to visit. As Andrea Liss says in her book *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography & the Holocaust*, "The museum's unflinching approach is even more literally tangible from the first steps the visitor takes into this mammoth edifice of simulated memory" (17). Simulated memory is exactly what the museum hopes to create for visitors. First, visitors enter "one of three thin gray elevators whose eerie steel and industrial feel evoke a claustrophobic finality" (17). Then, in the elevator, visitors watch footage of the U.S. liberation of the camps. "After viewing burned landscapes and devastated bodies, the viewer as victim and witness hears these last words

pronounced before the elevator arrives at its destination: ‘You can’t imagine. Things like that don’t happen’” (17). The museum then uses photographs, films, text, and material objects (like victims’ shoes and a full-scale railroad car) to tell the narrative story of the Holocaust.

The museum’s creators were aware that what they were attempting was difficult. Martin Smith, former director of the museum’s permanent exhibition program, used his experience as an independent documentary filmmaker to meet the goal of creating a “three-dimensional multi-media approach.” In an interview with Liss, Smith said, “I think we cannot avoid looking at ... the worst of the material. ... My belief is that if you do not put them on display, then you are diminishing the horror and what the experience actually meant” (16). He also said that “the photograph as object” was “of very little interest to us ... We are using photographs as evidentiary and storytelling vehicles” (16). The idea is to immerse visitors in an experience about the Holocaust. As Liss says “Everywhere in the museum – from the vague memory of the disembodied city outside, which the museum’s architecture tries to efface, to the intricate workings of the simulated environments it houses – the visitor is reminded that he or she is in a vast space of articulated re-creation” (21). The question, then, is whether the “articulated re-creation” intended to create empathy in its audience works?

Philip Gourevitch, well known for his journalistic work on the Rwandan genocide, wrote about the museum in 1993 for *Harper’s Magazine*. He says that the approach doesn’t work, that “one way history is doomed to repetition at the Holocaust museum is that day in and day out, year after year, the videos of the Einsatzgruppen murders will play over and over. There, just off the National Mall in Washington, the victims of Nazism will be on view for the American public, stripped, herded into ditches, shot, buried, and then the tape will repeat and they will be herded into the ditches again, shot again, buried again. ... Didn’t these people suffer enough the first

time their lives were taken from them?” He points out that the material objects, in particular, are transformed by their placement in the museum into something almost beautiful. His analysis seems sound to me – “The horrifying quality of the Holocaust material does not transform such a context; rather, it is transformed by the context.” He does not “want to suggest that the Holocaust should be forgotten, remembered in silence, or ignored.” He says he wants to remind Americans that “denouncing evil is a far cry from doing good.”

When I went to the museum’s current webpage, <http://www.ushmm.org/>, I was impressed to see that the museum focus now includes a heading called *Preventing Genocide* with sections specifically on Sudan, Darfur, and Chechnya. It is as if the museum listened to its critics and transformed itself beyond its focus on a single historical event. Aided by digital storage capabilities and the versatility of a website presence, the museum now focuses more generally on issues of global genocide, as well as continuing its interest in all aspects of the Holocaust.

Still, as I look at the image of a railcar on the *Permanent Exhibition: The Holocaust* page, I wonder whether I will ever pay a visit to the Holocaust Memorial Museum. What would be the goal beyond a human fascination with violence and horror?

Perhaps more productive would be to fully explore the online exhibit based on a Nazi camp officer’s photo album. *Auschwitz through the Lens of the SS: Photos of Nazi Leadership at the Camp* reveals the bureaucratic ordinariness that underlay the horror of the Holocaust. It may go further in explaining how this can happen than hundreds of images of victims. This virtual exhibit raises chilling, but ultimately relevant questions. That human beings are capable of genocide we know. What we may not know is how to stop it. Rather than focusing on the horror of what happened, perhaps we should focus more attention on how ordinary people become efficient, state-supported killers.

Relevant Links

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: <http://www.ushmm.org/>

Auschwitz through the Lens of the SS: Photos of Nazi Leadership at the Camp:

<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/ssalbum/>

Works Cited

Gourevitch, Philip. "Behold now behemoth: the Holocaust Memorial Museum: one more American theme park." *Harper's Magazine* 287.1718 (July 1993): 55(8).

Liss, Andrea. "The Identity Card Project and the Tower of Faces at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum." *Trespassing through Shadows: Memory, Photography, and the Holocaust*. Eds Michael Renow, Faye Ginsburg and Jane Gaines. Visible Evidence 3. Minneapolis, MN: U Minnesota P, 1998. 13 – 37.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Website. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 8 November 2008 <www.ushmm.org>