

BUT DO YOU ACTUALLY CARE? A STUDY OF PRECARIOUS EMPATHY AND PERFORMANCE AT #AUSCHWITZ

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the notion of empathy through the contemporary lens of social media performativity relating to ‘dark tourism’. Examining Auschwitz as a case study, the article explores the post-Holocaust idea that often this empathy is precarious and accompanied by performed authenticity.

Through analysis, this article focuses on concepts of ‘dark tourism’, vicarious victimhood, conspicuous compassion, and self-representation, all portrayed through Instagram. It argues that ‘pilgrimages’ to dark sites of trauma act not only as memorialisation but as spaces of self-validation and representation.

In the contemporary Western world, the distinction between ‘authentic’ empathy and conspicuous, socially informed performance is blurred as a result of digitisation and increased pressure on the individual to form empathic connections and then post about it online.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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KEYWORDS

Auschwitz—Selfies—Instagram—Dark tourism—Empathy

“Doing” Auschwitz

‘Welcome to Little Havana!’ a young blonde woman no older than twenty squeals from behind the reception desk. After a whole day of sitting on a cramped coach from Berlin, I’m too tired to feel much more than slight amusement at the effort taken to make this Polish hostel look Cuban.

The young woman photocopies our passports and places two clipboards in front of us. ‘If you wanna join the pub crawl tonight, write your names here! And if you wanna do the Auschwitz and Salt Mines tour tomorrow, write your names here!’

I glance at this second clipboard, already three-quarters full with names. ‘I highly recommend the tour,’ she adds. ‘Our price is very competitive.’

Four years on and my visit to Auschwitz is marked by only a few clear memories: the theatrically sombre tone of our tour guide, another blonde woman local to Auschwitz town; the moment she asked us to look down at our feet and the brief pause before she professed that we were standing on human remains (“Can you see the flecks of white in the dirt?”); the crowds of tourists wearing identical headsets and lanyards, shuffling from one horrific tour stop to the next; and the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach that lingered for days afterwards. I wore my digital camera around my neck, but I used it only once, to take a photo I’ve since deleted. It was taken from the top of the watchtower that looked out over the camp fields. It was at the end of the tour, so I remember, and I took it not so much because I wanted to, but because the tour was about to end and I didn’t have a single photo to remember my visit to Auschwitz.

If, as Goffman suggests, any social interaction is essentially a performance (1959) then the level of performativity at a site such as Auschwitz is amplified because of the expectation of conduct, and the assumed roles each participant commands during the tourist experience. This idea of social interaction as performance has been echoed by scholars such as Mitschke in the context of Auschwitz, nearly sixty years later: ‘Auschwitz itself becomes a gigantic auditorium, in which the visitor-spectator follows the guide-actor around the space of the camp in a form of promenade performance’ (2016: 236). With hindsight I see this very clearly: Auschwitz was the theatre space; the ticket queues and rules around noise were like that of a theatre; the guides performed their anguished, Museum-approved monologues like stage actors; and the hordes of tourists, in what Dalziel calls a kind of “morbid voyeurism” (2016: 186), were the eager spectators. Unlike a conventional theatre space, however, photography was rampant. If ‘the photograph’s essence is to ratify what it represents’ (Barthes 1981), then each photograph taken at Auschwitz theoretically carries weighted meaning. But increasingly, this meaning is defined not by the content of the image, but by the photographer—especially

when the photographer's face becomes the dominant focus of the image. Conscious of this or not, each time a tourist holds their phone at arm's length and takes a snap, what they are capturing, editing and sharing under their name has the potential to significantly alter the collective meaning of the actual site.

The ethical implications of photography at Auschwitz remain a contested issue among both scholars and the media. Further, the exact reasons why tourists choose to take photographs or pose for selfies at sites of trauma is 'one aspect of the tourist experience that has so far been seriously under-researched' (Dalziel 2016: 185). As I watched countless tourists at the site pose for photos that they would undoubtedly share to their online following, I had a strong sense that it was wrong, but I could not pinpoint exactly why. I now ask: what are the cultural repercussions of a tourist posting photos of their Auschwitz experience, writing a caption professing empathy with the victims, their own experiential emotions complete with a broken love heart emoji? Is it wrong?

According to the Auschwitz Memorial Annual Report, in 2017 more than 2,100,000 people visited the memorial comprised of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau. The report states that the main goal of educating people about Auschwitz is '... to build references to the threats and challenges of the contemporary world' (Bartyzel and Sawicki 2018: 27). Never before has it been more crucial to remember the 'worst manifestation of racism in history' (Özyürek 2018: 456); however, the allure of Auschwitz runs deeper than memorialisation and pedagogy. The 'didactic function' of Auschwitz, according to Ashworth, 'is a useful justification to the producers of such heritage who otherwise might have misgivings about their role in an entertainment activity' (2002: 364). Our fascination with horror is on a spectrum that spans from curiosity to obsession. Similarly, our engagement with horror ranges widely—visiting a haunted house; reading an apocalyptic novel or trauma memoir; watching a Netflix murder series—the suffering of others is everywhere, and our inherent desire to feel, pulls us towards it. Arguably this pull is empathic; we figuratively step into the shoes of the other. Concerning a dark tourism site like Auschwitz, however, forming an empathic connection with those that experienced the camp firsthand is 'generally agreed upon as impossible' (Dalziel 2016: 194).

An important distinction is necessarily made by all dark tourists, but is often neglected in an effort to feel the full 'dark' experience; what they are experiencing is not the real site of trauma—it is a memorial. When a tourist goes to Auschwitz, they are not actually *going to Auschwitz*. Similarly, a photograph of Auschwitz is not the place itself, but a representation. The current concerns of the tourist are a completely different entity to what constitutes the historical memory of the site. I think back to the way I felt in the pit of my stomach when my tour guide told me I was standing on the remains of human bones; in that

moment, my own experiential concerns overshadowed any remembrance of the actual people whose bones I was standing on. What then becomes concerning about the dark tourism industry is that the tourist experience ‘shimmers between historical memory and current concerns; between their own comfort and desires, and an awareness of what the physical space of Auschwitz stands for’ (Mitschke 2016: 239).

In a recent Twitter post, the Auschwitz Memorial condemned visitors who captured photos walking on the camp train tracks, imploring visitors to be mindful of what the site represents and engage with the space accordingly¹. This highlights the tension between self-representation and site representation, and suggests that these social media users have failed to recognise the inherent difference between site as tourist destination and site as trauma memorial, and the different modes of behaviour that are assumed at each. Whether or not posing for photographs balancing on the train tracks of Auschwitz is seen as abhorrent, the reality is that such practice is inevitable. Further research needs to be conducted into the tourist’s perceived outcomes and reasons for visiting dark sites if this discord between site as tourist destination and site as memorial is to be rectified.

In a world where trauma is a marketable commodity, it makes sense that laying claim to trauma, even in the most vicarious of ways, has some kind of value to those who see it as such. I felt this warped desire to lay claim to Auschwitz after my own visit, when I arrived home and regaled my Europe trip to my friends. Yes, I said, I went to Poland. Auschwitz is so synonymous with Poland that the ensuing question was always ‘Did you go to Auschwitz?’ There is a morbid fascination with the site because of the accepted status of it as the ultimate symbol of human evil. In retrospect, I can analyse my own retelling of my experience as somewhat concerned with self-representation; having visited Auschwitz, I could now speak with firsthand experience of the site, with a connection (however vicarious) to one of the greatest historical traumas in human history. While my own family history is tied to Auschwitz (and was the key impetus for my wanting to visit the site), there is no doubt that elements of what West calls ‘conspicuous compassion’ (2004), or perhaps more accurately conspicuous empathy, were present as I reflected on my own visit. If this kind of self-indulgence, however earnest the intension, is present in a face-to-face exchange, the representational complexity is amplified on social media platforms—especially Instagram, where self-image is at the core of all content creation.

In our postmodern context, ‘the simple distinction between reality and representation is no longer easy to identify’ (Newlin 2019: 13). Our connection to place and time is complicated by Instagram—the platform allows total self-curation and meaning manipulation via filters, augmentation effects, and

videography features. In taking a selfie, the temporality of the backdrop (for instance, the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau) is ruptured, and the meaning dismantled. As Newlin writes: ‘To take a selfie denies time of a place and redefines it as the “time of me”’ (2019: 38). The tourist’s compulsion to capture images of places has always been part of the travel experience, but what are the implications of new media and representing the self in a ‘post-truth era’ (Newlin 2019: 68), where objective fact is overshadowed by emotion and rhetoric?

Did you get the shot? An analysis of ‘filtered’ authenticity

I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art ... I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sense of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture (compared to certain nightmares) (Barthes 1981).

Nearly forty years ago Barthes noted that inauthenticity invariably arises from attempting to represent the multi-layered self. The addition of smartphones to the contemporary world means that the individual is now ‘the nucleus of pictorial life’ (van Dijck 2008: 60), and the self is therefore intrinsically tied to any meaning that might be produced through capturing an image. We live in a societal space where the real and the represented are interchangeable; where the individual has multiple online and offline representations; and where meaning is manipulated, blurred or destroyed with the touch of a thumb to a screen. We strive to be perceived as authentic, and yet the online platforms we increasingly choose to showcase our identity and experiences are inauthentic by design.

Since the birth of the front-view camera lens, the selfie has captivated the world. There are currently 380,000 photos on the Instagram app using the hashtag #Auschwitz, with the site-related content only set to increase. Scrolling down the grid of images pertaining to the #Auschwitz hashtag, there are black and white archival photographs of victims; black and white photographs of families who might have had relatives perish there; books about Auschwitz that have used the hashtag to gain social media traction; and, most significantly for this paper, the majority of #Auschwitz content consists of tourist photographs from the site.

Social media photography is now inextricable from tourism, which for museums such as Auschwitz indicates ‘a loss of control over content and context as digital information is dispersed and “remixed”’ (Wong 2011: 101). An

alternative view of social media usage in sites of trauma is that it contributes to the ‘digitalization of Holocaust memory’ (Dalziel 2016: 187), engaging contemporary audiences and giving the event continued relevance in the contemporary cultural landscape. Yet as Newlin writes, ‘As our culture becomes more digitized, so follows the commodification of our experiences’ (2019: 19). As the Holocaust recedes from living history into memory, it is necessary that preservers of this history find new ways to engage future generations and avoid what Mitschke calls ‘Holocaust fatigue’ (2016: 233), a perceived over-saturation of Holocaust imagery and narratives of Jewish persecution and suffering. While it is crucial that Holocaust memory sustains relevance into the future, capturing sites like Auschwitz through selfies focuses not on its history and meaning, but on the self. Selfies are motivated by ‘entertainment rather than engagement’ (Mitschke 2016: 230) and as such directly affect the way the Holocaust is ‘mapped in the collective imagination’ (Mitschke 2016: 230).

There are recognisable trends in the photographs taken by tourists at Auschwitz. Most of the photographs are taken along the barbed wire fences, beneath the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign, and on the train tracks. The almost standardised photography taken by tourists at Auschwitz exemplifies what Newlin calls the “homogenization of experience” (2019: 21)—the Auschwitz experience is commodified and used as currency in the transactional social media space, manipulated via filters and caption rhetoric in exchange for self-gratification, double-taps and love heart emojis.

The gates of Auschwitz Birkenau II are recognised not just for their historical significance, but also as a valuable photo opportunity. Dalziel suggests: ‘... the familiarity of these sights may ... provide visitors to the Auschwitz Museum with a sense of reassurance, having seen them so many times before, and grant a form of subconscious permission and compulsion to photograph them’ (2016: 189). Given this notion, mass media portrayal of the Holocaust as well as self-representation contributes to the compulsion to photograph specific aspects of the Auschwitz experience. The user’s choice to apply filters, angles and use specific rhetoric in their captions (remembering, #neverforget, noting feelings of sickness and despair, Auschwitz as haunted, Auschwitz as pedagogical) the site itself becomes secondary to the tourist-subject and the specific aims she wishes to satisfy through the photograph. Each ‘creative’ tool manipulates the image and distorts the original meaning of the physical site. The image no longer represents Auschwitz; it represents “me” at Auschwitz, “me” immortalised and vicariously associated with a filtered and manipulated version of Auschwitz, its meaning appropriated to suit the purposes of the Instagram post.

The association of trauma with purification is another feature of the rhetoric used in #Auschwitz content. Much of the photography shows tourists walking

along the train tracks leading into the main gate into the camp, perhaps symbolic of walking in the path of the victims, a visual attempt at empathising with witnesses of the Holocaust. The image might be enhanced through augmented exposure, creating a heavenly aura, which brings to mind the association of suffering with purification. The narrative of redemption and purification has been reiterated in mass media portrayals of the Holocaust, which has fed the creative choices of those tourists producing content about their visit to the site that is without doubt the nucleus of the Western narrative of the Holocaust. Rothe qualifies the association of trauma with purification:

Representations of the Holocaust are moreover consumed because of the dominant, if dubious, notions that suffering generates spiritual purification and that moral enlightenment can be gained not only from one's own immediate experience, but also through the vicarious experience of others' suffering via media consumption (Rothe 2011: 14).

It is impossible to tell if a visitor to Auschwitz actually attained moral enlightenment from their visit, but it can certainly be implied through visual representation. And what does it mean to seek moral enlightenment via the suffering of the other? It seems that this act is inherently self-oriented, and is perhaps incorrectly labelled as empathy.

There may be intention to genuinely empathise and learn from a visit to Auschwitz—the majority of visitors to the museum are undoubtedly good-willed people. There is a necessity for photography at Auschwitz, so that the site can have continued relevance in the contemporary world. However, it is dubious whether the self-oriented desires of the tourist can be detached from this notion. Hashtags are used to give posts traction and exposure on the platform and connect similar content; as such it is impossible to extricate self-representation from Instagram even if the post is not a selfie. Despite the seemingly earnest desire to empathise with the victims of the Holocaust and share the experience with other users, the sentiment is automatically corrupted by the performative nature of the Instagram platform.

The desire to feel an emotive affect from a dark site is part of our devious captivation with trauma yet is often labelled as empathy, and poetically described in accompanying Instagram captions. If you shed a tear at Auschwitz, did you have a more meaningful experience than someone who did not? If you posted your experience to Instagram, does that mean you are a more empathetic person than someone who chose not to photograph the experience at all? Of course not, but while elements of voyeurism are arguably present to varying degrees in all Auschwitz visitors, posting photos that predicate the self is exploitative of the trauma of others for selfish gain and validation. As West writes: 'Our culture of ostentatious caring concerns ... projecting one's ego, and

informing others what a deeply caring individual you are' (2004). As pictorial representation becomes more and more integral to contemporary life, so too does the perception of the self. Being perceived as a good and caring person in many instances surpasses the significance of actually being a good and caring person.

Posting the Auschwitz experience to Instagram appropriates its meaning for the benefit of the user. The image of Auschwitz might be embedded on the user's profile below happy snaps at the beach, next to a sunny travel photo on a cobblestoned street, a few rows down from a birthday shot. The content of the image becomes 'secondary to the user's documented experience' (Newlin 2019: 36); this representation of Auschwitz is an aspect of the user's curated and digitised self, displaced from its historical, geographical and temporal context. There is danger in appropriating iconic sites such as Auschwitz, as the 'pseudo-engaged' (Klüger 1999) usage of those images threatens to resituate and collectivise what should be the individual complexities, stories and heritage of the victims. The act of posting the Auschwitz tourism experience on Instagram 'transforms the pain of others into the moral capital of the non-witness' (Rothe 2011: 20).

The portrayal of sites like Auschwitz on Instagram become problematic when the contemporary concerns of the tourist overshadow the remembrance of the actual trauma victims. The inclusion of the self in photographic representations of Auschwitz disrupts the original historical memory of the site and alters the original meaning of the image for the personal gain of the user. However, the tourist's recapturing of iconic sites like Auschwitz is a cultural inevitability, and therefore its meaning is continually in flux. Dalziel suggests:

The decision to take "selfies" at places connected with dark tourism may not necessarily stem from reasons of vanity, narcissism, or disrespect, and potentially highlights a new trend in commemoration and witnessing that young people are increasingly using (2016: 203).

The appropriateness of photography and performativity at sites such as Auschwitz will continue to remain a matter of personal opinion. What can be concluded is that digitisation and the rise of social media has further complicated the notion of empathy in contemporary society, relying on the individual's inherent desire to feel validation and portray themselves as "good" by posting images of their visits to sites of trauma. It seems that authentic remembrance and empathic awareness are often replaced by confused emotion in an attempt to find depth in a culture that increasingly resides behind a screen, and in which 'reproduction' (Newlin 2019: 31) via Instagram has the potential to significantly alter the meaning of what the image is reproducing.

Selfies are an increasingly prevalent means of self-expression and cultural communication, and photography is an intrinsic aspect of the tourist experience, even at Auschwitz. What we are now left with is the question: by capturing a selfie at Auschwitz, at any site, what are the repercussions for the historical and cultural meaning of the site itself? Can the pictorial representation be extricated from the place it seeks to capture? It is crucial that we interrogate why we are pulled towards dark sites, reflect on how we interpret and engage with their meaning, and perhaps most significantly, become aware of how our own manipulated representations might impact the site's collective memory moving into the future.

Endnotes

1. Twitter post from @AuschwitzMuseum published 20 March 2019 states: 'When you come to @AuschwitzMuseum remember you are at the site where over 1 million people were killed. Respect their memory. There are better places to learn how to walk on a balance beam than the site which symbolizes deportation of hundreds of thousands to their deaths.'

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