Embodying ressentimentful victimhood : virtual reality
re-enactment of the Warsaw uprising in the Second World War
Museum in Gdansk

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Embodying *ressentimentful* victimhood: virtual reality re-enactment of the Warsaw uprising in the Second World War Museum in Gdańsk

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland, employs an immersive virtual reality (VR) experience 'Postcard from the Uprising' (*Kartka z Powstania*) in order to build an affective memory regime that prescribes an emotional repertoire for museum audiences. By engaging in a narrative inquiry of the VR experience, I demonstrate how it evokes the emotional dynamic of *ressentiment*, which has been identified as the affective driver of right-wing populism and which informs the historical policy of Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party. The *ressentimentful* emotional regime is predicated on (1) the repeated re-experiencing of perceived injustice and victimhood, which requires (2) an outlet of negative emotions directed at the enemy and (3) a reclaiming of self-worth and dignity along with an ennobled and morally superior victimhood position. The VR experience functions as an emotion training device through which 'appropriate' emotions towards the past are instilled in the audience. The VR narrative transforms collective historical victimhood from a powerless to a morally superior position and may help the PiS in harnessing feelings of injustice and victimhood present among the museum visitors, who yearn to overcome these feelings and reclaim their self-worth and dignity.

Introduction

This article examines how the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland, employs an immersive cinematic virtual reality (VR) experience, 'Postcard from the Uprising' (*Kartka z Powstania*), in order to build an affective memory regime that prescribes an emotional repertoire for museum audiences (Gregory and Witcomb 2007; Kidd 2015; Smith and Campbell 2015; Tolia-Kelly, Waterton, and Watson 2017). Given that museums are among the main contemporary institutions in which the rituals of remembrance are performed in public (Arnold-de-Simine 2013), they are important vehicles for the creation and maintenance of affective bonds of solidarity based on unifying visions of history.

The rise of VR and other immersive digital technologies in historical representation is indicative of the growing appeal of an affective and experiential mode of engagement with the past, which is closely connected to the current conditions of knowledge production and acquisition (Landsberg 2015). The trend of historical representation using immersive digital media brings into view how the dimension of knowing is inextricably intertwined with the dimension of feeling in relation to specific pasts (Smith and Campbell 2015; Smith, Wetherell, and Campbell 2018). In this regard,

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immersive digital representations of history stand out as the latest development in the genre of re-enactment, which has been characterised by its preoccupation with personal experience, individual physical and psychological experiences, social relations and everyday life (Agnew 2007; Kazlauskaitė 2022). Re-enactment, as a form of 'affective history', can be defined as 'historical representation that both takes affect as its object and attempts to elicit affect' (Agnew 2007, 301).[1] A distinctive feature of re-enactment is that it treats history 'as an experience and thus as something that can be (re)created' (Brauer and Lücke 2020, 53). It prioritises corporeal and affective engagement, sensory immersion, performativity and an appeal to authenticity derived from non-linguistic phenomena such as feelings and perceptions (Brauer and Lücke 2020, 53). In some cases, affective engagement and proximity can serve as a gateway to a better understanding of the experiences of past individuals, unsettle received narratives and help in overcoming the 'us vs. them' dichotomies when dealing with contested pasts (Smith 2016, 2021; Gregory and Witcomb 2007; Witcomb 2013, 2015). However, affective engagement may also be instrumentalised for distortion of past events and manipulative emotion regulation of audiences. VR experiences may misconstrue the past while collapsing temporalities, effectively eliminating the distance between the past and the present by immersing the users in an exciting illusion of the (re)appearance of the past.

The affordances of VR align well with the aims of re-enactment, which is likely predictive of the growing role of the medium in digital re-enactment practices in the future. VR is a spatial technology, which, when combined with historical subject matter, is often promoted by its developers as a vehicle for 'time-travelling'. The spatial logic of VR positions users 'inside' a scene or a picture, causing a sense of presence, immersion and immediacy. Instead of passively observing the representation at a distance, users are able to move and engage in an embodied way with what they are seeing, which makes a point of view active, dynamic and self-produced (Kazlauskaitė 2021, 2022). Bodily movement and sensorimotor interaction with virtual environments and people may enable a recollection of an emotionally impactful story from a first-person point of view, potentially turning a heavily indoctrinated narrative into a personal embodied memory. This holds significant implications for the use of VR in public practices of (affective) remembrance.

By forging an embodied and affectively charged connection to the past, immersive digital media constitute a powerful vehicle of historical knowledge as well as an important political resource that can be employed in memory wars and political mobilisation (Smith and Campbell 2015). These issues are particularly relevant in the context of the growing trend of immersive experiences in museums and heritage sites (Kidd 2018; Sterling 2019), which reflects the emergence of the broader 'experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore 2011). The 'immersive turn' and its 'story-led, audience and participation centered, multimodal, multisensory' experiences in museums and heritage sites highlight the extent to which embodiment becomes vital to sense making (Kidd 2018, no pagination; Ciolfi 2015; Kenderdine 2016). The use of VR in museums is, thus, an extension of the immersive turn into the digital realm.

The article proceeds by contextualising the affective politics in the Second World War Museum in Gdańsk within the national politics of history led by Poland's ruling right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party. I discuss the changes to the exhibition introduced by the newly appointed director of the Second World War Museum as indicating the underlying presence and the strategic use of *ressentiment*, a complex psychological mechanism, whose main axis is victimhood and which is used as an affective resource for right-wing political mobilisation (e.g. Salmela and Capelos 2021). By engaging in the narrative inquiry of the VR experience, 'Postcard from the Uprising', I show how the immersive story contributes to the dynamic of *ressentiment* through the VR director's choice of a projective embodied first-person perspective that turns the injustice and humiliation experienced by past individuals into a personal experience of the audience in the present. An embodied first-person point of view is used intentionally to create a sense that the viewer is taking part in affectively charged historical events – 'reliving' history – whose mediated character is hidden by the felt immediacy of the experience. VR experience becomes an emotion training device through which 'appropriate' emotions towards the past are

instilled in the audiences. The narrative of transformation of collective historical victimhood from a powerless to a morally superior position in the VR experience may help the PiS in harnessing feelings of injustice, humiliation and victimhood present among the audience, who yearn to overcome these unpleasant feelings and reclaim their self-worth and dignity.

The immersive turn and the new affective politics in the Polish museum landscape

The immersive turn has been exceptionally prominent in the Polish museum landscape, starting with the opening of the Warsaw Rising Museum in 2004, which was the first museum of its kind in Poland and was created at the initiative of Lech Kaczyński, the then newly elected Mayor of Warsaw and the leader of the PiS. Focused on the visitors' immersion in an emotionally engaging narrative and a multisensory atmosphere, immersive 'narrative scenographic museums' (Wnuk and Majewski 2015) are very popular in Poland. The exhibits in these museums use multisensory stimuli to trigger the emotions of the visitors, in contrast to more '"sterile" museums that present only artifacts and their descriptions' (Wnuk and Majewski 2015, 27). Other notable examples of such museums in Poland include the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw (2013/2014), the Schindler Factory Museum in Kraków, and the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk (2014). The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk (2017) adopted a middle-way approach, as it remains focused on the display of authentic artefacts, but blends these objects into an immersive scenography. What is distinctive about the Polish museum scene is that, since 1989, more museums dedicated to contemporary history were founded by the national and/or local governments in Poland than in any other European country (Etges, Zündorf, and Machcewicz 2018, 1). Most of the museums established during this period are focused on the Second World War as well as the Cold War period (Etges, Zündorf, and Machcewicz 2018, 1).

According to Etges, Zündorf, and Machcewicz (2018, 2), 30 million people[2] visited Polish museums in 2015, which is a significant number, given that the Polish population amounts to approximately 38 million inhabitants. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the popularity of museums in Polish society has caught the attention of political entrepreneurs, who make use of them as tools for spreading a specific emotionalised narrative. The ascendancy of the right-wing PiS party in 2015 heralded a new official interpretation of Polish history, which aims at defending the 'good name' of Poles and Poland, and highlights the role of ethnic Poles as victims and heroes in the Second World War (Hackmann 2018). One of the ways in which the PiS government implemented its new politics of history was by taking control of the leadership of history museums, including the Museum of the Second World War, and by modifying the exhibitions in order to make them more aligned with the PiS version of Polish history. Shortly after the opening of the Museum of the Second World War in March 2017, the founding director of the museum, historian Paweł Machcewicz, was dismissed from his position and was replaced by Karol Nawrocki, who previously led the Regional Public Education office at the Gdańsk branch of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN).[3] Originally founded in 2000, the IPN has turned from a historical research institute into a 'centre of state memory politics' (Peters 2016), or a 'ministry of remembrance' (Leszczyński 2016), whose main task is the implementation and dissemination of the PiS inter-pretation of Polish history, with a focus on Polish victimhood, heroism and countering the spread of 'untrue historical content vilifying the Republic of Poland or the Polish nation' (Peters 2016, no pagination).

The main points of criticism of PiS politicians directed at the original exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War were that 1) it undermined Polish national identity, Polish suffering and heroism by not keeping the primary focus on the Polish experiences of the war and by including the experiences of other nations; 2) it focused too much attention on the fate of civilians, thereby disseminating an anti-war interpretation of history and diminishing the heroism of Polish

soldiers; 3) it did not devote enough attention to the Polish Catholic Church and the Poles saving Jews during the war; 4) it was 'imposed upon Poland by the German politics of history' and was implemented 'on the orders of Berlin' (Etges, Zündorf, and Machcewicz 2018, 3; Machcewicz 2019).

One of the immediate and main changes to the exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War by the newly appointed director was the replacement of the last section of the exhibition, which featured a video and photographs portraying wars in Syria and Ukraine as well as the struggles of refugees trying to escape these conflict zones (Etges, Zündorf, and Machcewicz 2018, 4). The video was removed and replaced by an animated film, entitled 'The Unconquered', which was produced by the IPN and tells the story of the struggle of Poles for freedom from the Second World War to the fall of communism in 1989. The film uses highly emotionalised language and offers insights into the official memory narrative and its associated emotional dynamics that the PiS government seeks to elicit among viewers:

> On 23 August 1939, Hitler and Stalin entered into a secret pact. Its goal was to destroy Poland [These are the opening captions. The following text is narrated by a male voice].

> Nobody thought the war and its effects would last half a century for Poland. First, Germany attacks. Then, Soviet Russia. We don't give up despite being left on our own. We create an Underground State, complete with government, an army, schools and courts. We suffer two occupations. The Germans murder millions of Polish civilians. The Soviets deport Poles in cattle cars to gulags in the east. They shoot over twenty thousand officers during the Katyn massacre, and hundreds of thousands of Poles are forced into slave labour in the inhuman lands of the Soviet Union.

> Our army is reborn, moving west, where our soldiers are already fighting alongside the Allies. We conquer Monte Cassino. Our fighters wreak havoc and fear by air too. The Germans call us 'black devils' as we crush their resistance.

> Paratroopers make their way to occupied Poland to support the Underground State, while our counter-intelligence acquires secret plans of the enemy. There are Poles who save Jews despite the threat of the death penalty. We create resistance movements, even within the German concentration camps. We are the first to alert the world about the Holocaust, though politics appear to be more important than human lives, and nobody listens to us.

> Polish Jews fight the Germans in the Warsaw Ghetto without even a chance for success. Our nation comes up from the Underground and fights in the Warsaw Uprising. We break the German Enigma code, saving millions of lives. But in exchange for all that we do, we are betrayed. The free world distances itself from us, leaving us behind the Iron Curtain.

> Despite our scars from the war, we still resist. The Pope gives us strength. Worker strikes spread throughout Poland. The Communists lose. The Iron Curtain falls. The war is over. We prevail. Because we do not beg for freedom. We fight for it.

The four-minute film narrates the post-war history of Poland by combining simple, short and emotionally impactful sentences with a dark, dramatic game-cinematic aesthetic. The themes of repeated injustice, suffering and victimhood, heroism, perseverance against relentless, cruel adversity, courageous and resourceful defence, sacrifice, righteousness, betrayal and rebirth constitute the emotional core of the film's message that describes the Polish experience of the war and its aftermath. The protagonists (Poles) and the antagonists (the Germans and the Soviets/ Communists) in this narrative are clearly demarcated and presented as unambiguous, black-and-white figures. The Germans and the Soviets, in contrast to the heroic Poles, emerge as paradigmatic villains: cruel, inhuman, barbarous. The Western nations, on the other hand, are portrayed more ambiguously as war allies, but also as traitors, who betrayed Poland and the rest of Central and Eastern Europe by leaving them behind the Iron Curtain at the Yalta conference.

The emotional scheme of the film reverberates a historically embedded narrative about a contradictory position of Poland towards the West/Europe ('the free world'), where Poland defines itself as Western/European, yearns to be recognised and accepted by the West/Europe, but is repeatedly rejected or betrayed by it (Törnquist-Plewa 2002; Pytlas 2015). The aftermath of

the Second World War left Poland, once again, in an inferior, powerless and vulnerable position; its longing to be part of the free and prosperous Western world was crushed. Contrary to the expectations, the 'return to Europe' in 1989 also failed to bring the long-awaited satisfaction of being recognised as 'fully European'. The increased contacts with the West reinforced the feelings of inferiority as well as shame, as Poles became aware of the prejudice of the Western Europeans against Poles, who were perceived as backward and provincial (Törnquist-Plewa 2002). Thus, while Poles have been generally highly supportive of Poland's EU membership since the country's accession in 2004 (85% in 2008 and 87% in 2017), their ideas, beliefs and attitudes towards European integration are highly complex (Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka 2021). The countries of Western Europe ('the old EU') continue to be perceived by the Poles as the benchmark of 'normality' against which Poland is deficient in various ways, particularly in terms of economic prosperity and the quality of life (Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka 2021). As identified by Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka (2021, 368–371), two prevalent emotions in the Polish society in this regard are inferiority and a sense of injustice: Western European countries are perceived to be at a higher developmental stage, while the Poles 'are treated badly outside Poland and occupy the lowest place in the hierarchy of European nations'. This 'lagging behind' by Poland is viewed as being determined by the country's experience of the Second World War and communism (Konieczna-Sałamatin and Sawicka 2021, 371).

In contrast to these feelings of inferiority, 'The Unconquered' is saturated with emotional expressions, emphasising the self-worth of Polish people and Polish identity, mediated by heroism, courage, ingenuity and perseverance. It conveys a story of Poland as a morally superior and dignified victim – abused and betrayed by its ruthless enemies and disloyal allies, but finally emerging reborn as a result of the courage and heroism of the Polish people. Due to this focus on the positive and empowering characteristics of the Polish nation, the shameful and guilt-ridden topic of the Polish participation in the Holocaust is swept aside; instead, the film foregrounds Poles saving Jews. The omission of shame-inducing historical facts is consistent with the PiS historical policy, which aims to promote national pride and end the 'pedagogy of shame', in reference to the critical treatment of Polish history and the debates about the wrongdoings of the members of the Polish nation against Jews and other ethnic minorities during the Second World War (Mendel and Szkudlarek 2020).[4] In the new politics of history, the 'pedagogy of shame' presented an obstacle for the PiS to overcome. It confronted Poles with historical facts that revealed Polish indifference towards as well as direct involvement in the Holocaust, effectively displacing the self-image of Poles as the main victims of the Nazis and revealing a more complex picture of the past in which Poles were both victims and perpetrators in the Second World War.

The emotional dynamic of the PiS historical policy can be interpreted as indicating the underlying presence of *ressentiment*, which has been recently identified as an affective driver of right-wing populism and reactionary politics (Salmela and von Scheve 2017; Capelos and Demertzis 2018; Sharafutdinova 2016; Demertzis 2020; Salmela and Capelos 2021; Sullivan 2021; Kelly 2020; Wimberly 2018; Kiss 2021; Capelos and Demertzis 2022). Following Salmela and Capelos' definition (2021, 194), *ressentiment* is viewed as a psychological mechanism whose main axis is a sense of victimhood, derived from inefficacious anger, feelings of deprivation, repeated injustice and shame felt about one's circumstances or experiences. The pain of the negative feelings targeting the self in the powerless and inferior victim position forces the subject to redirect negative feelings towards others who, in turn, become the objects of resentment, hatred and indignation (Salmela and Capelos 2021, 194). The powerless victimhood is, hence, transformed into a morally superior, dignified and empowered victimhood, which lays the grounds for a collective identity of victimhood (Salmela and Capelos 2021, 194) that can be further employed as a political resource by political entrepreneurs.

The maintenance of morally superior victimhood then requires a continuous revisiting of the wound stemming from the original experience of powerless victimhood, combined with an externally focused and repetitive expression of resentment and hatred (e.g. Kelly 2020). For greater

societal impact, the efforts at revisiting and transforming the original powerless victimhood may particularly target popular media outlets (e.g. Kazlauskaitė and Salmela 2022) as well as, in this case, public museums with a wide reach of audiences. Popular museum exhibitions dealing with historical topics that may evoke feelings of powerless victimhood, shame and inferiority, such as the Museum of the Second World War, thus acquire strategic importance in the PiS agenda. Museums become institutions of social sharing of victimhood narratives, facilitating the emergence of (narcissistic) group pride and solidarity based on a shared experience of injury and adversity (on social sharing as the consolidating stage of *ressentiment*, see Salmela and Capelos 2021). In this context, *ressentiment* is characterised by a reductionist 'all-good, all-bad' attitude towards the self and others, which reinforces and validates the 'all-good new self', allowing the subject to feel 'pride rather than shame, satisfaction rather than disappointment, being somebody rather than nobody, counting for something rather than nothing' (Salmela and Capelos 2021, 199). *Ressentiment* hinders the efforts and curiosity to examine the complexity and moral ambivalence of past events, experiences and behaviours, as this resuscitates the mental pain of facing the 'not-so-good' parts of self. Willingness to learn about these 'not-so-good' aspects of the nation's history is, however, what distinguishes critical historical literacy from historical propaganda (Seixas and Morton 2013).

The original intention of the creators of the Museum of the Second World War was to preserve a critical distance in engagement with the past. They did not want to use an immersive scenography for arousing emotions 'that would imitate wartime experiences, as is done, for instance, in the sewer replicas in the Warsaw Uprising Museum' (Wnuk and Majewski 2015, 27). In other words, they sought to avoid a projective first-person mode of relation to the experiences and emotions of past individuals that prompts visitors to think of how they would have felt and experienced the past events or circumstances, instead of trying to understand the experiences of past individuals in their own historical context and otherness (Kazlauskaitė 2022). The creators of the Museum wanted to counterbalance the projective affective proximity to the past with critical distance. This is an important difference inasmuch as immersive projective proximity focuses the attention of the visitors towards the self – the experience of injustice, humiliation, injury done to the self. As will become apparent in the following sections, the intentions of the original creators of the Museum exhibition to preserve historical distance stand in contrast to the projective mode in the VR experience of the Warsaw Uprising, 'A Postcard from the Uprising', which is displayed in the newly founded Zone of New Technologies at the Museum and which enables the viewers to relive an empowering story of victimhood, sacrifice and heroism from a proximate first-person point of view. The first-person embodied 'reliving' of the historical events in the VR experience incites emotions stemming from *ressentiment* that are likely present in the target audience.

Method

The analysis of the VR experience, 'A Postcard from the Uprising', is based on a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin 2007; Homolar and Löfflmann 2021) that combines an identification of the emotional components of *ressentiment* in the depicted story (e.g. Kiss 2021; Kelly 2020) as well as the mediated modes of intersubjectivity in relation to the re-enacted past (Kazlauskaitė 2022). The narrative inquiry is based on my affective and embodied experience of the VR content, which may differ to some extent from the experiences of other users. The extent of previous exposure to the medium, prior historical knowledge and beliefs about the past as well as personal emotional sensitivities may alter the degree to which the users surrender to the illusion of the transparency and affective immediacy of the virtual representation.

Nevertheless, the particular choices of the VR content creators on how to position the users in the experience are likely to determine the level of cognitive and emotional engagement with the represented events. Taking an embodied perspective in a VR experience that depicts past events means that the (emotional) body is used for exploration of the mediated past environments and experiences of past individuals. Bodily engagement and interaction in VR account for the medium's

impact as they closely resemble the mechanism through which human beings come to an understanding of the physical world around them. As Gallese and Guerra (2020, xx) explain, '[t]he multimodal integration of what we perceive is triggered by the potentiality for action that we express corporeally'. One's own movement as well as observing the movement of others activate sensorimotor maps in the brain leading to a non-linguistic relationship with space and objects as well as the emotions, actions and sensations of others (Gallese and Guerra 2020, xix). Corporeality, thus, plays a decisive role in mediated experiences. It provides the ground for cinematographic intersubjectivity, or how human beings relate to the space, the people and the objects that surround them in the mediated environment (Gallese and Guerra 2020, xvi).

One of the most significant elements in the mediated intersubjectivity of the VR experience is the perspective which the user of the medium is positioned to take in relation to the re-enacted past events (Kazlauskaitė 2022). For example, VR may guide the user's perspective by situating the audience and the past in relation to each other through different modes of relation that elicit affective projection, bringing the past into proximity or, alternatively, dialogical attention, producing a more distancing effect (Kazlauskaitė 2022).

Projection entails a first-person relation to and a first-person embodied perspective on the past (Kazlauskaitė 2022). In practice, this means that the past and the experience of historical agents are approached primarily on the basis of one's own values, beliefs, feelings and experience; this mode of relation lacks a clear recognition and appreciation of the difference and the otherness of the past. An emotional connection to the experience of past individuals in this mode is premised on the projection of how the user would have felt and experienced the events in question (Kazlauskaitė 2022). The users may be asked to reflect on what they would have done in another's place and how they would have felt or behaved in those circumstances.

Dialogical attention to the past provides a second-person relation to and a second-person embodied perspective on the past (Kazlauskaitė 2022). In contrast to the first-person projection, dialogical attention combines attentive engagement and disengagement, affective proximity and critical distance. The user actively recognises the difference and otherness of the past, while simultaneously experiencing it in emotional, moral or ideological engagement (Kazlauskaitė 2022). The user is able and encouraged to differentiate between one's own emotional reactions to the (mediated) past experiences and the emotions of past individuals, which may or may not overlap. The user is also able to differentiate between the past and its mediated representation and recognise that the mediated story is not a mirror copy of the past events and experiences, even though some aspects of the representation can resemble the past to a certain extent. Affective connection in this mode is not opposed to reflexive engagement with the past, but, rather, is seen as an integral part of it.

These modes of relation to the re-enacted past model the user's perspective in the virtual environment in ways that hold implications for what kind of emotional engagement with (or disengagement from) the past it enables. The precise ways in which VR experiences position the user and combine affective proximity with critical distance acquire particular significance in the age of immersive digitalisation of cultural memory. Adopting a particular point of view in VR may promote and reinforce certain ways of approaching the past (and the present) outside the digital realm. This holds implications for the role of historical museum exhibitions as venues for social sharing of emotionally impactful stories.

With regard to the *ressentiment*, museum exhibitions may manage visitors' emotions and provide relief from frustration by providing targets for blame attribution, appealing to victimhood, and/or reclaiming feelings of (narcissistic) pride and self-worth. In what follows, I examine how the VR experience, 'Postcard from the Uprising', takes advantage of the projective first-person embodied perspective to tap into the mechanism of *ressentiment* and its related feelings that are probably present among the museum visitors. I trace the components of the *ressentiment* in the VR experience of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, focusing particularly on how it elicits the feelings of victimhood, injustice, powerlessness, suffering as well as the feelings of empowerment, pride, self-worth and dignity.

Analysis

The VR experience, 'A Postcard from the Uprising' (2018), is on display at the Museum's Zone of New Technologies.[5] It is a fifteen-minute cinematic VR experience that depicts the 11th day of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. The VR experience was produced by the National Centre for Culture Poland (Narodowe Centrum Kultury), which is a state-sponsored institution that 'aims to maintain and promote national and state traditions along with Polish cultural heritage' (Nck.pl). The story was inspired by an exhibit from the Warsaw Uprising Museum, a postcard with a prayer, written by the daughter of one of the insurgents, Captain Władysław Sieroszewski, code-named 'Sabała', whose life the postcard saved. In the experience, the user participates in the uprising as one of the members of an insurgent unit, led by Captain Sieroszewski. The goal of the experience is, therefore, to make the users feel not just that they can enter a different time and place, but that they can relive the events and experience the affective charge of the Warsaw Uprising in their bodies. The experience draws the users to relate to the past exclusively through sensory, embodied and affective proximity. However, proximity, as embodied immersion, is not counterbalanced by critical distance and reflection, neither in relation to the (complexity of) past events and experiences, nor to the act of mediation. The Museum's description of the experience evocatively conveys this mode of relation to the past:

> The 360-degree perspective allows you to completely immerse yourself in the story being told. Other characters seem to be right next to us, looking us straight in the eye. Looking around, we can see what Warsaw must have looked like in the heat of the insurgency and fighting. We hear shots from all sides, we see tanks, and the sewer walls are at our fingertips. It is an experience that is hard to describe. (Muzeum1939.pl)

> You need to try out the virtual reality goggles at least once, and you will see some great material that has been worked on for a long time. Only then can we understand what it really was like, says Tomasz Dobosz, the director of "A Postcard from the Uprising". (Muzeum1939.pl)

VR is presented as the technological innovation that offers a transparent and immediate access to the past, that gives knowledge of the past 'as it really was' and brings the past back to life. What is distinctive, however, is that such claims concerning the authenticity of the experience are entangled with expectations of an affective response as well as of a heightened self-conscious awareness of one's affective response to that experience. The experience is supposed to make the users more aware of their emotional reactions to a mediated past event. The director, Tomasz Dobosz, explains:

> When we watch ordinary films, in the classic technology, we often wonder what we would do if we were there, and we can answer this question for ourselves, I think, only with the help of the imagination, that is to say, we try to embody in some way the person we see on the screen, which is the character, and identify with him. In our film, we put on the goggles and we become one of the insurgents and, via this virtual reality, via the sense of immersion, we trick the brain in terms of physical presence. Hence, yes, we are closer to answering ourselves, inside, the question that I rather throw at the viewers: Answer yourselves, do you feel fear? Do you feel sadness? Do you feel sorrow? Do you feel anger when you see how an insurgent is shooting? Do you want to join in? Do you want to withdraw?[6] (Polskie Radio 2018)

The users are instructed to interpret the felt intensity and conscious apprehension of their emotional and bodily response as historical evidence without an accompanying distancing attention to the otherness of the past, its complexity, as well as the mediated and authored nature of the story. The assumption that 'what I feel, they (the insurgents) must have felt, too' reveals the underlying projective mode of relation to the past, which erases the distance and uses affective engagement to make claims about 'what really happened'. The more intense the feeling, the more authentic it is assumed to be. Personal feeling becomes the principal way to assess and access the historical truth.

As the commentary of the director reveals, the embodied, first-person point of view is used in a projective rather than a dialogical way, with the aim of focusing the audience's attention towards the experience of the self rather than the experience of past individuals. The viewer is not a witness, but a character in the story, 'one of the insurgents', who is made to personally undergo the dramatic events in VR. As critical distancing collapses, the injustice, victimhood and humiliation experienced

by individuals in the past become the audience's experiences in the present. This experience of past injustice may become an object of a past-focused rumination, which fuels *ressentiment* (Capelos and Demertzis 2018) and is enabled by a repeated 'reliving' of historical events in VR as well as in one's memory. The fact that the mediated past is experienced in an embodied, first-person perspective in VR and, hence, may become part of one's personal embodied memory reveals the political significance of affective proximity in immersive historical representation. The subsequent analysis elucidates the affectively charged narrative of the VR experience from a first-person point of view.

The opening scene of the VR experience places me in a room where I am sitting in front of an elderly woman, who is writing something at a desk. She is the daughter of Captain Władysław Sieroszewski, the main protagonist. She tells me how she wrote her father a letter with a prayer when she was eight years old and that she wanted him to return from the uprising. Her face is tearful and distressed; she is moved by the memories. Sharing the space of her home and seeing her facial expressions, I, as the viewer, feel beckoned to join her in this emotional engagement with the past.

Soon after, the scene changes and I find myself in an underground sewer, sitting on the ground, surrounded by a group of insurgents. Closest to me is a young woman, a paramedic, whose name is Zosia and who is dressing my wounds that I incurred during the fighting. She makes eye contact with me and comes up close to my face. As is revealed to me through the dialogues within the group, I was hit and lost consciousness. The group of insurgents, including Władysław Sieroszewski, is standing around and looking at me. I feel vulnerable and dependent on their care. Once again, a few insurgents come very close to my face, looking me in the eye, observing me, making me feel almost uncomfortable. This storytelling device is repeatedly used as the experience unfolds, enhancing the felt proximity and inhibiting critical engagement. As the insurgents come very close to me, enter my personal space, attend to my wounds, it is impossible not to have a bodily, emotional response or maintain a distanced attitude. I am compelled to become one of the insurgents through the bodily interaction in a shared space. One of the insurgents, Pestka, asks me if I find Zosia attractive. This gives the first cue that I occupy a male body in the VR experience. Throughout the experience, I am present and participate in the virtual experience from a first-person, embodied point of view positioned in a male body. This, however, does not diminish the immersive illusion.

When it becomes clear that I am not seriously wounded, the insurgents help me to my feet and we proceed to walk along the tunnel of the sewer – carefully, slowly, trying not to make too much noise, and listening if we can hear the Nazi Germans above. The sense of danger and confinement in the underground sewer is palpable. The fact that the other insurgents need to help me stand up and walk adds to the sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. Zosia and one of the other insurgents, Pestka, walk in front of me and quietly converse. Zosia is curious to find out who I am. This is a moment in the experience where the Polish language and the English language versions of the VR experience slightly diverge. In the English language version, Zosia asks Pestka whether I really am from Texas. 'Can't you tell?' Pestka responds. Then I hear the male voice of my VR character saying, 'I hate Nazis too, ma'am' in a broad American accent. I am supposed to be an American man called Alec. In the Polish version, on the other hand, Zosia asks whether it is true that I am from the remote Polish region of Śląsk, to which the insurgent responds: 'Can't you hear it?', supposedly referring to my accent. As a response to this, I hear the voice of my VR character responding: 'I dislike Germans too' (Ja też nie lubię Niemców). I am supposed to be a Polish man from the region of Śląsk, named Alek. As a participant in the experience, I am, therefore, positioned as a relative outsider, who is not 'from here', but who, nevertheless, shares the plight for freedom with the 'locals', is willing to sacrifice his life for it and also hates the Nazis. As a result, my VR character, even though vulnerable, wounded and victimised, acquires the characteristics of a brave hero who came all the way to Warsaw from a distant place to fight the Nazis. The hatred felt towards the Nazi Germans features as the affective bond that initiates me into the group.

We move forward along the tunnel. Władysław instructs me to follow him. As we proceed, we find a young woman, an insurgent, her dead body lying on the ground. Apparently, she was trying to give us a warning as there is a note written on the wall: 'Beware, Germans' ('Uwaga Niemcy').

Zosia removes her pistol and, as Władysław attends to her and to the note on the wall, I am given time to explore and reflect on what I see. The scene with a dead female insurgent conveys a sense of injustice, victimhood and sacrifice inherent in the Polish experience of the war, but also pays tribute to the solidarity and tragic determination of the insurgents fighting the enemy. The nation is personified as simultaneously a brave heroine and a victim which is contrasted to the cruelty and brutality of the enemy.

Afterwards, we continue walking and finally emerge from the sewer. Before coming out into the daylight, I hear myself asking another insurgent, who is already up, how it is out there. He responds that it's all clear. I climb up and see my hands in front of me, holding onto the ladder. As I partially emerge outside, I can look around and observe the city of Warsaw in ruins. It is completely destroyed, which further contributes to the atmosphere of powerless victimhood and injustice. I can see a male insurgent in one of the crumbling buildings looming above me as well as a Nazi officer, a captain, who comes out of the building and sits on a chair. His posture, body language and appearance convey power and authority. He is a force of destruction, in charge of the suppression of the uprising, in contrast to the vulnerable Polish insurgent in the building, who is trying to hide and escape.

Suddenly, I hear a rumbling noise approaching. I look around to see where the noise is coming from and I notice a massive tank heading directly towards me. It goes over the sewer opening, straight above me, and I duck my head down with a jerk. The bodily reaction to the approaching tank halts any attempt at critical distancing towards the story. As the tank passes, a large shard of metal falls over the sewer pit, right above me, making a loud noise. Nobody seems to notice me until the dog of another Nazi officer sniffs me out. I hear the sound of the sniffs of the dog approaching. When they find me in hiding, one of the Nazis points a gun at me and shouts at me loudly. Another one runs towards me and hits me on the head with his rifle. The Nazi Germans are portrayed as aggressive and ruthless, whereas I feel vulnerable and scared, and I am positioned much lower in relation to them, adding to the experience of vulnerability and powerlessness. Everything goes dark.

In the next scene, I open my eyes and am sitting next to Władysław, who is wounded. We are surrounded by a unit of SS officers who are terrorising a fairly large group of civilian Poles trying to escape the city. As I enter the scene, one of the SS soldiers comes very close to my face and stares at me with piercing and slightly mad eyes. It feels uncomfortable and frightening, and it makes me want to withdraw. The Nazis are rummaging through the belongings of the civilians and collect their valuables, such as furs and jewellery. The Nazis are portrayed in the scene as the ultimate villains: brutal, greedy and cruelly cold, lacking all empathy. The Polish civilians, on the other hand, are represented as scared and helpless victims.

One of the insurgents, who managed to mix in with the captive group of civilian Poles, secretly hands a grenade to Władysław. Immediately afterwards, I am ordered by a screaming SS officer to play the hand-operated gramophone that is on my right and I see my hand moving the handle of the gramophone. One particularly vicious SS officer picks a young girl from the group of Polish civilians, who are all standing next to a wall and are noticeably frightened and distressed. The Polish girl draws back in fear, but the SS officer drags her out from the group by force. As I am playing the music on the gramophone, they start dancing and keep turning around until they move behind a wall, going out of sight. I and the rest of the people in the scene can only hear the shots behind a wall. Suddenly, I stop playing the gramophone. The Nazi officer orders me to continue, but I hear myself saying 'No'. This symbolic moment, where my VR character, enraged by the Nazi terror directed at the civilians, refuses to follow commands, marks the point of change in the VR experience. The predominantly powerless, vulnerable and more passive victimhood position of the Polish civilians as well as the insurgents (hiding, trying to escape, experiencing terror and murder) is transformed into a position of heroic and bold resistance against the enemy.

The very next moment, Władysław, pretending to beg the Nazi captain and perhaps even bribe him, hands him a grenade and pushes him to the ground, away from us. The grenade explodes, but Władysław manages to take cover and protects both of us from the explosion by lifting a wooden

door. In the next scene, I find myself waking up, shell shocked, Władysław and another insurgent by my side. We are sheltered behind a car. Władysław asks if I am alright. We are under attack by the remaining members of the SS unit. The dramatic tension is at its peak. One of the Nazis is killed by an insurgent named Żwawy (Grizzly); Zosia shoots another one. After killing the man, I see her hands shaking and her face is distressed. She is afraid and in shock, and I can sense her anxiety in my own body.

Władysław stands up and suddenly gets hit in the chest by a bullet. Zosia and another insurgent pick him up and we try to seek shelter in the underground sewer. The Nazis have opened fire on us. One of the insurgents, however, heroically shields us with gunfire and a grenade. The pace of this scene is shown in slow motion. This provides enough time to look at the expressions and emotions on the faces of the insurgents, the struggle, exertion and pain. It feels like a hopeless situation, yet the insurgents show great courage, determination and solidarity. One of the insurgents tells me to take cover. The next moment we are in the underground sewer and I am told to stay with Władysław. I sit in front of him. He takes out his wallet from his chest pocket and I can see that the bullet that hit him earlier is embedded in it. He takes a note from his wallet, which his daughter has written him and in which she thanks God 'for giving her mother and father, and for everything, everything'.

In the final scene, a young girl is standing in front of me and is holding the note and, as the scene transforms, I see the note displayed in a glass box at the Warsaw Rising Museum. Władysław's daughter, who is now an old woman, is facing me and looking at the note. She looks at me smiling, making long, meaningful eye contact. The final captions on a black background explain that Władysław survived, lived until he was 96 years of age and always believed that his daughter's postcard saved him. Both in the opening and the final scene, which are set in the present day, I occupy an embodied position of my own self.

Discussion

Paradoxically, although the Warsaw Uprising did not succeed (partly because the Soviets, Americans and British did not support the Polish efforts), the VR experience leaves the viewer with a sense of empowerment resulting from perseverance against adversity. Betrayed by allies and attacked by a superior force, Polish resistance exudes both strength and victimhood, toughness and vulnerability (see, e.g. Kelly 2020 on how strength and victimisation overlap in Donald Trump's *ressentimentful* rhetoric). By undergoing such a challenging experience and surviving it, the viewer can then claim the new identity of a dignified and empowered victimhood. Whereas victimhood is a key axis of *ressentiment*, the VR experience provides a step-by-step transformative journey in which the original victimhood, derived from feelings of injustice and humiliation, is transformed into a morally superior victimhood of noble sufferers under siege by hostile external forces.

This morally righteous and dignified, all-good Polish identity is contrasted in the VR experience to the villainous and evil, all-bad Nazi German identity, illustrating the point made by Salmela and Capelos (2021) that a reductionist 'all-good, all-bad' attitude towards the self and others allows the subject to claim and reinforce self-worth. The pain of the negative feelings targeting the Polish self is redirected away towards the Nazi Germans as the main object of hatred and anger. Hatred of the Nazis is used in the experience not only as an affective bond of group solidarity, but also indicates the contours of the emotional regime: one is expected to hate the Nazis as the ultimate villain if one wants to belong to the group. The contrast between the evil Nazis and the heroic plight for freedom of Polish people further allows Poles (in the present) to evade the shameful aspects of the Polish experience in the Second World War.

Finally, the possibility to relive the victimisation and injustice in the VR experience at the Museum as well as in other locations in Poland where it is displayed – recurrently – as if it were happening in the present, may contribute to *ressentiment* by preventing the audience from moving on, recognising and owning the 'not-so-good' features of national history and working through

difficult feelings. Instead, the Museum's Zone of New Technologies produces a space in which the visitors can periodically re-experience historical adversity, injury and humiliation from a first-person embodied point of view, evoking feelings linked to *ressentiment* that are no doubt present in some segments of the audience. The *ressentiment* felt by the visitors may stem from perceived injustices, frustrations and powerlessness experienced in other unrelated fields of life (Salmela and von Scheve 2017), but it is these experiences that make the audience susceptible to the emotional message of the VR story, amplified by the added effect of the embodied, first-person point of view.[7]

Since this is an embodied experience, it becomes part of the audience's embodied memory, a kind of 'prosthetic memory' (Landsberg 2004), whose felt authenticity is reinforced by the audience's bodily and emotional response to the experiential unity of the story. The VR experience functions as an emotion training device that, firstly, engages by embodied immersion and tapping into the deep-seated frustrations of the audience and, secondly, instructs the audience on the right way to engage with the past and what to feel about it, contributing to the emergence of an emotional regime (Reddy 2001; Kazlauskaitė, Pyrhönen, and Bauvois 2022). This *ressentimentful* emotional regime is predicated on (1) the repeated re-experiencing of perceived injuries, injustice and victimhood, which requires (2) an outlet of negative emotional charge through hatred and anger directed at brutal enemies and (3) a reclaiming of self-worth and dignity along with an ennobled and morally superior victimhood position. As Kelly (2020) notes, such a stance 'prevents subjects from moving forward because their gaze is cast backward toward re-experiencing an injury' and 'creates a political community forged through and invested in its own marginalization'.

Hence, the incentive behind the new politics of history of the PiS government, focused around the themes of the victimhood and heroism of the Polish nation, is clearly the exploitation of the *ressentiment* present in Polish society. Rumination on the wounds of past injustices and the relentless hostility of the cruel enemies of the nation (whether in the past or the present) validates the claims for a dignified and morally righteous victimhood identity. The 'all-good' Polish self is contrasted to the 'all-bad' enemies of the nation. As a result, the defence of the 'good name' of Poles and Poland against any shame- or guilt-inducing representations of the past that threaten this 'all-good' image of the self becomes the focus of the government's agenda. One of the consequences of the morally superior, 'all-good' identity is that it makes the exclusion and marginalisation of those who challenge such a *ressentimentful* emotional regime and its narrative acceptable and even commendable.

Conclusion

The projective first-person embodied perspective in 'Postcard from the Uprising' turns the experiences of injustice, victimhood and humiliation of past individuals into a personal experience of viewers in the present. As a result, it may contribute to a past-oriented rumination of past injustices and victimisation that not only hides the otherness of the past, but potentially elicits an embodied recollection of other people's experiences as one's own. In other words, this kind of affective remembrance is self-focused rather than other-focused. Instead of understanding people in the past, it is fixated on alleviation of the troubled emotions of the viewers via an emotionally-engaging narrative that transforms powerless victimhood into a morally superior, righteous victimhood. The Museum of the Second World War and its Zone of New Technologies, in which the VR experience is displayed, become a space in which visitors can engage in a personal re-enactment of historical adversity, injury and humiliation, effectively erasing the temporal, spatial and critical distance between the past and the present, and between personal experiences in the present and the experiences of people in the past.

By harnessing the impact of bodily movement and interaction in the mediated space, VR functions in this case as an emotion training device that serves to elicit the 'appropriate' emotions of the museum visitors towards the nation's past and contributes to an emergence of a *ressentimentful* emotional regime. The immersive narrative taps into *ressentiment* that is

likely present among museum visitors to varying degrees, turning it into a powerful tool for political entrepreneurs. Even though the *ressentiment* of the visitors may originate from contemporary rather than historical grievances and frustrations, it is this affective alignment between the past and the present that renders the emotional message of the VR story so forceful.

While the emotionalised narratives, viewed on a flat screen, still retain a measure of distance by withholding the viewers' embodied presence outside the frame, VR embeds the viewers into a multisensory world of experience, whose felt immediacy may hide the mediated and constructed nature of the story. Depending on how VR experiences position users in relation to the past and calibrate a delicate balance between affective and critical engagement, they may function both as vehicles of distortion as well as provide opportunities for a reflexive and multifaceted encounter with experiences of past individuals. The political significance of affective proximity in immersive historical representation calls for a critical media literacy education geared towards consumers of immersive digital content. It also draws attention to the need for further studies on the role of VR in formation of affective communities and regimes.

Notes

1. In the context of this paper, I use the concept of affect and the concepts of emotion and feeling interchangeably.
2. This number is inclusive of foreign tourists, but the main target audience of the new museums are the Polish people, according to Etges, Zündorf, and Machcewicz (2018, 2).
3. For a discussion on the history of the Museum of the Second World War, its original exhibition and the changes imposed by the new museum leadership, see (Machcewicz 2019; Jaeger 2020; Radonić 2020).
4. See (Wnuk 2018) for a complete analysis of distortions of historical facts in the film 'The Unconquered'.
5. The VR experience has also been exhibited in other temporary locations around Poland.
6. Translation by the author.
7. I thank Mikko Salmela for bringing to my attention how the VR experience may contribute to the intermingling of the individual and group-based *ressentiment* by providing the audience members a context in which they can interpret the former in terms of the latter, and by offering discharge of the emotional drivers of individual *ressentiment* through group-based emotions of group-based *ressentiment*.

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