Look Back at It: Performing “Post”memory at #Auschwitz

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GER433: Holocaust Representation

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In 1974, The New York Times published a tongue-in-cheek piece on the incongruous nature of tourism at Auschwitz. The article notes that visitors “troop through the former prison barracks, gas chambers and crematoria, looking with interest at such gruesome displays,” yet “few seem to have been crying.” The author documents the wide array of souvenirs at the concentration camp’s giftshop and an onsite hotel—in case visitors desired to stay longer. He claims the only thing to be missing is “a stand selling souvenir bones and ashes.”

Since being liberated nearly 75 years ago, the Memorial and Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau has become a popular tourist destination, attracting over 2 million visitors in 2017 alone. The attraction of approximately 1.1 murders appears across tourism sites’ lists of the “BEST things to do in Poland.”

The aforementioned New York Times article was published before a time in which people had the ability to share their trips around the world to the world itself via social media. Now, the Auschwitz experience has been “hashtagged” through Instagram. Visitors of Auschwitz-Birkenau are now able to share their experience, respect, and condolences with their followers online. These pictures echo the discordant nature of a gift shop and hotel at Auschwitz; they provide a visual representation of the issues concerning dark tourism, memorialization, and Holocaust representation in the digital age. To this date, people have posted with “#Auschwitz” in their captions over 375,000 times on Instagram. The content of these posts varies from black-and-white filters, somber looks, soft smiles, and clichés calling viewers not to forget the

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2 Ibid.
past. A majority of these pictures, and all the pictures I examine in this paper, depict visitors posing in similar ways on the train tracks leading to the entrance of the concentration camp. In this paper, I examine posts from both the #Auschwitz collection and the geolocation of “Auschwitz-Birkenau” on Instagram, and I place them in conversation with Marianne Hirsch’s principles of postmemory and Pierre Nora’s theory of lieux de mémoire (memory space) to understand social media’s implications in Holocaust representation and collective memory. I do not attempt to problematize the practice of taking pictures at Auschwitz. Instead, I examine these visitors Instagram posts as a performance and production of Holocaust postmemory. I argue that this performance reifies the concentration camp as a lieux de mémoire: “the ultimate embodiment of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it.” Through Auschwitz-Birkenau becoming the lieux de mémoire #Auschwitz, Holocaust representation is further simplified, commoditized, and distanced from our present.

**Organization**

I structure this paper in three parts to examine these posts from various angles of scholarship on memory, performance studies, and artistic responses to Holocaust representation in the digital media age. First, I place Marianne Hirsch and Pierre Nora about the theories of memory in conversation with #Auschwitz. Then, I arrange these posts thematically into a photo stream and close read them as if I commented on them using the Instagram platform. Lastly, I discuss these posts alongside artist Shahak Shapira’s #Yolocaust and discuss #Auschwitz in the context of dark tourism culture.

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Methodological and Ethical Considerations

I randomly selected the Instagram posts I highlight in this paper from the #Auschwitz tag and the geolocation tag “Auschwitz-Birkenau”. I collected a wide range of posts in front of the gates and/or on the traintracks during May 2019, and randomly generated 15 pictures that I use for this paper. To ensure this phenomenon is not limited to a specific month or tourist season, I compared them to pictures taken using the #Auschwitz tag and the geolocation tag “Auschwitz-Birkenau” in every month of 2019. There were no stark visual differences among these posts, so I concluded that using a small sample size of posts from May 2019 could adequately represent the phenomenon for the current scope of my paper. To ensure privacy for these Instagram users, I have blurred out their usernames.

Performing postmemory

Comparative literature scholar Dr. Marianne Hirsch coined the term postmemory to understand how Holocaust survivors pass down memories and trauma of state-sponsored genocide to their families through stories and photographs. Hirsch writes that “postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.” In her article “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” Marianne Hirsch discusses how photography functions as a form of witnessing and facilitates postmemory for second and third generations of remembers. She responds to Holocaust historian Barbie Zelizer’s claim that the repetition of ‘liberating armies’ photographs of concentration camps are causing

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second and third generational witnesses to “remember to forget” as they become “no more than
dectextualized memory cues, energized by an already coded memory, no longer the vehicles
that can themselves energizes memory.” She reaffirms Zelizer’s notion that Holocaust
representation is becoming simplified by the repetition of the same very few iconic images.
Through this repetition, however, she claims that “in [the postmemorial generation] displacing
and recontextualizing these well-known images…repetition has become not an instrument of
fixity or paralysis or simple retraumatization (as it often is for survivors of trauma), but mostly
helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past.” Hirsch would argue that these posts from
#Auschwitz document a form of postmemory. These second and third generation witnesses,
whether related to Holocaust survivors or not, work through inherited cultural trauma through
posting these pictures of themselves at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

I agree that posting pictures of #Auschwitz is an expression of postmemory. Instead of
problematicizing these posts, I ask how this expression contributes to representation of the
Holocaust. In her article, Hirsch examines iconic pictures of concentration camps that Zelizer
critiques. She examines the iconic picture of Auschwitz-Birkenau’s “Gate of Death.” Because of
the repetition of this image in Holocaust representation, these “gates” function as a symbolic
entrance to remembrance. Hirsch claims that “the postmemorial generation, largely limited to
these images, replays obsessively this oscillation between opening and closing the door to the
memory and the experiences of victims and survivors.” The viewer is always left at a threshold
from the violent past Auschwitz bears, contextualizing the space with learned Holocaust history,

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9 Ibid, 9.
10 Ibid, 18.
cultural memory, and familiar iconography. By visiting Auschwitz and documenting their experience through Instagram, they are performing in the space.

Through this performance, #Auschwitz becomes a lieux de mémoire. What does it mean for visitors to place themselves in front of this iconic shot their pictures? Is this background ubiquitous enough to not be hashtagged or geotagged as Aushwitz? Nora echoes these questions in his discussion of historical representation in post-modernity. He claims:

“Our relation to the past is now formed in a subtle play between its intractability and its disappearance, a question of a representation—in the original sense of the word—radically different from the old ideal of resurrecting the past. As comprehensive as it may have wished to be, in practice such a resurrection implied a hierarchy of memory, ordering the perspective of the past beneath the gaze of a static present by the skillful manipulation of light and shadow. But the loss of a single explanatory principle, while casting us into a fragmented universe, has promoted every object—even the most humble, the most improbable, the most inaccessible—to the dignity of a historical mystery… Representation proceeds by strategic highlighting, selecting samples and multiplying examples.”

#Auschwitz posts illustrate this “light and shadow” manipulation of the past. Through posing with gestures of the social media culture and using the “Gateway of Death” shot, the practice of #Auschwitz ressurects Auschwitz-Birkenau as a hallucination of the past. The lieux de mémoire of #Auschwitz represents Holocaust history but grounds it in the present as a site for reflection, performance, and commodification.

My comments

These visitors attempt to place themselves in the history at Auschwitz. They all have a somber face with an emotional and/or educational caption. Why

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11 Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 17.
do they feel the need to educate their followers through their post?

Does posing and posting at Auschwitz-Birkenau help @ajklein22 process the murder of her aunt? Holocaust history educator Rachel N. Baum claims that “remembering implies not only information passively held by the individual (the opposite of forgetting), but some kind of action… According to this logic, the person who remembers is fundamentally different, from the person who forgets.” One’s memory of the suffering and terror of the Holocaust acts as a moral guide in memorial spaces. Do they feel duty to remember and educate others about their experience at Auschwitz-Birkenau?

I think these posts disturb me the most out of all the examples. There’s an apparent lack of acknowledgement and awareness of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a site of mass torture and murder. I believe this illustrates the commodification of this concentration camp through tourism and social media.

What does it mean for Israeli youth to pose at Auschwitz-Birkenau with an Israeli flag?

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Is an emotionless pose the most appropriate way to pose at Auschwitz-Birkenau?

If you’re not showing your followers that you are moved by this experience or trying to educate them about the space, why post at all?

#Yolocaust

Israeli artist Shahak Shapira created the project “Yolocaust” to expose visitors of Holocaust Memorials who take “fun” pictures or selfies at the sites that commemorate mass suffering and murder. By superimposing visitors’ pictures over actual pictures of victims of the Holocaust, Shapira’s work not only works against but also proves that concentration camps and Holocaust memorials are *lieux de mémoire*. This exercise below takes the same approach as Shapira, but I believe that I give these visitors a little more grace. Comparing these tourists’ poses at both #Auschwitz and #Beach, #City, and

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#Mountain, suggest a disrespect of the meaning of these sites through poses and gestures. #Yolocaust argues that visitors’ transgression of a selfie at Auschwitz reveals their historical ignorance and disrespect. The exercise below interrogates dark tourism and its similarities to “regular” tourism. Dark tourism scholar Laurie Beth Clark writes that “tourism is one of the ways we make sense out of the parts of the world not previously known to us, and of the experiences in our own world that are ‘inconceivable’. Tourism is as ‘reasonable’ a response to traumatic histories as it is to sublime landscapes or to pleasurable curiosities.”14 The visitors’ poses are nearly identical to visitors poses at “regular” tourist sites: beaches, mountains, and cities. Are these poses a “reasonable” response to the inconceivable past of Auschwitz?

#Beach

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#City
#Mountains
#Conclusion

By placing pictures from #Auschwitz next to pictures of #Beach, #City, and #Mountains, I attempt to convey that #Auschwitz is not only a *lieux de mémoire* but also just another hashtag on the endless stream of Instagram.

Instagram and Western tourism culture have influenced visitors to view Auschwitz-Birkenau as another photo-opportunity. Therefore, the figures’ poses in the pictures matter more than the background. This claim is more forgiving than the condemning nature of Shapira’s “Yolocaust” but just as haunting. Because these gestures can be—and are—duplicated anywhere, Auschwitz becomes just a picturesque “anywhere” to function as another green-screen template, another desktop background, another stock image, another broad hashtag in the endlessly growing stream of Instagram. Auschwitz becomes #Auschwitz and Holocaust memory becomes further distanced from the present.
Works Cited


