THOMAS THIEMEYER
Ludwig–Uhland–Institut für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft
Tübingen

# Displaying atrocities: How European museums represent the two world wars

Proximity and distance are key terms in describing how the history of war is represented in museums. Some exhibitions try to keep an emotional distance from the issues they display; others try to present their topic as intensely as possible to visitors. In this respect, an exhibition's content and the mode of display permit curators to adjust the visitor's emotional relationship to the represented past. In the particular case of war exhibitions, this means that the content will alternate between *Kriegserfahrung* and *Kriegserlebnis* (both German terms correspond to the English word 'experience', but each suggests different concepts of representing the past[1]), and the display will vary from abstract/discreet to realistic/very explicit. This article analyses the presentation of the First World War and the Second World War in contemporary museums in Germany, France, Belgium and England in terms of these two lines of presentation. It has three parts: in addition to the first question regarding the best way to show the history of war, I will ask how accurately museums can convey what happened in times of war and consider the relationship of realistic depiction and violence.

## *KRIEGSERLEBNIS* AND *KRIEGSERFAHRUNG*

The Historial de la Grande Guerre Museum, near the Somme battlefields in Péronne, France, which opened in 1992, and the In Flanders Fields Museum, in Ypres, Flanders, which opened in 1998, follow two different approaches to the cultural history of the First World War that closely relate to the terms *Kriegserlebnis* and *Kriegserfahrung*. The term *Kriegserlebnis* here refers to the impressions, stimuli and perceptions that confronted the soldiers in the Great War[2] and implies

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[1] See J. S c o t t, *The Evidence of Experience*, "Critical Inquiry", vol. XVII, 1991, pp. 773–797.

[2] M. H e t t l i n g, *Kriegserlebnis*, [in:] *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. by G. H i r s c h f e l d, G. K r u m e i c h, I. R e n z, Paderborn–Munich–Vienna–Zürich 2009, pp. 638–639.

that the witnesses of the past are able to transmit their war experiences in a way that is fairly true to their initial perception. In contrast, *Kriegserfahrungen* are individual experiences (*Erlebnisse*) that can never be transmitted directly, i.e., without losing their original form. This concept presumes that the transmission of an experience is always influenced by social settings and by narrative strategies that give past experiences a new meaning. *Erfahrungen* are 'successful explanations [*Auslegungen*] or interpretations of active or passive experiences [*Erlebnisse*]'.[3]

The concept of *Kriegserlebnis* is the central idea of the In Flanders Fields Museum, which conveys war history with displays that mimic the supposed reality of wartime. In Flanders Fields presents the war as a forum for 'virtual contact' (curator Piet Chielens' intention) between the witnesses of the past and the current generation. The exhibition evokes participation in the initial war experience of the soldiers by exposing the visitor to the impressions, stimuli and perceptions of an earlier era. In the words of the curator: 'We do not show the war of the historians, but the war of the men and women who experienced it at the time'.[4] The exhibition is centered around eyewitnesses, whose testimony is presented in diaries, letters works of art and other media. The extracts of letters printed on the walls, scenographical reconstructions (in one letter extract a British lieutenant writes, 'I adore war. It's just like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic'), film reenactments (including one in which a doctor talks about the atmosphere in a war hospital), sounds of war, and quotations from former fighters transmitted via loudspeaker all suggest that the witnesses of the past are speaking directly to the visitors of today.

Unlike the In Flanders Fields Museum, the Historial at Péronne rejects the suggestion of proximity. It makes 'no appeals to the familiar and the comforting'[5] and does not promise to share original war experiences (*Kriegserlebnisse*). Instead, it aspires to be a place that encourages people to think about history and its reconstructive nature (the past as history). Its exhibits do not claim to show the reality of war, but rather what war represented to those who lived it. The objects are not intended to disclose the truth about the war, but to represent the subjective interpretation of the individual war experience (*Kriegserfahrung*). The architecture of the museum expresses this attitude through pure and clear shapes, polished ground, white walls, and broad daylight that contrasts with the gloomy subject. Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, members of the board of trustees at Péronne, argue that the rooms 'present a face which is radically other than that of the subject,

[3] K. Latzel, *Vom Kriegserlebnis zur Kriegserfahrung: Theoretische und methodische Über–legungen zur erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Untersuchung von Feldpostbriefen*, "Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen", vol. LVI, 1997, pp. 1–30, p. 14; see J. Scott, *The Evidence of Experience*.

[4] P. Chielens, interviewed by Th. Thiemeyer, 16 April 2007, Ypres.

[5] J. Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven–London 2006, pp. 222–237.

and thereby force us to think about what the art of historical representation is all about [...] We bring the visitor, through a set of spatial metaphors, to the limits of representation itself'.[6] This is the subtext of the exhibition design: present–day visitors' mental distance from the soldiers prevents their realistic perception of the *Kriegserlebnis*. As a result, there is no reason to insinuate the contrary by recreating a former reality with the scenographical and performative display of war images.

In general, following the sociology of knowledge as presented by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann,[7] museums lack the ability to revive past events with the means they have. As objects of the past, former experiences are unavailable. Their reality must be experienced, but it cannot be communicated without changing their status (from *past* to *history*).[8] However, curators can provide an impression of the feelings triggered by experiences. The crucial question is: how important are very detailed reconstructions of historical situations or milieus in triggering appropriate feelings today? Do we trust in the power of mental images based on some 'reticent objects' (Peter Vergo) that need no support from re–enactments, or do we prefer realistic scenography to involve visitors emotionally? Do we need to show war experiences in the most evident manner — visually and auditively, as directly as possible — in order to reach the contemporary visitor?

## DISPLAY: ABSTRACTION AND REALISM

The differentiation between *hot* and *cool media* proposed by Marshall McLuhan is useful in answering the question posed above about triggering appropriate feelings. Hot media extend one single sense in high definition, support it with additional information and contain extensive data and details (e.g. movies), whereas cool media as speech do not. 'Speech is a medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience'.[9] Whereas the recipient of hot media is not very involved in completing the message and understanding the meaning, cool media depend on the participation of the recipient to convey their messages. Without the intellectual effort of the user, they remain silent. McLuhan suggests that cool media involve their visitors or audiences and that hot media exclude them. If this is true, the museum visitor's emotional access to the past does not depend on

[6] Ibidem, p. 227, p. 232.

[7] P. Berger, T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, New York 1966.

[8] See A. Munslow, *Narrative and History*, Basingstoke–New York 2007, and H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth–Century Europe*, Baltimore 1973.

[9] M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, New York–London–Sydney–Toronto 1965, pp. 22–23.

explicit performances or detailed reconstructions of past environments (hot media). On the contrary, as hot media, these are consumed passively, whereas cool media (tacit displays) require active examination and promote a deeper understanding of the past because visitors must think about it.

Habits of media consumption have changed, however. In 1944, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were already lamenting the 'withering of imagination and spontaneity in the consumer of culture today'.[10] Visitors accustomed to seeing explicit presentations at the cinema, on TV or via the Internet may no longer be willing to pay attention to topics without strong visual evidence. More and more museums are attempting to compete with these easily accessible media in order to retain their visitor numbers. One of the first museums to deal with the history of the Second World War in this respect was the Mémorial Pour la Paix Museum in Caen, France, a peace museum on the Atlantic coast which was opened in 1988 (and expanded in 2002). The Mémorial invites its visitors to journey through time and promises to bring past events very close to the present. The 'virtual contact' the In Flanders Fields Museum fosters between the witnesses of the past and the contemporary generation follows a similar idea (to implicate people in a history).

The main attraction of the In Flanders Fields Museum is its scenography. Original objects, as relics of the past, serve only to augment the main exhibition. These authentic objects are not always identified by labels; their purpose is to authenticate and illustrate the messages conveyed by the scenography. Through personal stories, individual war experiences (*Kriegserlebnisse*) and spectacular installations, this museum attempts to overwhelm its visitors emotionally in order to reach them intellectually. Its concept is meant to attract young visitors in particular, those who share no personal remembrance of the Great War and its combatants.[11] The staging relies on a light and sound show that constantly demands the attention of all senses, using light, sound and fictitious talks between soldiers to reduce the distance between past and present and arouse emotion in the audience.

Auditory emotionalisation of the visitor is also a device of the Mémorial in Caen. Similar to In Flanders Fields, original objects play a minor role. The scenography at this museum seeks to convey moods and atmosphere by offering constant sensory effects, such as an echo chamber that amplifies the voices of the visitors passing through. The historian Benjamin Brower interprets this approach of constant sensory effects as a method of suppressing the trauma of the Second World War through media substitution. According to Brower, the Mémorial's museumification gives priority to the presence of the past in order to repress feelings of loss with

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[10] M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by E. Jephcott, ed. by G. Schmid Noerr, Stanford 2002, p. 100.

[11] P. Chielens, *Interview de Piet Chiellens* [sic]*, responsable du projet*, "Bulletin du GEGES", vol. XXXI, 1998, pp. 73–77, p. 76.

substitutes (photographs, images, etc.). 'As the fetish both memorialises and represses trauma, so too the Mémorial's museumification points to the traumatic absences of the past by means of banishing their loss'. The presentation prevents mourning and critical reflection because it replaces the lost and absent things with newly created simulacra. This is a main point of Brower's thesis of the 'repressive power of narrative fetishism: that which threatens the visitor's conception of self is ignored, and only material which valorizes the *status quo* is read in the history of the war'.[12] Instead of choosing an ironic and self–critical approach, the Mémorial presents a homogeneous and consensual history that does not disturb the visitor and prevents a real examination of the dreadful events of this war.

In summary, narrative–scenographic[13] presentations as practiced in Caen and Ypres run the risk of trivializing the content by their mode of presentation and of substituting the dreadful memories of war with cheerful entertainment. Envisioning their visitors as passive consumers rather than critical observers, they are hardly able to promote deeper reflection. The decisive point seems to me that narrative–scenographic presentations fill gaps in tradition (*Überlieferung*) with facsimiles or fancy props. These simulacra pretend to show (read: prove) what is not visible in reality. They are artefacts of the present that claim to give a realistic impression of how the war occurred. Original objects and imitated artefacts are indistinguishably mixed — with severe consequences for the credibility of the museum's narrative. The exhibition is not based on authentic objects, i.e., objects that verify past events as material relics. Instead, it relies on sensory evidence that appears more convincing but is less truthful.

Unlike the scenographic approach, the object–centered concepts of both the Historial at Péronne and the Deutsch–Russisches Museum in Berlin–Karlshorst, which opened in 1995 with an exhibition concentrating mainly on the war between Germany and Russia in the 1940s, maintain distance from their atrocious contents. Both exhibitions have chosen cold materials and low–key (discreet) exhibition design and have adopted the white–cube atmosphere[14] of an art gallery to increase

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[12] B. Brower, *The Preserving Machine: The 'New' Museum and Working Through Trauma — the Musée Mémorial pour la Paix of Caen*, "History & Memory", vol. XI, 1999, pp. 77–103, here pp. 91–92.

[13] Following the French etymological tradition, I use the term scenography as counterpart to the term museography. 'Museography [...] indexes something like the depiction of contents with museal means [in the sense of museum objects]. In contrast, scenography signifies a spatial–scenic design of exhibition rooms to visualise ideas, affects, sensitivities, moods, and imaginations', G. Korff, *Museumsdinge: Deponieren — exponieren*, ed. by M. Eberspächer, G.M. König, B. Tschofen, Cologne–Weimar–Vienna 2007, 2nd edn., pp. XXf.

[14] 'The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is "art". The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself', B. O' Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, expanded edn, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1986, p. 14.

the value of the objects on display. These museums are convinced that the essence of war is not presentable. To a large extent, the Historial does not show pictures of the battle at the Somme. It sidesteps the question of how to represent realistically what happened during the war. Instead, it aims to bring the visitors through the abstract metaphors of its architecture so that they can reflect on this question themselves. This reflexive history considers the mental images of the visitors as the only real representations of the war.[15] A similar approach has been taken by the Deutsch–Russisches Museum at Berlin–Karlshorst: 'The exhibition design is based on the principle of giving the visitor the opportunity to take emotional distance in the face of the accumulation of cruelties provoked by war and mass murder. We assume that the visitor is no longer able to grasp documents of these disasters emotionally [...] Therefore, a reserved exhibition design has been chosen in order to maintain visitors' absorption capacity, at least intellectually'.[16]

The exhibitions that maintain scenographic distance from their subjects trigger two main criticisms: excessive elitism and emotional inaccessibility.[17] According to French historian Sophie W a h n i c h, the Historial at Péronne fails to link visitors with the past because it prevents them from having empathy. To Wahnich, the Historial's representation appears too cool and therefore too distanced to make the history of the Great War part of the visitor's identity. The neutralizing aesthetics of the exhibition require no examination of the breaks with tradition, but keep all disturbing parts of this past distant.[18] From this perspective, history remains a foreign country.

As the reviews of the exhibitions at Caen, Ypres, Péronne and Berlin–Karlshorst show, the judgement of the emotional impact of realistic scenography and more abstract, object–centered displays is as subjective as personal taste, and therefore hardly disputable. It is hard to judge objectively how best to reach visitors: a low–key exhibition design, trust in the aura of objects and in the capability of the recipients to create their own mental pictures, or scenographic performance with explicit displays that recreate a past environment quite realistically. The choice depends upon the conception of the visitor's imagination and curiosity (and upon the museum's collections). Whereas abstract displays, as cool media, must find a way to get through to visitors and give them visual incentives in spite of their

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[15] J. W i n t e r, *Remembering War*, pp. 226–228; A. P r o s t, J. W i n t e r, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, Cambridge 2005, p. 187.

[16] P. J a h n, *Gemeinsam an den Schrecken erinnern: Das deutsch–russische Museum Berlin–Karlshorst*, [in:] *Der Krieg und seine Museen*, ed. by H.–M. H i n z, Frankfurt am Main–New York 1997, pp. 11–23, here p. 22.

[17] See A. K u g l e r, *Kapitulation vor der Geschichte*, in: "taz", 11 May 1994.

[18] S. W a h n i c h, *Les musées d'histoire du XXe siècle en Europe*, "Études: Revue de culture contemporaine", vol. CDIII/I–II, 2005, pp. 29–40, cit. p. 39–40; S. W a h n i c h, *L'Europe, c'est toujours l'après–guerre...*, [in:] *Fictions d'Europe. La guerre au musée*, ed. by S. W a h n i c h, Paris 2003, pp. 17–38, pp. 23–30.

low definition, detailed displays, as hot media, should not merely provide material for consumption and create an emotional dividend at the expense of historical accuracy.

## DISPLAYING ATROCITIES

In addition to the question of how best to show the history of war, we should also ask how accurately museums can convey what happened in wartime. My final reflections therefore consider the relationship of realistic depiction and violence.

The promise of realism is veracity (authenticity) through sensory evidence (evidence by auditory, visual or performative accessibility). Photographs and movies in particular, as objects that are at once authentic and very detailed (hot), provide credible documentation of wartime events. How important are these pictures and realistic depictions in bringing the war closer to the visitor? Pictures of extreme violence and its consequences are well known: as Susan Sontag argued in the 1970s: 'Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel [...] The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings'.[19] Moreover, pictures of extreme violence tend to overwhelm or have an impact on visitors instead of triggering empathy with the victims.[20]

On the other hand, movies like Steven Spielberg's 'Schindler's List' (1993) and 'Saving Private Ryan' (1998) have recognized that very explicit pictures of the war or the Shoah have a unique capacity to make an impression. These movies have influenced the collective memory far more than memorials or museum exhibitions because they confront the imagination with pictures whose messages are not negotiable in any way.[21]

Exhibitions that refrain from showing cruelty in explicit pictures out of respect for their own inability to represent all of the dimensions of human suffering and violence leave the field of representation to filmmakers and writers, who mix facts with fictional elements to construct emotional and veracious stories. Contemporary history and war movies tell their stories in black–and–white pictures ('Schindler's List') or use handheld cameras and audio effects to share the perspective and impressions of the fighting soldier with the spectator ('Saving Private Ryan'). Jonathan Littell's 2006 novel *Les Bienveillantes* (*The Kindly Ones*), which tells the

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[19] S. Sontag, *On photography*, London–New York 2002, 8th edn, pp. 19f. Sontag modified this thesis some years later.

[20] See C. Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung: Öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus national–sozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945*, Berlin 1998.

[21] The first version of the German exhibition *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* ("War of Annihilation. Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944", 1995–1999), with its shocking photographs, followed a similar idea.

story of the Second World War from the point of view of a German perpetrator, is a recent example of this kind of narrative realism. A German reviewer remarked that this novel 'wants to withdraw even the last reflexive and aesthetic distance. It wants to show something so powerful and massive that the reader is forced to face it, direct and unmediated'.[22]

Littell's explicit descriptions of mass murder and violent excess are very impressive and realistic. Moreover, these fictional narratives have an undisputed field in which to display their authenticating effects when truthful counter–images do not exist. The accounts are disturbing to their recipients because they supposedly allow new insights. A reviewer from the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" describes his experience reading Littell's book as follows: 'You trust the author. Everything written seems to be true. At the beginning, you try to fight against this. Later, you're distressed by the presence [*Gegenwärtigkeit*] of the narrative'.[23] The crucial point is that Littell's novel as well as Spielberg's 'Schindler's List' seemed to their readers and visitors more authentic than history books, memorials or exhibitions, because these media were 'not able to depict explicitly the arbitrary violence that was constitutive for Spielberg's script as well as for National Socialism'.[24]

Do exhibitions of wars or memorials of the Shoah then have the duty to show scenes of violence as explicitly as possible, since they would lose their veracity and impact on collective memory otherwise? Or should museums renounce pictures altogether, as Claude Lanzmann contends with regard to representations of the Holocaust? According to Lanzmann, picturing the Holocaust automatically implies trivialization, because the reality inside the concentration camps could never be authentically transmitted: the experience of fear and suffering was unique and beyond comprehension or representation.[25] 'Historical archival documents (what he [Lanzmann] calls "iconic images") are generally of no use when applied to a set of conditions that are impossible to comprehend anyway, and where it is unethical to claim comprehension'[26].

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[22] T. Steinfeld, *Der Couponschneider des Monströsen. Jede Pornografie will die Über–schreitung: Jonathan Littells Roman 'Die Wohlgesinnten' erscheint nun auch in Deutschland*, "Süddeutsche Zeitung", 22 February 2008.

[23] V. Weidermann, *Das Verbrechen im Kopf*, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung", 17 February 2008.

[24] F. Bösch, *Film, NS–Vergangenheit und Geschichtswissenschaft: Von 'Holocaust' zu 'Der Untergang'*, "Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte", vol. I, 2007, pp. 1–32, cit. p. 18.

[25] C. Lanzmann, *Ihr sollt nicht weinen: Einspruch gegen Schindlers Liste*, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", 5 March 1994. See M. D'Arcy, *Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah' and the Intentionality of the Image*, [in:] *Visualizing the Holocaust: Documents, Aesthetics, Memory*, ed. by D. Bathrick, B. Prager, M. Richardson, New York 2008, pp. 138–161.

[26] D. Bathrick, *Introduction: Seeing against the Grain*, [in:] *Visualizing the Holocaust*, pp. 1–18, cit. p. 10.

The question of whether it would have been better to reproduce the supposed reality of wars in as explicitly and detailed a manner as possible, or if exercising reserve on this point would have been more appropriate to the subject — recalling Gotthold E. Lessing's sentence, 'to present the uttermost to the eye is to bind the wings of Fancy'[27] — was being debated as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth century, in the 'Laocoon–debate'. There is no single right way to deal with the representation of atrocities in exhibitions. According to James Young, the depiction itself does not answer the question of its appropriateness; we must judge its ends to determine whether its means have been legitimate: 'it is not a question of veracity in interpretation or its intrinsic correctness that determines appropriateness, but its capacity to sustain and enable life itself'.[28]

Finally, curatorial decisions about the presentation of wartime cruelty are also influenced by three other aspects: 1) responsibility towards the public (what are we allowed to show? What kinds of pictures are still tolerable for the public to see?), 2) the visual predisposition of the visitors (what are they used to seeing?), and 3) a sense of tact, meaning an intuitive perception of what is appropriate in a certain situation. These are the reasons we must negotiate the representation of sensitive topics in museum displays again and again.

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[27] G.E. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry. With Remarks Illustrative of Various Points in the History of Ancient Art*, Boston 1887, p. 17.

[28] J. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequence of Interpretation*, Indiana 1988, p. 192.