Laurier Undergraduate Journal of the Arts

Volume 5 Article 9

2018

The Effects of Isolating Visuality in The Memorial to The Murdered Jews of Europe

Jace Silberbach

The Effects of Isolating Visuality in The Memorial to The Murdered Jews of Europe

Jace Silberbach

The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a holocaust memorial in Berlin, is famously credited with provoking strong reactions from its visitors. Opened to the public in 2005, the memorial consists of two parts: the outdoor field of 2711 slabs of concrete and an underground information centre (Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe [FMMJE]). Located outdoors in the centre of the city, the outdoor portion of the memorial blocks street sights and noise while also intentionally omitting any mention of the victims or reference to their perpetrators. This analysis will focus exclusively on the outdoor component of the memorial and its relationship to visuality. Appropriate methods for memorializing the dead have been an ongoing area of contestation within the field of visual communications; this is due to the centrality of memorials in evoking specific national reactions to historical events. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the modern museum is not only involved in the representation of experience, but is crucial to the effective communication of abstract systems of knowledge based on logic and reason (456). Therefore, the museum stands separately from other educational institutions by providing the audience with sensory modes of knowledge that favour memory. According to Marita Sturken, Communication scholar at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, narratives of sacred grounds signify loss of life and produce discourses of redemption and responsibility (414). The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (MMJE) combines Chakrabarty's and Sturken's concepts to challenge traditional notions of visuality in museums. Through an analysis of different strategies of visuality employed by the memorial's architect, Peter Eisenman, I argue that the memorial engages visitors in self-reflexive learning, enhances visitor sensory experience, and redefines visitors' understanding and emotions relative to the lived experience of the murdered Jews of Europe. Ultimately, through visual abstraction and isolation, the psychologically and emotionally disturbing effects of the memorial engage its visitors in a highly immersive experience that, in turn, shapes collective memory formation and subverts representations of experience traditionally found in holocaust memorials.

Central to this discussion are the implications of vision with reference to the Holocaust. Media theory and visual culture scholar W.J.T. Mitchell identifies vision as a cultural and social construction that is acquired through experience (166). Instead of understanding vision as being granted exclusively by biology, we need to recognize how it is linked to and acquired from social practices of visuality and display. Through these practices, the dichotomous relationship between seeing and being seen are also established. This relationship is important to the study of the MMJE, as within this context "visual culture [should be seen] as both the social construction of the visual as well as the visual construction of the social" (Ibrahim 95). The way in which we make meaning, and subsequently memories, affects the way we see, which is mediated through visual culture. Visual culture incorporates the ways people see and how representations of reality are produced. Representation is formed through places and material objects, which act as vehicles to aid visuality and vice versa. Visual culture is a key to building political narratives through images, symbols, and architecture. Most often, visual stimuli are essential to the production of memory, and physical places of commemoration offer the perfect foundation on which to begin the process of memory making (Ibrahim 95). However, relying on visual culture as a commemorative tool is risky, as Ibrahim argues: "whilst visual culture enables access to historical imagination it can equally distort memory and decontextualize suffering and disassemble it from history" (111). With this in mind, it is important to recognize the ability of memorials and museums alike to impose dominant discourses that shape how meanings are curated.

Traditional memorials and museums are designed in such a way as to encourage visitors to remain physically passive and stationary so that they are able to read and observe cautiously composed iconography for a calculated length of time. By contrast, the architect of the MMJE, Peter Eisenman, designed the memorial to be abstract by leaving out perimeters, signs, and pictures (Stevens 40). There is no designated location at which the memorial starts or ends, no direction the visitor is supposed to follow, and little variation in terms of what the visitor sees. These strategies evoke feelings of desolation, claustrophobia, segregation, and confinement. To deepen the feelings of isolation, the aisles between the memorial's tall cement slates are too narrow for more than one person to walk through at a time; to create a sense of unsteadiness the ground is uneven and often slopes in multiple directions; finally, to garner feelings of insignificance some structures tilt over the visitor (Stevens 40). As the ground continues to slope towards the centre of the memorial and the aisles become narrower, visual cues and sounds

from the city vanish, leaving the visitor with only the harrowing sounds and sights in front of them: "the deeper in you go the quieter it becomes, the buoyancy of street sounds slow to a murmur as a gray narrow silence infused the belly of the site" (Parr 160). This scientific premise, by which one sense faculty is diminished in order to enhance another, was a calculated decision upon construction of the MMJE. In fact, scientific research suggests that individuals who experience auditory impairments, such as hearing loss, allocate their visual resources more strategically and over a broader range of visual stimuli than those without auditory impairments (Sladen et al. 1529). Therefore, through the loss of external auditory sensation, the visitors become more susceptible to the visual qualities of the memorial. The architect's intention was not only to grant the visitors the chance to explore purely visual practices of looking as a mode of learning, but to do so without revealing this intention.

Left: Uneven ground, progressively taller structures, and a narrowing walkway all contribute to an experience of increased isolation and disorientation.

Right: At the center of the memorial, towering concrete slabs lean inwards creating a near-claustrophobic and helpless experience.

Although the MMJE does not use traditional memorial practices, it does rely on practices of visuality to enhance feelings of bewilderment through the process of seeing and being seen. There are no focal points to see or to congregate around; rather, there are multiple paths and crossways and very few key vantage points where the visitor's ability to be seen and to see becomes central to the memorial's significance (Stevens 45). Through the act of seeing, visitors undergo continuous transformations in self-awareness and memory-making. They are forced to ask themselves whether they have been appropriately affected by the memorial and, in turn, question when is a suitable time for them to leave. Dekel illustrates that as visitors undergo these transformations, they engage in four types of observation to accentuate meaning and memory making ("Ways of Looking" 73). First, self-observation and exploration invites the visitors to question their observations in relation to memory and encourages them to internalize their feel-

ings of unease. Secondly, observation of each other allows the visitors to make sense of the memorial by watching how other visitors create meaning through their actions and behaviours. Thirdly, observation of the scene from certain vantage points or even outside the memorial challenges the roles of seeing and being seen as focus is shifted away from the architecture and onto the self. Lastly, imagination and projection forces the visitors to imagine what the architect would have wanted them to see and experience (74–76). Heightened through acts of seeing, these aspects were constructed deliberately to produce feelings of disorientation in an effort to mirror the experience of Holocaust victims. In addition, this experience of disorientation effectively inspires self-reflexive learning by encouraging visitors to create mean-ing and memory.

Through the use of architecture as a form of abstract representation, Peter Eisenman's memorial effectively materializes the collective memory of the Jewish people. Grenzer refers to architectural memorials or landmarks as "memory theatres" whereby buildings themselves have the power to embody memories (96). Additionally, architecture is seen as its own commemorative token because it establishes itself as something permanent. Architecture stands as a means by which to observe the relationship between the selected mediums, in this case the arrangement of cement slabs, and the message for which the arrangement conveys. The power of architecture should not be understated as this memorial proves that no additional information, symbols, or imagery are needed to be effective in conveying the desired message of desolation. The architecture speaks for itself. Through architecture, a reinvention of a social and collective memory takes place, demonstrating the ambiguity and flexibility that characterizes the preservation of the Holocaust (Grenzer 109). In other words, Eisenman's architecture works to prove the limits of fostering a collective narrative about the Holocaust, as it invites a variety of interpretations. By encouraging visitors to actively interpret and reflect upon their personal viewing experience, the memorial becomes even more important for healing. In this way, the establishment of the memorial represents not only the past but also a turn towards the future, progress, and reconciliation.

Unique to this memorial is a lack of personalization, as there are no images or biographies in reference to the victims. This nothingness enables visitors to identify with the experience of the memorial and in turn to engage in collective and self-reflexive memory making. Further, the lack of personalization makes the memorial more personal for each individual visitor. In an attempt to individualize the dead, visitors often leave flowers or rocks, Jewish symbols of mourning, on the slabs of cement (Sturken 415). Despite these attempts, the memorial is intention-

ally designed to express collective loss and collective memory. A reflective mode of observing the memorial is vital to understanding the transformative arenas of public participation through which cultural memory production takes place, as expressed by Sturken. Dickinson et al. argue that

> The prime function of memory is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present … memories are not ready-made reflects of the past, but … selective reconstructions based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize and classify the world around us. (7)

To think of memory as something that serves the future instead of the past is vital to understanding the construction of this memorial. Peter Eisenman echoed this notion of memory when he explained, "our memorial attempts to present a new idea of memory as distinct from nostalgia … we can only know the past today through a manifestation in the present" (FMMJE). The types of memory making that occur in the memorial are just as collective as they are diverse. Collective memories, much like the ones created in the memorial, are found not in the mind of the individual but rather in the experiences the group shares. In the new age of museums, collective memory has shifted from national memory to a stronger self-reflexive memory that addresses the wrongdoings of the past and the actions needed to make right of the future (Sodaro 81). However, it is naive to suggest that memorials are purely democratic spaces free of politics. Oftentimes, political parties use memorials or museums to push the agenda of national redemption and responsibility to shape the national narrative of repentance and memory. Public memory does not exist outside the realm of politics, as it is centred on a stage of contemporary public issues.

Chakrabarty suggests that museums play a significant role in democracy by emphasizing the need for authoritative modes of learning (457). These modes of learning are fuelled by experience and remain free of physical and metaphorical boundaries or barriers. Chakrabarty explains, "a crucial aspect of this education was the capacity for abstract conceptualization and reasoning" (455). Eisenman's MMJE is a prime example of using abstraction for the purpose of achieving both deep personal reflection and learning. In fact, the memorial is so abstract that most visitors are unaware that they are standing on commemorative grounds and act in ways that, in a traditional memorial setting, would be deemed inappropriate (Dekel, "Ways of Looking" 78). It is through the language of abstraction that Eisenman is able to uplift the victims of the Holocaust and transform those bodies into the

memories of the visitors. The isolation of visuality through the lack of other sense stimuli, such as sound, creates the ideal platform for self-reflexive practice-based learning.

The abstract quality of the memorial is further heightened because the location is deemed unrelated to where Jewish persecution took place (Dekel, Mediation 130). With less emphasis placed on the physical location of the memorial, visitors are better able to focus on memorialization and self-reflexive learning. Dekel argues that this was intentional so that visitors are able to firmly concentrate on their experience with the memorial itself and not necessarily the historical event (Mediation 136). The separation of location of representation allows for the memorial to become a lens through which to view memory. Some scholars believe there is a distinction between a social memory and a historical memory (Levy and Sznaider 91). Social memory is acquired through personal experience or through the experience of the collective group, whereas historical memory is fabricated to represent social memory through various forms of media or social institutions (91). In the context of the Holocaust, social memory is restricted to the victims of the Nazi hate crimes and historical memory is reserved for everyone else. This historical memory is an experience that is mediated by representations. The role of memorials in developing historical memory highlights the importance of the MMJE's innovative turn towards a sensory experience meant to materialize the lived experience of holocaust victims.

Representations are not substitutions for authentic experiences. Rather, they exist as separate entities that provide connections to the real lived experiences of victims. Representations, as culturally and socially determined, foster notions of identity and memory. Ibrahim outlines three distinct forms of representation: a form of representation that recreates the drama, a form of representation that seeks to work through the original subject or event, and a form of exploitative representation that commodifies history for monetary or entertainment value (103). Eisenman's memorial does not exhibit qualities of the first type of representation because it is too abstract to tell a story. Instead, the memorial aims to work through personal, collective, and national events of the Holocaust. He does this through the multiplicity of interpretations, reactions, and narratives the visitors get to experience. Furthermore, the memorial charges no entrance fees and sells no souvenirs so as not to contribute to an industry that exploits trauma. The memorial's opposition to this aspect of tourism is significant because, as Sturken notes, this type of consumerism is predictable in meaningful historical locations (423). Eisenman works to reject this souvenir culture, or Ibrahim's first type of representation, so as

not to contribute to the re-enactment and reproduction of harm for profit. Although souvenirs and tourism help to foster the production of a cultural memory, they evoke a representation that Chakrabarty would deem as ineffective for abstract, self-reflexive learning.

Conventional museums and memorials operate on the assumption that knowledge should be transferred from the expert to the uninformed. In this context, knowledge is understood to be objective and credible and often remains unquestioned. In accordance with the views of Chakrabarty, Eisenman's memorial works in opposition to this model of learning by encouraging visitors to interpret the memorial as they wish. Instead of a physical space, the new museum or memorial can be thought of as a process that moves into the spaces of the people they serve (Hooper-Greenhill 15). Additionally, Eisenman's model of learning understands that meanings of objects are subject to change over time and are influenced by a variety of interpretations. Within this framework, museums and memorials both produce and embody forms of visuality while simultaneously encouraging a relationship between the object and the viewer.

Eisenman's memorial both complements and competes with Hooper-Greenhill's idea of museums. According to Hooper-Greenhill, "to recognize something, it is necessary to have prior knowledge of it—thus observation depends on already knowing that for which one is searching. This contradictory and complex situation is at the heart of the museum experience" (15). Eisenman's memorial, however, requires no previous knowledge to enhance the idea of abstraction. He explains, "the enormity and scale of the horror of the Holocaust is such that any attempt to represent it by traditional means is inevitably inadequate" (FMMJE). His memorial articulates the shift from memorials as authoritative sources of knowledge to mutualistic representational sources of experience. This shift indicates a change not only in the way authority is established, but in the way meaning is constructed if not guided by a dominant narrative. Per Chakrabarty, Eisenman's memorial was built on the foundation of learning through abstract experience, as he envisioned a space for reflection to foster self-reflexive memory. Both Chakrabarty and Hooper-Greenhill would agree that through the multiplicity of representations, there exists freedom to move between previous knowledge and new knowledge in order to enhance the personal experience of the memorial.

In conclusion, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, designed by Peter Eisenman and located in Berlin, embraces concepts from both Chakrabarty's abstract representation of experience and Sturken's memory production through the deliberate isolation of visuality. Visuality is the vehicle through which visitors

are able to engage in a type of learning that is free of physical and metaphorical barriers, which aids the process of memory making. Memory is produced and maintained by contemporary concerns, narrates collective identities, and is triggered by physical visual entities such as memorials. Eisenman's memorial denies the visitor a critical vantage point and instead relies on the practices of visuality through seeing and being seen to establish significance and meaning. The memorial communicates the shift from memorials as definitive sources of knowledge, by means of disseminating information from expert to amateur, to, instead, a mutualistic source of knowledge through means of experience, representation, abstraction, and self-interpretation. Representations, although not substitutions for authentic experiences, act as mediators for memories and work to make connections to the lived experiences of the victims. Abstraction in design is necessary because figurative representations or iconographic symbolism of the Holocaust are rendered as incapable of capturing the true horrors of victims' lived experience. Peter Eisenman's memorial succeeds in generating visceral responses as a reaction to psychologically and emotionally disturbing effects of disorientation, made possible through aspects of visuality.

Works Cited

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Museums in Late Democracies." *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, Routledge, 2003, pp. 455–462.

Dekel, Irit. *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013.

Dekel, Irit. "Ways of Looking: Observation and Transformations at the Holocaust Memorial, Berlin." *Memory Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, pp. 71–86.

Dickinson, Greg, Carole Blair, and Brian Ott. P*laces of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials*. University of Alabama Press, 2014.

Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Peter Eisenman, 2017. Retrieved from: https://www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en/memorials/the-memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe/peter-eisenman.html.

Grenzer, Elke. "The Topographies of Memory in Berlin: The Neue Wache and The Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe." *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2002, pp. 93–110.

Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*.

Routledge, 2000.

Ibrahim, Yasmin. "Holocaust as the Visual Subject: The Problematics of Memory Making Through Visual Culture." *Nebula*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2009, pp. 94–102.

Levy, Daniel and Natan Sznaider. "Memory Unbound the Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory." *European Journal of Social Theory*, vol.5, no.1, 2002, pp.87–106.

Mitchell, W.J.T. "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture." *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2002, pp. 165–181.

Parr, Adrian. *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma*. Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

Sladen, Douglas, Anne Marie Tharpe, Daniel Ashmead, D. Wesley Grantham, and Marvin Chun. "Visual Attention in Deaf and Normal Hearing Adults: Effects of Stimulus Compatibility." *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, vol. 48, 2005, pp. 1529–1537.

Sodaro, Amy. "Memory, History, and Nostalgia in Berlin's Jewish Museum." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2013, pp. 22–91.

Stevens, Quentin. "Visitors Responses at Berlin's Holocaust Memorial: Contrary to Conventions, Expectations and Rules." *Public Art Dialogue*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp.34–59.

Sturken, Marita. "Tourism and 'Sacred Ground': The Space of Ground Zero." *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, Routledge, 2007, pp. 412–427.