

MEDIATING THE HOLOCAUST PAST: TRANSMEDIA CONCEPTS AT HOLOCAUST MEMORIALS AND MUSEUMS

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Transmedia concepts are increasingly used at museums and historic sites in order to expand and intensify learning experiences. By linking real objects and places with digitised information through hybrid media concepts new entry points, learning processes and perspectives can be enabled. We will present key concepts and current approaches in the context of Holocaust education and discuss the question of how transmedia concepts can be applied at Holocaust memorials, museums and historic sites.

1. MEDIATISED “AUTHENTICITY”

The “aura” (Walter Benjamin) of artefacts, historical places and especially of witnesses’ testimonies is attributed to transmit the most powerful sensation of authenticity. To enhance visitors’ experiences (visual) media is additionally used to raise emotions and involvement and therefore generate a certain sensation of authenticity. Holocaust museums and memorials have also adopted media as an integral part of exhibition design and dramaturgy. As many others, the exhibit at the *Auschwitz Museum*, to name one example, focuses on visualisation: large-sized historical photos or video-interviews with survivors which are supposed to stimulate imagination and intensify learning experiences.¹

The focus on an individual life or story, another key concept in Holocaust education, in combination with media can be seen at the well-known *Hall of Names* (*Yad Vashem Museum*, Israel)² and *Tower of Faces* (*Holocaust Memorial Museum*,

¹ See <http://auschwitz.org/en/gallery/exhibits/general-exhibition,2.html> (retrieved July 15, 2015).

² See http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/museum/hall_of_names.asp (retrieved July 15, 2015).

Washington)³. Private photos show the victims before imprisonment, torture and dehumanisation. Every single photo tells an individual story that allows an empathic approach.

Participatory approaches have also found their way into museum education and cultural mediation: communication has changed from one-to-many (the “all-knowing” guide) to many-to-many. Self-exploration, interaction, exchange of knowledge, sharing and creating are being used more and more. Similarly, educational programs at museums and historic sites have shifted from object-oriented towards audience-oriented approaches. At the *Ravensbrück Memorial*, for example, visitors are sent out to explore the historical landscape of the concentration camp and asked to take photos of what has received their attention during the tour. This kind of “photo safari”⁴ proves highly effective with school classes as it collects different perspectives of young visitors during their tours. After the outdoor experience, the individual collections of pictures are discussed within smaller groups and with the pedagogical support of camp instructors. Here photos are used as facilitators of historic memory.

In Holocaust education the increasing use of new media concepts correlates with the “age of postmemory” (Hirsch, 2001). Since authenticity was always considered a crucial factor in Holocaust education, now, due to the physical disappearance of eye witnesses, the “aura” of artefacts and especially of “real places” has gained more importance in presenting the past and transmitting an authentic experience. Holocaust education nowadays is to a large extent mediated: countless number of books, video and audio interviews, photos or documentaries is available. Perhaps the most influential to common Holocaust memory is popular Holocaust fiction. Holocaust memory is highly formed by fictionalised media products such as Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) or the TV-series *Holocaust* (1978).

A nowadays popular historical education activity is “living history” and re-enactment: participants are recreating aspects of a historical event or period by using historical clothes or tools and thus trying to catch the “authentic” trace and aura of a certain era. Variations of reenactment also reached Holocaust education as shown at the Anne Frank Exhibition at the *Museum of Tolerance* in Los Angeles⁵. Visitors are led to the reconstructed dark hiding-place of the Frank family where they can hear audio-files such as a young girl’s voice reading Anne’s diary and family and friends telling about Anne’s life: “Hear first-hand accounts about Anne from the people who knew her and experience the story of Anne Frank as never before,” and “visitors are led back in time to become witnesses,” as the museum describes the intention of the Holocaust exhibit.⁶ Being transferred in a simulated-

3 See <http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/permanent/tower-of-faces> (retrieved July 15, 2015)

4 See <http://www.ravensbrueck.de/mgr/neu/deutsch/paed/> (retrieved July 15, 2015).

5 See http://www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tmL6KfNVLtH/b.9053657/k.CD10/Why_An_Exhibit_on_Anne_Frank.htm (retrieved July 15, 2015).

6 See <http://www.museumoftolerance.com/site/c.tmL6KfNVLtH/b.4865935/> (retrieved July 15, 2015).

historical situation, visitors are supposed to feel like eye and ear witnesses and relive historical experiences.

2. DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND TRANSMEDIA CONCEPTS AT HOLOCAUST MUSEUMS AND MEMORIALS

Robert Pratten (2010: 12) recalls “Discovery, Experience & Exploration” as main parts of valuable “audience engagement” in any mediated communication. Various Holocaust memorial sites are trying to imply participatory culture by making use of Web 2.0 media concepts to link historical information, documents and memories by means of digital technologies, an approach which is known as “Culture of Remembrance 2.0.” The example at the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* provides such a mix of transmedia collections including online picture collections (Pinterest), video channels (YouTube), social networks (Facebook), and blogging systems.⁷

Digital technologies like tablets, smartphones and mobile apps are also finding their way right into the landscapes of concentration camp memorials and historic sites referring to the history of Holocaust as to how to present their heritage to a divergent group of visitors, perspectives and interests. Pedagogical concepts including digital technologies are particularly suitable for explorative, interactive and audience-oriented learning experiences.

Neuengamme⁸ and Bergen-Belsen, two concentration camp memorials in Germany, developed various media installations and instruments to explore the historic place “on site.” In particular, self-guided tour apps for mobile phones and tablets have proven to provide useful concepts to communicate the historic past to individual visitors enabling them to access “on site” relevant historical information, including audio, picture material, historical data or citations of witnesses. Those apps act as facilitators of the “Participatory Culture” by Henry Jenkins et al. (2005: 5ff), meaning a change in the role of the visitor from a passive viewer to an (inter) active visitor, but going a step further than the Ravensbrück “photo safari” by providing additional information and contexts “on site.” Multiple perspectives of the historical past can be collected and become part of the historical discourse. Different historic artefacts are brought into historical discourse while at the same time motivating visitors to explore and share new perspectives of the heritage.

In some cases the media installations contain virtual reconstructions of disappeared/removed historical environments. Two installations should be mentioned. Firstly, the “Space of Memory”⁹ multimedia installation offered to visitors

7 See e.g. <http://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/preventing-genocide-blog/genocide-prevention-blog> (retrieved July 15, 2015).

8 See <http://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/service/selbsterkundung/>, App “KZ Gedenkstätte Neuengamme” (retrieved July 15, 2015).

9 “Here: Bergen-Belsen, Space of Memory” (2012 -), available at: <http://www.belsen-project.specs-lab>.

at the *Bergen-Belsen Memorial*. The installation is presented “inside a box” and genuinely demonstrates how virtual 3D reconstructions and historical audiovisual material can be valuable in transferring a virtualised image of the historical past to the memorial visitor. The presentation makes use of different media including a 3D reconstruction of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (as it was last seen after the liberation in 1945) and a historical audio report from 1945. The aim is to make the visitor aware of various perspectives from the past and present. Eye witnesses are involved in the production of the installation to recall, preserve and link the many separate memories, documents and testimonies in the presented transmedia experience.

Similarly the “Oshpitzin app”¹⁰ uses geo-located 3D models to reconstruct the Jewish traces of Oshpitzin/Oświęcim, the Polish town renamed “Auschwitz” by the Germans during occupation, on the display of mobile devices. Visitors in the town of Oświęcim are offered a virtualised view of its vanished Jewish past (e.g. a destroyed synagogue). The app includes an interactive map as well as historical documents such as videos, audio, photographs, etc.

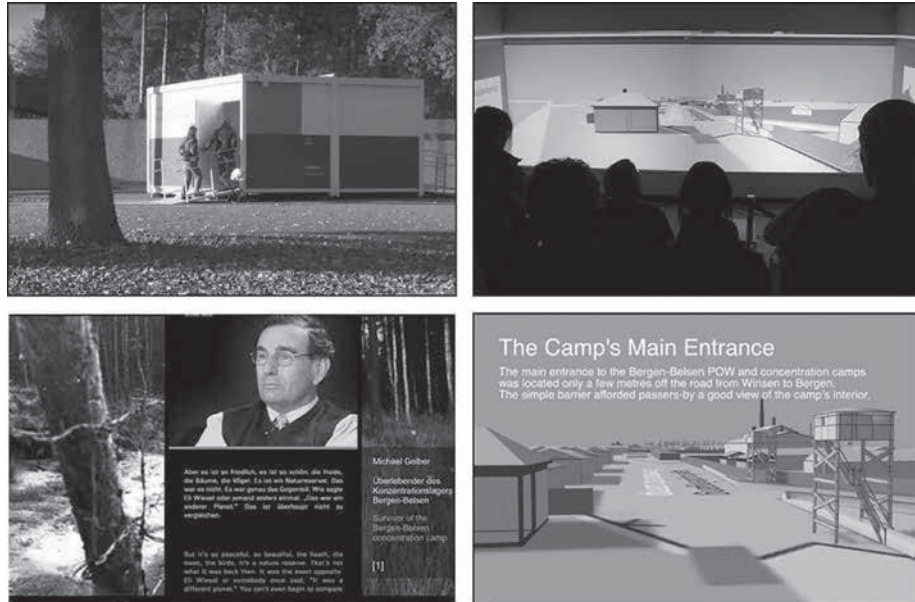
Also highly-sophisticated applications such as the “Here Space of Memory” app (Pacheco et al., 2014) demonstrate how memorial sites can benefit from the latest technology such as geo-location and virtual and augmented reality (Fig 1).
The App

- can be used by visitors of the concentration camp memorial during their tour “on site,”
- uses a selection of interactive tools, maps and historical documents for further explanation,
- uses a virtual reconstruction of the camp to visualise the historical landscape and
- embeds the app into an educational package to be used by individuals and schools.

A very important part of this project is the reconstruction of the historical environment. Real-time interactions are used at the memorial site as a trigger to connect historical memory to the real environment. They facilitate discovery and audience engagement. With this app visitors are offered a view of the reconstructed historical past in a perspective that connects it to the empty landscape of the present and use it as a gateway to historical sources.

To generate real benefits for young persons, transmedia installations should be embedded into a sound pedagogical concept. The Bergen-Belsen Memorial has developed such packages. After a short introduction by a personal guide, students go out on the landscape to explore the former camp grounds in small groups using the interactive app guide. After the self-guided outdoor tour, the students

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com/the-box-installation/ (retrieved 10.05.2015).
10 See app.oshpitzin.pl/ (retrieved, 10.05.2015).



Picture 1: The „Here: Space of Memory“ project at the Bergen-Belsen memorial site developed by specs.upf.edu in collaboration with the Gedenkstätte Bergen Belsen. Top left: Users access the projection space where they can see a 3D reconstruction of the camp site presented in a broader narrative of its history and development. This space has now been moved into the museum building itself. Right top/bottom: immersive installation presenting a 3D reconstruction of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. (Pacheco et al., 2014). Image credit © futurememoryfoundation.org. Inset of Michael Gelber interview © Gedenkstätte Bergen Belsen.

come together and discuss what they have explored within smaller groups with the pedagogical support of camp instructors.

The Bergen-Belsen project is an example of how transmedia concepts can be effective at (Holocaust) memorial sites and even going beyond Pratten’s theory of “audience engagement” by shaping experience and learning.

Another example of digital Holocaust memory was developed by the *Institute for Creative Technology* in Los Angeles, which has worked on films such as *Avatar* (2009), and the *USC Shoah Foundation Institute* in 2013: They produced hyper-photorealistic life-size digital versions of Holocaust survivors.¹¹ Being able to respond to certain key words, these holograms are supposed to be used at schools or museums and have simulated conversations with the audience. We believe that computer-generated answers from holograms without any contextualisation will enlarge the perception of the reconstructed past as a fictionalised (invented) story. The borders between reality, memory and fiction vanish.

¹¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMFTDkJCG4o> (retrieved July 15, 2015).



Picture 2: The mobile app of the „Here: Space of Memory“ project at the Bergen-Belsen memorial site developed by specs.upf.edu in collaboration with the Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen. Users access the historical organization of space through a tablet app, which uses Augmented/Virtual reality to enhance space with historical sources following an active learning model (Verschure, 2011). Image credit: © futurememoryfoundation.org.

Summarising the potential of digital technologies and transmedia concepts at Holocaust museums, memorials and historic sites gives reason to assume that the potential of interactive immersive design and active-user involvement is significant, particularly when involving the memorial site, existing artefacts or historic surroundings in the communication of the past. By linking real objects and places with digitised information through hybrid-media concepts new entry points, learning processes and perspectives can be enabled. Digital technologies can be used to enhance, verify, reflect and contextualise existing knowledge or “Holocaust memories” originating from popular fiction. The aim of such concepts is self-exploration and involvement, not re-experiencing historical times. Insinuating that a visitor can actually be a “witness” of a historical event or re-experience others’ experiences leads to a dubious sensation of “authenticity.”

What meaning does this have for the Mauthausen Subcamp Memorial Ljubelj/Loibl, which is situated in two countries, divided into two different places (the north and south camp) and where only a few physical relics of the former concentration camps remain?

When we think of the *Ljubelj/Loibl Memorial* as one joint memorial site, we might think of a set of packages that will help to mediate the historical testimony. We might think of a memorial app which provides information to both the south and north camp; a 3D reconstruction of the entire terrain, an interactive visitor's guide, various media installations at the historical site and various educational packages for schools, young visitors and adult individuals.

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