



Memorial and the Macabre: Conflict Resolution in Memorial Space

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Though the rise of new media and globalization suggest that our planet is more connected than ever, the reality is that nation states attempting to consolidate their power in such an inclusive global landscape increase restrictions. We live in a world divided. This has led to complex geopolitical situations and conflicts of identity for today's citizens, as their allegiances to various consolidating groups complicate their lives. These identity issues make it difficult for people to cope with tragedy in ways not constricted by political and national agendas. Recently developed forms of thanatourism – also known as dark, grief, and black tourism – create memorial spaces in which the international community can come to terms with violence in a way that extends beyond political and ideological limitations. Such tourism is more than mass marketing and the encountering of pseudo-events; it is a societal safety valve adapted to address communal problems. By looking at two of the most popular dark tourism sites, Ground Zero and Auschwitz, this paper will argue that dark tourism in its recent global form has developed in the face of international political fragmentation to allow people to confront profound moral issues that transcend political and geographical boundaries.

I. Introduction

Tourism often conjures the image of a sun burnt vacationer in a Hawaiian shirt or, perhaps, someone strolling through the bustling heart of Paris their eyes intent on their map. Tourists are often, and possibly incorrectly, considered “herded consumers”, but this assumption does both tourists and tourism a disservice. Tourism has developed into a lucrative industry, but it is more than the souvenirs and money associated with it. Its

economic strength and very existence is the product of societal needs that, when served, alleviated community tension. For example, in the time of the Grand Tour, tourism removed reckless young aristocrats from their own countries. During the industrial age it provided frustrated downtrodden workers with the promise of a slice of paradise and mollified their indignation at the demands of labor. Tourism is more than an effect of mass marketing; tourism solves communal problems.

An example of tourism as a space in which important social work takes place is dark tourism; also known as thanatourism, grief tourism, and black tourism. This relatively recent development within the tourism industry has become increasingly popular in the past 25 years (Timm, 2011, p.56). Such a development prompts investigation, and this paper will turn to scholarship on societal causes of touristic trends to examine its possible origin. Though the rise of new media and increasing globalization suggests that people are more connected than ever, most of us still live in a world marked by significant political divisiveness. Our interconnectedness has actually created more barriers between people as nation states struggle to adjust and consolidate their power in a global landscape that threatens difference. New struggles for identity have created complicated geopolitical situations, provoked deeply ingrained nationalism, and created conflicting allegiances to various ethnicities, nationalities, and groups.

These identity issues and complex relationships make it difficult for people to acknowledge violence and cope with tragedy, as political and ethnic differences seem to permeate every situation. Dark tourism responds to this by creating a memorial space in which citizens of all nations can meet and negotiate human violence and the misfortunes it gives rise to beyond the boundaries of political difference and ideological limitations. By looking at two of the most trafficked dark tourist sites, Ground Zero and Auschwitz, this paper will argue that dark tourism, in its recent global form, has developed in the face of international fragmentation to allow very different people to confront profound moral issues in spaces that transcend political and geographical boundaries.

II. Defining Dark Tourism

In the most basic sense, thanatourism is defined as “tourism to globally recognized places of commemoration”(Timm, 2011, p.57). However, due its specialized nature, this paper will rely on a slightly more nuanced

definition, which takes into account certain assumptions about the motivations and attitudes associated with this type of tourism. “Many forms of tourism can be said to be guided by a self-consciousness about the potential superficialities of everyday tourism” (Sturken, 2007, p.11) and dark tourism is certainly influenced by guilt surrounding the avoidance of reality through vacation. Additionally, a more prevalent motivation and the focus of the paper, is the desire to visit sites of historical tragedies as part of a pilgrimage. These tourist sites serve as stops on a quest to experience a sacred place and gain some understanding and acceptance of the violence that is so prevalent in the world. “In the contemporary context of global consumerism, tourism can be can often take on the meaning of a pilgrimage...it can be said that people make pilgrimages to sites of tragedy in order to pay tribute to the dead and to feel transformed in some way in relation to that place”(Sturken, 2007, p.11). This motivation is central to the notion of dark tourism examined in this paper. I argue in what follows that, despite the differences between these two locations, both Ground Zero and Auschwitz are pilgrimage sites that allow members of every group to confront tragedy beyond political difference.

III. Ground Zero

Ground Zero is a clear example of dark tourism; it invites visitors to confront ethical issues on a human level that transcends nationalism. Ground Zero is the area surrounding the site of the World Trade Center. It is currently the location of the reflecting absence memorial¹ and home to a small museum and a wall covered with the names of the deceased. What is most significant about Ground Zero, however, is what isn't there. “A site like Ground Zero in lower Manhattan... embodies competing and powerful meanings of authenticity: the authenticity of a site of violence, a place that contains remnants of a much-photographed building, a place where the dead were not found, a place where iconic images of spectacle took place” (Sturken, 2007, p.11). The iconic nature of Ground Zero is achieved precisely by the presence of absence. Its impact comes from the people who aren't there and the buildings that are missing. This striking absence allows

¹ The reflecting absence memorial is made of two large reflecting pools in the footprints of the twin towers.

people to mourn a tragic event by fictively experiencing the loss that was felt all over the world. Every touristic aspect of Ground Zero is focused on recreating that historic moment of loss, allowing people to see and understand what is missing in New York City, and in doing so to comprehend the violence of September 11, 2001. This is accomplished by emphasizing the experiences of people in New York that day. “The tale told at Ground Zero, taking the position of victims and the personalized relations created between witnessing tourists and primary witnesses, tends to turn this event into a natural disaster and avoids the possible disagreements that any political framing would evoke. The design invokes empathy and not political action” (Timm, 2011, p.63). It also allows people to face trauma on an emotional level without requiring a political or ideological response that, while sometime productive, can make addressing trauma more difficult. Ground Zero is an example of how Dark Tourist locations have evolved and formed around providing people with the “means of working through the trauma, re-inscribing it into a symbolic order, making it fit consistently within a cohesive reality” (Loos, 2011, p.69).

Crucial to understanding the role of Ground Zero as a dark tourist site, which separates visitors from their pervasive political concerns, is understanding its clientele. Ground Zero is the destination of many domestic and international tourists. “Ground Zero is a site of mourning not only for the local or national community but also for the global community. Large audiences have seen the eternal looping pictures of the second plane crashing into the second tower, of the burning towers, of the first tower falling”(Timm, 2011, p.62). The event of 9/11 shocked people all over the world and is internationally viewed as a tragedy. For this reason, Ground Zero attracts grief tourist from all corners of the globe. The falling of the towers was “fundamentally a global event and that brought out the full range, the best and the worst, of humanity”” (Sturken, 2007, p.227), also drawing out a range of humanity to visit it. Ground Zero seems to serve a wide variety of tourists from all different backgrounds, but what is remarkable about Ground Zero is that it can be a space of mourning for people of many different nationalities without inducing ideological conflict. This is because its purpose, like other sites of dark tourism, is to allow people to confront traumatic events while transcending the limits of nationality. Ground Zero is often referred to as sacred ground, a reference that “implies not daily life but worship, contemplation, and a suspension of

ordinary activities”” (Sturken, 2007, p.200). This site of tragedy is exempt from the continuous ideological conflict we all experience as beings with complex identities, because the sacred transcends the human and thus, lies beyond nationalism or idealism. “By necessity as a site of mourning, Ground Zero is stripped of its larger political meaning and situation within global politics”” (Sturken, 2007, p.218) and this is a classic feature of dark tourism as well as the reason it has come to exist. Sites like Ground Zero allow people to separate from their national identities and confront tragedies in a way that allows for the expression of international ethical norms despite disparate and often conflicting political or national concerns.

Two specific examples are the failure of the International Freedom Center and the success of the World Trade Center viewing platform. Originally Ground Zero was supposed to be home to the International Freedom Center, which would – as its name suggests – promote international freedom by placing the terrorism of 9/11 and Ground Zero as a site in a larger global context, but families of those lost in the attacks and the public at large fought against this vehemently” (Sturken, 2007, p.276). There was a general feeling that taking what many termed a crime against humanity and turning into a political tool was inappropriate and contrary to the sacredness attributed to the site of the towers. People resisted the idea of associating any political or ideological value to the site, wanting instead for it to connect all humans in a shared horror of violence rather than dividing them over issues of international politics. The decision to omit the center is representative of the values associated with such tragic sites and helps us to understand these sites exist and so many are drawn to them.

This perspective is also reflected in attitudes towards the World Trade Center viewing platform. This temporary platform was created to allow people to visit what was left of the towers relatively shortly after their fall. The platform was a major international tourist attraction: “record numbers of Canadians, Mexicans and Japanese made trips to New York when the viewing platform opened” (Lisle, 2004, p.7). From an American perspective this might initially seem strange, but the fall of the towers was experienced as an international tragedy:

The World Trade Center complex employed people from all over the world—not only business people in multinational

corporations, but also recent immigrants working in low-skilled service sector jobs (e.g. waiters, janitors, dish-washers, mailroom workers). Along with the 67 British citizens killed at Ground Zero, there were also 17 Columbians, 16 Jamaicans, 5 Filipinos and 15 Mexicans (Lisle, 2004, p.7).

For this reason there was an international need to come to terms with the losses sustained on 9/11. The viewing platform helped with this as “both American and international visitors reproduced powerful feelings of belonging, community and solidarity when gazing upon the rubble of the WTC” (Lisle, 2004, p.4). The platform, the beginning of Ground Zero as a dark tourist destination, is representative of global need to escape the particularity of national politics in order to confront shared human tragedies in a meaningful way through the experience of a specific kind of memorial space.

When speaking about Ground Zero, one informant described her time at the site saying, “standing there and...from a human level feeling like these were just people who went to work that day or walked by or just happened to be there. You don't know the people but you feel connected to them” (Personal interview, 2013). What struck her, and others I spoke to, was the feeling that those who died on September 11th could have been anyone. The issue of nationality and ideology almost never seemed relevant; instead these visitors used Ground Zero to confront the tragedy of a senseless loss of life, a loss not specifically American, but one potentially shared by all human beings. Ground Zero, like other sites of Thanatourism, allows people to confront a vulnerability to tragedy that transcends local identities and politics.

IV. Auschwitz

Auschwitz is one of the most visited sites of dark tourism, and it is a site of incredible value to the thousands who travel there annually. The Auschwitz memorial site helps people to confront the Holocaust, one of the past century's most brutal violations of human rights collectively beyond political constraints. Auschwitz is a unique Thanatouristic site and though it serves the same purpose as Ground Zero – allowing the confrontation of human inflicted violence by people from very different political and national identities – it is a distinctive site. More than 400,000 people visit Auschwitz

annually, and memory and mourning is invited by performative means, by the retelling of the lives that ended there, and by the visiting of buildings that remain or have been rebuilt and furnished with artifacts that have survived since the 1940s (Keil 2005, p.483). At Auschwitz “significant sites are represented within a context of cultural and social tradition. They are items of collective memory, and visits to them form part of the social construction of rituals of remembering, and the grounding of both personal and collective memory in physical place” (Keil 2005, p.482). These spaces and artifacts play a pivotal role in allowing the tourist to feel a connection to the dead and the few who survived on both a physical and spiritual level.

Creating an emotional connection through physical experiences is a theme at Auschwitz where there are “high levels of visual and textual information and interpretation; the site is an educational centre, and a locus of testimony, frozen in written, photographic, archival and artifactual forms. To Primo Levi, a survivor who returned after the war, Auschwitz seemed: ‘a museum—something static, rearranged, contrived’”(Keil 2005, p.485). The site focuses on using tangible objects, images, and texts to allow people to feel a connection to those who suffered there. Visitors walk through the same gas chambers as those who died and stand in the same cattle cars that countless people suffered in. This performance of the past is meant to force tourists to encounter the horrors of the Holocaust. The role played by performance in dark tourism, and certainly at Auschwitz, is summarized well within "What's so 'Dark' about 'Dark Tourism'? Death, Tours, and Performance" where Dr. Bowman and Professor Pezzullo write:

The upshot of ritual as performance is artificially heightened behavior, normally displayed publicly, that marks ‘the startling ability of human beings to create themselves, to change, to become – for better or for worse – what they ordinarily are not’. Ritual is performative and transformative. It is also restorative in the sense that it recalls, retrieves, and reenacts living behavior before it...it might be worthwhile to imagine tourist sites that induce memories of death as rehearsals, spaces where we can try on reactions and imagine the subjunctive ‘what if?’ This possibility of transformation seems pivotal to the ritual of touring places that evoke memories of death (Bowman, 2009, p.194).

Auschwitz has been created as an utterly unique tourist site, as it responds to an incomparable part of our history. Like all dark tourist sites Auschwitz tries to collectively re-assimilate trauma, but unlike all dark tourist sites it does so in a manner that is reliant on commodification (Keil 2005, p.482).

Auschwitz provides a kind of commoditization of tragedy, which, though potentially controversial, allows for reassurance, acceptance, and potential moral development by neutralizing political identity. Specifically, one visitor described his visit to Auschwitz by saying, “I thought back over the many moments of imaginative reflection that had prevailed during my visit, and how the so-called ‘material evidence of crimes’ (shoes, suitcases, hair etcetera) are — despite their plurality — able to invoke a powerful affective sense of individual loss if one is prepared to engage in imaginative contemplation”(Dalton, 2009, p.218). He also wrote that Auschwitz was “located outside the cinematic frame and outside our realm of experience, it is also located outside our temporality”(Dalton, 2009, p.216). This man had a very otherworldly and emotional experience at Auschwitz, and this was a product of the classic tourist site focus on objects related to the event associated with the site. Auschwitz’s role as a dark tourist location allows it to use tourist techniques to help visitors to connect with, and try and comprehend, the Holocaust as a human tragedy.

V. Conclusions

After looking at two important dark tourism sites, it is possible to reach certain conclusions about the nature of the recent popularity of this macabre type of travel. Ground Zero and Auschwitz are very different sites, though as centers of dark tourism one could argue that they serve similar purposes. By making locations of tragedy tourist sites, thanatourism responds to a deep human need to understand human tragedy and violence. Mass killings are always hard to address; especially in the fragmented world we live in today where ideology, nationality, and politics are so polarizing. This being said, it is crucial that these horrors are confronted in order to ensure they never occur again. Dark tourism offers a trans-political space to acknowledge and learn from mass killing. Both sites allow those who visit them to confront the limits of the human realization and empathy. Marita Struken, the academic and author of *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero*, describes this well when she

writes, “The practices of tourism and consumerism both allow for certain kinds of individual engagement with traumatic experience yet, at the same time, foreclose on other possible ways of understanding national politics and political engagement”(Sturken, 2007, p.213), and this foreclosure creates a greater opportunity for the confrontation of international tragedies on an individual and human level.

Specifically, it provides people with a space to acknowledge that the Holocaust was not just a German or Jewish event but a human tragedy. The attack on the World Trade towers was not just an attack on Americans by a terrorist group, it was an attack perpetrated by human beings that destroyed other people and violated the security of a nation. This being said, thanatourism is more than the purpose it is meant to serve. As a branch of tourism it has far-reaching effects, some of which have yet to be examined. Dark tourism provides individuals with a unique response to global tragedies and by creating a memorial space for reflection and confrontation it allows visitors the invaluable opportunity to process global human sufferings. However, this opportunity has costs and there are certainly risks of over commodification. As this industry continues to develop, its impact will most certainly expand and it will affect our global consciousness and communal memory, perhaps in ways that we cannot even yet imagine.

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