

Intermediality as Prosthetic Memory: The Case of the USHMM

1 Introduction

The Holocaust and the systematic murder of millions of people in the first half of the 1940s shook the world to its very foundation. It seems self-evident that we need to remember and commemorate the victims. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. - built in 1993 - shares the same conviction. It, however, seems untimely that almost 50 years passed from the end of the Second World War to the construction of the Holocaust Museum. But what are the factors that determine when something becomes "timely" in political, collective, or religious memory?

Peter Novick, an American historian, claims that the formation of the US Holocaust museum, as I will call it here, is tied closely together with the political and social context at the time. In the late 20th century, the US experienced an important change in mindset that affected the way many people, religious, ethnic and other social groups viewed and identified themselves. As American history began with waves of immigrants, people coming from different cultures, countries and religions needed to learn to focus on the aspects that united them rather than their differences if they wanted to coexist in peace. In the late 20th century, however, this integrationist mindset was replaced by a more particularist ethos, that focused on and appreciated differences between people again (Novick, 7). One of the many groups whose identity was affected by this change was the already well integrated community of American Jews. The question arose: what is it that makes them different from other Americans - what constitutes their American *Jewish* identity? It was no longer Judaism, since there was a significant decline in religiosity. At the same time, the number of intermarriages between Jews and non-Jews spiked. Combined with increasing assimilation and integration into American society, these developments threatened the very existence and uniqueness of Jewish identity in the United States (ibid.). What, however, still united the American Jews, Novick writes, was "the knowledge that but for their parents' or (more often) grandparents' [...] immigration, they would have shared the fate of

European Jewry," that is, they would have perished in the Holocaust (ibid.). This very knowledge, and with it the historical event of the all-but-total annihilation of Jewish life in Europe, became the foundation of a new collective and unifying identity.

It is in this context that the USHMM opened its doors. The museum describes itself as an "institution for the documentation, study, and interpretation of Holocaust history, and serves as this country's memorial to the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust" (ushmm.org). But rather than simply displaying artifacts and, thereby, preserving history, the museum's exhibition follows a so called *narrative* curatorial approach. A narrative approach entails that the museum tells a coherent narrative of the Holocaust, primarily focusing on Jewish victims, which, in this case, is told from an American perspective - the exhibition begins with images of concentration camps taken by American soldiers and also ends with the liberation of the camps and American responses to the Holocaust during the war years (ibid).

The narrative goal of the USHMM, as I will argue in this paper, is thus not only to remember the Holocaust, but, by creating what Alison Landsberg has termed as "prosthetic memory", to engender a new, collective memory of a shared Jewish history achieved through intermediality. With this claim I build on an ongoing historical debate, that, in this case, centers around Peter Novick's idea of the USHMM being a place for collective Jewish memory and identity.

The officially stated goals combined with the narrative approach in the museum will allow for a better understanding of these claims. The official mission statement of the USHMM is aiming "to advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy" (ushmm.org). In other words, the visitors ideally learn about the *past* and take something away for the *present*. At the same time, "identity" and "identification" are foregrounded to visitors the moment they enter the museum, as they are given "Identification Cards" of Holocaust victims.

My major claim today is that the US Holocaust museum realizes its official goals and also the underlying search and formation of a new, collective memory of a shared Jewish history by reflecting the intermedial character of memory with the intermedial character of its exhibits. In both cases, visitors ideally create a form of artificial prosthetic memory of the Holocaust as an event and also as part of collective identity in the present, although they have not experienced it first-hand.

2 Intermediality

Before we begin, I want to first define the term *intermediality*, because it is crucial to my claim that memory is intermedial and that the USHMM relies on intermediality to create prosthetic memory. In our context the term *intermediality* usually refers to the relations between literature, visual arts and music (Herman, "intermediality"). Important, for my purpose here, is that there are at least two of these three different kinds of media interacting with each other. In this paper, however, *medium* and, hence, *intermediality* is used in a much broader sense referring to anything that mediates information, emotions or ideas. With regards to the USHMM and its narrative approach this expansion of the term *medium* seems necessary. As I will demonstrate, the USHMM uses not only pictures, video material, and texts to represent the past but also artifacts, architecture, people, atmosphere, and sound. Only by broadening the idea of intermediality it is revealed how not just books and movies but also *spaces*, such as the museum itself, function in collective memory. As I will show later, the same holds true for memory. The same way we remember anything from people to events to smells and even feelings, our memories can also be altered, revived, triggered or created by these different factors.

3 Intermediality at the USHMM

As I mentioned above, part of what makes the USHMM unique is that it is a *narrative* historical museum. The museum's display is organized along a story line (Weinberg, 17) rather than a collection of artifacts. It tries to follow the known course of events of the Holocaust. The narrative approach

offers the same advantage as movies, novels or plays - it can touch and affect the reader or viewer emotionally, and it encourages an empathetic engagement with the past. Whereas traditional historical museums, such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for example, mainly try to collect artifacts and to preserve history and knowledge, the USHMM goes beyond that and wants its visitors to change and develop emotionally, mentally, or morally and to understand the full significance of the exhibits (Weinberg, 49).

When the USHMM opened its doors in April 1993 a great number of Holocaust survivors attended the dedication of the museum. They had helped create the museum by contributing funds, donating their personal items, and by documenting their personal experiences (Weinberg, 17). Artifacts and testimonies, therefore, are two core aspects of the museum.

Authentic artifacts play a particularly important role in an exhibition. They link events from the past to the present, and constitute proof that the events in the past really happened. These artifacts can be many different things, the permanent exhibition contains for example kitchen utensils that were confiscated from victims at Auschwitz, Zyklon B poison crystals, hair that was shorn from Auschwitz inmates, or a box car that was used to transport Jews from Warsaw to Treblinka, or barracks from Auschwitz. All these items provide historical evidence. They are usually supplemented with explanatory text labels and panels.

Hence, textual components are also part of the exhibition. There are explanatory texts and there are textual exhibits such as authentic letters or documents. Whereas textual exhibits are only sparsely used, explanatory texts are crucial since they provide background information on displayed items and set them into their historical context. One kind of these items are photographs.

Photographs, or visual components in general, are a kind of artifact as well. They, too, are witnesses of the past linking bygone events to the present. They add to the narrative. What is even more interesting, is that the USHMM focuses on more than what there is to see in a film or photograph. It is also crucial how these visual media are positioned, how large or small they are and if they should be

accompanied by sound to fit into and continue the narrative of the Holocaust. And in fact, the USHMM has some internal guidelines on how to use sound.

Similar to textual components, sound is not frequently used to tell the narrative for various practical reasons. The planning team decided, though, to use sound, such as music of Nazi marches or speeches of Nazi leaders as an *atmospheric* component (Weinberg, 62).

Most strikingly, however, is that the building itself adds to the atmosphere and to the narrative. Red brick walls and gray steel structures reminiscent of concentration camp barracks surround the visitor after entering the building, followed by stairs that lead up to a brick gate, reminiscent of the gate to the death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Visitors speak of "feelings of fear, loneliness, helplessness, almost of panic, but also of holiness," when they walk into the museum (Weinberg, 25). The architecture of the building is so unique and well thought out that the building not only contains a Holocaust museum but already visually expresses its function or identity. The structure is not exchangeable, it itself is part of the museum and the Holocaust narrative that is being told.

This is quite remarkable. On the one hand it reveals how well-conceived the USHMM and its exhibition are, and on the other hand it shows that intermediality does not end with literature, music and visual arts. Most of the individual components of the intermedial exhibition are already intermedial themselves. A diary, for example, counts as an artifact, it is an authentic object from the past but at the same time it contains writings and testimonies. Authentic pictures can contain text, or be part of an album that belonged to a Holocaust victim. Even more striking, however, is the overarching interaction between these single components. As mentioned before, the USHMM is not just a collection of artifacts, trying to preserve history and knowledge, the goal is to touch and change visitors emotionally, morally and mentally - to allow them to take something away from the past, transfer it to the present and to let it influence their future decisions and ideas. This goal can only be reached through the intermedial interplay between the different components - in other words: through the *use of intermediality as a tool*. By combining atmosphere, physical surroundings, sound, artifacts, personal

stories, and even actual Holocaust survivors who work in the museum, this narrative approach makes it possible to address visitors' feelings, emotions, to evoke their empathy, it allows people (so at least the exhibition's idea) to put themselves in the place of Holocaust victims and ultimately, to form their own kind of Holocaust memory. Freed, the architect of the USHMM building once said about abstraction in architectural design - and I think it holds true for the entire narrative approach - that it operates "as a vehicle for a certain kind of memory - a memory that remains open, fluid, and above all highly personal and subjective" (Hansen-Glucklich, 78).

Linking intermediality to Holocaust representation and memory can be very fruitful, especially since, as I will show next, memory itself is intermedial. We not only remember what we see, but also what we physically or emotionally feel, smell, or hear. Other people, different influences or simply time can alter our memories or even create them in the first place.

4 Memory

The same way a museum can be constructed from a variety of different media, memory also consists of different aspects. Memory is commonly thought of as something we automatically build up and then access and recall when we need it, but memory is not as straightforward as a hard drive - memory is a creative and interpretive process.

How, then, are memories formed and then recalled? How do we come to know something about the past? To anticipate the answer: there is not only one single way of creating memory. There are, in fact, several different forms of memory. What connects these various forms is their constructedness. My understanding of the different types of memory is based on the work done by French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and also Alison Landsberg who is an internationally recognized scholar in the field of memory studies.

The USHMM uses, for example, interviews from victims who survived the Holocaust. These witness accounts are a form of *autobiographical memory*. Autobiographical memory is memory of

events that we have personally experienced (Halbwachs, 24). There are, however, many factors that can influence and also alter this kind of memory. Especially media, social or cultural influences and emotions are known to play an important role.

Not only autobiographical memory can be created but also *historical memory*. The same Holocaust survivor who might have provided the witness testimony can also have historical memory about the Holocaust. He can have memories regarding the liberation of the camp in Treblinka although he has never been there. Historical memory can only be formed through written or other types of records (Halbwachs, 23). It is therefore not a direct but a *mediated* memory. Although historical memory is indeed formed by some kind of records, it is being kept alive through commemorations and other regularly held social events. The interaction with other people and social groups - in short: the social context, therefore, plays a crucial role in the creation and perpetuation of memory.

In this context, Maurice Halbwachs, who worked on ideas of memory, introduces the idea of *collective memory*. He argues that, because all memories depend on the present social context, the collective memory of the past is actually a *reconstruction* of the past in light of the present (Stier, 4). And indeed, it is collective memory about the Holocaust that is first (probably unconsciously) created by the American Jewish community while in search of a common denominator - a collective identity. This memory helps to shape the American and Jewish centered exhibition in the USHMM and to create new prosthetic memory, which, then again, closes the circle and helps to form collective memory and identity. Collective memory can therefore be found inside but also outside of the museum.

Whereas the USHMM makes use of autobiographical memory and historical memory, and is part of collective memory, it strives to create *prosthetic memory*. As a reminder, the USHMM wants its visitors to change and develop emotionally, mentally, or morally and to understand and appreciate the full significance of the exhibits. The definition of the term prosthetic memory, which was coined by Alison Landsberg, seems to match that goal: *prosthetic memory* refers to a kind of artificial memory that emerges when "a person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more

personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live" (Landsberg, 2).

The present section on memory has shown that memories in general are constructed. Many different aspects interact with each other and build up memories. In other words, there is a great variety of elements involved when memories are created. This constructive character can be found in the USHMM as well. As demonstrated, the museum, too, incorporates an array of aspects - witness testimonies, personal artifacts, sound, and the architecture to name only a few. All this, again, forms one single coherent narrative.

The USHMM's exhibition, therefore, provides all the necessary elements that are needed to form real, even though prosthetic, memories. These prosthetic memories are still different from memories created from first-hand experience but they, nevertheless, make the past accessible, personal, and allow to learn from it - to incorporate the Holocaust, in other words, to some extent into the present.

5. Conclusion

As I have shown, the US Holocaust Museum relies on intermediality as a mode of representing the Holocaust aimed specifically at the production of "prosthetic memory". The exhibition as a whole is based on a narrative approach: it is constructed as a narrative that employs such intermediality to tell its story. Indeed, as I have shown, many of the individual exhibits rely and incorporate intermediality themselves. The underlying approach combines these singular elements into an overarching narrative by allowing elements of the exhibition to interact with and to complement each other in order to create, so it would seem, a unified representation of the past. This narrative approach enables the US Holocaust Museum to prompt its visitors not only to remember the past and to reflect on it, but also to take something (namely a prosthetic memory) away for the present. The salient point is that memory is also constructed and, as I argued, can even be characterized as intermedial in a broader sense. In the case of memory, there are also different influences that create, add to, and alter memories. Similar to

the constructed narrative that is being told in the USHMM, memory is an organically growing product of interpretation rather than an objective one-to-one account of an event that took place in the past.

The same holds true for collective memory that can not only be found inside but also outside of the museum. It is prone to change and interpretation. Through the structure and the narrative that is told in the USHMM the presence and influence of collective memory become evident, but it is expressed only through the prosthetic memory the exhibition aims to create. While collective memory always originates in a social, historical or political context, the context itself and its implications for the present only become readable and legible through the, in this case intermedial, formation of prosthetic memory.

What I hope to have shown today is that the point in time the USHMM was built, 1993, indeed, seems untimely. This untimeliness is continued by prosthetic memory, in that it creates a *memory* - although artificial - *of the past in the present*. It, again, does so by utilizing historic objects - past their circulation and use - relegated to a museum in order to make memory present. Visiting the USHMM, in fact, always comes with a feeling of untimeliness: the past is taken out of its own time and displayed in a system where visitors try to put it back in time through a narrative based on intermediality. And it is this intermediality and the utilization of intermediality as a tool that overcome the untimeliness and ultimately stabilize the temporality of the museum, the Holocaust, and the exhibits.

Such a conclusion complicates the notion of intermediality as being "prone to confusing the otherwise stable temporalities and historical contingencies of works of art and literature," (<http://untimelinessofmedia.tumblr.com>) as suggested in this conference's call for papers. For intermediality, as demonstrated here, can be, as in the case of the USHMM, a strategy of memorialization aimed at overcoming the limits of temporality.

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