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Chapter 8

Using immersive and interactive approaches to interpreting traumatic experiences for tourists

Potentials and limitations

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Dark encounters

Entering
You will find yourself in a climate of nut castanets
A musical whip
From Torres Straits, from Mirzapur a sistrum
Called Jumka, ‘used by aboriginal
Tribes to attract small game
On dark nights’, coolie cigarettes
And mask of Saagga, the Devil Doctor,
The eyelids worked by strings.

(Fenton 1984: 81–4)

In this stanza from a poem about the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University, the English poet James Fenton conjures up an image of this Museum not only as a place of wonder and curiosity but also as a metaphor for travel, for encounters with ‘the other’. Museums are, for him, places of the imagination in which one can perform a multitude of identities, largely because one can lose a sense of self in them. Travel, imagination and immersion are, in this image of museums, a productive constellation of ideas that capture some of the experiential aspect of visits to museums and heritage sites.

Traditionally, these encounters have been understood in terms of either the beautiful or the exotic (Dolff-Bonekamper 2008). However, as the growing literature on dark tourism (e.g. Stone 2006) indicates, visits to museums and heritage places increasingly include encounters with the abject – with horror, depravity or terror. This trend is evident, for example, in recent developments in re-unified Berlin which offer tourists, as well as locals, the opportunity to explore that city’s and Germany’s role in a geography of terror – that of the Holocaust as well as the Cold War. According to Elke Grenzer (2002: 94) ‘about 600 new placards, monuments and memorials now commemorate a past that Berlin had left unacknowledged’.
Much of it comes from a desire for redemption, the need to memorialise in order to grieve and the need to demarcate the present from the past while also recognising the ongoing effects of the past on the present. But it also comes from the recognition that Germany’s unique position in the history of twentieth century terror is a commodity that can be traded – it brings visitors.

Under these circumstances, and others like it, what are the parameters for ethical and socially responsible forms of interpretation? The question is particularly acute for those forms of interpretation that encourage tourists to encounter the abject by explicitly taking on the identity of those who were either social outcasts or victims of atrocities and disasters through immersive interpretation strategies. These forms of interpretation provide a particularly challenging context for asking this question as they frequently use strategies of role-playing, re-enactments and reconstructions as part of their attempts to cast visitors in the role of victim. This particular form of privileging immersive experiences poses a series of important questions that need our critical attention. Among them is the question of whether interpretative strategies that attempt to place visitors in the subject position of the other – victim, perpetrator or social outcast – can live up to the aim of achieving empathy in ways that go beyond didactic forms of moralism or which avoid the problems of further objectification. In exploring my own experiential encounters with three very different immersive sites dealing with themes of incarceration, death through disaster and genocide, this chapter explores the conditions under which these strategies either aid or complicate our ability to sensitively and ethically engage with the abject. My aim is to contribute to the exploration of the potentials and limitations of immersive experiences in the hope that the increasing interest in dark tourism does not eclipse critical and reflexive approaches to museological and heritage practices.

The Melbourne Watch House Experience

My first case study, The Melbourne Watch House Experience, comes from a gaol complex owned and managed by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). Built in 1906–7 and closed in 1994, The Melbourne Watch House was the site where every potential criminal who had been arrested by police was placed in a cell, under crowded conditions awaiting their court appearance – a process that could take months. Caught in its net were hardcore criminals as well as petty offenders. In amongst the dangerous criminals were housewives, naïve youths, innocent people and the mentally ill. The site also includes the Court House, where those held in the Watch House were either convicted or freed. Next door is the Old Melbourne Gaol, an older structure famous as the site of Ned Kelly’s hanging – a bushranger who, through his death, achieved a mythological status
in Australian bushranging stories and who many liken to a Robin Hood-type figure.

From the point of view of marketing and finances, the immersive approach developed at The Melbourne Watch House is extremely successful. Before its opening in October 2007, the National Trust had been experiencing financial difficulties culminating in a loss of AUD 1.59 million in the Trust’s 2006/07 budget (National Trust of Australia Victoria 2008: 3). By 2008 the new interpretation at The Melbourne Watch House, marketed as the ‘Crime and Justice Experience’, contributed to a profit of AUD 2.1 million in (2008: 3). The complex received 153,000 (2008: 22) of the 250,000 visitors to the Trust’s properties in the 2007–8 financial year (2008: 5), a figure that is quite remarkable given the Watch House Experience was only opened in October 2007. By the end of the 2008–9 financial year, the complex had received 163,780 visitors – an increase of 7 per cent on the previous year (National Trust of Australia Victoria 2009a: 27). The Old Melbourne Gaol Crime and Justice Experience also won the State tourism award in November 2008 for the best Heritage and Cultural tourism attraction in Victoria, and the National award in the same event in 2009, as well as the 2009 Interpretation Australia (IA) Gold Award for Excellence in Heritage Interpretation (National Trust of Australia Victoria 2009b).

The Watch House complex presents an opportunity to understand the nature of the justice and penal system over the twentieth century: the experience of awaiting trial while locked up, police culture, social attitudes towards criminals, the cultural practices of those in gaol, the dreams, fears and aspirations of those caught in its net and the social situations that led to people being incarcerated there. Moreover, the longevity of the working life of this watch house means the potential to undertake an interpretation strategy that analyses these factors in the recent past. Apart from the physical presence of jailors and jailed (and the smells and sounds), all the infrastructure still exists – the police office where people were arrested, the cells in their original condition, including all the graffiti (which has not been whitewashed) (see Figure 8.1).

The ambiguous position of those in power (the police) and those under their power (the prisoners), however, make this potential a difficult thing to achieve. Unlike victims of the Holocaust or of autocratic despots, the inmates of this prison are not subjects that can easily attract our sympathy. Unless they were a colonial convict who is often understood as a victim of the system within Australian popular culture, gaol prisoners are not ‘us’ but ‘the other’. The figure of the police also presents any attempt to interpret their role with difficulties. They are not the standard perpetrator who is clearly in the wrong. Though they might abuse power, they also represent a socially given permission to arrest and incarcerate individuals who are accused of not staying within the confines of the law. Who audiences are going to identify with and why is not, therefore, straightforward, and nor is
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Figure 8.1 Graffiti on the bench in one of the cells in the Watch House
Photo: Andrea Witcomb

the question of who they should identify with. The question of ethical integrity in the case of this site is therefore a complex one and is perhaps best served by exploring the complexity of the subject positions of gaoler and gaoled. How then is this potential realised through the immersive, interactive interpretation strategies for the site?

Playing on the double meanings of ‘arrest’, the Trust advertises the site as an ‘arresting experience with performers playing the part of Charge Sergeants, allowing the visitors the experience of being apprehended and incarcerated in the Watch House’. (National Trust of Australia Victoria 2008: 20). The main substance to the tour is thus the experience of being arrested en masse. An individual actor, playing the role of a Police Sergeant, does their best to intimidate, harass and generally disempower their audience by replicating the process of conducting an arrest on the audience who are put in the subject position of being criminals. Members of the audience are indiscriminately shouted at, made fun of, ridiculed through the use of abusive language, stripped of any social standing. Phrases used all the time include ‘move your carcass’, ‘saw-dust brain’, ‘you – here. Move!’; ‘Quiet!’ Everyone is given a charge sheet and told to memorise it and is then subjected to questioning concerning their sex and sexuality,
age, physical marks, charge and name of arresting officer. Other than short answers to this question based on the charge sheet, no audience member is allowed to interrupt or ask questions of any sort and they must answer ‘Yes Sir!’ or ‘No Sir!’ to any question thrown at them. Neither are they allowed to talk to one another.

It quickly becomes clear that it is better to do as one is told or suffer the embarrassment of being pulled out and made fun of. As men and women are separated and told to march in separate lines, they are taken into the gaol where a physical search is conducted to indicate the kinds of things police are looking for – mainly drugs. You are given to understand this is only the soft version and what a serious physical search would involve. Each group is given a few minutes in a locked cell with no natural light and told to stand against the back wall. It is the first moment where we can catch our breath, have a laugh, check everyone is alright and not stressed and comment on how good or not the actor is. Interestingly, in my two visits there, I have not come across any discussion about the meaning of what is being experienced. The focus is on the performance, not the content, a response that indicates that the thrill of the experience is more important than any moral message the show might be intending to deliver. After that we are given a small lecture on the prison regime and given about ten minutes to explore the site. We are told about the existence of sound and video installations but constantly shouted at to move and keep going – the performance never lets up and the consequence is that the other side of the story (that of the prisoners) is hardly allowed through despite the intensely powerful ambience of the site itself, an ambience which is made even more palpable by the presence of multimedia installations, particularly soundscapes, within the site.

My impression of these, from my intense but necessarily short experience of listening, is that these multimedia-based installations add to the powerful ambience of the site itself by filling in some of the absences – the sounds of voices and dialogues in the exercise yards, the sound of toilets being flushed, showers running. Among these sonic installations are snatches of dialogue meant to give some insight into the thoughts of the prisoners, representing a variety of people and experiences. But the ‘forced march’ nature of the tour makes it impossible to take in this multiple layering of the stories and people associated with the place. The curatorial intent to provide a layered interpretation aimed at providing a level of complexity to the interpretation of the site by personalising individual circumstances and thus render what has become silent palpable (Gibson 2008) is lost in the overwhelming experience of the theatrical nature of the tour and the pressure of the clock (which times each tour) to maximise the economic return to the institution rather than the range of meanings its audiences might construct from their experience while at the site. At the end of the tour, audiences have slightly more time to read a number of
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panels dealing with various inhabitants of the Watch House but, by this time, the majority of the tourists have only inhabited the experience of being arrested rather than the opportunity to explore the various circumstances in which a wide variety of people might have gone through that experience. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are more interested in being photographed playing the role of prisoner and taking that away as their memento of the experience than in exploring the nature and purpose of the justice system.

On reflection, what comes across is not a sensitive exploration of power relations and how they are produced. Rather, what comes across, as Jacqueline Wilson (2008) has put it, in relation to prison sites that use former prison guards to conduct tours, are the perspectives of the prison establishment. While the actors work hard at communicating the brutality of the system, they also work hard at communicating the brutality of the inmates, often with recourse to sexual innuendo and references to the insane. No reference is made to the more complex explorations of fear and dashed hopes found in some of the multimedia installations. Nor is an interpretation offered of the graffiti found in the cells or the exercise yards. And yet, as the work of Jacqueline Wilson (2008) has shown, the graffiti in this prison is a unique record of the culture and experiences of the prisoners, offering an insight into their friendships, the ways in which it was essential to have friends within the prison population who were feared by others as protection, their attitudes towards the police force and to the place itself.

In working so hard to provide an experience of what dehumanisation is like, the actors end up continuing the practice of 'othering' the prison population. The result is that it is impossible to explore the social matters that often lead to criminal activity, ask questions about the nature of today's prison population, the nature of the justice system or about police practices in these places and how they might have changed over time or to explore attitudes towards criminals. The fact that the tour guides are actors rather than education officers only emphasises these difficulties. I tried to engage one of them in conversation by asking them how they felt people responded to the tour after the tour was finished. Her concern was with whether they were realistic enough, hard enough. She then proceeded to share with me some of the comments other visitors had made to her, which included the line that prison nowadays was 'too soft' and that criminals 'deserved everything they got'. She went on to support these views herself, by saying with quite a straight face 'what happens when all these people are out on the street? We are all going to get blown up'. Clearly her education at the site had not extended to any discussion of the social, political and economic matters embedded in the police and justice system. She had no critical distance from the discourse she herself was mouthing as an actor.

The problem is made worse by the fact that it is very hard to maintain
this performance as a drama. The only way for the audience to cope is to take it as a bit of fun, almost enjoying the embarrassment of the various situations they find themselves in. Rather than drama, the experience is that of a farce or even vaudeville. In itself this raises a difficult ethical question – is it ethical to position people into subject positions they can never take on and which ultimately provide entertainment for themselves at the cost of a real understanding of what might have led real people to experience the horrors of the Watch House?

The question is one that has been taken up by historians and cultural critics who question the ethics of strategies of interpretation that seek to replay the position of victims of the Holocaust. James Young for example, has asked whether the constant repetition of images of the victims aimed at eliciting empathy leads to their re-objectification in the present or, alternatively, to some understanding. ‘To what extent’ he asks,

do we participate in the degradation of victims...? To what extent do these images ironize and thereby repudiate such representations? And to what extent do these images feed on the same prurient energy they purportedly expose? To what extent does any depiction of evil somehow valorize or beautify it, even when the intent is to reveal its depravity?

Taken to our admittedly less stark example, does the attempt to place visitors as the victim by replaying the ways in which they were degraded lead to a re-objectification of the prisoners and to some form of perverse pleasure in the brutality of police culture? If the answer, as I have been arguing, is yes, are there alternative forms of interpretation that lead instead towards either more complex forms of understanding and even, perhaps, a critical position?

An insight into this question is provided by Dominick La Capra (1998) in his critique of historians and documentary filmmakers that seek to inhabit the landscape of trauma experienced by the victims of the Holocaust. He is critical of those who suggest that it is either possible or desirable to take on the victim’s position. He is concerned with two issues. The first is a concern that the focus on the moment of trauma leads to a culture of victimhood, an inability to imagine a future for those who suffered the original trauma. The second, however, and perhaps of more relevance to the factors raised by the Watch House Experience, is that La Capra wants to encourage a form of interpretation which uses affect to jolt the reader/viewer from complacency and leads them towards what he calls ‘empathic unsettlement’ – an experience which does not centre on replaying the traumatic experience and identifying with it but one which gives a perspective from outside.
However, for this to take place, this affective or sensorial experience cannot remain entirely within itself. A strategy of identification, in this case through role-play, is not enough. What is necessary is the provision of some vantage point from which the viewer or audience is encouraged to question their own relationship to both victim and perpetrator. La Capra’s (1998) point is that if audiences are left without this outside perspective, if they are left only within the realm of experience or affect, they do not have recourse to language and therefore the means to construct an alternative understanding. Affect and language must work in a dialectical relationship if one is to emerge transformed and able to engage in critical thinking.

In the case of the Watch House Experience it is the multimedia installations that provide that reflective space. Unfortunately audiences are not given sufficient time to engage with them to the point where they can turn what they experienced as a farce into a serious exploration of power relations between people and the social, political and economic issues that might provide a ray of understanding into the experiences and lifeworlds of those who worked at or passed through the Watch House. The problem is one of both insufficient time to feel the tensions within the interpretation and lack of an opportunity to articulate those back into language. The tour needs discussion time with trained and properly informed education officers similar, I would suggest, to the discussions available at the Tenement Museum in New York, in which historical experiences are the ground for contemporary explorations between visitors and education officers around migration matters as part of each tour of the Tenement’s apartments.

The Titanic artefact exhibition

My next example revolves around a very different ethical landscape, one that uses strategies of identification and immersive interpretation techniques to support a commercial enterprise that is in clear contravention of the Underwater Cultural Heritage Convention – a convention which aims to preserve underwater heritage in situ for both conservation and interpretation reasons, prevent the salvaging of material for commercial purposes involving the dispersion of the collection and which encourages the sharing of knowledge. The exhibition in case is the Titanic: The Artefact Exhibition that is currently touring the world and which showed as the Melbourne Museum’s Winter Masterpiece exhibition in 2010. Developed by RMS Titanic Inc. and its owner, Premier Exhibitions Inc., who have fought in court for the exclusive rights to the archaeological material and its display, this exhibition is a blockbuster. It uses a range of sensory experiences, in combination with an ‘identity card’, to produce an immersive narrative framework that prevents a critical understanding of the concerns surrounding the recovery of material from the archaeological
site itself. This outcome is achieved through the juxtaposition of two narratives. The first is the explicit narrative that provides the dramatic impetus of the show, namely the tension between the naïve faith at the time of the sinking in technological progress and the knowledge that a simple iceberg destroyed that naïveté and with it well over a thousand lives. The second narrative is far more subtly produced but supports a significant commercial machine by proposing that only the modern technological knowhow of this enterprise makes it possible to honour the memories of those who suffered and died that cold night in 1912 through the retrieval, conservation and display of objects that once belonged to them. Supported by an interpretative strategy that encourages identification with the victims of this disaster, it becomes relatively easy to encase the exhibition within a narrative of memorialisation. The result is not only to support an exclusive commercial enterprise but also to re-enchant our faith in technological progress and its desirability.

Using a simple passenger card as the entry to the exhibition, the organisers invite their audience to experience the story of the Titanic from the point of view of those who travelled on it. We experience the excitement of the story of its production, the sumptuous and not so sumptuous interiors, meet some of our fellow travellers and experience the tragedy of its sinking. This is followed by the story of the discovery of its location, the process of recovering and conserving the artefacts and the memorialising aims of that effort, a memorial gallery where it is possible to find out whether the passenger we were given at the beginning survived or not and finally, in the Melbourne case, a little display on passengers with an Australian connection and their fate. The exit is through the inevitable exhibition shop where it is possible to get replicas of various personal items carried on board – mainly jewellery – as well as replicas of the third-class blankets and first- and third-class dinner sets.

It is the emotional trajectory of the exhibition, however, and how that is achieved that is of interest, as it is this trajectory that underpins the exhibition maker’s ability to defend their existence and institutional aims. Essentially, the exhibition works through a series of sensory contrasts, using music, different levels of light, changing temperatures and the contrast between sumptuous recreations and the fragility of recovered objects to achieve an emotional narrative to support the attempt to get visitors to identify with the victim through the strategy of the passenger card. The experience, for the visitor, is somewhat akin to a Hollywood epic à la Cecil B. de Mille, much like the film Titanic, in which the sumptuous stage set is contrasted with the minutiae of the protagonists’ lives who carry the emotional focus of the viewer.

The visitor experience begins with our placement in Ireland at the beginning of the exhibition by a soundscape of traditional Irish music. Upbeat in feel, it captures the working-class nature of the men who built
the ship and offers a pleasant background against which we can sense the optimism of the period, the faith in technology that lay behind the design and construction process and the ambition of the White Star Line who built the ship to control the lucrative trans-Atlantic trade. The large-scale black and white photographs of the shipyard, the ship itself in different stages of construction, the men who financed, drew up plans and finally of those who built her, and a few small pieces from the ship itself helped to tell the story. These are supported by the industrial nature of the exhibition space itself – hard wooden floors and black industrial-looking walls. This section of the exhibition provided great opportunities for inter-generational conversations as grandfathers happily explained to their grandsons the intricacies of building a ship while others excitedly looked at their boarding cards to find out who they were, willing to participate in the game to be a passenger on board this most famous of ships.

This sense of playing a game continued into the next space as we were led through a gangplank into the upper first-class deck of the ship itself. This was the space for ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ as we were led from one reproduction of the ship’s luxurious interior to another. The sets were brightly lit by crystal chandeliers setting off the dark oak panels of the grand staircase, the rich surfaces and decorations of marble, brass and wrought iron in the first-class areas. We gazed in wonder at the splendour of the ship and those rich enough to pay for this luxury while listening to the strains of Strauss’s The Blue Danube, which gently took us back into another time. Amid the sumptuous reproduction of the ship’s interior spaces, such as the grand staircase where one could be photographed, the Verandah Café and a first-class suite, small vitrines held a range of artefacts recovered from the sea bed leading to a different kind of ‘ooh aah’ experience – that of wonder that such objects survived in the first place, followed by the realisation that they once belonged to someone. As one child put it to their mother, ‘is that really real mum? Did it really come from the ship?’, while another visitor I overheard, this time a young adult, said: ‘Someone’s boot. Just imagine, someone wore that!’ This sense of wonder was clearly effective in leading people to identify with the passengers. The contrast between the sumptuous reproductions and the fragility of the objects on display, as well as their ephemeral and everyday nature, made for an experience of wonder which only heightened the emotional encounter with the moment in which such grandness and the dreams and aspirations of those aboard the ship, whose stories we had just come into contact with as we leaned over the vitrines and studied their possessions, came to a sudden halt.

As we continued our tour deep into the ship, along a narrower passage and past a third-class cabin recreation, the ambience changed. The lighting got darker, the strains of Strauss disappeared to be replaced by the sounds of the ship’s engine and the air temperature became noticeably cooler. The mood of the audience changed to one of apprehension. At the
end of the passage we arrived in the ship’s boiler room which, instead of hot and smelly, was dark and cold. Here we heard how the men reacted to the Titanic’s encounter with an iceberg. We then emerged into a cold dark room, in which a large sheet of ice (masquerading as the iceberg) was dramatically lit against a black, starry night. The soundscape was appropriately sombre and quiet. There, largely in silence, in stark contrast to the first-class recreations before where lively chatter was the order of the day, we encountered the drama of that terrible night – the life and death decisions people made to separate from each other or not, the realisation that there were not enough lifeboats for everyone and a few eye-witness descriptions of the moment in which the Titanic sank with over a thousand people still on board. A silent digital recreation of the moment of the sinking in which the ship broke into two completes the picture. Visitors watched it in horrified silence.

Suitably chastened into a recognition of the power of nature against human naivety, greed and faith in technology, the exhibition moved on towards the redemptive aspect of its narrative strategy – that modern-day technology enables us to appropriately memorialise the tragedy by salvaging, conserving and display items from the wreck site. Without a hint that such a narrative stands in contradiction with the critique in the faith in technology we have just experienced or, as Marcus Westbury (2010) has argued, any admission of the debates that have occurred over such an enterprise, RMS Titanic Inc. goes on to glorify its own role in the tragedy. This is a role that, as they describe it, requires courage, a sense of moral duty and technical expertise at the use of modern technology. As one looks around at these fragments from the ship, in wonder not only at their survival but at their very presence in front of our eyes, the ‘company’s goal’ to ‘preserve and display these objects in memory of those who perished aboard Titanic’ seems not only worthwhile but necessary, given that the ship is slowly disintegrating due to the action of metal-eating bacteria.

The exhibition ends with a memorial gallery where one can find out what happened to each and every passenger on the ship as well as some of the personal stories of those on board. These include that of the last survivor, Elizabeth Gladys Dean, a child travelling in third class who survived along with her mother and brother but whose father died. Millvina, as she was known, died in 2008 and the exhibition is dedicated to her memory. As we walk out through a small corridor, there are some panels accompanying the display of a few ephemeral objects from the ship-wreck site which link its story to the stories of a small number of Australians on board as both staff and passengers. We come out into the bright glare of the shop where we can purchase photos of ourselves taken as we entered the exhibition and later on the grand staircase, as well as any number of replica objects from the ship. If we did not catch on to the exhibition as a marketing exercise for the company to fund and rationalise its salvaging
activities, if not to make a profit, it becomes clear here. Not that that realisation has had any impact on the desire of people to purchase – a quick scan on the web reveals that many have come to this exhibition in locations around the world just to purchase and collect that first-class dinnerware or third-class blanket. *Titanic* Mania, much of it driven by the box office success of the film starring Leonardo di Caprio and Kate Winslet, now includes the collecting of exhibition merchandise.

The exhibition has had a number of critics, some of whom point to the commercial interests of the salvage company and the lack of any acknowledgment within the exhibition of the debates surrounding their activities and the limited nature of its formulaic account of the disaster which, as Edward Rothstein pointed out (in relation to the Times Square version), offered no exploration of the cause of the Titanic’s failure, barely a hint of the difficulties of that night’s rescue and only a cursory nod at the event’s impact. There is little here that will challenge preconceptions or offer reinterpretations. It is, in other words, a package: effective, intriguing, but stopping short of what the best museums might demand.

(2009: para. 12)

What I hope to have shown is how these problems are a direct outcome of this exhibition’s immersive strategies which play to people’s emotional engagement but not necessarily to any deepening of their historical understanding. A separate but linked matter, then, is how public institutions should position themselves. This I grant is not an easy question. Engaging the public with history in the enormous numbers that this exhibition does all over the world is an achievement. There is intense public interest in the story of the *Titanic* and an argument could certainly be made as to their right to see this material and engage with it at an emotional level. But the fact also remains that there is contest over this particular company’s activities and that this contest is not recognised within the structure of the exhibition. The battle for exclusive rights only makes the use of emotional narratives to control how people view their activities more distasteful. How should public institutions engage with commercial entities when it comes to heritage and what controls or ability to add value through debate should they be able to exact for the price of granting them the status that inevitably comes with display in a public institution?

**The memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe**

Producing strategies of interpretation which position visitors in the role of victim in order to give them a heightened emotional experience is not, however, the only way to use our attraction to other human beings. Instead,
taking my cue from critics such as Young and La Capra, I am interested in exploring how a more complex focus on the impact of personifying the victim might lead to a questioning of one’s own relationship to other human beings and thus to the production of ‘empathic unsettlement’. My final case study is one where the identification of visitors with victims is not achieved through attempts to step into their shoes either through role-playing or the ubiquitous identity card supported by a highly emotive journey. Instead, I wish to explore how the interaction between a focus on personal narratives and the aesthetic qualities of an exhibition can encourage both an empathetic response with the victims and a critical position which requires a process of self-examination that asks about our relationship to both victim and perpetrator. My example comes from the exhibitions at the information centre that supports the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in central Berlin.

The need for this centre was established as part of the deliberations in the Bundestag which led to the German government’s decision to support and pay for the building of the Peter Eisenman-designed Memorial in 2000 (Schlusche 2007). Its tone is set by the aesthetics of the Memorial above which, as Schlusche (2007: 28) argues, resists identification with any one individual and uses the sombre nature of cemetery forms (stelae, sarcophaguses and gravestone slabs) to reference the millions who perished during the Holocaust in a sensorial experience that resists any final understanding or absolute knowledge of what occurred. The intention is to create a field of disquiet as well as the quietness appropriate to a Memorial space – that is we are meant to think as well as feel.

One of the difficulties posed by the building of this Memorial and its dedication as a Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe was the perception that its existence precluded the necessity for the German State to build a national memorial that served as a warning to itself and its citizens. The identification with the victims was understood as leaving out any confrontation with the perpetrators (Benz 2007: 31). That perception changed as Germany itself went through a process of debate which, as Jürgen Habermas (1999, cited in Benz 2007: 31) argued, resulted in a widespread understanding that memorialising the victims involved accepting the question of responsibility – an acceptance that is reflected not only in the decision of the Bundestag to add an interpretation centre to the Memorial but also in the eventual form of the exhibition itself. It is that form, I want to argue, which prevents any simplistic identification with the victim while eschewing the question of one’s relationship to the perpetrators.

At first glance, the narrative provided within the Centre is not that different from other memorial sites. A summarised version of what occurred between 1933 and 1945 is provided in the introductory space. Four thematic rooms deal respectively with the range of experiences from Western to Eastern Europe; they offer representative family histories from
across Europe before, during and after the Holocaust, provide a space for the naming of victims and a cartographic representation of the sites of persecution and extermination of European Jewry. Mention of other victims also takes place within these rooms. Finally, the foyer area is used to point visitors towards other memorials and museums that explore similar themes.

The genre and content of the material is familiar from other exhibitions dealing with the Holocaust. The museological contribution of the space however is different and lies in the productive use of the tension between the role of memorialisation above ground and the role of information below ground. Not simply a documentary centre, its displays, I want to argue, use aesthetics as well as documentary evidence, much of it in the voice of the victim, to produce disquiet as well as remembrance on the part of the visitor. It is within that space of disquiet that our own position in relation to both victim and perpetrator and our future role as a defender of democratic values emerges. How then was this achieved?

The first strategy is not to attempt any vicarious identification with the victim by attempting to put visitors into their position. There are no re-enactments, no role-play and no identity cards of any sort. The visitor, then, is not explicitly positioned in relation to either the victims or the perpetrators. The fact that they are within a memorial space is allowed to signify whom that space stands for.

Instead, the focus is simply on individual stories that give meaning and immediacy to the scale of the disaster. Indeed, the aim of the Foundation’s Board of Trustees was to provide a cognitive space that would counter the emotional experience of the Memorial sculpture itself by bringing the reality of the six million people who were being commemorated down to the level of what the Holocaust meant for individual people and their families. Their aim was that the information centre should ‘personalize and individualise the horrors of the Holocaust’ (Quack 2007: 41) and show its impact throughout Europe. At the same time, the Centre also sought to educate their visitors, including German citizens, as to the basic contours of the Nationalist Socialist policies and their applications. Hence a visit to the Centre ends with information on other memorial sites where the atrocity itself occurred. Responsibility for what occurred is clearly owned.

It is in the space of the encounter between information and aesthetic experience, however, that the educational potential of this narrative is realised. Those involved in the development of the exhibition had two main aims, both of which were driven by the location of the Memorial in Europe, as well as in German capital itself. First, they wanted to ensure that visitors would be able to sympathise not only with the fate of individuals and their families but begin to understand the impact on entire communities and European Jewry at large (Quack 2007; Rürup 2007). Given that the history of remembrance of the Second World War in both Western Europe
and the former USSR tended to embed the Jewish experience as just another victim of the Nazis among many others, this was regarded as an important aim (Rürup 2007). Knowledge about the fate of Eastern European Jews who had tended not to be commemorated during the socialist period was seen as particularly important. The second aim was that people would make the connection between the collapse of democracy in Germany and the fate of the Jewish People, taking on the role of guardians of modern day democratic societies (Rürup 2007). In a country that was newly reunited and facing its own process of educating its expanded citizenry into democratic values, this aim also took on an added importance. It is also this aim that requires visitors to make the connection between empathising with the victims, essentially an emotional journey, with undertaking a degree of self-examination that requires them to confront the role of perpetrator and their relationship to it. It is this aim that is catered for, I want to argue, at the level of the aesthetic experience rather than the straightforward narrative informational content provided within the exhibition space.

As Dagmar von Wilcken (2007), the designer of the space points out in his contribution to the commemorative book about the Centre, it is the tension between the function of information provider and reflective memorial space that drives the aesthetic experience. For von Wilcken it made sense to continue the visual language of the memorial above into the information centre below. This language, of stelae and grave, is embedded within the walls, floors and ceilings of the space, as well as the colour scheme with its tones of black, grey and white. For her, it is this language that provides the space necessary for reflection appropriate to a memorial space. For me, as a visitor, it is this language, in conjunction with the documentary material on display that allows me to empathise with the victims and, at the same time, explore my own relation to them in the present rather than simply relegate them to history.

The experience is particularly strong in the first thematic room dealing with the European dimensions of the Holocaust. At first sight this room appears largely empty. An electronic frieze around the upper perimeter of the room records the names of all the countries affected and the number of their victims. The large scale of the event equals the incomprehensibility captured in the Memorial above where the stelae appear to disappear into the horizon. A sense of absence and emptiness is the first experience. However, on entering the room proper it becomes evident that it is the floor that carries the main message. For the pattern of the stelae above is repeated on the floor where rectangular light boxes carry quotations from the diaries and writings of the victims. On the floor, these rectangular light boxes become gravesites. Looking downwards, to read them is not only a chance for inner reflection, a point made by von Wilcken (see Quack and von Wilcken 2007: 46). It is also a point of ethical choice – I did not see a
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single person walking across each gravesite and thus desecrate them. How one walks in the space involves a conscious choice to treat the information as sacred and precious, and thus showing respect for the testimony of those who went to such efforts to speak to others beyond their shortened lifetime. In showing that respect, visitors are engaging in exactly what those victims did not have at the time of their murder – a recognition of their humanity (see Figure 8.2).

![Figure 8.2 Looking, feeling and apprehending the significance of what happened and our own relationship to it](Photo: Henry Benjamin)

The point is not only that the authors of these extracts from fragments of diaries, letters and postcards sent or thrown out of train windows at the moment of deportation wished to testify to posterity what was occurring to them in the hope their names would not be forgotten. While, as many authors have argued, these writings are part of an extraordinary effort on the part of individual Jewish victims to make it impossible to erase their existence from European history, to ask of survivors to speak their names as is customary in Jewish commemorative tradition, they are also attempts to recover their status as human beings. As Annette Auerhahn and Dorothy Laub (1990) argued in relation to the giving of testimony on the part of survivors, testifying was not only based on a desire to document what happened. It was also based on a desire to have an audience, to be heard.
According to them, the experience of the Holocaust was the experience of being left alone, of not being able to establish a relationship between themselves and others. In our listening of these testimonies, then, we are to some extent, giving them their humanity back. We have become their listeners, receiving, as Roger Simon (2006) would argue, 'their terrible gift' – a gift that comes laden with political responsibility.

That this is happening inside the German capital, so close to the former site of the Reichstag, is of course of enormous metaphorical significance. It is this decision, embodied in our sensorial or affective response to the aesthetics of the display and the recognition of the import of the informational content (the personal testimony) that takes this exhibition away from a representation of the past to a request to engage in the present. The space produced out of the tension between the form or aesthetic quality of the display and the informational content, particularly its documentary, testimonary nature in the first person is what makes this exhibition an immersive space that encourages rather than shuts off a process of self-reflection. The process is somewhat like that put forwards by Bertold Brecht in his epic theatre productions, which produced a critical space by allowing each element – words, music and dramaturgy to stand on their own, creating meaning through their relationship to one another. The point was not to produce a closed narrative but one where representation was open to critique as was the relationship of audience members to that representation.

**Conclusion**

Techniques of immersion can be structurally very different from one another and have very different outcomes for the visitor. The three case studies explored here suggest that there is a real need to understand these differences. Closed immersive experiences that do not allow sufficient time for different voices to emerge from within the experience close off any form of exploratory learning based on a notion of critical engagement. If they do so using a form of delivery that borders on farce for its dramatic effect, they function only at the level of entertainment posing serious ethical concerns. Immersive experiences aimed at producing closely structured emotional encounters on a grand, almost filmic scale, as in the *Titanic* exhibition, make it difficult to have any external perspective on the narrative being produced. The problem with these is not that they function only as entertainment, which could, in some scenarios, be a sufficiently worthy aim. The problem is that it is too easy to use them to hide either ideological or commercial motivations. Finally, immersive strategies that create a space for reflection and critical engagement, while also being successful in terms of box office appeal, are those that create a spatial and aesthetic environment where the dialogue between the
nature of the material on display and the form of the display work
together to create a space for affective as well as cognitive forms of inter-
action. It is only then, I would suggest, that such interpretation strategies,
particularly in the context of dark tourism, can achieve full ethical
integrity.

Note
1 An earlier version of this argument was published as a review of Titanic: The
Artefact Exhibition in ReCollections 5(2). Available online:
http://recollec tions.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_5_no_2/exhibition_reviews/titanic
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