Staging battlefields

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Staging Battlefields: Media, Authenticity and Politics in The Museum of Communism (Prague), The House of Terror (Budapest) and Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen (Berlin)

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Abstract

This article analyses the construction of authenticity in three sites commemorating oppression under state socialism. I demonstrate that each of the sites aims to incorporate the physical involvement of the visitor as part of its educational programme. This observation is linked to the political potential of 'prosthetic memory', that is, bodily memory of events one has not experienced. The methods used to achieve this immersive visitor experience are assessed in each site and the potential impact on the individual consuming the exhibit is considered. I argue that the success of prosthetic memory depends not, or not only, on the authenticity of the artefacts, but also on the nature of the interpretation that accompanies them. An overpoliticised narrative, which does not allow the individual to make meaning for him or herself, is likely to focus attention away from the objects and may result in 'disinheritance' of particular visitor groups.

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Captions for Images

Figure 1: Exterior of the House of Terror in Budapest (image: Sean Sullivan, 2010).

Figure 2: Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen in Berlin (image: Sara Jones, 2010).

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Craig Wight argues that the postmodern world, a 'world of mediated, staged and multisensory experience', gives rise to a public that desires the '"authentic"' and the '"real"' (Wight 2009: 134). This search for authenticity has also made its mark on tourism consumption, with the development of the 'alternative tourist', who seeks 'reality' and meaning in the lives of others (Wight 2009: 134 and Macleod 2006:183). Wight argues that the 'dark tourist', that is, travellers to sites associated with death, violence or the suffering of others (see Sharpley 2009b), 'displays some of the traits of the "alternative tourist", particularly because encountering "truth" and "reality" and the search for new (or "rare") knowledge and experiences is central to the discursive formation of dark tourism' (Wight 2009: 134). This article considers the particular staging and construction of authenticity in three heritage sites, all of which can be considered 'dark', and all of which market the experience they offer as in some way 'authentic': the Museum of Communism in Prague, the House of Terror in Budapest and the Stasi prison memorial in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen.

The Prague Museum of Communism claims on its website that 'visitors will be treated to a fully immersive experience' (Kapplerová et al. 2010). In an interview with Ian Willoughby for Radio Prague, shortly before the opening of the museum in December 2001, Jan Kaplan, a Czech émigré film-maker and co-curator of the exhibit, asserts: 'The idea is that people come here and walk in a way through time. It's a three dimensional pop-up book. It's revisiting the recent past of Czechoslovakia' (cited in Willoughby 2001). On both its website and in its informational pamphlets, the House of Terror in Budapest makes much of its situation in a building that saw the torture and death of individuals under both fascist and state-socialist regimes. Maria Schmidt, director of the site, highlights this authenticity of

place in an article published in 2006: 'in 60 Andràssy Boulevard, we found a site that, through its sinister historical experiences, was virtually melded with the concept of terror' (Schmidt 2006: 95).[1] She adds that they aimed with the exhibition to make it possible for young people to both 'experience' and 'feel' the 'horrors of the totalitarian dictatorships of the 20th century' (Schmidt 2006: 96). Comparable metaphors are used in the marketing of the memorial at the former Stasi prison in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen. Visitors are offered the opportunity to have 'direct experience' of political persecution at the site (Gedenkstätte Berlin-Hohenschönhausen 2010b), which offers an 'authentic image of the prison regime in the GDR' (Gedenkstätte Berlin-Hohenschönhausen 2010a).

It is striking that all three of the museums claim to offer the potential not only for a cognitive experience, but also for a bodily, physical one. The visitor is to be 'immersed', to 'walk through time', 'to feel the horrors', to have 'direct experience'. This may in part be a response to tourist demands for 'genuine' experience, as discussed above, and an understanding that visitors tend to retain far more of what they do and see, than what they hear or read, that is, based on educational considerations (Puczkó 2006: 236). However, in the case of such 'dark' sites, this desire to offer an experiential attraction also has an important political dimension. This dimension lies in what Alison Landsberg has termed 'prosthetic memory', a 'new form of memory' that 'emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum' (Landsberg 2004: 2). According to Landsberg, through engaging the visitor or viewer both physically and cognitively, these media allow the individual to '[suture] himself or herself into a larger history', he or she '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 2004: 2).

Following Landsberg, memories acquired in this way can 'shape that person's subjectivity and politics' and 'serve as the grounds for unexpected alliances across chasms of difference' (Landsberg 2004: 2-3). This political potential is clearly significant for sites which have a diverse visitor group and which seek to impart knowledge of traumatic pasts, the political meaning and significance of which is far from settled. As will be seen, the history of oppression under state socialism falls into this category in all three of the national contexts considered in this article. These sites offer a narrative that is not only anticommunist, as might be expected, but also anti-authoritarian (or, indeed, anti-totalitarian), comparing state socialism with other forms of dictatorial rule. This anti-authoritarian narrative sets the history of state socialist dictatorship in the context of contemporary concerns with democratic transition and the reconstruction of a democratic national identity. In this way, these sites reflect not only the pasts of the states under consideration, but also their political present.

Building on these theoretical reflections, in the following, I consider the methods and media used to produce an 'authentic' and bodily visitor experience and the potential of each site to generate 'prosthetic memory'. I analyse the exhibitions in terms of media form and display and consider how the techniques employed to interpret and transmit a particular historical narrative function and what their impact is likely to be on the visitor. This interpretation is, in turn, assessed in terms of its political position within broader national discourse on the history of state socialism and its meaning for contemporary society.

The Museum of Communism, Prague

The Museum of Communism in Prague was founded in 2001 by the American political scientist and entrepreneur, Glenn Spicker, in collaboration with Kaplan. The exhibition is centred on a large number of artefacts from the socialist period gathered from antiques stores and junk shops (see Connolly 2002 and Holdsworth 2002). The curators describe the

exhibition as being based around the theme, 'Communism – the Dream, the Reality, and the Nightmare', that is, reflecting the utopian ideals of the communist movement, the 'reality' of everyday life under state socialism and the 'nightmare' of the oppressive aspects of the regime (Kappelerová et al. 2010). This theme is presented through a series of scenes from life under state socialism, constructed using the original artefacts: for example, a factory, a schoolroom, a shop with empty shelves and a secret police interrogation room. These scenes are accompanied by information placards that offer interpretation of the displayed objects. The museum also contains a large number of statues and busts of socialist leaders, as well as posters and photographs from the period, organised thematically and accompanied by information placards (for example, 'Devastation of the Environment', 'Guarding the State Frontiers', 'Prague Spring', 'Underground and Dissent'). A 'television time machine', a room adorned with communist iconography and screening a short film on Czechoslovakia after 1969, offers a narrative of Czech history in a different media form.

The focus of the museum is, therefore, on objects – described on the museum website as 'authentic artefacts' and 'rare items' (Kappelerová et al. 2010). As indicated above, the narrative of the museum's marketing suggests that these objects and their arrangement into thematic scenes are intended to serve as a kind of virtual time machine, allowing visitors to feel themselves 'immersed' in the past. In this regard, these artefacts are designed to play an essential role in the construction of a bodily experience and thus the potential for the visitor to acquire the deeper understanding that Landsberg attributes to prosthetic memory. The concept of a physical movement back in time, even when it is employed metaphorically in this way, suggests a shift in the visitor's subject position from observer to actor in the museum experience. They are no longer expected only to look at the exhibits, to read the information, but actively to feel the past through the objects presented. In this sense, the artefacts themselves are ascribed special properties, an aura that allows them to enact this

process. This aura is generated not only by the labelling of the artefacts as 'rare' and 'authentic' (and thus worthy of inclusion in a museum), but also through their link to the 'Other' of state socialism (cf. Seaton 2009 and Assmann 2007: 155).

However, for the objects to produce prosthetic memory this aura alone is not sufficient; the visitor's body must also be placed in a particular relationship to the artefacts on display. For Landsberg, objects can play a role in the generation of prosthetic memory in that they 'offer the illusion of unmediated proximity and because they do not, like the printed word and the photograph, operate on a principle of distance'. However, this proximity is lost when the objects are placed in display cases, where the glass functions as an obstruction between artefact and visitor (Landsberg 2004: 132-33). In the Prague Museum of Communism, although there is only minimal use of display cases, each of the scenes is placed behind a rope barrier. The visitor cannot enter the 'factory' or the 'shop', but only observe the artefacts from a distance. They cannot literally feel the objects, as they are repeatedly instructed not to touch the displays. In this sense, the proximity required for an 'immersive' experience and the generation of prosthetic memory is not, in fact, achieved in this museum and it is more likely to produce behaviour patterns in its visitors not dissimilar to those in traditional displays. The objects may be received as 'authentic' representations of the past, but the exhibits are not constructed in such a way as to make the museum experiential in Landsberg's understanding of the term.

However, this does not mean that the objects do not serve a political purpose. As Paul Williams argues, 'although the intrinsic solidity of any museum object appears to make it both dumb and still, museums often seek to grant it a dynamic life history, assigning it a dramatic role in the historical story of any event' (Williams 2007: 31). The information that accompanies the object is, therefore, essential to its interpretation by the visitor. It is in this context that the museum's political agenda comes to the fore. The authors of the website state

that the museum 'stands as an authoritative historical narrative relating to this 20th-century phenomenon', but that 'it is [...] in no way intended by the organisers to be a filter for contemporary political issues in the Czech Republic' (Kappelerová et al. 2010). However, this defensive stance in itself points towards the complexity of the political context in which it is situated: a post-socialist country, which has seen increasing nostalgia for the socialist past (Ekmana and Lindeb 2005: 360) and in which the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia has received consistent popular support. Many of the journalistic articles published on the opening of the museum point towards the apparent failure to deal adequately with this chapter of Czech history. Nick Holdsworth asserts that 'most Czechs prefer to forget the communist past' (Holdsworth 2002). A statement echoed by Stanislav Stransky, chairman of the Czech Association of Former Political Prisoners: 'people just don't talk about the communist period and the difficulties' (cited in Krosnar 2002). The Museum of Communism is seen as a potential antidote to this process of forgetting (see Krosnar 2002).

Indeed, an analysis of the narrative of the exhibition indicates that, despite the claim to historical objectivity, the interpretation of the primary artefacts does not remain at the level of a politically neutral representation of a historical period, but contains a strong anticommunist narrative. The term 'Communism', used in the name of the museum itself, is not an undisputed term for the description of the 'People's Democracies' of Eastern Europe. The states generally did not define themselves as 'communist', but rather as 'socialist', considered a stage along the route to the communist utopia. Moreover, the black-and-white rhetoric of the Cold War is present in the interpretation of the displays. Next to statues of Lenin, for example, the visitor reads: 'Lenin pushed forward the tactics of extreme perfidiousness and ruthlessness, which become characteristic of all communist regimes of the time'.[2] The part of the exhibit focusing on the 'Guarding of the State Frontiers' describes the citizens' escape from 'the socialist misery'.

This presentation of the state socialist past is complemented by an emphasis on opposition to the regime, particularly during and following the Prague Spring of 1968 and in 1989. The film shown in the 'television time machine' focuses on this aspect with dramatic scenes of demonstrations and clashes between protestors and security forces. Displays are devoted to the Prague Spring, the self-immolation of the student Jan Palach, underground and dissent, Václav Havel, Charter 77, Radio Free Europe and the Velvet Revolution. The visitor is even presented with a section of the Berlin Wall, an iconic symbol of the fall of state socialism in Eastern Europe and the power of mass demonstrations. This juxtaposition of the repressive and destructive aspects of the dictatorship with the various forms of resistance to it validates opposition to state socialism and, in turn, democratic transition – it thus leaves little space for nostalgia for the former regime or sympathy for Communist successor parties.

The emotive use of language in the displays ('perfidiousness', 'ruthlessness', 'misery'), broad generalisations ('all communist regimes'), the staging of the nation as both victim and revolutionary, and the juxtaposition of dictatorship, opposition and the transition to capitalist democracy thus feed into contemporary political debates and stand in contrast to the museum's claim to political neutrality. In this regard, the efforts to create an 'immersive' experience through the use of 'authentic' objects takes on a further dimension: the visitor is not only expected to 'walk through time' to a dictatorial past, rather the narrative of the exhibit encourages the visitor to compare this past with the present, and to draw particular political conclusions. We can link this to Landsberg's assertion that prosthetic memories acquired in experiential museums can impact on an individual's subjectivity and politics.

Nonetheless, we might question whether this clear-cut political viewpoint is really compatible with the 'immersive' experience promised by the museum. In the context of the authenticity of visitor experience, the impact of this unnuanced narrative might, in fact, be similar to that of the rope barriers. Richard Sharpley and Philip R. Stone argue that

ideologically motivated interpretations that attempt to convey 'broader political messages beyond the immediate significance of the site' can actually diminish the experience of authenticity for the visitor (Sharpley and Stone 2009: 117). If the visitor perceives the interpretation accompanying the primary artefacts to be too didactic, or politically biased, this is likely to result in an increase in the distance that prosthetic memory seeks to reduce. The impact of the political narrative in these terms is likely to depend largely on the expectations of the visitor and their own experience or understanding of this part of the Czech Republic's history. Visitors whose views correspond to the narrative of the exhibition, or whose previous knowledge of the period is limited, may not perceive the ideological bias and will view the objects accordingly; however, for those with dissonant memories or alternative political interpretations, this clear-cut narrative is likely to result in a rejection of the museum's reading of the past and further distance from the objects on display.

The House of Terror, Budapest

The dominance of the narrative in the Prague Museum of Communism is also partly the result of the dominance of the information placard as a transmission medium at this site. The use of other media forms, such as video or voice recordings, is essentially limited to two displays: the 'television time machine' described above and a video interview with Ladislav Vanys, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the Anglo-American Business Institute and Center for Democracy and Free Enterprise in Prague. I will now turn to an exhibition where the range of media and presentation forms used is comparably broad: the House of Terror in Budapest.

The focus of the House of Terror is, in contrast to the Prague Museum of Communism, not on objects, but on multi-media presentations: video interviews with eye witnesses; telephones through which the visitor can listen to archive recordings; documentary footage; and photographs. The exhibit also contains many symbolic displays or scenes

representing different aspects of dictatorship: a Soviet tank hanging as a centre-piece in the stairwell; a long table with Arrow Cross place settings; a rotating Janus-like figure depicting the rapid conversion of some individuals from fascist to communist ideology; a carpet map of the Soviet Union indicating the distance that those transported to Siberian camps had to travel; voting booths; a courtroom; a church, a maze-like corridor tiled with imitation lard bricks; reconstructed prison cells; and a series of gallows with the file of a victim attached to each.

Andreas Huyssen argues that the late twentieth century saw a transformation in the museum experience: 'spectators in ever larger numbers seem to be looking for emphatic experiences, instant illuminations, stellar events, and blockbuster shows rather than serious and meticulous appropriation of cultural knowledge' (Huyssen 1995: 14). Tamara Rátz links this development in visitor expectations explicitly to the exhibit in the House of Terror. She states that it may be inappropriate to describe the site as a 'museum' in the traditional understanding of the term, as 'the original objects on display would hardly be sufficient for a comprehensive exhibition on totalitarian terror' (Rátz 2006: 247; cf. Horváth 2008: 269-70). Rátz argues that the House of Terror is, in this regard, 'a good illustration of the new kind of museum the function of which has gradually evolved from passive to interactive and from the authenticity of the object in the museum's collection to the authenticity of the visitor's experience' (Rátz 2006: 247).

This might seem somewhat paradoxical: how can a decrease in the authenticity of the object result in an increase in the authenticity of visitor experience? Here it is useful to consider in more detail the nature of the material on display. The multi-media exhibits may not have the solidity of an object; however, they are based on media that might, nonetheless, be considered 'authentic': eyewitness interviews, documentary footage, archive recordings and photographs. Eyewitness narratives, specifically those of victims, are often ascribed

legitimacy and a right to be heard by virtue of their past suffering. As Jeffrey Wallen argues, 'eyewitness testimony contains an imperative – you too must know, must remember, must bear the marks of the past' (Wallen 2009: 262). The narration of experience by an eyewitness also appears to offer undiluted access to this experience, as there is apparently no intervening instance between the individual and the story of their past. Similarly, documentary footage, archive recordings and photographs all suggest unmediated contact with the past and give, following Roland Barthes, 'certainty that such a thing had existed' (Barthes 1993: 80).

Moreover, these media are displayed in the context of a site that, unlike the Prague Museum of Communism, has a clear link to the events that are the subject of the exhibit. Both fascist and state-socialist regimes used this house as a prison and individuals were incarcerated and tortured here under both forms of authoritarian rule. In particular, the reconstructed prison cells in the basement of the house appear to present an unmediated window on the past, similar to the impact of a photograph. We might consider this through reference to historic house museums, as described by Mónica Risnicoff de Gorgas. In such museums, as in the basement of the House of Terror, the aim is to offer the visitor the experience of travelling to a 'frozen past', apparently 'free of any kind of manipulation' (Risnicoff de Gorgas 2004: 356).

In this respect, both forms of display – the multi-media and the reconstructed – can offer a sense of authenticity to the visitor as they are either based on authentic media or offer an apparently immediate view on the events they depict. Nonetheless, closer analysis of these exhibits reveals that the displays are in fact either a literal reconstruction, as in the case of the cells, or a reuse of original memory matter in a new media form: eye-witness narratives are recorded onto film; documentary, photographs and sound recordings are taken out of the archive and given a new lease of life as museum exhibits. The aim is to create the impression of authenticity, but this is achieved through a process that Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney

following Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, have described as 'remediation' or '"repurposing"', that is, 'taking a "property" […] from one medium and re-using it in another. In this process, memorial media borrow from, incorporate, absorb, critique and refashion earlier memorial media' (Erll and Rigney 2009: 5).

Whereas the Prague Museum of Communism traded on the status of its artefacts as 'rare' or 'authentic' links to the past of a particular social group, the House of Terror combines remediation with reconstruction and representation. In this regard, the visitor experience that the House of Terror offers is not based on the auratic nature of the artefacts themselves, but on the stimulation of the senses. This shift in emphasis is highlighted particularly well by Rátz's description of her impression of the lift leading to the basement of the House. In the lift, the visitor is played a three-minute video explaining the process of execution: 'locked in a slow moving elevator, having no choice but to listen to the emotional description of an execution, it is a chilling and slightly claustrophobic experience and a reminder that the victims of terror had no choice either' (Rátz 2006: 250). The language that Rátz uses here indicates not only a physical and sensory experience, but also the role of this experience in generating a deeper understanding of the victim subject position. In this respect, the bodily involvement of the individual in the multi-media and symbolic presentations of the past appears to offer ideal conditions for the generation of politically useful prosthetic memory, as Landsberg understands it.

However, despite this active visitor experience and the potential for the promotion of empathy with victims groups, the media and academic response to the exhibit has not focused on this aspect. As Rátz notes, the House of Terror 'has been under almost constant political attack since the birth of the concept', and that 'probably the most controversy arises from the House of Terror's alleged political motives' (Rátz 2006: 253). Constructed under the right-wing government of Viktor Orbán and opened in the final stages of the election campaign, it

was seen as a tool for propaganda against the Socialist opposition (see Horváth 2008: 266; Rátz 2006: 253; Sharpley 2009a: 154). Concern at the conflation of fascist and state-socialist crimes has also been voiced by critics of the site and the disproportionate space accorded to Communist crimes and the emphasis on external powers has lead to accusations that the Hungarian role in the Holocaust is being played down (see Kerékgyártó 2006: 301; Rátz 2006: 254 and Sharpley 2009a: 154). The 'Gallery of Victimisers', a display of those seen as perpetrators of the terror presented in the exhibition, has been particularly controversial, as the individuals, some of whom are still alive, are named without the necessary contextualisation or description of their actions (see Rátz 2006: 254).

Zsolt K. Horváth argues that the House of Terror is 'a historical museum which could rather be defined as a memorial representation with a teleological function, whose main purpose is the affirmation and confirmation of a political identity' (Horváth 2008: 270). The terror is seen to be perpetrated by outside forces, the Nazis and the Soviets, upon a freedom-loving Hungarian people (cf. Rátz 2006: 253). The information leaflet that accompanies the first display, 'Double Occupation', reads, for example:

> Up to the time of the Nazi occupation of 1944, Hungary's affairs were conducted by an elected legitimate parliament and government, with representatives of active opposition parties sitting in the chambers. Despite wartime restrictions, freedom of the press was upheld. Hungarian citizens lived a better and freer life than their neighbours.[3]

The exhibit on 'Resistance' pulls between suggesting that opposition was impossible in the 'all-encompassing, ever-present terror machine', and asserting that 'in all parts of the

country, in each generation, every social stratum, resistance was rife'. The narrative found in the 'Hall of the 1956 Revolution' similarly stages the nation as both victim and revolutionary:

> In October 1956, the Hungarian people proved to themselves and the world, that there are no small nations, only helpless ones. No people can be subjugated forever, one can and must take up the fight even against a power thought to be invincible when oppression and terror become so unbearable that a nation's identity and its very existence are in danger.

The authoritarian (and in this reading totalitarian) regime of the past is thus presented not only in opposition to liberal democracy, but is also juxtaposed to the idea of the nation – itself constructed as victim of dictatorial regimes and martyr to democratic ideals. The demonization of communism thus serves the (re)construction of Hungarian national identity in a post-socialist context. This can be viewed as part of a broader trend in Eastern European states, which, according to Bill Niven, 'appear to be developing new, more nationally oriented resistance, victimhood and liberation narratives focusing on their suffering under the Soviet Union' (Niven 2008: 42-43).

In reference to the politicised reception of the site, Rátz argues that, 'the House of Terror has definitely proved more successful in provocation than in instruction' (2006: 252). The media impact of the site has been political controversy, rather than the promotion of personal reflection on this part of the Hungarian past. It is difficult to make definitive statements on individual visitor responses; these are again likely to depend on previous knowledge, understanding and memory of the period. Nonetheless, it can be seen that the clear ideological bias of the narrative accompanying the exhibit leaves little room for alternative readings of the past and runs the risk of appearing overly didactic. The visitor may

be engaged physically in the presentation, but they are not allowed to interpret and make meaning from this experience for themselves. As Risnicoff de Gorgas argues, 'excessively structured discourses aimed at showing us the right way to see do indeed rob the museum of its quality of being a space of freedom and inner quest' (2004: 360).

Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen, Berlin

A similarly didactic approach to the transmission of a historical, and political, narrative can be seen in some aspects of the presentation of the East German past at the Stasi prison memorial in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen. Like the House of Terror, Hohenschönhausen has also been the target of criticism for the particular view of the GDR it presents, notably, for its overemphasis of the physical violence of the 1950s and conflation of Nazi and Soviet oppression (e.g., Kappeler and Schaub 2008). It is viewed by some as engaging in political propaganda against far left parties that have gained in popularity since the 1990s, notably Die Linke (e.g., Hofmann 1997 and Kappeler and Schaub 2008).

Hohenschönhausen also views itself as participating in political education within the context of a united Germany. Recent surveys have revealed that many young Germans know little about the social and political conditions in the GDR and this is often interpreted as a result of the dominance of what is viewed as the nostalgic image of the GDR presented in comic feature films and in the narratives of family members (see Deutz-Schroeder and Schroeder 2009). The Hohenschönhausen website openly engages with this issue, the authors state:

Since the fall of the communist system in East Germany a new generation has grown who only know about the GDR from hearsay [Hörensagen]. In order to counter the increasing ignorance about the second German dictatorship, the Berlin Senator for

education, science and research has set up an Education Services Office at the

memorial in Berlin Hohenschönhausen. (Gedenkstätte 2010c)[4]

The image of the 'second German dictatorship' that the memorial wishes to portray is seen

clearly in the secondary media associated with the site. The information booklet, *Sites of the*

GDR-Dictatorship [Stätten der DDR-Diktatur], written by Hubertus Knabe, director of the

memorial, describes the site as 'the house of terror', that 'unavoidably recalls the time when

the SED forced a whole people into subjugation' (Knabe 2004: 5). The visitor pamphlet,

giving information on the memorial, states that the large numbers of Stasi officers and

informants 'ensured surveillance of all parts of the population'.[5] Both statements suggest that

it was not possible to lead a normal life under the state-socialist regime without the intrusion

of the state organs of repression. The video, *Zentrale des Terrors/Headquarters of Terror*

(Frauendorfer and Knabe, 2003), which many visitors are shown before guided tours of the

site, similarly leaves no doubt as to the allegedly totalitarian nature of Soviet-style socialism.

This ideological narrative would appear to reflect that produced at the House of

Terror and the Prague Museum of Communism, and, as indicated above, Hohenschönhausen

has been the focus of similar controversy. Nonetheless, the visitor experience on offer at this

site is, in fact, very different. The memorial at Hohenschönhausen is also set in the site of the

injustices it is designed to commemorate, that is, at the former Stasi remand prison. However,

unlike the House of Terror, the construction of this site as a visitor attraction is relatively

subtle. There are no multi-media displays on the tours and no symbolic representations. The

use of information placards is quite minimal. The prison, both the new building, used in the

1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and the windowless 'submarine' prison of the 1950s, have largely

been left as they were found or reconstructed on the basis of eyewitness testimony – they

have the feel of a 'frozen past', as described by Risnicoff de Gorgas (2004: 356). The

recreation of the site as a visitor complex is evident in the form of toilets, café and bookshop, and this disturbs the apparently unmediated past of the cells; however, when compared with the House of Terror, the constructed nature of the site is far less likely to be perceived as such by the visitor (compare the exteriors of the two sites as per Figures 1 and 2). The absence of the multi-media forms makes the site seem frozen in time and it is, therefore, easier to envisage the visitor empathising with the victim subject position as he or she walks through the prison corridors, stands in the neon-lit 'submarine' cells, sits at an interrogation desk or lies on a prisoner's bed. This is also a construction of authenticity, a staging of the past; however, it is a construction that does not rely as heavily on reconstruction and remediation.

Another key feature of the memorial at Hohenschönhausen is that the cells can only be viewed as part of a guided tour. The narrative is therefore given not solely by information placards or leaflets, but by an individual. Moreover, three in five of the guides are former internees of the prison. If the visitor is guided by one of these eyewitnesses the narrative they receive is a mixture of an overarching historical interpretation of the site and subjective personal experience and personal history. The visitor hears an account of the prison from someone who was actually there and is confronted with the individual in the present as they imagine his or her experiences in the past – in this way, the eyewitness provides a tangible link between past and present and, through their personalised narrative, between repression and the impact and meaning of this repression for contemporary society. As discussed above, eyewitness narratives are a powerful tool, as they offer seemingly undiluted access to the past. They are also a powerful antidote to didacticism – the general and openly political become individual and personal.

This is not to say that the particular political interpretation of the GDR, seen in the secondary media produced by the memorial, is completely absent from the narratives of the guides. They frequently mix accounts of their past experiences with comments on the impact

of these experiences and the politics of the united Germany; however, these comments are integrated into an eyewitness narrative that appears more authentic (and more credible) because it is just that, an eyewitness narrative. Moreover, in contrast to the eyewitness accounts used in the House of Terror, there is no mediating instance between visitor and guide: these narratives are not recorded and repeated, but produced anew with each visit. This not only gives the impression of immediacy and an increased sense of 'authenticity', it also allows the possibility of interaction and personal connection between visitor and witness. In this way, by incorporating the individual into the site, the memorial at Hohenschönhausen, although controversial in its national context, actually avoids placing its broader political message between the visitor and the experiential aspects of the memorial.

The Emotional and the Political

In the conflict of the Cold War, in respect of state violence perpetrated against citizens, there are no battlefields, in the traditional understanding of the term, which might form the focus of pilgrimage or national remembrance. The violence or oppression carried out by the state security services, the police or border guards, acting under the orders of the repressive regime, was nonetheless experienced by large sectors of the population. The sites discussed in this essay provide a space for the memory of this violence and debate about its significance. In this sense they represent ideological battlefields designed 'to be battered by and absorb criticism' (Williams 2007: 130). However, in order for them to fulfil this role they must stage or construct the 'battle' through a presentation of the violence they aim to remember. All three sites claim that this presentation is in some way 'authentic' – authentic objects, authentic space or authentic experience – but all three sites in fact construct this authenticity using a range of different techniques and media. The sites make direct appeals to the emotional faculties of the visitor: they use emotive language, auratic objects, symbolic and sensory experience, eyewitness narratives or personal interaction. In this way, they

attempt to construct a physical and cognitive visitor experience that might foster empathy with victims' groups.

These emotive appeals and staging of authenticity are combined with, indeed in many cases closely bound up with, attempts to shape the rational and ideological framework in which this past is received. These narratives do not, however, allow for a nuanced interpretation of the complex societies under state socialist regimes. This can also be understood in terms of 'political memory' as described by Aleida Assmann. Assmann contends that 'official' or 'political memory' is the only form that can be seen as truly 'collective' and that it relies on a 'radical narrowing in terms of contents' for its stabilisation (Assmann 2006: 36; 58). The debate surrounding these sites indicates that 'cultural memory', in its broader sense, and communicative memory between individuals, is more diverse (see Assmann 2006: 58). These sites may represent an 'official' narrative, which simplifies the past for the purposes of promoting national identity and/or a commitment to democratic structures in the present; however, as cultural institutions, they are part of a more varied discourse relating to the state socialist past – this discourse includes the dissonant memories of individuals, but also other cultural products that present this period differently, including literature, film and other heritage attractions.

What then is at stake in the narrow interpretation of the past at these sites? As Rátz argues, 'a selective use of the past for current purposes and its transformation through interpretation is a widely experienced phenomenon in cultural and heritage tourism' (Rátz 2006: 246). The simplification of the past in these terms may allow for ease of understanding and make complex histories instantly accessible to those with little knowledge or experience of the period; the narrative may also be accepted and reinforced by victim groups. However, those whose personal memories do not mesh with this interpretation are likely to feel alienated from the presentation of their heritage: not only those who committed the crimes

and injustices portrayed here, but also individuals who were neither victims nor perpetrators of state violence, and whose recollections centre on the familial and social, rather than the political. In this context, Sharpley argues that 'for any event, for any "past", recent or distant, there is no single story or interpretation, but new or alternative interpretations […]. Therefore, the particular interpretation of the past may create an "inheritance" for one group of stakeholders, the inevitable outcome of which is the "disinheritance" of other stakeholders' (Sharpley 2009a: 150). The presentation of state violence under dictatorial regimes naturally focuses on those who suffered under these regimes, and it is politically important that they do so. However, the interpretation accompanying this presentation risks alienating and 'disinheriting' much of the audience it seeks to address, if it is not able to reflect the ambivalence and complexity inherent to its subject matter and allows ideological imperatives to take the place of individual understanding and meaning-making.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Unless otherwise stated all translations from German are my own.

[2] All references to the exhibition of the Prague Museum of Communism are taken from field notes made during a visit to the museum on 7 August 2010.

[3] All references to the exhibition of the House of Terror are taken from field notes made during a visit to the museum on 10 August 2010.

[4] Please note, this is my own translation of the German version of the website. The text of the English version is slightly different and, significantly, does not contain the term 'hearsay'.

[5] Museum pamphlet: Das Stasi-Gefängnis, collected in Berlin in 2008.