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### Memorial Museums: Politics, Spectacle and Interpretation

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**Memorial Museums: Politics, Spectacle and Interpretation**

**By**

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Presented to the Graduate Faculty of  
Claremont Graduate University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts in History

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2022

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## Table of Contents

### Part I:

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<i>Kigali Memorial Center.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>The Terror Háza (House of Terror), Budapest.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Interpretation and Representation of a difficult past.....</i>	<i>7</i>

### Part II:

#### Theoretical Framework

<i>Memory and Narrative: Paul Ricoeur’s Memory, History Forgetting.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Guy Debord: Society of the Spectacle.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>The Museums’ use of “spectacle”.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Ashworth and Tunbridge The Management Of The Past As A Resource In Conflict.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Effects of tourism on representation at Memorial Museums.....</i>	<i>25</i>

### Part III:

<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>30</b>

## Memorial Museums: Politics, Spectacle, and Interpretation

### Abstract:

Memorial museums that commemorate the turbulent events of the 20th century *claim* as their main objectives the remembrance of victims and prevention of future atrocities through *truth*, education and advocacy. Their narratives are, however, sometimes skewed by politics and other influences that lead to exclusion and an exaggerated effect of the spectacle, which distorts on-site interpretation. Furthermore, memorial museums are increasingly blurring the lines between education and entertainment; displays that rely on their emotional effect can more easily manipulate the observer's reaction and are less likely to encourage critical assessment. I make the argument that by acknowledging only a select category of memories of violence, memorial museums are failing to address and challenge the social rifts and exclusion that characterized the countries' pasts and could foster exclusion and social rifts today. Memorial museums may encourage empathy with their depictions of suffering, but they often lack accurate historical and political context; unacknowledged grievances, or unsettled, historical memories are likely to increase in intensity with time, and unacknowledged emotional wounds could be powerful motivations for retribution, even violence. Failure to acknowledge memories, including painful memories, could hinder peace building. Reconciliation of memories is an important part of peacebuilding, which includes both the acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility by the perpetrators.

The paper engages in a critical analysis of the heritage interpretation at the *Terror Háza* (House of Terror), Budapest and the Kigali Memorial Center, Rwanda to critique the role of memorial museums, and the ways in which memorial museums create emotionally engaging visitor experiences; and aims to untangle these affective responses and to explore how they impede or facilitate visitor engagement.

## Part I

### Introduction:

In every act of remembering there is something silenced, suppressed, or forgotten. For every narrative, representation, or image evoking the past, there are others that are silenced— "deliberately forgotten, carelessly omitted, or simply neglected."<sup>1</sup> Something has changed in the last four or five decades in how society contends with the past: the place of the past in the present and the events that are most commemorated have changed over the years.

The most spectacular evolution has been the emergence of “memory” as a major political and moral tool. Memorial museums are part of a larger “memory boom” that has characterized recent decades.<sup>2</sup> Aleida Assmann one of the most insightful commentators on German memory, states that the memory boom reflects a general desire to reclaim the past as an indispensable part of the present, and she suggests that the idea of “collective memory” has become an umbrella term that has replaced the notion of “ideology,” which was prevalent in the discourses of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.<sup>3</sup> What was at stake during this period was not merely the remembrance of the past in a general and traditional way, but a new approach specifically addressing difficult histories. Apologizing for past wrongdoings, recognizing victims of collective traumas, and bringing to trial the perpetrators of genocides and other mass crimes progressively informed the political agendas of states, parties, and groups. The duty to remember and commemorate these aspects of the past became a major element in processes of democratization around the world. Assman raised questions about the risks and benefits of memory from traumatic events: “Does this memory bring up aggressive potential or result in

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<sup>1</sup> Lindsey A. Freeman, Benjamin Nienass, and Rachel Daniell, *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (New York (N.Y.) etc. Berghahn Books, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Karin Tilmans et al., “Re-Framing Memory. Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past,” in *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 37-39.

more respect and dialogue between neighbors?; Does it build a society that is more vengeful and more aware of its past? Does it leave individual citizens more sensitive or insensitive to the violation of human rights or the condition of minorities?”<sup>4</sup> Through a critical analysis of the representation and visitors’ responses at Kigali Center and the House of Terror, I hope to understand how societies attempt to come to terms with past atrocities and trauma through memorial museums.

Paul Williams, Assistant Professor in Museum Studies at New York University, noted that the rapid escalation in the development of memorial museums over the past twenty years played an important role in the shaping of public historical consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Commemoration is steeped in its political framework, the state-sponsored commemoration is a politically sanctioned and politically funded rite of remembering in public, adjusted to a publicly or politically approved narrative.<sup>6</sup> Political scientist Jenny Edkins argues that “commemoration is a practice of concealment,”<sup>7</sup> conceived to reconstitute sovereign power after mass violence and genocide. The collective identity or memory is not produced only through remembering but also through forgetting.<sup>8</sup> Rendering, understanding, and communicating catastrophic events is a challenging and daunting task but we will never achieve clarity and healing if we base our history on lies.

The Kigali Center commemorates the victims of the 1994 genocide while the House of Terror commemorates victims of the Holocaust and crimes committed under the communist regime. The Holocaust is a genocide but Communist crimes are termed politicide (and not genocide) owing to the nuanced definition of ‘genocide’. The term genocide was

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<sup>4</sup> During a conference entitled ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory: the link between past, present, and future’, at the University of São Paulo, researchers Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, both professors at the University of Konstanz, addressed this dynamic character of memory.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums the Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Berg, 2007), 157.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Winter, “The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the ‘Memory Boom’ in Contemporary Historical Studies.” *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research* 1 (2007): 363–97. [https://doi.org/https://archivo.cartagena.es/doc/Archivos\\_Social\\_Studies/Vo11\\_n0/16-winter\\_generation.pdf](https://doi.org/https://archivo.cartagena.es/doc/Archivos_Social_Studies/Vo11_n0/16-winter_generation.pdf) p. 366.

<sup>7</sup> Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda.” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 76 (2006): pp. 131-150, <https://doi.org/www.jstor.org/stable/40027106>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2020., 132.

first coined by Raphael Lemkin in the 1930s; a legal definition of genocide was not incorporated into international law until 1948. It is unlikely the term genocide, which began to be widely used only in the 1960s, would have received much traction had it not been for the Holocaust. Europeans hadn't given much thought to mass atrocities in colonial Africa and in other parts of the world i.e. when victims were perceived as *others*. After World War II, however, Europeans could not ignore the massacres on European soil. The Holocaust was the first time in Western history that atrocities "were perpetrated upon white/Christian/European populations the same outrages they had routinely carried out against non-white/non-Christian/non-European colonial populations with relatively little outcry from Europeans."<sup>9</sup> It was this understanding that drove the United Nations to codify a new type of international crime as genocide.

Eight decades on, the Holocaust continues to be the point of reference for genocides. Representation of genocides around the world, including those of museums, utilize the *de facto* Holocaust mode. The Kigali Center and the House of Terror use the western Holocaust template: at the Kigali Center the architecture, minimalist design, and layout are reminiscent of Holocaust museums. The House of Terror uses a new kind of Holocaust remembrance, where the memory, symbols and imagery of the Holocaust were appropriated to represent crimes of Communist regimes i.e. *memory appropriation*,<sup>10</sup> where the memory of the Holocaust memorializes a different kind of suffering. The goal of both museums is to appeal to *western* tourists; as scholar Rebecca Jinks notes, the Holocaust lingers in the minds of Western visitors' as an interpretive device and a model for "moral witnessing."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Torpey, *Making Whole What Has Been Smashed: on Reparation Politics* (Cambridge, MASS.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Scholar Jelena Subotić used the term memory appropriation to describe the Holocaust commemoration practice in Eastern Europe. J. Subotić, 2020. The Appropriation of Holocaust Memory in Post-Communist Eastern Europe. *Modern Languages Open*, (1), p.22. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.315>

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Jinks, "Thinking Comparatively about Genocide Memorialization," *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 4 (2014): pp. 423-440, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.975945>, 427.



In addition, at both the museums the representation of the past is rooted in a particular political context and each has a distinct political agenda. The narratives and ideologies represented at the Kigali Center and the House of Terror conforms to Pierre Nora's description of an "ideological decolonization [that] helped reunite these liberated peoples with traditional, long-term memories confiscated, destroyed or manipulated by those regimes."<sup>12</sup> In this paper I make the case that both sites' narratives are skewed by politics and the commodification of the heritage industry, which increasingly focusses on representation that is conducive to the *Western* tourist. Consequently, the narrative promoted is a *selective* and *curated* representation of their respective events. Furthermore, I argue that by acknowledging only a select category of memories of violence, the Kigali Center and the House of Terror fail to address and challenge the social rifts and exclusion that characterized the countries' pasts and could be fostering exclusion and social rifts today.

Furthermore, at memorial museums, commemoration and education are becoming more visitor-centric and the public's opinions and perceptions need to be interpreted. While much scholarship has considered the rhetoric of the monument, memorial, or museum exhibit, less attention has been paid to how visitors to these places respond to them. Given the importance of human rights, social inclusion, and collective responsibility that inform memorial work, it is essential to understand the visitor experience in all its facets. In addition, memorial museums are increasingly using new media to shape visitor engagement and affective response to engage with diverse audiences and include new groups and communities. Is empathy adequate to bring about changes in perceptions and promote forgiveness and reconciliation? Aesthetics and the sensory are closely bound into the work of

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Nora, "Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory," Eurozine, April 19, 2002, <https://www.eurozine.com/reasons-for-the-current-upsurge-in-memory/>, 5.

driving human political consciousness and the means of expression which communicate political voices.<sup>13</sup>

In order to highlight the connection between affect and representation at Kigali Center and the House of Terror, this paper uses a combination of theoretical and ethnographic frameworks to address certain key questions and themes: how memorial museums define, engage, and appeal to audiences, examining the relationship between museums' claims<sup>14</sup> and actual visitor learning outcomes. Is there a disconnect? And what is the cause?

I use a framework comprising French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theories which combine phenomenological description with hermeneutics, French Marxist theorist Guy Debord and his definition of "spectacle." In addition, cultural heritage theorists, GJ Ashworth & JE Tunbridge's work on the dissonance in the on-site interpretation of difficult heritage is used to analyze the effects of commodification and tourism. The visitor (and survivor) responses on online platforms such as TripAdvisor, travel blogs and interviews have been contextualized within the theoretical framework and analyzed.

### ***Kigali Memorial Center:***

In 2004, on the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, the new Kigali Memorial Centre opened and has since become an important tool for conveying interpretations of the 1994 genocide. The Rwandan genocide was the twentieth century's most swiftly executed massacre: 800,000 people -- primarily Tutsis but also moderate Hutus -- were massacred by Hutu extremists in just one hundred days. The memorial is part of a state-led endeavor to promote a collective identity in a nation torn apart by genocide. Public remembrance is typically a means for national elites to cultivate a shared understanding of the past and to

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<sup>13</sup> French philosopher Jacques Rancière's analyzed the relationship between politics and aesthetics. He states that politics plays itself out in the theatrical paradigm as the relationship between the stage and the audience. According to him the notion of representation or mimesis organizes the ways of doing, making, seeing, and judging.

<sup>14</sup> Memorial museums' claim that their mission is to present the truth and pave the way for peace and reconciliation.

construct political legitimacy; in Rwanda the ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (the RPF) seeks to employ it to this end. Aegis Trust, an NGO based in the United Kingdom, built the Center in cooperation with the Kigali Government. The Aegis Trust is the initiative of two English brothers, Stephen and James Smith, who built a Holocaust center in London in 1995 and then became interested in the Rwandan genocide. They founded the Aegis Trust in 2000 to memorialize the Rwandan genocide and use the Rwandan example as a means of to prevent genocides.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Terror Háza (House of Terror), Budapest***

The House of Terror is located in a renovated building that was once the headquarters of both the Arrow Cross, the Hungarian Fascist Party that ruled Hungary for a few months in 1944, and of the Communist Secret Police, until the 1956 revolution. The memorial museum inaugurated in 2002 serves as a “monument to the memory of those held captive, tortured, and killed in this building.”<sup>16</sup> Like other memorial museums, the House of Terror has an ambitious and complicated mission: it seeks not only to remember the victims of two totalitarian regimes but also to educate visitors about the evils of totalitarian and dictatorial ideologies.<sup>17</sup> The House of Terror, backed by the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and with an opening date scheduled to coincide with the national elections, was mired in controversy from the very start. Many believe that the museum is a political device employed by Orban and Fidesz<sup>18</sup> to vilify the Communist party and link it to today’s Hungarian Socialist parties.

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<sup>15</sup> “What We Do,” Aegis Trust, April 14, 2020, <https://www.aegistrust.org/what-we-do/>.

<sup>16</sup> “The History of the Museum.” Terror Háza Múzeum. Accessed March 21, 2021. <https://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/museum>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Fidesz is Victor Orban’s political party founded in 1988 and is the opposition to the Socialist party.

### *Interpretation and Representation of a difficult past*

Rwanda and Hungary are faced with the daunting task of dealing with and the representation of a difficult and contentious past. The “double experience” of two totalitarian regimes – National Socialism and Communism in Hungary -- and the inter-connectedness of the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda plays a paradoxical role. Categories such as victims, perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders, are difficult to apply in discussing the memories of these regions. Both individuals and ethnic groups in this region often shifted their roles with the many, often violent turns in the history of the “age of extremes.”<sup>19</sup> Sometimes people were both victims and perpetrators, complicating the narrative and its representation.

Museums are particularly dense sites of memory, where acknowledgment or the absence thereof, come head to head. They are “a major area, in which politics, sensibilities, and folklore mingle.”<sup>20</sup> Communist and other totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are well aware of the high stakes of the past and its memory and so made every effort to control it, which often resulted in the erasing and rewriting of history and memory according to the ideological goals of the regime.<sup>21</sup> The challenge to engage responsibly with the past though challenging is one that remains as important as ever. “The goal of history is not to understand bygone days, but to understand what remains from those times and what is still present today.”<sup>22</sup> Lategan explains that history is not a reconstruction but a construct in itself. It may be shaped and influenced by the past, but the past never dictates history. We cannot change what happened in the past, but how we understand these events and what meaning we attach to them, can indeed change. It is important to ask the “how” and the “what” questions because how one remembers the past has a lot to do with what one regards as important in

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<sup>19</sup> Historian Eric Hobsbawm in his book *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, described 20<sup>th</sup> century as a period characterized by the rise of fascism, world wars, and the rise of totalitarian ideologies.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Le Goff, Steven Rendall, and Elizabeth Claman, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 87.

<sup>21</sup> Lindsey A. Freeman, Benjamin Nienass, and Rachel Daniell, *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (New York (N.Y.) etc.: Berghahn Books, 2017), 19.

<sup>22</sup> Lategan BC, “History, Historiography, and Reformed Hermeneutics at Stellenbosch: Dealing with a Hermeneutical Deficit and Its Consequences.” (2007), 169.

that past. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's use of the concepts: memory, history, and forgetting is of particular importance in an attempt to answer these questions.

## **Part II**

### **Theoretical Framework:**

#### ***Memory and Narrative: Paul Ricoeur's Memory, History Forgetting***

Ricoeur examines the relationship between remembering and forgetting, showing how it affects both the perception of historical experience and the production of historical narrative. Memory can be used, but it can also be abused and abused memory is a threat to memory's aim of truthfulness.<sup>23</sup> I argue that the narratives promoted at the two memorial museums is an example of what Ricoeur has referred to as the abuse of memory: ".....the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory – and of forgetting."<sup>24</sup> The selective recall is a well-known trend in the world in which we live, but so too are the abuses of memory and history that serve harmful ideologically-driven projects of identity construction.

Furthermore, Ricoeur is critical of official history because he is aware of the obsession with commemoration that is present in our time – a commemorative obsession which disconnects us from the responsibility to remember. "commemorations seal the incomplete memory and its lining of forgetfulness."<sup>25</sup> When we build places of commemoration and memorial monuments, we feel content with ourselves, as if we have done our duty, and can return to a sense of normalcy. Nevertheless, we should guard against

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 451.

the blocked or manipulated memory and forgetting that, according to Ricoeur, is often present in “official” histories.<sup>26</sup> Memory and forgetting that serve any political ideals are very often in service to a specific ideology; we should not be uncritical thereof.<sup>27</sup>

A recent New York Times article, *No More Lies. My Grandfather Was a Nazi*, dealt with the effects of distortion of history and memory: “Did Lithuanian officials actively hide the truth because it would make the country look bad? Or were they in genuine denial in a democracy too fragile to face its own history?”<sup>28</sup> Although the article addresses the history of Lithuania, the story is applicable to other Eastern European countries that were caught between the Nazi and Communist occupations, and is reflective of the narrative that is promoted at the House of Terror. The author, Silvita Foti, recounts his struggle to reconcile with the truth he learned about his grandfather: a man who was considered a hero and savior of Jews during World War II was in fact complicit in rounding up Jews for deportation to camps. “There was a deep freeze on the truth: Lithuanians were only allowed to talk about how many *Soviet* citizens were killed during World War II. References to Jewish victims were scrubbed away by the occupiers.”<sup>29</sup> The ‘deep freeze on the truth’ is apparent at the House of Terror, which fails to differentiate between the two regimes of terror and its victims, and in the process has blurred the lines between Nazi collaborators and national heroes; perpetrators and victims.

Moreover, Foti stresses the need to correct historical memory as a means for reconciliation: “...reconciliation between Lithuanians and Jews as we remember what happened and learn from it to ensure it never happens again.” The House of Terror claims to examine the atrocities and to remember the victims of the two totalitarian regimes—the

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 444.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>28</sup> Foti, Silvia. “No More Lies. My Grandfather Was a Nazi.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, January 27, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/27/opinion/jonas-noreika-lithuania-nazi-collaborator.html>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

fascist Nazis and Arrow Cross and the Soviet and Hungarian communists, but the narrative is skewed to the evils of Communism. The terror and suffering in that era was considerable but is not the whole picture. Additionally, the Museum is playing an active role in erasing the nations' difficult past, and transmitting a falsified historical narrative: "the memory politics that is tacit in the House of Terror is actually synonymous with the falsification of history without any regards to academic consensus."<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, at the Kigali Memorial Center the official narrative promotes a particular version of the past and the choice of what to memorialize in post-genocide Rwanda sends a clear message. "Some victims are forgotten erased from the national imagination,"<sup>31</sup> memory of moderate Hutu victims, and victims of vengeance killings has been sidelined. In Rwanda, the narrative promoted by Kagame's regime<sup>32</sup> continues to exploit the horror of the genocide to legitimize his authoritarian regime. More than twenty-five years after the genocide the "issue of justice still reverberates and rankles." Kagame credits his regime for the fact that there has not been any large-scale violence since 1994 but he fails to admit that the "peaceful but uneasy community relations,"<sup>33</sup> is a result of the lack of democracy and freedom that does not allow for Rwandans to voice their true feelings. Rwandans speaking against the official narrative are accused of "revisionism" and "genocide ideology."<sup>34</sup> Without addressing the underlying factors that enabled the genocide in which neighbors turned on each other, how can one ensure that the violence will not recur?

Ricoeur draws from Freudian theory to analyze the effects of such repressed memories. He states that a resistance develops due to the repression of memories. The

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<sup>30</sup> Zsófia Frazon and Zsolt K. Horvath, "The Offended Hungary. The House of Terror as a Demonstration of Objects, Memorial, and Political Rite (2002)\*," *mezosfera.org*, 2002, <http://mezosfera.org/the-offended-hungary-the-house-of-terror-as-a-demonstration-of-objects-memorial-and-political-rite-2002/>.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Laban Hinton, Kevin Lewis O'Neill, and Jennie E Burnet, "'Whose Genocide? Whose Truth? Representations of Victim and Perpetrator in Rwanda'," in *Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 91.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Kagame belongs to the Tutsi minority and has been accused of promoting a 'Tutsified-version' of history. The moderate Hutus who were killed for helping Tutsis, as well as the victims of the RPF killings are yet to be recognized in the official genocide narrative.

<sup>33</sup> "How Well Has Rwanda Healed 25 Years after the Genocide?," *The Economist* (The Economist Group Limited, March 28, 2019), <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/03/28/how-well-has-rwanda-healed-25-years-after-the-genocide>.

<sup>34</sup> Danielle Beswick, "Managing Dissent in a Post-Genocide Environment: The Challenge of Political Space in Rwanda.," *Development and Change* 41, no. 2 (2010): pp. 225-251, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2010.01640.x>, 230.

resistance is then manifested as a “compulsion to repeat.”<sup>35</sup> The way to deal with repressed memories and the compulsion to repetition which they create, is by working through these memories.

An analysis of a dark past is always traumatic. But one will never achieve clarity and healing if one promotes a history based on lies. “History can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory regarding its past; it cannot abolish it.”<sup>36</sup> The Kigali Memorial Center and the House of Terror in order to fulfil their missions of promoting education and truth should rework their narrative to ensure that the injustices are acknowledged for there can be forgiveness only when the perpetrators are held accountable. It is along the path of critical history that memory encounters the sense of justice.<sup>37</sup>

Memories become more subjective and selective with the passage of time. It is the nature of collective memory to be written and rewritten by decision-makers to cement the memory into the national consciousness. This means there is particular attention to the physical representation of history in the form of commemorative monuments and museums, for instance. Both museums have been criticized for the use of *spectacle* to engage and elicit feelings of empathy and affect.

### **Guy Debord: *Society of the Spectacle***

Peter Apór, Hungarian historian and perhaps the House of Terror’ most vociferous critic, stated that, “the Budapest House of Terror is one of the most notorious examples of abusing spectacular new media audiovisual technology to exhibit a politically and ideologically biased historical narrative.”<sup>38</sup> Apór refers to the Museum’s use of ‘spectacle’ as

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 70.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 498.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 500.

<sup>38</sup> Péter Apór, “An Epistemology of the Spectacle? Arcane Knowledge, Memory and Evidence in the Budapest House of Terror,” *The Journal of Theory and Practice* 18, no. 3 (March 31, 2014): pp. 328-344, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2014.890371>, 328.



a means to distract the visitor and distort memory. The overly theatric representation was also criticized by Hungarian Historian, Andras Mink, “The House of Terror brings down the memory of terror into false, cheap and repulsive political propaganda.”<sup>39</sup>

Rwanda’s memorial sites’ displays of genocide victims’ remains are controversial and apparently in contradiction to survivors’ wishes to honor and rebury their dead. For critics, this is confirmation of the RPF dominance of memorialization “add[ing] to the past horror through the voyeurism of the corpses.”<sup>40</sup> One can also argue that the display of human remains suggests that emphasis is placed on *foreign* testimony because it is considered more legitimate. The objects were intended to convince the international community of the genocide and perhaps create an obligation to recognize and remember the event as genocide.<sup>41</sup>

French theorist, Guy Debord coined the term ‘spectacle’, a concept that is complex but essential in contemporary society and life in general: that life as we see it is not life as it is. What we do see, is “an immense accumulation of spectacles,”<sup>42</sup> and these spectacles do not reflect reality – they reflect ideology. The ‘particular ideology’ or representation is replete at the Kigali Center. The use of human remains as display goes against traditional Rwandan burial rites; Rwandans bury their dead around their homes, not in cemeteries, to maintain a personal connection with their ancestors. The gruesome display of the dead is inauspicious in Rwandan culture. Memories can become fixed through preservation and display so the decision about what and how to preserve and display can also determine what and how to remember. We could therefore argue that commemoration has a political agenda.

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Fuller, “Stark History / Some See a Stunt : Memory Becomes Battleground in Budapest’s House of Terror.” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2002. <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/02/news/stark-history-some-see-a-stunt-memory-becomes-battleground-in-budapests.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Claudine Vidal (2001) ‘Les Commemorations du genocide au Rwanda’, *Les Temps Modernes* 56(613): 1–46. 45.

<sup>41</sup> The international community was criticized for its inaction and indifference during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

<sup>42</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 2016), 10.

“On the surface, what the House of Terror presents is a lie: a falsified narrative of Hungary’s history. It’s a spooky, exhilarating narrative, one in which visitors are stuffed in cattle cars, locked in interrogation cells, and sent to torture holes—in this way the House of Terror does for the 20th century what the hell houses do for hell. But below the surface, the museum communicates a hidden truth about the underside of Fidesz’s ideology of nationalistic renewal.”<sup>43</sup> The true appeal of the House of Terror is subliminal: “throughout the museum is the sacrifice of information and documentation in the form of text, labels, photographs, and documents to dramatic renderings and artistic and imaginative scenes that blur concrete, historical data with symbolism that leaves much room for the imagination.”<sup>44</sup> But there are many critics who have criticized the Museum’s “myth of silence.”<sup>45</sup>

The Rwandan regime has chosen to present a “strategy of suffering” to the international community, rather than honor the genocide’s victims. While survivors wish to obviate the need for “museums of horror” (academic, 2006)<sup>46</sup>, they understand that skeletal remains are powerful evidence to combat forgetting and denial. The Children’s Room<sup>47</sup> has color photos of children with the child’s name above the photo. Each lists identifying details; for example, Agathe, age five, favorite food: chocolate; best friend: her older sister; last memory: witnessing her hacked to death. The Children’s Room is more likely to evoke empathy than the shock induced by the display of nameless dismembered skeletons.<sup>48</sup>

And this review (December, 2018) is consistent with the desired effect hoped for by the Museum: “From the introduction film to The Children’s Room and on to the gardens and mass graves outside, this is the most emotional rollercoaster of utter disbelief and just sadness

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<sup>43</sup> Jacob Mikanowski, “The Frightening Politics Of Hungary’s House Of Terror,” *The Awl*, accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.theawl.com/2012/03/the-frightening-politics-of-hungarys-house-of-terror/>.

<sup>44</sup> Amy Sodaro, “THE HOUSE OF TERROR ‘The Only One of Its Kind,’” in *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 70.

<sup>45</sup> See the essay *Offended Hungary*

<sup>46</sup> Rachel Ibreck, “The Politics of Mourning: Survivor Contributions to Memorials in Post-Genocide Rwanda.” *Memory Studies* 3, no. 4 (2010): 330–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698010374921>, 339. Excerpt from Ibreck’s interview with a Rwandan academic.

<sup>47</sup> The Children’s Room is one of the galleries at the Kigali Memorial Center, and it is dedicated to the memory of children killed in the Genocide.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Kenyon Lischer, “Narrating Atrocity: Genocide Memorials, Dark Tourism, and the Politics of Memory,” *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (2019): pp. 805-827, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210519000226>, 17.

through to the amazing forgiveness and hope of the Rwandan people. It is clear Rwanda has reconciled its past and with strong leadership, is indeed looking toward a very bright future.”<sup>49</sup>

Amy Sodaro in , *Haunted by the Specter of communism: Spectacle and Silence in Hungary’s House of Terror*, illustrates the limits and failure when museums/sites employ spectacle to primarily incite feelings and emotions in visitors without much consideration to the history being presented. “In many senses, the loud and spectacular memory of the terrors of communism in Hungary that is on display in the museum serves as a convenient ‘screen memory’<sup>50</sup> ....to block what is possibly the more disturbing and difficult memory of fascism, the Holocaust, and extremist right-wing politics in Hungary’s past.”<sup>51</sup> The House of Terror purports to be a space with a focus on education by showcasing two oppressive regimes that controlled Hungary in the twentieth century, but the museum has failed in its mission as it has attempted to simplify the nation’s past, and has ended up being a showcase and a political tool for the government (Victor Orban). Furthermore, Sodaro describes the museum’s choice of selectively presenting history, and simplifying history as a process of sacrificing information; and this sacrifice coupled with the museum’s “theatrics” has ended up rendering the House of Terror as “more of a communist crimes theme park than museum.”<sup>52</sup> Additionally, she states that “the museum’s silences become official forgetting by the Hungarian political establishment.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, spectacle can be thought of as conceptualized by Debord: a tool of distraction employed by hegemonic powers.

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<sup>49</sup> “THE Must Do, When in Kigali - Review of Kigali Genocide Memorial, Kigali, Rwanda,” Trip Advisor, accessed March 18, 2021, [https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293829-d671098-r640623431-Kigali\\_Genocide\\_Memorial-Kigali\\_Kigali\\_Province.html](https://www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g293829-d671098-r640623431-Kigali_Genocide_Memorial-Kigali_Kigali_Province.html).<sup>50</sup> The term coined by Sigmund Freud refers to a distorted memory, generally of a visual rather than verbal nature.

Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, and Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), 236.

<sup>51</sup> Lindsey Freeman et al., “Haunted by the Specter of Communism,” in *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 32-33.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 18.

### *The Museums' use of "spectacle"*

Hungarian writer and researcher, András Szántó described the House of Terror as “the new museum in Budapest that employs a tourist-friendly theme-park approach to depict the horrors of the Nazi and Stalinist eras.”<sup>54</sup> The Hungarian architect Attila F. Kovács, who made his name in film design is credited with designing a museum that is “the first in the region to adopt a theme-park approach to teaching history.”<sup>55</sup> The ‘theme-park’ approach exemplifies Debord’s analysis: “But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane.”<sup>56</sup> The House of Terror embodies this approach, the experience begins before entering the building; the word “TERROR”, the communist five-pointed star, and the Arrow Cross symbols are prominently inscribed onto the roof. Maria Schmidt stated in an interview that the dramatic façade is a prelude to the theatrical experience that lies within.<sup>57</sup> An ominous soundtrack, prevalent throughout the Museum, greets the visitor. At the entrance, a large Soviet truck symbolizes the arrival of the Soviet occupiers in Hungary. The tank is against a towering wall of photographs of victims, underlining the magnitude of victimization that one is about to witness (though it is not clear if these are victims of communism or fascism or both). The galleries are more performance art pieces than traditional history museum displays, with dramatic gallery names: Double Occupation, Arrow cross Corridor, Soviet Advisors and Changing Clothes. The galleries are designed to relate the story to maximum effect.<sup>58</sup> While exhibit labels are in Hungarian, headsets providing detailed narration in English are available. (The touch screen monitors and search aids in the galleries and on the museum's website are available only in Hungarian.) An information sheet accompanies each room, for those willing to seek the

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<sup>54</sup> Andras Szanto “Terror on Andrassy Boulevard.” *Arts & Humanities Database* 57, no. 1 (2003): 41–47, 41.

<sup>55</sup> Andras Szanto “Terror on Andrassy Boulevard.” *Arts & Humanities Database* 57, no. 1 (2003): 41–47, 42.

<sup>56</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 2016), 10.

<sup>57</sup> Amy Sodaro’s interview with Maria Schmidt

<sup>58</sup> The description of the museum’s interiors is based on the accounts of scholar Amy Sodaro, travel blogs, and YouTube videos

information out, but otherwise the museum is striking in its lack of textual information, especially for the non-Hungarian visitor.<sup>59</sup> The combination of foreign language and dark music creates a haunting and alluring experience. Some of the horrors of the Holocaust and the destruction of Hungarian Jewry are touched upon, but with scant reference to the homegrown anti-Semitism that brought the Hungarian fascist Arrow Cross movement (and the Germans) to power.

The Museum's creators believed that the only way to tell the story of totalitarianism in Hungary was to "reach the heart of children and people"<sup>60</sup> before reaching their brains. As reiterated by a museum visitor, "Whatever your views, the museum's impact on the visitor is visceral. It is an overwhelming experience, regardless of one's familiarity with the political situation or the language."<sup>61</sup> The museum is therefore a dramatic, experiential, and haunting experience with several audio-visual and interactive components that engage the visitor and provoke an emotional and deeply affective response to the horrors of communism, and to a lesser degree, fascism. Similarly, the Kigali Memorial Center, like the House of Terror, is designed to produce an emotional reaction first and foremost.

The Kigali Memorial Center houses a museum with three permanent exhibitions, memorial gardens, and mass graves with the remains of more than 250,000 genocide victims who were killed in and around the city of Kigali.<sup>62</sup> The display of bones as I mentioned earlier is a controversial issue for Rwandans who are culturally reserved and would not construct such graphic memorials to remember and honor their dead.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Amy Sodaro, "THE HOUSE OF TERROR 'The Only One of Its Kind,'" in *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 70.

<sup>60</sup> Lindsey A. Freeman, Benjamin Nienass, and Rachel Daniell, *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (New York (N.Y.) etc.: Berghahn Books, 2017), 19.

<sup>61</sup> David Dalka, "House of Terror Museum Visit in Budapest, Hungary: Nazi and Soviet Headquarters," The Holocaust History - A People's and Survivor History - Remember.org, January 13, 2017, <https://remember.org/house-of-terror-museum.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Amy Sodaro, "THE HOUSE OF TERROR 'The Only One of Its Kind,'" in *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 84.

<sup>63</sup> Olivia Trabysh, "GENOCIDE AGAINST THE TUTSIS': RWANDA'S MEMORIALS AS POSTCOLONIAL TEXTS," West Texas A&M University, n.d., [https://www.wtamu.edu/\\_files/docs/EPML/5%20Trabysh.pdf](https://www.wtamu.edu/_files/docs/EPML/5%20Trabysh.pdf).

The ‘voyeuristic sensationalism’ appears to be the mode of representation at both of the memorial museums. In addition, both museums have been criticized for their emphasis on their victim narrative with a focus on ‘terror’ and violence as opposed to critically assessing the factors that facilitated the atrocities. In order to learn from the past, it is important to analyze the facts through a neutral lens and while feelings of compassion and empathy are important; feelings alone are not adequate to ensure that history does not repeat. A key impediment to empathy and action is the perceived distance between the geopolitical status and identity of the observer and that of the causalities being observed.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, in the case of sensory representations, the critical self-destruction of society’s former common language is opposed by its artificial reconstruction within the commodity spectacle, the illusory representation of nonlife.<sup>65</sup> At the House of Terror the reconstructed spectacle with a focus on communism silences memory of fascism and at the Kigali Center the spectacle shifts focus from the dictatorial practices of the current political regime to eliciting empathy for the victims. The museums believe that for visitors to understand and empathize with the victims the representation of the event must be such that it is “burned in,”<sup>66</sup> which is in line with the Freudian notion of “repetition-compulsion.”<sup>67</sup> While it may be true that such representations may be “burned in” to visitors, I would argue that the overt representation produces indifference rather than empathy.

Entertainment and education are often inextricably combined to render atrocity one of the most marketable of heritages and powerful instruments of political or social messages.<sup>68</sup> The messages conveyed through representation and interpretation of atrocity heritage by the

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<sup>64</sup> Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: the Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 151.

<sup>65</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black & Red, 2016), 69.

<sup>66</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche used the phrase to emphasize that for something to stay in one’s memory the event must be “burned in” as only that which never ceases to *hurt* stays in the memory. Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals. Ecce Homo EST: Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 61.

<sup>67</sup> A type of compulsion characterized by a tendency to place oneself in dangerous or distressing situations that repeat similar experiences from the past. Sigmund Freud, “Papers on Technique. Remembering, Repeating and Working-through. (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II) (1914),” *PsycEXTRA Dataset*, 1971, pp. 147-156, <https://doi.org/10.1037/e417472005-288>.

<sup>68</sup> J. E. Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: the Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester etc.: J. Wiley, 1996), 95

museums may be perceived differently by the visitors. The intensity of the emotion evoked by the events could create protective barriers against their understanding. To understand the interpretation at the two sites requires an understanding of their audience and how they interact with the sites.

**Ashworth and Tunbridge *The Management Of The Past As A Resource In Conflict***

In their study of what they call “heritage dissonance,” Tunbridge and Ashworth explore the tension at sites where visitors want to view authentic markers of atrocity, but locals would prefer to move beyond the event to focus on rebuilding and economic revitalization. However, the paradox lies in the fact that revitalization in many cases is reliant on tourism. Mass-tourism, itself a product and producer of increasing tendencies to globalization, provides one of the most important contexts in which popular and official uses and narratives of history are shaped today.<sup>69</sup> Just as tourism is available to the masses, memory and memorialization are becoming globalized, inspiring the same emotions, standardizing architecture, and curatorial practices, and blurring the uniqueness and specific historical context of each tragedy.<sup>70</sup>

In 2006, scholar Susanne Buckley-Zistel interviewed Rwandan genocide survivors to study their attitudes towards memorialization and the narrative promoted by the State. An important finding of her study was the fact that the average Rwandan rarely visits the memorial sites and local communities avoid them. Buckley-Zistel interviewed a rural woman whose husband had recently been released from prison in Nyamata and her response was that, “According to what happened here in Rwanda we cannot forget, it is very important. But, you know, sometimes it creates conflict among Rwandans. I think we should stop memorial sites

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<sup>69</sup> Nikolas Glover, “Co-Produced Histories: Mapping the Uses and Narratives of History in the Tourist Age,” *The Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (January 2008): pp. 105-124, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tpb.2008.30.1.105>, 109.

<sup>70</sup> Brigitte Sion, “Conflicting Sites of Memory in Post-Genocide Cambodia,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 2, no. 1 (2011): pp. 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2011.0007>, 6.

because they are nonsense, they generate trauma and hate. Trauma is for all and not for the survivors only.<sup>71</sup> A similar thought was reiterated by another young, rural woman in Nyamata<sup>72</sup>: “First of all we cannot identify the people they put in the memorial sites. They took all the bones. And no particular ethnicity died, all Hutu and Tutsi dies. The problem is when they remember, they remember only Tutsi, ...Second, when we are on the memorial sites, both Hutu and Tutsi, it creates conflicts...”<sup>73</sup> Consequently, despite the shared memory of the genocide as horror, the anger and resentment deriving from the post-violence circumstances affect personal and community relations, perpetuating the divide between the Hutus and Tutsis. A consequence arising from the state’s policy of choosing not to remember all victims and selectively presenting history. In the end all Rwandans wanted memory and memorialization to contribute towards the making of a more inclusive society, and to promote peace.

Other scholars’ field interviews are consistent with Buckley-Zistel’s findings. Olivia Trabysh, during her visit to Rwanda’s memorial sites, noted that she did not see a Rwandan walk into these mass graves; she also noted that the glass surrounding the entrance to one of the mass graves was defiled with graffiti. Similarly, Trabysh noted that at another site there was an English inscription ‘Never Again’ on a case with skulls. The most commonly spoken languages in Rwanda are Kinyarwanda and French with English a distant third. If the memorials were intended for Rwandans, the language used would have been Kinyarwanda or French. Additionally, Timothy Longman learned from the guides at the Rwandan memorial sites that visitors to the sites comprised mainly two groups: foreigners and repatriated Tutsi. While local people might have questioned the authenticity of the display of bodies and bones,

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<sup>71</sup> Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 76 (2006): pp. 131-150, <https://doi.org/www.jstor.org/stable/40027106>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2020, 138.

<sup>72</sup> Nyamata is a town south of Kigali and is one of Rwanda’s genocide memorial sites.

<sup>73</sup> Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 76 (2006): pp. 131-150, <https://doi.org/www.jstor.org/stable/40027106>. Accessed 4 Dec. 2020, 138.



they served as clear evidence of the genocide to those unfamiliar with the community. Longman's interview with the Director of Memorials made clear that a primary purpose of these memorials was "to serve as proof of the genocide, to refute those who would deny the genocide."<sup>74</sup> To sum up, the Rwandan memorials cater to the West's understanding of the complex multi-faceted politics in Rwanda. Rwanda's genocide memorials are cumulative, post-colonial texts that function as a lens through which we might interrogate testimonials of the marginalized.<sup>75</sup> Financial dependence on international visitors has led to a memorial narrative shaped to their tastes, rather than the preferences of the survivors.

Associate professor of Politics Sarah Kenyon Lischer's research highlights the role of international influences on memorialization, particularly how Western visitors, funders, and consultants interact with the post-conflict government's narrative.<sup>76</sup> The findings indicate that the funding and consultation by Western organizations – while offering distinct benefits in preserving memory and evidence of the genocide – tends to encourage a homogenized atrocity narrative that reflects the values of the global human rights regime and existing standards of memorial design rather than privileging the local particularities of the atrocity experience. The Kigali Memorial Center is an example of "an active heritage management component which is both reacting to visitors' expectations as well as shaping them."<sup>77</sup> It considers how uses of history are determined by the specific conditions of tourist contexts. Substantial dissonance potential exists between tourists and residents, particularly in the often wide divergence between them with respect to the cultural and political uses of heritage; this

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<sup>74</sup> Timothy Longman, "Symbolic Struggles," Chapter. In *Memory and Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda*, 65–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. doi:10.1017/9781139086257.005, 432.

<sup>75</sup> Olivia Trabysh, "GENOCIDE AGAINST THE TUTSIS: RWANDA'S MEMORIALS AS POSTCOLONIAL TEXTS," West Texas A&M University, n.d., [https://www.wtamu.edu/\\_files/docs/EPML/5%20Trabysh.pdf](https://www.wtamu.edu/_files/docs/EPML/5%20Trabysh.pdf), 1.

<sup>76</sup> Sarah Kenyon Lischer, "Narrating Atrocity: Genocide Memorials, Dark Tourism, and the Politics of Memory," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (2019): pp. 805-827, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210519000226>, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Gregory Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge, *The Tourist-Historic City: Retrospect and Prospect of Managing the Heritage City* (London: Routledge, 2011), 69.

is most clearly the case when tourists from rich, Western countries visit poor non-Western societies.<sup>78</sup>

Similarly in Hungary image is a serious attraction in tourism and a significant part of its international image is its Communist past together with its historic attractions.<sup>79</sup> Heritage interpretation in many communist regimes is endowed with messages which are deliberately framed by an existing or aspirant power elite to legitimate the existing dominant regime, or alternatively are developed by an opposite group with the objective of overthrowing a competitor.<sup>80</sup> As George Orwell observed: “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”<sup>81</sup> Memory and the past have become extremely important political, social, and moral tools, especially for regimes emerging from dictatorship and repression. Sites of destruction and concealment may become more prominent, especially in Eastern Europe as nationalist reinterpretations occur in an environment of rapidly increasing tourist access; sites of mass slaughter associated with both Nazis and communists are focal points of heritage dissonance.<sup>82</sup>

Among Hungarians, the major categorization factor is age: a generation gap divides those whose lives have been affected by terror and those who are too young to have personal memories.<sup>83</sup> Aldea Miklosue, a middle-aged schoolteacher who visited the exhibits, stated that she was deeply moved by the museum. She believed she learnt more about the way that Hungary was ruled during Communist times than she had ever learned in school: "It is very

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<sup>78</sup> J. E. Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: the Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester etc.: J. Wiley, 1996), 68.

<sup>79</sup> Tamara Rátz, “ Interpretation in the House of Terror, Budapest,” *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World*, 2006, pp. 244-256, <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018>, 244.

<sup>80</sup> J. E. Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: the Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester etc.: J. Wiley, 1996), 47.

<sup>81</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (London: Dolphin Book, 2016), 34.

<sup>82</sup> G.J Ashworth and Peter J. Larkham, *Building a New Heritage Tourism, Culture and Identity in the New Europe* (London: Routledge, 2014), 129.

<sup>83</sup> Tamara Rátz, “ Interpretation in the House of Terror, Budapest,” *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World*, 2006, pp. 244-256, <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018>, 252.

important to have this museum," she said, "especially for the young people and for the victims."<sup>84</sup>

Imre Csordas, a retired repairman, echoed the sentiment. "It's a sad fact that people forget," he said. "People are preoccupied with their daily lives. But so many people are still alive who victimized others. Even if they didn't actively participate in what happened, it is in their interest to cover it up."<sup>85</sup>

Since the end of communism, a new generation of Hungarian citizens has grown up; the first Hungarian adults to have absolutely no memory of the state socialist period. It is not only a matter of reconciliation or coming to terms with the past, or confessing the past that are at stake here, but also making the past relevant to people who were born too late to experience it. Due to their lack of information, this generation is extremely susceptible to the various, often contradictory interpretations of the past, and because of their age, they have very different attitudes towards digital media than members of previous generations.

Zsófia Réti interviews<sup>86</sup> reveal that, the generational position of her interviewees had a very visible impact on the ways in which they perceived the exhibition. Although none of them took part in a guided tour, they were invariably accompanied by older relatives who helped them understand what they were seeing. A thirteen year old responded, "It was interesting all right, but as a child, I didn't understand everything, unlike mum, so she had to explain things to me."<sup>87</sup> When asked about the information sheets,<sup>88</sup> all but one of the teens admitted that they had not collected, read, or even looked at them extensively. Five of eight respondents praised the video displays of the exhibition, claiming that although they had no

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<sup>84</sup> Thomas Fuller, "Stark History / Some See a Stunt : Memory Becomes Battleground in Budapest's House of Terror •," *New York Times*, August 2, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/02/news/stark-history-some-see-a-stunt-memory-becomes-battleground-in-budapests.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Scholar Zsófia Réti interviewed teenager visitors to the House of Terror to analyze how the younger generation received and processed information in the Museum.

<sup>87</sup> Zsófia Réti, "Past Traumas and Future Generations: Cultural Memory Transmission in Hungarian Sites of Memory," *The Hungarian Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (2017): pp. 377-403, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26374323>.

<sup>88</sup> Almost every room at the House of Terror features a take-home information sheet, both in English and in Hungarian

time to watch all of the videos, those that they did see were all interesting. When asked about their knowledge of state socialism in Hungary, many of them mentioned that although they do not generally watch films about “the era,” they do have an impression of it from video games.<sup>89</sup>

Overall, the respondents could not recall much objective knowledge they had gained from their visits to the House of Terror. Six of eight teenagers did not realize that the exhibition was about two kinds of dictatorships, although they had a good understanding of Hungary having been under two different forms of occupation during those times. A fourteen year old girl remarked that “it was Disneyland.”<sup>90</sup>

The House of Terror is seen as necessary for several reasons: besides preserving the memory of Nazi and Communist terror for Hungarians too young to remember, the museum also provides a unique opportunity for foreigners get a glimpse of the country’s past, behind the iron curtain.<sup>91</sup> Since the 1990s Western Europeans and American tourists have flocked in large numbers to former communist nations, seeking examples of unfamiliar communist political arrangements and living conditions.<sup>92</sup> The House of Terror *sells* a narrative that is conducive to the *western* tourists. The Museum has been criticized for favorably revising the role of the Iron Guard militants and other Hungarian fascists and anti-Semites by suggesting that, following the war, they were themselves early *victims* of the new communist state.<sup>93</sup>

The House of Terror intends to be—and is—one of the most popular and visited tourist sites for foreign visitors to Budapest, but lacks English text panels, which is somewhat surprising. “The House of Terror is called a museum, but it is actually more of a

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<sup>89</sup> During the interview the games mentioned were *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*, while another one named *Metro 2033* and *Red Faction*, neither of which is strictly about communist dictatorships.

<sup>90</sup> Zsófia Réti, “Past Traumas and Future Generations: Cultural Memory Transmission in Hungarian Sites of Memory,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (2017): pp. 377-403, <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26374323>.

<sup>91</sup> Tamara Rátz, “ Interpretation in the House of Terror, Budapest,” *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World*, 2006, pp. 244-256, <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018>, 248.

<sup>92</sup> Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: the Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 115.

<sup>93</sup> Tony Judt, “From The House of the Dead: On Modern European Memory,” *The New York Review of Books*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/10/06/from-the-house-of-the-dead-on-modern-european-memo/>. Judt is describing a Romanian museum but the facts are applicable to the House of Terror as well, which is substantiated by Paul Williams.

work of political art. There is no real sense of narrative of what happened to Hungary under Soviet occupation, ...But very little of it is translated from the original Hungarian or Russian, so what a foreigner is left with is a jumble of images, which is indeed very powerful, but unfortunately mostly useless for establishing any sort of historical context. Emotionally moving, but it leaves the intellect yearning for more.”<sup>94</sup> For most international travelers, the House of Terror is a modern edutainment experience, one of Budapest’s contemporary cultural attractions: they can understand and imagine the tragedy of the victims, but they are not personally involved in the story.<sup>95</sup> “The effect is immediate and emotional, as it was intended to be, and the rest of the museum continues in the same vein.”<sup>96</sup> Most international visitors arrive without preconceptions and without a deeper knowledge of modern Hungarian history. “The excellent displays are not just informative but atmospheric and a lot of work has gone into making it a visual and emotional experience – not simply an educational one. As a foreign tourist, you are presented with a detailed overview of life in Budapest during those hard years and how the building played such an important role...And if you’re interested in learning a bit more about the communist history in Budapest and Hungary, I would recommend this museum.”<sup>97</sup> The less obvious slippages and silences of the museum will elude the foreign visitor suffice to say that historical faithfulness does not appear to have been exclusively on the exhibition organizer’s minds:<sup>98</sup> “perhaps it was the references to the ‘twin occupations’ I heard that made me wonder if someone a little more innocent than I am could go through the museum without recognizing the horrible truth: Hungarians were not just victims of these totalitarian movements, but many were perpetrators and enthusiastic

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<sup>94</sup> Tom Bartel, “House of Terror Museum, Budapest, Hungary,” *Travel Past 50*, December 20, 2013, <https://travelpast50.com/terror-museum-budapest-hungary/>.

<sup>95</sup> Tamara Rátz, “ Interpretation in the House of Terror, Budapest,” *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World*, 2006, pp. 244-256, <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018>, 251.

<sup>96</sup> Anne Applebaum’s visit to the House of Terror. Anne Applebaum, “Hungary’s ‘House of Terror,’” *The Wall Street Journal* (Dow Jones & Company, March 1, 2002), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1014936167731913360>.

<sup>97</sup> Michael Turtle, “The House of Terror in Budapest: The Story behind the Museum,” *Time Travel Turtle*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.timetravelturtle.com/house-of-terror-budapest-hungary/>.

<sup>98</sup> Andras Szanto, “Terror on Andrassy Boulevard,” (2003, *Print 57* (1), 41-47.

collaborators.”<sup>99</sup> The above reviews are reflective of the vast majority of reviews that I analyzed<sup>100</sup>; based on this analysis, I conclude that most international visitors are misled by the Museum’s narrative and will not learn of Fascism’s effect in Hungary and the role of Hungarians as collaborators during the second world war. While the official *raison d’être* of the House of Terror is that of a cautionary tale, it is also a tourist attraction for both Hungarians visitors and foreigners.<sup>101</sup>

### ***Effects of tourism on representation at Memorial Museums***

The attraction of death and tragedy has always been a powerful motivation for travel.<sup>102</sup> Some tourists may visit a site compelled by a moral obligation but others are not so much interested in learning and remembrance as in satisfying morbid curiosity.<sup>103</sup> Increasingly, the heritage of atrocity and the sites associated with disaster such as concentration camps, prisons, torture chambers or assassination sites are routinely developed as popular and profitable tourist attractions.<sup>104</sup> The consumption of the disturbing past is driven and shaped by tourists’ needs, but it is also subject to changes in political and cultural climates.<sup>105</sup> Tourism requires the reduction of a rich and complex past to a set of easily recognizable characteristics: the heritage product must be rapidly assimilated into the existing experience, expectations and historical understanding of a visitor with limited local

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<sup>99</sup> Michael Brendan Dougherty, “Through the House of Terror,” *National Review* (National Review, February 15, 2018), <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2017/12/18/through-house-terror/>.

<sup>100</sup> Based on visitor reviews of the House of Terror on Trip Advisor, Travel Blogs and social media posts.

<sup>101</sup> Tamara Rátz, “Interpretation in the House of Terror, Budapest,” *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World*, 2006, pp. 244-256, [https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018\\_247](https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018_247).

<sup>102</sup> Svetla I. Kazalarska, “‘Dark Tourism’: Reducing Dissonance in the Interpretation of Atrocity at Selected Museums in Washington, D.C.” (dissertation, 2002).

<sup>103</sup> The term ‘Dark Tourism’ was first coined in 1996 by professors John Lennon and Malcolm Foley. Dark tourism, or Thanatourism as it is sometimes referred to in academia, refers to sites associated with death, disaster and destruction. In recent times there has been a marked increase in visitation to these sites. J. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism: the Attraction of Death and Disaster* (Andover, Hampshire, United Kingdom: Cengage Learning, 2010).

<sup>104</sup> G Michalkó ‘A turizmuselmelet alapjai. Sze’kesfehe’rva’r: Kodola’nyi Ja’nos Fo’iskola (2004). Translation in Tamara Rátz, “Interpretation in the House of Terror, Budapest,” *Cultural Tourism in a Changing World*, 2006, pp. 244-256, [https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018\\_245](https://doi.org/10.21832/9781845410452-018_245).

<sup>105</sup> A Seaton, “From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism: Guided by the Dark,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 2, no. 4 (1996): pp. 234-244.

knowledge and quite definite expectations of what this heritage product should contain.<sup>106</sup>

A selective use of the past for current purposes and its transformation through interpretation is a widely experienced phenomenon in cultural and heritage tourism.<sup>107</sup>

### Part III

#### Conclusion:

The most frequently cited rationale for memorial museums is their pedagogical value in preventing recurrences of the past. Memorial museums do choose between what will be remembered and what will be forgotten; they can therefore hide as much as they reveal. How can memorial museums engage new generations who have little knowledge of what the museums commemorate? If the objective of museums' pedagogy is to promote learning from the mistakes of the past, then "their very presence indicates our failure to do so: they most clearly represent evidence that history has been repeated."<sup>108</sup>

Nevertheless, memorial museums have become important transitional justice mechanisms in societies undergoing democratic transformation, suggesting that confronting and remembering the past is imperative for building democracy. However, as the two examples in this paper demonstrate, there are fundamental flaws to these assumptions and serious limits to what the form can deliver. Rather than educating visitors about the past, memorial museums reveal the political priorities and goals of the regimes that build them, reminding us that memory remains very much in the political agenda of the nation state. Moreover, the case studies also show that reconciliation is predicated on the assumption that victims and perpetrators have put aside the past and are ready to embark on a shared path towards the future; the *selective* narrative is shaped and promoted by the State in Rwanda and

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<sup>106</sup> Erik Cohen, "A Phenomenology of Tourist Experiences," *Sociology* 13, no. 2 (1979): pp. 179-201, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003803857901300203>.

<sup>107</sup> László Puczko and Tamara Rátz, "Social Tourism in Hungary: from Trade Unions to Cinema Tickets," *Current Issues in Tourism* 14, no. 5 (2000): pp. 459-473, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2011.568055>.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: the Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 208.

Hungary. In both countries, the Museums are reduced to propaganda tools and the involvement of international actors further complicates the process of memorialization.

I suggest that any activity in the field of remembrance should extend beyond a moral perspective, provide a political vision to understand how remembrance activities could improve our democratic systems, and generate new knowledge of the past whilst coping with its memorialization. Above all, one must contemplate the true purpose of remembrance's policy to share a common legacy of the past rather than centralizing its differences. Scholars, international organizations, and victims alike consider acknowledgment of memories of violence an important element of (re)building the social fabric. There is no recipe for acknowledgment in sites like memorial museums because post-conflict and post-genocide contexts differ considerably. Yet, selecting memories is a challenge with important consequences: memorial museums have significant power in their ability to choose how to represent historical violence. "Memorial museums can only support reconciliation if they operate under political conditions that lead to understanding rather than ongoing recrimination and conflict."<sup>109</sup>

Memorial museums have moved from the traditional museological focus on collecting and displaying to a new era of experiential exhibition strategies to provide a richer, more emotional, and more affective visitor experience. As memorial museums, The House of Terror and Kigali Center are intended to tell the truth; but if the museums are careless with truth -- in their many reconstructions, reproductions, and re-creations -- can they be trusted as moral authorities?

Technology is a tool to enhance visitors' experiences; museums incorporate new technology for a more immersive experience but the technology may become a gimmick to entice people through the door. As Réti's study highlighted, for the younger generation, new

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Williams, *Memorial Museums: the Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), 111.



technology is more of a tool of engagement than a learning tool. Museums ought to use new technology when it enhances learning. As we've seen in the two case studies, memorial centers use different methods to evoke emotional responses to the historical events and victims they commemorate; also, the emotional engagement and empathy evoked could hinder on-site interpretation and contextualization of historical events, which is an important element of historical thinking and reasoning. Within the field of museum studies, it has been argued that deep emotional engagement does not necessarily engender critical insight.<sup>110</sup> It is therefore important to understand the ways in which cognitive and affective engagement in museums advances learning.

Memorialization should foster dialogue rather than create a hierarchy of victims. Nations also emphasize their own victimhood and tend to ignore their roles as perpetrators. Memorial museums can facilitate post-conflict reconciliation but may also deepen divisions and blur distinctions between perpetrator and victim. Interpretations of the past are inherently subjective with more than one narrative but memorial museums typically promote a singular interpretation. We have seen how the Kigali Center and the House of Terror, in a post-conflict context, could be seen to promote the dominant narrative of collective responsibility by blaming foreign interference; the museums do not distinguish between perpetrator and victim nor do they address the fact that collectively, groups can be both victim and perpetrator. Memorial museums should promote healing and reconciliation even if there is an element of historical revisionism.

Memorial museums are important for education and critical engagement with our past and it is imperative that museums stand in opposition to the dominant historical narratives. Questioning the dominant narrative with a balanced and inclusive method of

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<sup>110</sup> Laurajane Smith, "Visitor Emotion, Affect and Registers of Engagement at Museums and Heritage Sites," *Conservation Science in Cultural Heritage* 14, no. 2 (2014): pp. 125-132, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1973-9494/5447>.

remembrance can foster reconciliation and social reconstruction. Nevertheless, it is the universal political and ethical obligation – the duty to remember. It is a therapeutic tool to help heal and reconcile and represents not the end of something but the beginning – because it is future oriented. Memorialization should be and usually is an aspect of the wider process of reconciliation, social reconstruction and restoration of social and political relations within society which were damaged during the period of violence or repression. Memory is crucial to come to terms with the past, regardless of its potential divisive effects in certain contexts.

Memorialization fosters reconciliation when it is inclusive and directed at the acknowledgement of victims and perpetrators. Reconciliation and memorialization are important to rebuilding a society after a period of violence or political repression.

“It’s important in today’s fast-paced digital world to pause and think so we may hold up an umbrella of critical thought to the spectacular assault of images and stories from the past, which rains down from all angles threatening to drown out certain communities and voices.”<sup>111</sup> Memorialization should warrant an interpretation of existing structures in their entirety and suggest ways to humanize and include all members of society: “Peace, reconciliation, and social healing cannot occur when the powerful silence the weak.”<sup>112</sup> A contemporary reinterpretation, however difficult, is a necessary step to change perceptions to enable reconciliation.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Lindsey A. Freeman, Benjamin Nienass, and Rachel Daniell, *Silence, Screen, and Spectacle: Rethinking Social Memory in the Age of Information* (New York (N.Y.) etc.: Berghahn Books, 2017), 240.

<sup>112</sup> Sarah Kenyon Lischer, “Narrating Atrocity: Genocide Memorials, Dark Tourism, and the Politics of Memory,” *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 5 (2019): pp. 805-827, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210519000226>, 23.

<sup>113</sup> J. E. Tunbridge and Gregory Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: the Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester etc.: J. Wiley, 1996), 112.

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