Storytelling

Campscapes as Narratives

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iC-ACCESS: Project Presentation /01
Materiality: A Short Theoretical Outline /02
Findings Trapped in a State of In-Betweenness /03
Thinking Conflicted Heritage Through Campscapes /04
STORYTELLING: CAMPSCAPES AS NARRATIVES

Our team assesses the dynamics of competing postwar memories of Nazi, state socialist and fascist terror at work in European spaces. This can potentially offer new perspectives, beyond the tools used in other disciplines, working towards a more inclusive way of storytelling that integrates different histories and divergent memories at our key sites. To achieve this, we will explore comparatively how ‘heritage as narrative’ is articulated by national, transnational and local experiences and by tropes of resistance, collaboration, occupation, victimhood and perpetration. Our focus is on the processes of signification and appropriation in dominant and counter-historical discourses and memory narratives, and how they might and, more often than not, do overshadow complementary or conflicted perspectives.

We do so through analyses of existing narratives relating to campscapes (represented in testimonies, literature, historiography, juridical proceedings, public media, memorials and education), by examining of historical discourses and their specific biography in museum display, and through investigation of the sites’ historical transformations in the context of post-1989 transnational and transcultural dynamics of memory. This concerns in particular commemorations of specific victim groups at campscapes where conflicted histories are silenced (if not erased by monumental redesigns) or spatially appropriated by different memorial communities. We address both the competing memories and politics of identity relating to the legacy of the Second World War and the Holocaust as well as of Eastern European experiences of terror and repression. We also consider the competing use of tropes such as ‘occupation’ and ‘genocide’ after the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, as well as within the current context of the European Union’s eastward enlargements. We also highlight the growing attention placed on long-silenced postcolonial war memories of camps and massacres, which has
resulted in an intensification of a series of memory wars on the issue of ‘the
guilt of nations’. To understand how these narratives function within museum
and media contexts, our team carries out interviews with stakeholders and
curatorial and educational teams, conducts alternative historical research and
a “data mining” of previous research (raw material and mediated research
outcomes), analyses visitors’ behavior, and, last but not least, investigates the
ontological role of researchers working with such sensitive histories.

On a theoretical level, we adopt an integrated, interdisciplinary, relational
and comparative approach to campscapes, in order to capture the
dynamics of their development while doing justice to their complex,
layered ontologies. Through this approach, our team treats campscapes
as loci of conflict, competition and contestation articulated through
representations, practices and materialities. We take narratives as
inscribed into landscapes of terror (including campscapes designed for
hiding crimes and misleading victims) and perpetuated by their discursive,
visual, spatial and material organization as memorial sites. Our research
is focused on the nodes of conflicted histories, contested heritage and
competing memories, where mediated representations of the past relate
to (or collide with) the spatially-framed experiences of visitors.

We study the (past, present and future) role of audio and video
testimonies in safeguarding, understanding and valorizing campscapes.
While these individual stories can provide accounts of previously
uncharted microhistories or become an additional source regarding
representations of victimhood, agency or responsibility, they also
provide a new cause for reflection and experimentation. In addition to
examination of the ways in which audio and audiovisual testimonies are
being employed in historical research, memory studies, political activism,
public and private institutions, we also examine critically the historical,
social and political contexts of their collection and archivization.
By counterpoising archival collections of personal testimonies with
historical simplifications of conflicted pasts, our team conveys the
multiple perspectives on individual experiences circumscribed to
campscapes.
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