

Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities. Paul Williams. Oxford, UK: Berg, 2007. 240 pp.*

Reviewed by Natasha Goldman

In a generation of “memorial boom,” Paul Williams sets out to analyze memorial museums dedicated to remembering atrocity. The range of sites that he addresses is impressive, and include, among the 24 briefly described in the first chapter: the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum; the Maison des Esclaves, Senegal; National Chernobyl Museum, Kiev; the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum, Nanjing; and the Memorial of the “Disappeared,” Cementerio General, Santiago. The list of international sites piques curiosity in the reader, for the book has the potential to be a true learning experience. Williams analyzes sites in chapters roughly divided into the following topics: “objects,” “photographic imagery,” “spatiality,” “political fortunes of memorial museums,” “identity complexes in memorial museums,” and “historical consciousness.” He argues that in light of the abundant literature on Holocaust museums and memorials, it is time to attend to massacres and genocides throughout the world. This is an important point. Nevertheless, the Holocaust appears numerous times as an example for his argumentation. In addition, instead of focusing on one memorial museum at a time and rigorously analyzing the roles of objects, images, space, and politics in each, Williams jumps from site to site within each chapter. Still, he covers an immense amount of material, often incorporating sophisticated argumentation on photography, memory, history, and civic responsibility.

While Williams purports to analyze memorial museums that do not address the Holocaust, he frequently writes of the latter. For instance, in a discussion of the moral imperative of memorial museums, Williams writes: “Unlike Holocaust memorials, which now exist in the nations of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders alike, the memorial museums on which I focus are normally located only in the place of suffering” (p. 132). And yet, in this chapter, he devotes one and a half pages to German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—Germany’s coming to terms with the past (pp. 137-138)—and ends the chapter with a discussion of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (pp. 154-155). The reader might wish that moral responsibility could be framed by the rich topography of international genocide he wants to address. Instead, those very examples are often only briefly examined.

For example, in discussing objects at the Siem Reap War Museum maintained by Cambodia’s Ministry of Defense, Williams notes that only taxonomic information is given to “helicopters, artillery, anti-aircraft guns, and a motley assortment of tanks and armored vehicles...citing their type and place of production” (pp. 31-32). The museum glosses war, Williams argues, for which he provides a potential political reason—albeit in parentheses: “...(and demonstrates, if little else, that the Hun Sen government is more interested in capitalizing on financial benefits from tourism at nearby Angkor Wat than in developing heritage projects in aid of national reconciliation)” (p. 32). Would it not be fruitful to provide the political and historical context of

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the Siem Reap War Museum to understand why national reconciliation is not a national top priority before moving on to objects in yet another memorial museum?

Another instance of such analysis is found on the chapter on “spatiality,” in which Williams, in one paragraph, addresses the Museum of the Armenian Genocide, Berlin’s Führerbunker, and the Topography of Terror. For the theme of space and the Armenian genocide, he notes that the museum is located on an “Iron Age Fortress,” but does not investigate what meanings that Iron Age fortress might have for the Armenian genocide or its memorial museum (p. 86). To write one sentence on this topic in a chapter on space is unfortunate. Surely there is more to say about the location of the Museum of the Armenian Genocide, or that the Führerbunker is located somewhere beneath a mini strip mall and Chinese restaurant.

Williams’ analysis shines when he writes of the function of different kinds of photographs—what he terms “head shots” versus “action photos”—in memorial museum spaces. He pays particular attention to the theory of photography, and cites Susan Sontag and John Tagg to support his claims for the uses of photography in museum spaces. But once again, his often brief analysis of photographs leaves the reader wanting to know more about the political, historical, and cultural relevance of certain kinds of photographs. In a discussion of American brutality at Abu Ghraib, Williams asks, “might repeated viewing play into the psychic violence the assailants desire?” (p. 58). But he quickly moves on to another topic, leaving the ramifications of this question unexplored. He provides a useful political context for an “action photo” such as Ingers’ repatriation to Finland, exhibited in the Museum of Occupations, Tallinn, and asks vital questions about the role of the viewer, and his or her ability to understand the level of trepidation experienced by Ingers (pp. 59-60).

Williams’ becomes more generous with giving individual examples their due in the fifth chapter, “A Diplomatic Assignment: The Political Fortunes of Memorial Museums.” The failed attempt at the International Freedom Center (the initial plan for a museum at Ground Zero) is explained in detail, as is the process of memory for the Argentinian Dirty War and the Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada (Navy Petty-Officers School of Mechanics) Museum of Memory at Buenos Aires. One would wish that at this point, the author would investigate objects, photographs, and spaces within that museum before embarking on a discussion of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Chilean disappearances under the Pinochet regime (p. 109).

Williams opens up an important field of study. If much emphasis has been placed on Holocaust museums, then it is perhaps time that more emphasis be placed on the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum; the Maison des Esclaves, Senegal; National Chernobyl Museum, Kiev; Nanjing Massacre Memorial Museum, Nanjing; and the Memorial of the “Disappeared,” Cementerio General, Santiago. The book should be of interest to a range of readers, from those who focus especially on memory and memorialization to those who want to begin to think about genocides and their representation in public space on an international level. Williams should be applauded for his breadth of material and for insisting that, with so much material on Holocaust memorialization, scholars may well be served in looking at other sites of genocide. His argument is an important one that I hope opens up further investigations into the sites he mentions.

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