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'Clogs, boots and shoes built to the sky': Initial findings from a sociomaterial analysis of education at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

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Abstract

Recent statistics indicate that Scotland's level of hate crime is at a five year high, convincing that elements of British society actively resist multiculturalism: indeed the place of Holocaust education has thus never been more vindicated, both in terms of its historicity and the lessons we can learn from the event, regarding citizenship and moral education (Cowan and Maitles, 2011). However, despite a body of educational literature which purports to evaluate the best methods for Holocaust teaching, little is understood about its educational 'affects'; in particular, the pedagogies of educational excursions to Holocaust sites (Burke, 2003; Lindquist, 2011). This PhD study thus investigates different pedagogies at a particular site of death and destruction: Auschwitz- Birkenau State Museum (Law, 2004). Here three case studies of learning are explored in-depth: a Scottish Government-funded student excursion; an independent Scottish excursion; and an excursion involving Norwegian students, whose curriculum is closely aligned to the Scottish system, but whose historical circumstances regarding the Holocaust differ greatly. Deploying a hitherto unexplored methodology for Holocaust education studies - sociomaterial analysis – data has been collated from ethnography, documents and focus group interviews to explore how particular assemblages of observed human and nonhuman interaction facilitate students' learning about the Holocaust (Fenwick and Edwards, 2010). For the purposes of the CiCe Student Conference, an aspect of data analysis is mapped out, attempting to disentangle how a single exhibit communicates multiple realities of the Holocaust to students. The material-discursive assemblages comprising the museum's exhibit of plundered shoes are described in relation to (1) shoes as hybrid recording devices (2) shoes-as-exhibition-space, where the sociomaterial physical things that comprise the room are considered as recounting a particular version of the Holocaust, and; (3) shoes as performing a memorial script. Further analysis will elucidate how students' learning selves are practised in a space which has been designed to elicit an emotional response from the viewer (Ellsworth, 2005).

Introduction

Although the events surrounding the Holocaust ended over 60 years ago, the legacy of some 11 million people murdered between 1938-1945 continues to haunt contemporary society: the Cambodian genocides, the massacre of Tutsis in Rwanda and the humanitarian crisis in Syria, are proof positive that despite calls that the Holocaust will

'never happen again', conditions in a given society can deem the killing of civilians possible (Totten and Parsons, 2009).

Although events may seem distant, their underlying causes are still evident today via social intolerance (Bauman, 1989). Historically, during an economic recession, the volume of hate crime towards minority groups rises, bolstered by right-wing parties: indeed in the UK, the British National Party has gained support, whereas individuals associated with Catholicism in Scotland have received death threats (Hurst and Keely, 2009; Cook, 2011; Quillian, 1995; Knigge, 1998). With increased social media technologies, some have sought support for their hateful views, as profiled through an anti-Semitic Glaswegian Facebook page (Campsie, 2012). Scotland's race hate crime figures are currently at a six-year high, with the subset for religious crime charges showing an increase of 29% from 2011 to 2012 (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, 2012).

Concurrently, critical scholars have investigated alternative pedagogies (Cowan and Maitles, 2012). Without an awareness of the consequences of discrimination within an historical state, it might be predicted that further upset will occur even in seemingly pluralistic societies. Hence, in 2012 the relevance of Holocaust studies research has never been more vindicated, even in my own country, which was relatively unaffected by these events during WWII. Philosopher George Santayana has written 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'. His words feature at the Holocaust museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the site of the mass murder of 1.1 million people (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2012). For curators here, part of the solution to intolerance, in its many forms (anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, LGBT prejudice) lies in education. Indeed whilst studying the history of the Holocaust is important, learning from Holocaust – in terms of promoting human rights, multiculturalism and religious tolerance – is equally, if not more so, crucial.

Hence, through exploring the particular method of educational excursions, the aim of my PhD was to explore how Holocaust education might contribute to combatting intolerance today, in a country which is experiencing increased support for right wing parties (Duboys, 2008).

Literature review

My literature review comprised three areas: Holocaust education; experiential learning processes, and; sociomaterialism in education, exploring how we come to 'know' about the Holocaust through a post-phenomenological frame.

Holocaust education is commonly rationalised via history and citizenship, focusing on the universal and particular lessons of the events (Duboys, 2008). Lesson approaches vary, where 'one of the biggest challenges is making sense of the subject while implementing pedagogical approaches that provide students with the tools they need to comprehend complex historical processes' (Ben-Peretz and Shachar, 2012, p.6). Classroom-based programmes are distinguished from those outwith this setting – such as Holocaust education excursions which comprise visits to museums, memorials and

historical sites (Williams, 2007). Yet projects have previously failed to evaluate *how* these programmes transform students' learning: moreover,

Scottish teachers have previously cited a lack of confidence in tackling emotionally-challenging subjects (see Davies, 2000; Duck, 2008). Research by Cowan and Maitles (2011) has explored the experiences of young people visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau with the Holocaust Education Trust – an external organisation which takes selected pupils from British local authorities. Despite pupils' seemingly pluralistic attitudes following the trip, they query an apparent transformative learning experience, outlining that further research into emotions is needed (see also Keren, 2004; Ben-Peretz and Shachar, 2012; Kverdokk, 2009). There was therefore a need to explore educational excursions not merely in Scotland, but also via international comparison.

Hence, secondly, I explored experiential learning processes as theorised by other excursion and museum education programmes. Museum learning is distinct from 'school-based' processes because learning is taking place in a different context (Hein, 1998). Many subscribe to the 'three part model' of museum trips whereby the visit is contextualised in the curriculum – including an opportunity for students to recreate their own learning outcomes before the visit, which enables longer-term retention (Falk and Dierkling, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Yet these museum learning models are not readily applicable to Holocaust sites: many commentators assume that that museum learning is effective because it is enjoyable (Pace and Tesi, 2004).

Thus I argued that Holocaust museum learning models must emphasise sociospatial contexts (cf. Massey, 2005). Holocaust sites have competing purposes such as education and commemoration: they are 'complex, carefully scripted performance sites, playing a range of different roles' (Wollaston, 2005, p.63). Given the emotional entanglements, models should consider young people as comprising multiple identities, performing as pilgrims, students, tourists (Marcus, 2007). In Holocaust education, there is a lack of developed methodologies for this. Yet my review has shown that in other disciplines such as sociology or media studies, nonrepresentational aspects of research and emotions can be explored through ethnography (Feldman, 2008; Thrift, 2008; Pink, 2009).

Having considered the literature consulted in terms of Holocaust education and museum learning models, I now discuss the chosen theoretical frame, contextualising the specificities of sociomaterial analysis. Lastly, one particular aspect of my study, shoes, is critiqued as multiple Holocaust knowledges: thus the title of my paper, 'Clogs, boots and shoes built to the sky'.

Theoretical Frame

Given my concerns to explore how learning might occur through a bodily engagement with place, my research was explored through a sociomaterialist frame. Inspired by theorists such as Bruno Latour, John Law and Tim Ingold, sociomaterialism challenges our understandings of what constitutes 'ontology' (Latour, 1999). They explain that types of knowledge and the power of that knowledge is related to their production: meaning is produced through the fluid interactions of 'assemblages' of the things we

research, including human and nonhuman participants, with particular configurations coming to dominate and 'matter'. For example, Mol (2002) has outlined that rather than there being a single reality upon which multiple perspectives are hinged, things are foregrounded in practices which enact and perform various realities. In terms of the particular context of my research, I was interested in how particular realities of the Holocaust past and present are produced in a museum, i.e. Auschwitz-Birkenau. I also considered exploring *why* particular knowledges dominate, and crucially what this might mean in terms of knowledges that are manifestly 'absent' (Law, 2004; Singleton and Michael, 1993). Indeed, I wondered how the physical space of the exhibition, bodies and material 'things' (such as the Curriculum Learning outcomes, shoes, display cabinets, audio visual equipment, tour guides, mobile phones, reproduction artefacts) enabled particular sensory experiences of the Holocaust (Roth, 1996).

Although sociomaterialism frequently emphasises the equivalence of researching human and nonhumans, for me the concern was to investigate how young people make sense of the Holocaust through corporeal engagement. Ellsworth (2005) argues that the learning self is produced through experiences of architecture, whilst Ingold (2007) has emphasised that knowledges are made through processes of 'being' in the world, such as walking. Both post-phenomenologists argue that emotions are crucial to experiencing 'place' where the 'unexpected' or disruptions to scripted performances of place enable learning to occur. For example, Ellsworth (2005) explains:

> Specific to pedagogy is the experience … of the body's time and space … in the midst of learning. Because this experience arises out of an assemblage of mind/brain/body with the time and space of pedagogy, we must approach an investigation into the experience of the learning self through that assemblage. How, then, might we think about knowledge in the making? How might we think of pedagogy experimentally? (Ellsworth, 2005, p.4- 5).

Hence in the Holocaust museum, a concern for me was to explore how such sociomaterial assemblages produced new notions of learning identities – what Ellsworth (2005) has called the learning self – pertaining to their emotions.

Research questions

Considering the above, my first question for exploration - 'which objects comprise the experiential memorial museum landscape' - considers objects as 'things'. Fenwick and Edwards (2010) argue that a primary concern in learning and identity, methodologically, should focus on delimiting the sociomaterial things for study: such as the spaces of the 'welcome' area, the glass cases, the artefacts.

Secondly, how do these particular assemblages in museum spaces produce Holocaust knowledges? Here I delimit the area of study: by following particular assemblages identified in question one, how do they mutually intra-act to practise and crystallise particular Holocaust knowledges in the museum? The final area for concern is students'

notions of the learning self, how do assemblages produce particular knowledge of the student learning self (Ellsworth, 2005)?

For the purposes of this paper, I explore how a Holocaust exhibit, plundered shoes, crystallises disparate Holocaust knowledges, and how this affects students' learning selves.

Methodology

To explore how Holocaust knowledges come to matter as pedagogy in the museum, a mixed methods research design was selected (Delamont, 2002). According to Fenwick and Edwards (2010) most actor-network-theory-inspired studies use ethnographic and documentary analysis to trace human and nonhuman actors, as they enable researchers to disentangle how these actors ('things') produce particular knowledges. With my interests in pedagogy and curriculum, and how these might crystallise as knowledges performed within a single site (the museum spaces of Auschwitz-Birkenau) I thus decided to conduct an in-depth case study of student learning here (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Given the limited intelligence about Scottish trips to Auschwitz, I focused on following the learning interactions of Scottish groups visiting the site, who were sampled from a nationwide recruitment campaign. Two Scottish groups were opportunistically selected for study: few schools were visiting Poland during the timescale for research, with ethical consent being granted from relevant organisations for a small number due to the sensitivities of the project. These groups comprised 6th year students (aged 16 to 17 years old) travelling independently with their teacher from a secondary school in North East Scotland, and a cohort travelling with the Holocaust Educational Trust's *Lessons From Auschwitz Project*, which takes selected pupils from Scottish local authorities on a day trip to visit the memorial museum. The project is partially funded by the Scottish Government, and involves a series of reflective exercises prior and following the visit, including a commitment by pupils involved to disseminate their experiences to the local community and peers. 'Following' these groups allowed an interesting comparison between how Holocaust knowledges are made, considering the difference in pedagogical approach. Furthermore, an international group also added a further dimension to the research: Norway's *Hvite Busser* programme takes school groups via coach to sites in Poland every year. Norway was allied with Germany during World War II (Bruland and Tangestuen, 2011). Yet today Scotland and Norway have similar education systems, hence there was an interesting opportunity for me to investigate an established Norwegian Holocaust education programme which took both students and parents to Auschwitz-Birkenau (Balodimas-Bartolomei, 2012; Kverdokk, 2008).

Prior to fieldwork with all case study groups, a period of three weeks was spent working as a museum volunteer, which enabled pilot ethnographies and the development of research methods, including in-situ analysis of museum policies and curricular documents (Pink, 2009). For example, performative ethnography – which attempts to glean the more-than-representational aspects of observed behaviours - was deployed to collect data, noting everyday interactions between people and things, including their emotions (Morton, 2005). Pilot ethnographies of other groups at the site were conducted whilst working as a museum intern during August and September 2012. Encounters

between things were 'followed', involving note-taking and/or producing short films at specified points (Downing, 2008). Students' conversations, their body language and their photography helped trace performances of the learning self (Ellsworth, 2005). Follow-up semi-structured interviews enabled student feedback on research findings (Silverman, 2005). Students were then encouraged to discuss the researchers' short films to explore how emotions figured in their learning (Zembylas, 2002).

All data were coded via NVivo9 software, using actor-network theory to tease out examples of presence and absence in Holocaust knowledge production (Law, 2004). This included initially identifying the actors/things in the Holocaust education landscape, before delimiting the assemblages under study through creating maps which traced the relationships between these identified things/actors. For example, a key concern was noting where specific curricular policies from the museum where practised by the guides, attempting to identify how Holocaust knowledges were 'done', depending on those elements of the policy ignored or visible through their *absence.* In order to reach these conclusions, I had to create different assemblages of things-as-observed in the Holocaust education landscape: a seemingly inane object, such as a discarded shoe, is translated and mobilised variously, comprising different knowledges depending on how the students, guides, policies and places are entangled. Indeed in this paper, I attempt to outline how such knowledges were made, and what the implications are for the wider PhD study.

Results

The PhD thesis focuses on three areas, outlining how assemblages are formed before presenting places of learning as different performances of Holocaust knowledges, and attempting to make sense of what this means for students as learners: what Ellsworth (2005) has called the 'learning self'. Yet for the purposes of this paper, I 'follow' one of these things, the shoe, in an attempt to disentangle how a place of learning is variously experienced.

A focal point chosen for study was Block 5 in Auschwitz I, so-called the Exhibition of Material Proofs. Here, various items plundered by the Nazis are stored in glass cases. The lack of narrative means that visitors are reliant on contextualisation from the guide, who, in official museum policy, is requested not to speak during this memorial space.

Two particular rooms house stolen shoes collected by the Nazis; these were chosen as particular focal points because the initial observations in the ethnography stage showed that visiting groups often reacted overtly. When students were asked, 'which part had the most impact on you?' several mentioned the shoe exhibition. Moreover, such reactions are supported coincident with Jewish studies. Nahshon (2008, no page) has written that shoes are particularly important to the memory of Jewish people who experienced the Holocaust:

> Often regarded as no more than humble articles of clothing, shoes,
> as well as their makers, occupy a special niche in the Jewish closet
> of memories. They are evoked in tandem with experiences of exile

and immigration, and with nostalgia for a lost world of craftsmen and artisans. Above all, shoes have become a metonym for the victims of the Holocaust, their footwear and other personal effects collected by the Nazi killing machine in a gruesome attempt to profit from every last aspect of genocide (Nahshon, 2008, no page).

As an initial exploration, I consider the multiple realities of Holocaust knowledges via 'shoes': (1) shoes as hybrid recording devices (2) shoes-as-exhibition-space, where the sociomaterial physical things that comprise the room are considered as recounting a particular version of the Holocaust; (3) shoes as performing a memorial script.

Reality #1: shoes-as-hybrid-recording-devices

Firstly I consider that shoes are themselves hybrids, comprising different materials and uses, which present a particular version of the Holocaust *in themselves*. Curators at Auschwitz have chosen to display mounds of decomposing shoes, whilst creating a ledge of the 'best preserved' examples, comprising a variety of sizes and styles: what is 'present' in terms of Holocaust knowledges is victims' apparent demographics, which encouraged some of the students to make assumptions about their past lives:

> Sadie: I mean…the shoes all look the same. I guess they must have all shopped in the same shops.

> Lois: Yeah and the shoes are quite modern, like the sandal wedges…

> (Scottish School interviews, 2012)

Yet retracing these shoes to the laboratory, even 'well-preserved shoes' are reproductions of the past: EU funding, partnerships with the Polish government, sponsorships from former Nazi affiliations such as Volkswagen, have enabled these leather shoes to be restored. Law (2004) would argue that such processes are absent in the students' realities of shoes and victims' previous lives, but are important tool for curators in engendering empathy amongst visitors. The goal of the museum is to educate visitors about the lives of lost victims, which might result in slightly confused interpretations of exhibits, but nonetheless create a personal resonance.

Related thus, shoes are also hybrid recording devices, performing the biographies of previous wearers. Shoes give an indication of wear and tear, lifestyles and ages of victims: the particular display of children's shoes was difficult for students, who recoiled. Here the Holocaust knowledge produced is related to the assumption that an emotional empathy will be gained by displaying vulnerable victims:

> Chris: I cried here … in the places with the shoes and outside too

> Alfie: You know the bits with the kiddies' shoes in it?

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> Chris: I'm probably like [there] crying my eyes out
>
> Alfie: Yeah I was like crying. You'll see me wiping my tears on my t-shirt

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(*Lessons from Auschwitz*
interviews, 2012)

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Reality #2: shoes-as-exhibition-space

Secondly, the configuration of the shoes as a part of the physical layout of the exhibition space performs a particular Holocaust knowledge. According to Ellsworth (2005) a place of learning is effective where there is a sensory experience that is unexpected, or where an event disrupts the 'flow' of learning. Walking into the hall of shoes, a narrow corridor is flanked on either side by masses of shoes piled behind glass cases which according to one student, makes you 'feel as though they will fall on top of you' (Keira, Norwegian pupil). The presence of such shoes, including a lack of narrative from the guide about their origins, evidences the scale of the tragedy: they become a problem-solving learning tool for pupils in determining 'how many shoes' and related thus, how many victims.

Yet as Law (2004) has noted when describing the heterogeneity of assemblages, such translations can also have unintended effects: rather than attending to every part of the glass, students would walk halfway up the narrow corridor, squeeze past other visitors, and return to the exit without viewing all of the shoes on display. Such students were often visibly overwhelmed: curtailing their viewing or removing their headsets during particularly difficult narratives, were their coping strategies. Ellsworth (2005) would argue that learning was therefore effective via this physical configuration, as these students were forced to confront the scale of the Holocaust and thus appreciate the types of information they were emotionally capable of understanding (or not). For some students, the glass case may have even served as an insulation device from more vivid Holocaust remnants: in Majdanek, visitors can physically touch shoes through wire cages and smell the decomposing leather, which Feldman (2008) argues is "a much more complex reference than even the most sophisticated footage, photographs, or narrative" (Feldman, 2008). Indeed an unfamiliar scent may have conjured difficult visions of those victims who are absent, affecting the success of the Holocaust knowledge present: memorial may have been located in imagined death and suffering, rather than previous lives before the Holocaust.

Reality #3: shoes-as-memorial

Lastly the shoes therefore performed memorials: ossified in the exhibition space, they work in conjunction with spatial configuration of the exhibition where self-contained headsets and guides (who are silent and do not speak) create a quiet, solemn place. Whispers from students were hard to distinguish; young people took off headsets here in an apparent disruption of their learning. The shoes, despite performing scale geographies, were powerful in orchestrating veneration. Indeed, participants often recounted in later interviews that they felt unable to discuss what they were seeing in this part of the museum: some recount crying and hiding their faces using their t-shirts, others explain how they automatically went to stand beside a friend, but did not speak to anyone else because the room was silent. Reflecting on their learning was therefore

seemingly impossible in this place: we could speculate that without a guide or teacher – whose change from talking via the microphone to suddenly being quiet was a disruption – students might be encouraged to discuss what they were witnessing as they experienced it, yet here visual, nonverbal cues to others were more successful in facilitating learning.

Conclusions and further work

This paper sought to explore how Holocaust knowledges are made through the sociomaterial assemblages comprising a museum exhibit, i.e. a victim's shoe. Herein I attempted to outline answer one of my research questions: *how do these particular assemblages in museum spaces produce Holocaust knowledges?* I concluded through the display of plundered shoes that multiple realities of the Holocaust were being continually performed: as a remnant of previous lives, as method of displaying numbers of victims, as a pedagogical device for memorial *and* emotional engagement through the layout of the exhibition space. Using a methodological tool such as sociomaterial enabled an analysis of *how* Holocaust knowledges are assembled through pedagogy and space, yet more detailed analysis is required to explore which of these knowledges are dominant and meaningful to learners in any given learning-space: this will be achieved later in the thesis by disentangling students-as-sociomaterial-hybrids, using Ellsworth's (2005) concepts of anomalous spaces.

Indeed as I continue to undertake data analysis, the main findings of my work relate to citizenship, however not conventionally. By restricting independent interaction (through the dominance of a guide; the use of a headset) and by presenting material remnants, learners are encouraged to experience the Holocaust through numbers of victims and the eyes of perpetrators. Yet they are also learning about *themselves* and their feelings: which aspects of the exhibit affect them? How can they cope with learning about atrocity? These are key questions for Holocaust educators, but also teaching professionals more generally as they grapple with controversial issues in the classroom.

There are clear implications not only in terms of how the Holocaust might be taught at the site, but also in the classroom. It appears that for particular spaces of the museum, *not being told* about the context does not necessarily lead to a greater understanding of the subject. Pedagogies might be more enabling in terms of providing moments of reflection during the tour, particular in places where emotional work is difficult or where critical reflection on what is being experienced is desired.

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