CASE STUDY

MEMORY PERFORMANCES AT A MEMORIAL HERITAGE SITE

THE CASE OF THE GUIDED TOURS AT THE MUSEUM OF MEMORY AND HUMAN RIGHTS, CHILE

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What are the aims **of your research?**

IIn my dissertation thesis I explored the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (hereafter MMHR/the Museum) guided tours as spaces of memory performances, that is, as emocratic platforms for the unfolding of memories and experiences, a forum where visitors create, articulate, join, connect and expand their memories.

The Museum is located in the Quinta Normal neighbourhood in Santiago, Chile, and was inaugurated on the 11th of January 2010 by President Michelle Bachelet. Its mission is to demonstrate the systematic human rights violations committed during the seventeen years of Military Regime (1973 – 1990), in addition to paying homage to the victims of political repression (Brodsky 2011; Sepúlveda 2011; Scantlebury 2010). The Museum's narrative is based on the two Truth Commissions that were established after the fall of the Regime. These Commissions resulted in two reports: the Rettig Report (1990 1996) and the Valech Report (2004).

In this study, I demonstrate that the Museum's importance resides not only in its permanente exhibition, but also in the way its narrative is actively negotiated and appropriated by visitors and guides. I aim to raise new perspectives on the Museum's visitors, guides and tour guides, and connect my findings to wider Critical Heritage approaches. In this sense, I build on the theoretical approaches of Performance Studies and Tourism Studies to establish a critical dialogue with Critical Cultural Heritage Studies and Cultural Memory Studies.
The dialogue between these different fields enables the study of heritage as a cultural platform of exchange, communication and creation (Smith 2006, 1; Harrison 2013). Consequently, the Museum can be seen as a heritage space where visitors and tour guides produce actions that constantly modify and renew it. Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to investigate what kinds of memory performances take place in the Museum's guided tours.

IThe idea of 'memory performances' refers to the deployment and staging of narratives that shape the individual memories of the people who visit the Museum, reflecting visitors' active and critical appropriation of the official discourse (Bagnall 2003; Jonasson and Scherle 2012; Larsen and Widtfeldt 2013; Overend 2012; Williams 2013) (See Figure 2). Three different kinds of performances - which derive from my own investigation - were analysed in this study: performances of knowledge, performances of power, and performances of emotion. These categories arise from this research and signify my personal contribution to the field of Critical Heritage Studies and memorial museums. These performances imply an understanding of visitors and tour guides as active agents in the creation and appropriation of individual and official memories and meanings in a museum context (Falk and Dieking 1992; Hooper-Greenhill 2006, 2000, 1994; Hein 1998).

What challenges **did you encounter?**

The most important challenge that I encountered in this study had to do with the methodology, which consisted of ethnographic fieldwork (interviews, participant observation, field notes) that took place between May and July 2015 at the MMHR, and also consisted of an autobiographical account of my own experiences as a tour guide. As a researcher, I had to be very conscious of the limitations of this kind of methodology. From a Reflexive Ethnography perspective, in so far the researcher becomes his/her main ¡§key informant¡¨, the boundaries between the ¡§insider¡¨ and ¡§outsider¡¨ become rather diffused (Davies ƒË1998ƒÍ 2008, 222).

I also had to bear in mind that the fact of having experience as a tour guide and having imbued myself completely in this culture does not necessarily guarantee an unlimited and ¡¥real¡¦ access toknowledge (Davies ƒË1998ƒÍ 2008, 228). For this reason, I decided to complement the autoethnographic data with ethnographic fieldwork in order to obtain a more balanced perspective (both from insider as a former guide, and outsider as a researcher and visitor).

What were the overall **successes of the project?**

IIn this study I researched the different types of memory performances that take place at the Museum of Memory and Human Right's guided tours. The results obtained demonstrate theexistence of performances of knowledge, performances of power, and performances of emotion. Performances of knowledge relate to those attitudes and acts in which visitors externalise knowledge, memories and testimonies about the recent dictatorial past. They also include complimenting the guide's information, debating, discussing and/or rejecting what the guide is saying. Performances of power are shown in the different power negotiations between the guide and the visitor, and each one's authority to speak about the traumatic past. Finally, performances of emotion demonstrate how visitors and guides use guided tours to reveal and feel catharsis, empathy, indifference and guilt.

Drawing on these performances, this study provides material to investigate visitors, guided tours, guides and the MMHR within another perspective, one that takes into account these spaces and actors as active agents in the creation of meaning, rather than containers or passive recipients of pre-established discourses (Macdonald 2006, 3). In this context, the guide becomes a memory performer, acting not only as a mediator and negotiator, but also as an agent of creation and promotion of memories, who also contests the discourses and enables the spaces for others' performances. As one of the tour guides told me, guides at the MMHR are "memory DJs": they manage, synchronise, regulate and create (or suppress) memory negotiations. Consequently, guided tours become spaces of new meanings (or new music).

With regard to new perspectives on the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, this study shows that the Museum's importance goes beyond its exhibition or official narrative; through visitors' and guides' performances, it becomes a democratic platform or "microcosm of the wider society" (Shelton 2006, 79) for the unfolding of testimonies and experiences, a forum
or, borrowing Clifford's (1997) term, a 'contact zone' in which visitors can enunciate, articulate, assemble, compare and share different memories and points of view. Using Alex Wilde's term, it is a place where 'irruptions of memory' can be seen. In this sense, memorial museums present an ideal context in which to explore these different performances, because, as controversial spaces, they dynamically encourage debates and arguments (see Huyssen 2003, 109). Particularly, the MMHR is a vivid and dynamic space where the 'memory battles' (Illanes 2002) take place, and where Chile's 'memory box' is performed and opened (Stern 2009, 2012). In other words, the MMHR is used by visitors to perform/construct/socialise their different memory camps. Referring to the field of memorials, Hite points out this idea by saying that they
are "lenses into the deep politics of struggle and conflict and a suggestive arenas for imagining democratic practice" (2012, 21).

Hitherto, literature about the MMHR has focused solely on its 'physical context' (its exhibitions), or on its 'legislative' aspect (the Museum's history of creation and its oficial discourse riddled with political consensus), rather than on its 'social context'. Moreover, until now, no research had focused or analysed visitors' and guides' performances at a South American memorial museum. The originality of my study derives precisely from this new focus, and from the fact that I was a tour guide myself, hence, I had the opportunity to mix up different perspectives in the study of Critical Cultural Heritage: the 'native' (as a former guide), and the 'researcher' and 'visitor' (by participating in tour guides during fieldwork).

Notwithstanding, this does not mean that performances take place only during the Museum's guided tours; rather, they can also occur outside the tour, for instance, in the context of family or individual tours. In addition, it is important to add that the difference between 'knowledge', 'power' and 'emotion' is purely analytical; these categories blend with and superimpose each other. Furthermore, there are many more types of performances that could be included in future research.

Bearing this in mind, it must be said that Performance Studies illuminate Critical Heritage Studies with new questions: how are the different performances at heritage sites structured? What are the consequences and effects of these performances for the creation, communication and reinforcement of new identities? (Komitee, S. (n/d), 4). Moreover, Performance Studies reinforce the idea that gave rise to Critical Heritage Studies: the fact that identities are not stable but exist only in constant transformation and change (Harrison 2013). In this line, I argue that the identities and memories of visitors are not static and preconceived, and they do not leave the Museum the same way they entered it, with a steady identity. The Museum offers a platform in which these memories undergo certain changes, they are expanded, articulated and contested, and where narratives are assembled in different ways depending on the social interactions that take place at the guided tour. This does not mean that visitors do not possess previous identities or memories, as that would be an extreme relativism and simplification. Rather, I am interested in highlighting that, although a person can pretend to have a stable narrative about his/her past, the MMHR, throughout the many performances that it hosts, is able to stimulate the transformation of these different memories. Crane has said that "we possess knowledge, which we deploy in the midst of the museum, equally as much as we gain knowledge and experience from the information and objects resented" (2006, 103). Drawing on my results, this dissertation contributes to the idea that this broadening of knowledge takes place not only from the "information and objects presented", but also from the social interactions between visitors and guides in the context of guided tours. Finally, studies on Cultural Memory which understand memory as a constructed narrative about the past, illuminate this research by regarding the Museum as a 'social context' in which Chilean memories about the Dictatorship are dynamically elaborated, presented and performed in the present.

With this in mind, this study marks a contribution to Critical Cultural Heritage to the extent that, through the case of the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, it exposes the idea that memorial museums' guided tours are spaces of performances both for visitors and guides. In this sense, what really matters, from a theoretical perspective, is not only the study of exhibitions and their objects, or the building's architecture and underlying official narrative and silences, but also how these elements are actively appropriated and used in social practice (Hooper-Greenhill 2006, 374). This becomes particularly important in a context in which memories are still very much contested and alive, as they are in the Chilean case.

How could the **project be developed?**

The project was developed thanks to my own experience as a tour guide at the MMHR. Being a guide allowed me to have a deeper connection with visitors' experiences, and also made me more curious about the importance of the guided tour as a space of encounters between different memory camps, and between the visitor, the guide and the Museum. During my period of employment as a guide, I was inquisitive about how the guided tours and the museum itself became 'particular stages' (Edensor 2001, 71) in which visitors could display their testimonies and individual memories, where they could confront or reject the Museum's narrative, or where they could unfold emotions and knowledge, and even negotiate their authority to tell the true story of what had happened.

What advice would you give to **thosewho want to work on a similar project?**

I would advise researchers to consider the ethical implications of their research related sensitive and controversial topics. For example, visitors must always feel comfortable with the researcher and the topic: they must have access to the informed consent sheet and information sheet, and the researcher must assure their anonymity and confidentiality. Also, in order to any interview to take place, it is fundamental that informants know exactly what the research is about, what they will have to do, how their information will be used, and what are their risks and benefits.

How do you think your work **can contributeto promoting human rights and addressing controversies?**

In practical terms, my research draws light on the importance of offering spaces at the MMHR for the creation and display of memories, that is, for social interchange and for the sharing of personal experiences that could eventually promote human rights and ethically address controversies in such a sensitive field. This becomes particularly relevant since there is currently still a great amount of people alive that lived through the period. As demonstrated in this study, guided tours at the MMHR stand in for the need visitors have to share, legitimate, deploy and discover other points of view. This 'need' is quite evident and it must not be avoided by the Museum. On the contrary, it must be promoted and embraced. Already, "the Museum offers the opportunity to talk and express what had been silenced for so long" (Scantlebury 2010, 6). One way to even further accomplish this would be by offering a space - beyond the 'Book of Comments' - for visitors in which they could leave their testimonies. Perhaps, it could be a cabin or a special room where to write or record that experience. In fact, the person who was in charge of the Museum's creation and development told me that the original design included cabins at the end of the exhibition where visitors could tape and video record their testimonies. In my opinion, this is an excellent idea that should be resumed. However, the Museum should also be aware of the different memory camps and, consequently, take the necessary precautions to avoid offensive comments. Overall, this practical implication means that memory and human rights should be regarded as a social space rather than a static and preconceived place of unchangeable meanings

Biography

I completed a BA in History (2008 – 2011) and pursued a Professional Degree in Teaching at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (2012). I also completed a Master Degree in Cultural Heritage Studies at University College London, UK (2014 – 2015). Currently, I am working at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights (Chile), in charge of International Relations. Previously (2013 -2014), I worked as a tour guide and educator in the Education and Audience Department at the same Museum. The job offered me the opportunity to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between memory museums, objects related to the recent past, and audiences, all of which participate in the creation of 'difficult heritage'. It is that very intricacy which now pushes me to continue doing research into what museums are and how traumatic histories are represented.

In the future, I intend to work in academia, where my objectives are to share the knowledge obtained on memory museums and difficult heritage through university level teaching, and I hope to contribute to the development of postgraduate programmes in Chile that explore these issues. Currently, I continue my research on visitor experiences at the Museum of Memory and Human Rights, and I intend to pursue a PhD in order to examine this issue more deeply.

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