Observing Memorials Around the World: Blanking Space in Urban Environments

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Abstract

This project examines visitor performances at memorial sites in Berlin, Hiroshima, Washington D.C., and New York. Historically, people have visited memorials to remember their loved ones or honor those who have died under traumatic circumstances. Today, however, with the rise of globalization and interest in “dark tourism,” tourists (both foreign and domestic) seem interested in memorials for their aesthetic value, or because they constitute visitor “hotspots” of sorts. In this project, I am particularly interested in the affective parameters of a phenomenon I have noted in myself when visiting memorial spaces as a tourist. I call this phenomenon “blanking”: a process in which a visitor negotiates (consciously or not) with what he or she perceives as the space’s argument that the sacred persists in a secular world. When I speak of the “persistence of the sacred” here, I don’t mean ongoing influence of religion, but rather the fact that the forces of globalization must in some way attempt to make sense of the traumascapes that comprise its history.

I begin this project by considering the answers of theorists (Nigel Hunt, Adrian Forty, Christine Nugent) who have addressed the question: what precisely is a memorial, and what is its cultural purpose? Next, I consider why memorials are placed in certain locations. Here I turn to Henri Lefebvre’s argument that spaces exist dialectically as both material and imagined, and consider Jean Baudrillard’s argument that tourist sites in particular are often expressly designed to simulate particular types of realities. My thesis ends with a protracted discussion of memorials and the aesthetics of the sublime. Here, I combine theoretical work from Karen Baptist and Jennifer Gamble with my own personal observations while conducting fieldwork at each site.
Taking a phenomenological approach, I argue that especially in the context of minimalist memorials, blanking sometimes encourages behaviors and thoughts that are ‘inappropriate’ around sacred spaces. In these cases, blanking counters the intent of the architects who designed abstract memorials as sites of contemplation and focus. In other cases, however, blanking has provided a powerful—if necessarily diffuse—means by which to think critically about the meaning of localized suffering in an international context where increasingly, narratives of history are under siege. At these times, blanking seemed to work best for me when I spent enough time at sites to sort through emotional registers like awe and boredom, or when I wound up in protracted encounters with others unlike myself while on-site.

*Keywords:* memorial, history, war, tragedy, trauma, memories, space-value, sublime, globalization, dark tourism, blanking