

# YOLOCAUST, AUSTERLITZ & UPLOADING HOLOCAUST: DARK TOURISM GOES PUBLIC

February 9, 2017 by Asaf Leshem



To many travellers, the act of visiting a tourist site, where death, tragedy or atrocity are presented in some way is a familiar experience. Relatively new, however, is the increased popularity of experiencing dark tourism on screen. Just months apart from one another, we were introduced to Shahak Shapira's *Yolocaust* (<https://yolocaust.de/>) – a website showing people taking inappropriate pictures at the [Holocaust Memorial in Berlin](http://www.visitberlin.de/en/spot/memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe) (<http://www.visitberlin.de/en/spot/memorial-to-the-murdered-jews-of-europe>) to Sergei Loznitsa's *Austerlitz* (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/nov/21/austerlitz-review-holocaust-tourism-documentary-sergei-loznitsa>) – a documentary film showing tourists on a visit to the former concentration camps (now memorial sites) Dachau and Sachsenhausen, and to Udi Nir and Sagi Bornstein's *Uploading Holocaust* (<http://berliner-filmfestivals.de/video/59-dok-leipzig-uploading-holocaust-von-sagi-bornstein-und-udi-nir>) – a documentary film made entirely of YouTube clips uploaded by Israeli youth from their so-called “journey to Poland”. These three prominent projects have taken a big step in mainstreaming the discipline of dark tourism: taking out of its academic discourse to a wider public audience. This has proved to be a tricky introduction, and it is the treatment of several ethical problems related to dark tourism and how its reverberate online that this article will address.



... Lennon and Malcolm Foley in 1996, and that in the same year Tony Seaton (the Greek word *Thanatos* – the personification of death). Slowly, both terms albeit mostly on the English-speaking world. The founding of the Institute for [www.institutefordarktourism.org.uk/research/explore/groups/institute\\_for\\_dark\\_tourism\\_research.php](http://www.institutefordarktourism.org.uk/research/explore/groups/institute_for_dark_tourism_research.php)) by ... as a significant push to bring public awareness to the topic, and encourage ever-growing global tourism segment.

... cked up its pace with several mentions in popular pages. One such example Christine Watty ([http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dark-tourism-eine-.html?dram:article\\_id=302400](http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dark-tourism-eine-.html?dram:article_id=302400)) (2014) for the quite popular ... Idem mainstreaming of dark tourism at the end of 2016 broke out with the

three projects examining people while visiting dark tourism sites. Not surprising is the 'stone in the lake effect', spilling over to the world of art and documentary film making. That in itself is not a great wonder. Rather, it is the chaos of questions created by the speedy attention of social media that is taking us viewers out of focus.

### Documenting dark tourism

In *Austerlitz* Loznitsa placed cameras on tripods in the memorial sites for concentration camps Dachau and Sachsenhausen, filming visitors' reactions and tour guides leading walking tours through the exhibitions of the two memorial sites. *Uploading Holocaust* brings a totally different approach, where the film makers selected from 10,000 YouTube clips uploaded mostly by students on Israeli "Journey to Poland" groups (as they are commonly known), editing them into a feature length film showing moments from the trips. The third, and perhaps the most controversial of all, is Shahak Shapira's *Yolocaust*. Shapira took photos (mostly selfies) of people in the Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe (commonly known as the Holocaust Memorial). The stated difference in approaches is an essential part of this project, as Shapira determines that this kind of behaviour is inappropriate, allowing the people in the pictures to write to him with the email address: *undouche.me*. This was done in stark contrast to Loznitsa's and to Nir and Bornstein's intentions. As Loznitsa explains, he doesn't have the answers to why people take such pictures in concentrations camps, or to whether a visit to Sachsenhausen can help them understand the mystery of death, all he wants to do is to discuss. In other words, to raise questions for public debate about tourism to former concentration camps, with the ethical controversy which accompanies the behavior of tourists. Like Loznitsa, Nir and Bornstein explained in interviews that they want to raise questions about this type of tourism, and with a focus on the delegations, rather than judge the subjects shown in the clips.

In *Austerlitz*, the viewers receive no interpretation and little editing from Loznitsa, leaving us to ask the questions ourselves. His cameras show mass tourism in former concentration camps, and the popularity of the two sites (together receiving more than 1.5 million visitors per year). The viewer of his documentary may ask questions which range from the topic of appropriate behavior in such places, to the importance of education, the purpose of the memorial site, its conduct as a tourist attraction, site interpretation, and heritage management. Certainly, some of these questions are answered in academic discourse. For example, Sharpley (2009) argues that there is no doubt that morbid curiosity, voyeurism and even *schadenfreude* provide us with principal account to the existence of such tourism. But this is of course just one answer to one of the questions arising by watching *Austerlitz*. It can be argued that if a viewer is presented with this topic for the first time, the viewer may be overwhelmed with self-reflecting questions. Loznitsa did comment in an interview that through his cameras he was trying to wonder why do people take pictures with the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign? To ask whether we behave differently in such places if we are in a group or visiting on our own? And to ask if such visitation really provides the answers the tourists are looking for.

*Austerlitz's* relative success and the questions it brought out was immediately followed by Shahak Shapira's *Yolocaust* project. At the time of the writing of this blog, Shapira's website received 2.5 million hits. At a first glance, there is a major difference between *Austerlitz* and *Yolocaust*: the first is a documentary film, while the latter is a collection of photos of people frozen in seemingly embarrassing, awkward and as it overwhelmingly turns out socially inappropriate.

The second evident difference is that *Yolocaust* shows a place of commemoration, an abstract monument, which – as its designer Peter Eisenman stated on numerous occasions – is meant for people to spend time in and even play around, rather than take a photo and continue to the next tourist attraction. Moreover, as Eisenman and others have pointed out the memorial is neither a site of a former death camp, nor a graveyard. As Tony Walter (in Sharpley and Stone, 2009) argues, at least officially, memorials are not designed to intermeditate between the living and the dead, rather to

function as places of memories; memories which can be either individual or shared by the group. And perhaps this also confirms some of Loznitsa's suggestions: as the fourth generation forgets with time, it takes us away from the event presented by the site, they (new generations) create new memories.

*Yolocaust* is hardly the first critique of the Memorial for the Murder Jews of Europe being – for some – too much fun. Shapira was clever enough to hit the spot using the one thing that would draw most attention by his generation peers: social media pressure.

There is perhaps no clearer way to present Shapira's project but a project of internet shaming. Shapira, to my knowledge, did not receive permission from the people, the photos of whom he took from the likes of Instagram, Facebook, Tinder and Grindr. Instead, he allowed them to write to him with an email address starting with *undouche.me* implying the 'douchebag' behaviour of the subjects of his project. Unsurprisingly, all of the people shown in the project wrote to him to remove their photos and 'undouche' them. We do not know if the people who asked to remove their pictures really felt that they did something wrong, or were simply under social pressure to do so. And then two main issues which spring to mind are the morality of going to people's social media personal pages to judge their posts. And, the equally difficult question, can and should such memorials really provide us with moral instruction? (Stone in Sharpley and Stone, 2009).

However, in spite of the borderline legality of *Yolocaust*, using people's private pictures without their permission, and the controversial morality of invading people's personal social media pages, the real problem of such projects is much bigger. By simply putting camera and shaming people who visit sites which present death and tragedy important questions that should be asked are being scattered and mixed without any direction or focus.

Moreover, Shapira's self-proclaimed judge and jury position is using the artistic card to effectively cancel visitors' rights for privacy. As of mid-January 2017 Shapira has granted himself the third and last governing authority by policing the internet, threatening in an Al Jazeera video to find and shame anyone who will continue to put Holocaust Memorial selfies on their pages.



([http://socialscienceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Auschwitz\\_entrance.jpg](http://socialscienceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Auschwitz_entrance.jpg))

Shapira's supporters claim that he showed the ethical failure of his subjects. Whatever the memorial is meant to do, it is inappropriate for people to behave in certain ways. This indeed is arguably *Yolocaust's* best achievement: it points out to the problematic nature of regular, and at best slightly foolish, tourist behaviour at sites presenting death and human tragedy. Rightfully so, it's easy to criticise these tourists, the subjects of an art project, to think to ourselves 'I behave

*better at such sites' or 'I am more respectful.* But in spite of the fluid social construct of what is considered to be appropriate behaviour, for some visitors a disrespectful behaviour can be a way to deal with the emotional difficulties of visiting sites of death and tragedy (Sather-Wagstaff, 2011).

Certainly, the evolution of *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance) in Germany is a topic for another debate. In the meantime, however, *Austerlitz* and *Yolocaust*, chaotic in their presentation of the topic as they are, created a heated debate; a social debate that was long waiting its turn to break the academic circles in order to take the much larger social media space.

In both quality and format *Uploading Holocaust* stands out with this new trend of giving artistic new perspective to the phenomenon of dark tourism. Taken from more than 10,000 YouTube clips uploaded by teachers, family members and students who participated in Israeli youth delegations to Poland, the directors created a film made entirely by the voice of those who visit dark tourism sites.

Interviewed after the film premiere in Leipzig in October 2016 Udi Nir told about the laborious task of asking permission from every person whose face appears in a significant way in the film, from 1987 to 2015. Many students, parents and teachers gave the film makers their permission. Possibly, in our culture of reality shows, being famous for a moment was a good enough motivation to allow this kind of exposure. Or perhaps, to paraphrase Voltaire's quote, the common sense of what behaviour is appropriate is not so common.

Here, too, the film poses questions rather providing the answers, albeit in a much more chronological and analytical manner. Nevertheless, the editing of the film, like the journey itself, includes all stages of the experience, from boarding the plane in Israel, through the expectations the students have from themselves, and the expectations their teachers and their society have from them (and what they are supposed to gain from the visit), and of course their reactions and behaviour. Anthropologist Jackie Feldman observed a number of groups on their 'journey' to Poland. The central question of the 'real' purpose of the youth trip to Poland as shown in *Uploading Holocaust* is perhaps best answered by Feldman (2002, p.106):

*"Through students' display of Jewish strength, they transform the murdered dead into sacrifices for a Jewish future. Through their willingness to sacrifice themselves for the State and the Land (especially in the army), they prove themselves worthy heirs to the legacy entrusted them".*

Since Feldman made his observations, social media added another perspective to the debate. It can be argued that part of the difference in visitor behaviours has to do with whether or not tourists knew of the cameras pointed at them. In *Austerlitz*, most people behave as they would. Whereas in *Uploading Holocaust* many are aware of the cameras, feeling the pressure to perform. The may be what causes, as Erving Goffman (1959) argues, to hide our true self, the self we would like to be.

At this point the nature of a generation expressing itself via YouTube it is perhaps vital to remind ourselves that not all students and all delegations are exactly the same, and that for every moment of dark tourism with all its scenes captured on camera there are hundreds that are not. Still, in editing the film in a narrative that flows like the trip itself from pre-trip preparation to post-trip reflectivity, Nir and Bornstein provide us with a well organised set of mirrors to the challenges of dark tourism, both to site management and to the tourists themselves.

### Some concluding remarks

To summarise, here are some of the questions that came to mind watching *Yolocaust*, *Austerlitz* and *Uploading Holocaust*. Is shaming appropriate? Is it their moral fault for behaving like this? Are we blaming millennials for the reality they grew up in? Or perhaps it is the authorities of Berlin who should be at fault for not placing better signage instructing visitors how to behave? What if the unimaginable will happen and the people in the pictures will actually take a look back at their visit to Berlin and read about the Holocaust? Isn't that what Peter Eisenman intended? Can such memorial sites invoke curiosity and educate a new generation who grew up without first-hand testimony of the Holocaust? Why should a young teen *not* coming from an environment that educates about the Holocaust know how to behave around a perfectly geometrically positioned set of concrete slabs? How should visitors behave in sites of dark tourism? Can city authorities and/or site management instruct tourists on how to behave? What about the purpose of such sites? Can they be made to serve the heterogeneity of visitors and visitors' knowledge? Can they be made to serve the heterogeneity of visitor purposes for their visit?

Several scholars (see for example, John Beech, John Thunbridge and Gregory Ashworth) point out to the controversial nature of tourism in former Nazi concentration and extermination camps, the usability of heritage, and the difficulty in practicing interpretation where such atrocities took place. And while the questions will linger, the answers will have to

be updated with the arrival of a fourth and fifth generation.



([http://socialscienceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Shooting\\_the\\_Memorial.jpg](http://socialscienceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Shooting_the_Memorial.jpg))

Placing cameras and in some instances shaming the people visiting memorial sites and monuments is not just easy, it is practically *the* contemporary thing to do. It is even, ironically, a voyeuristic way to look at voyeurism. One common positive about this, running through *Uploading Holocaust*, *Austerlitz* and *Yolocaust* is the successful shaking of the German (and international) *Erinnerungskultur*. In fact, considering the social media's globalised character, the very thing that for a new young adult generation crosses physical borders and national cultures, managed to provoke a debate in social media domain that continues to provide challenges for teachers and museum docents in Germany and elsewhere in the world.

There is, however, another way for the transition from an academic debate and dark tourism research to be used by artists and filmmakers to expose the wider public to these important topics. Perhaps after this initial outburst of pioneering projects a more focused artistic lens can be placed on issues site marketing, on the visitor experience from the visitor perspective, on the reasons for people to visiting such sites and on what do they expect as a result of such visit, on site interpretation of such tragic events, and perhaps most importantly on the future evolution of these sites and the purposes they will be used for by the next generation.

### Links and references

Austerlitz by Sergei Loznitsa, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8oCvzGVDmE>

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8oCvzGVDmE>)

Ben-Peretz M. and Shahar M. (2012). The role of experiential learning in Holocaust education. *Social and Education History*, 1 (1), 5-27.

Feldman J. (2002). Marketing the boundaries of the enclave: Defining the Israeli collective through the Poland 'experience'. *Israel Studies*, 7(2), 84-114.

Gross A.S. (2006) Holocaust tourism in Berlin: Global memory, trauma, and the 'negative sublime'. *Journeys*, 7(2), 73-100.

Goffman E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.

Lennon, J. and Foley, M. (2000) *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster*. London: Continuum.

Sather-Wagstaff, J. (2011) *Heritage that Hurts: Tourists in the Memoryscapes of September 11*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA.

Seaton, A.V. (1996) Guided by the dark: From thanatopsis to thanatourism, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2(4), 234-244.

Sharpley, R. and Stone, P. (2009) *The Darker Side of Travel: The Theory and Practice of Dark Tourism* Bristol: Channel View Publications.

Soan D. and Davidovitch N. (2011). Israeli Youth Pilgrimages to Poland: Rationale and Polemics. *Images*, 9 (17-18).

Uploading Holocaust by Udi Nir and Sagi Bornstein, 2016:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4z6w3EiWIk> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4z6w3EiWIk>)

<http://www.uploading-holocaust.com/#screen/start> (<http://www.uploading-holocaust.com/#screen/start>)

[http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dokumentarfilm-uploading-holocaust-der-holocaust-wird.2156.de.html?dram:article\\_id=370249](http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dokumentarfilm-uploading-holocaust-der-holocaust-wird.2156.de.html?dram:article_id=370249) ([http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dokumentarfilm-uploading-holocaust-der-holocaust-wird.2156.de.html?dram:article\\_id=370249](http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dokumentarfilm-uploading-holocaust-der-holocaust-wird.2156.de.html?dram:article_id=370249))

Watty Christine, 2014. Turismusexperte Stefan Küblböck in Gespräch mit Christine Watty.

<http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dark-tourism-eine-moeglichkeit-dem-tod-zu-b>  
(<http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dark-tourism-eine-moeglichkeit-dem-tod-zu-b>)  
[egegenen.2156.de.html?dram%3Aarticle\\_id=302400](http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/dark-tourism-eine-moeglichkeit-dem-tod-zu-b)

Yolocaust by Shahak Shapira, 2016: <https://yolocaust.de/> (<https://yolocaust.de/>)

## Leave a Reply

Name (required)

Mail (will not be published) (required)

Website

Submit Comment

- Notify me of follow-up comments by email.
- Notify me of new posts by email.

## SSW On Facebook



**Social Science Works**

March 14th, 11:53 am

(<https://facebook.com/994983930512733>)

Certificates for the participants in the Multiplicator Workshops are going in the post today! Here's a sneak peak!

If you're interested in participating in the next round of workshops, please

(<https://www.facebook.com/socialscienceworks/photos/a.995109710500155.1073741829.994983930512733/1449081905102931/?type=3>)

... See More

Photo

(<https://www.facebook.com/socialscienceworks/photos/a.995109710500155.1073741829.994983930512733/1449081905102931/?type=3>)

View on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/socialscienceworks/photos/a.995109710500155.1073741829.994983930512733/1449081905102931/?type=3>) · Share