

# ***Memorialising the Holocaust: How historical exhibitions can reshape our understanding of history.***

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## **An Introduction**

There is no denying that history is multi-faceted and complex. It is complex as it can be viewed, interpreted and remembered in innumerable ways. This essay, for example, will critically trace the way Sydney Jewish Museum Holocaust Exhibition memorialises the Holocaust in an arguably post-modern manner. The Holocaust was one of the most detrimental acts of genocide documented in history and as aforementioned, the way modern society memorialises and remembers the genocide of the Jewish people greatly varies. Thus, this essay will attempt to argue that society cannot understand our past without historical exhibitions which allow us to remember past mistakes and help society move forward. This essay will likewise highlight, through critically analysing the memorialisation of the Holocaust, how history can perhaps change based on whether it is remembered in a post-modern or modern way. Through critically analysing the role of historical exhibitions in remembering the past with a focus on the memorialisation of the Holocaust, this essay will challenge the concept of shared history and memorialising the past which ultimately moulds the present moment we live in.

## **A Deeper Look into the Modern, Post-Modern and Memorialisation**

To set a foundation for the themes in this essay, it is essential to have a sound understanding of three vital terms that will be used in this paper. These include ‘the modern,’ ‘the post-modern,’ and ‘memorialisation.’ There are many facets of each of these concepts. However, in these definitions I will primarily focus on the aspects that relate to the Holocaust and historical exhibitions.

### ***Modernity***

Modernity is a discourse that uses transformation and progress as its primary premise. It functions on the idea that man is continuously aiming for constant progress and improvement. Theorist Marshall Berman states that the three key concepts of modernity are “industrialisation, urbanisation and mechanisation” (Berman 1983). Furthermore, David Morley suggests the modern refers to modernity in the context of the sixteenth and seventeenth century development of capitalism and the creation of colonial empires (Morley 1996, p. 50). He states modernity is “ideas about science, progress and reason, in the European Enlightenment” (1996 p.51).

### ***Post-modernity***

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy states that “the post-modern can be described as [...] concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress,

epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning” (2005). Post-modernity is an era of hyper-reality, finding expression in art and literature. Primarily, and this is how I shall reference post-modernity in this essay, it is a way “of understanding, or acting in, or on, the world” (Morley 1996 p. 51). And as Morley points out, post-modernity is discussed as both a period and a cultural style or aesthetic (1996 p. 56). In this essay, I will be exploring the post-modernity as a cultural style.

### ***Memorialisation***

Memorialisation is a vital concept of this essay, especially when looking at the process of memorialisation and how it differs through a modern and post-modern view. Holistically, memorialisation refers to the process of preserving memories of certain events or people. Victoria Baxter and Judy Barsalou state that “memorialisation is a process that satisfies the desire to honor those who suffered or died during conflict and as a means to examine the past and address contemporary issues” (Baxter and Barsalou 2007).

### **A Short History of Historical Exhibitions**

The holistic idea of historical exhibitions and curatorship is vital to understanding the past and societies’ progress and future. It is important to understand the history of historical exhibitions to comprehend memorialisation. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the definition of a museum is “A history of the institutions that preserve and interpret the material evidence of the human race, human activity, and the natural world” (Encyclopedia Britannica n.d.). The very beginning of museums and historical exhibitions dates back to the 18th century. It began with natural history museums focusing on taxonomic collections that showed man’s progress in controlling the environment. In the 19th century, history museums altered exhibit styles from art museums to exhibiting objects from the past as examples of design and mankind’s accomplishments. (Alexander and Alexander 2007, p. 110) Presently, historical exhibitions and museums collect and preserve past objects and use them to portray a “historical perspective and inspiration as well as a sense of what it was like to live in other ages” (Alexander and Alexander 2007, p. 113).

What is most notable about museums and the history of historical exhibitions, is the similar claims of historians who profess the importance of balancing fact with visitor experience. Historian Katharine Corbett suggests “historians working with other museum people to produce exhibitions have long tried, self-consciously, to balance the claims of academic rigor against the vagaries of visitor response” (Corbett 1996, p. 38). Similarly, scholar Gaynor Kavanagh stated that “both the curators and the visitors make meanings” (2005 p. 4). He also suggests “museums are a meeting ground for official and formal versions of the past called *histories* offered through exhibitions and the individual or collective accounts of personal experience called *memories*.” (2005 p. 2) Perhaps most interestingly is Kavanagh’s assertion that the word history itself has two meanings, “It is used to refer to what happened in the past. It is also used to refer to the representation of that past in the work of historians” (2005 p. 6). This ‘representation in the work of historians’ could hint at the fact historical exhibitions cannot always be accurate. Personal understanding and interpretation will always somewhat mask the truth of the past.

The Sydney Jewish Museum itself is quite young, opening twenty years ago in 1992. It was essentially built in order to,

“Commemorate the lives of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, honour the Survivors and pay tribute to the Righteous Among the Nations. Ensure through education, academic research and the display of artefacts and memorabilia, that the Holocaust and its uniqueness in history is never forgotten and that it is recognised as a crime against humanity with contemporary and universal significance” (‘Mission statement’, n.d.).

Interestingly, on the museum’s website, it explicitly states that the museum “challenges visitor’s perceptions of democracy, morality, social justice and human rights” (‘Overview’, n.d.) This notion of ‘challenging perceptions’ is a highly post-modern feature, exemplifying that indeed the Sydney Jewish Museum Holocaust Exhibition is curated in a post-modern style.

### **The Post-Modern - a Response to the Holocaust?**

There has been much debate on whether post-modernity was indeed a response to the events of World War Two and the Holocaust. Historian Dominick LaCapra once said:

“For some people, the Holocaust can be seen as a kind of divider between modernism and post-modernism. And post-modernism can also be defined as post-Holocaust; there’s a kind of intricate relationship between the two. On one level, this makes sense. It certainly is a fruitful way of trying to reread certain figures in the light of problems that have not been as foregrounded in our attempts to understand them” (LaCapra 1998).

According to Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (1998) when referring to the Holocaust and post-modernity and analysing the representation of the genocide created by post-modernists, we are instantly challenged to question: “what modes of discourse, which thinkers are included under the rubric of post-modernism?” (Milchman and Rosenberg 1998 p. 12). Furthermore, there is no one post-modern theory or even an intelligible stance.

Perhaps what has caused historians to suggest post-modernity is a response to the Holocaust is its similarity to fascism. Milchman and Rosenberg argue that post-modernity has an “indirect complicity with fascism by the way of its supposed irrationalism” (1998 p.8). However, Milchman and Rosenberg also agree with Michael Foucault’s theory, the modern *episteme*. This suggests that merely because post-modernity perceives the world and arrives at truth claims differently, does not mean it deserves the mark of irrational (1998 p.9.)

Furthermore, if post-modernity was a response to the Holocaust, what does that mean for Holocaust memorialisation and historical exhibitions? Perhaps then, it was almost impossible for the Sydney Jewish Museum’s Holocaust exhibition to be created in anyway but post-modern. Jean Lyotard thus questions where, after the metanarratives, does legitimacy reside? He surmises the “[post-modern condition] has no relevance for judging what is true or just” (Jenkins 1997, p. 40). Perhaps this is ultimately suggesting

any post-modern representation or memorialisation of the Holocaust is illegitimate to some extent.

As a thought, it can be argued that if post-modernity was a response to the Holocaust, was the Holocaust a response to modernity? Possibly not. However, as Morley suggests, the promise of modernity, to “achieve the emancipation of humanity from poverty, ignorance, prejudice and the absence of enjoyment” (Morley 1996, p.50) became no longer feasible. Such grandiose hopes of modernity dwindled. Milchman and Rosenberg similarly consider the possibility. They suggest that Nazism was in fact a rejection of the West and its morals at the time, which were modern values (1998 p.10).

Moreover, according to historian Arnold Toynbee, the two ‘World Wars’ of the early twentieth century in fact threw the complacency of bourgeois notions of modernity into turmoil. (Morley 1996). Toynbee likewise suggested that western technological advancements had triggered a crisis in human affairs through a rapid western change that society could not so quickly adapt to (Morley 1996). Not only has the Holocaust been dubbed as the catalyst for post-modern philosophy, but likewise as, according to Zygmunt Bauman, “the truth of modernity” (Bauman 2001, p. 4). According to Bauman, in this ‘perverse fashion,’ having raised the theoretical and historical importance of the Holocaust only downgrades its significance. Bauman suggests in this way, the horror of genocide will essentially become identical to other tribulations that modern society creates daily (Bauman 2001, p. 12).

### **The Sydney Jewish Museum Holocaust Exhibition: a Post-Modern Memorialisation**

In the words of Robert Braun, the post-modern asks us to,

“Question the traditional understanding of the relationship between ‘facts,’ ‘representations,’ and ‘reality.’ ‘Facts may be constructions of reality rather than mirrors of it; ‘representation’ a mode of meaning production rather than a re-enactment of the past; and historical ‘reality’ a web of constructions of distant minds and representations themselves.” (Milchman and Rosenberg 1998 p. 13).

Arguably, the Sydney Jewish Museum Holocaust Exhibition is a post-modern memorialisation of the Holocaust. This post-modern interpretation has both positive and negative outcomes. Jean Baudrillard suggests in a post-modern interpretation, we are “seduced into the hyperreal [...] of pure floating images’ behind which there is nothing” (Baudrillard 1988). Morley paraphrases Baudrillard, stating that first Baudrillard says the image reflects reality, then masks it before it marked the disappearance of reality. Finally, the image shows no connection to any reality, but has effectively become its own simulacrum (Morley 1996). Morley suggests “this simply is the condition with which we have to come to terms, without resorting to discredited depth models of analysis, in attempting to discover any 'hidden truths' lying behind this realm of images and appearances” (Morley 1996 p. 59)

Now why is it that the Sydney Jewish Holocaust Exhibition is represented in a post-modern style and not modern? The post-modern, with an emphasis on representation and representability would seem dangerous to memorialising the Holocaust. It appears that the post-modern representation is far from factual, too often distorting the truth.

Michael Rothberg once stated “The critique of representation [...] has aroused unavoidable suspicion about naive claims of realism”(Rothberg 2000 p.10), this representation of course being a post-modern one. Rothberg furthermore states, “Thinking in terms of rationality, an overlap may seem to risk producing an ahistorical account of culture, but in fact it is precisely in the specific modes of interaction between modernist and post-modernist strategies that historical particularity can be grasped” (Rothberg 2000 p.12). However, is Rothberg correct in his statement? Could a memorialisation of the Holocaust be better created if it were in both a modern and post-modern style? However, when stating that the Sydney Jewish Museum Holocaust Exhibition is presented in a post-modern style, one must take heed of Morley’s words: “those writing about about post-modernism exhibit no central consensus as to what it actually refers, in concrete terms” (Morley 1996 p. 51). Thus, to some, the exhibition could be interpreted through a modern lens. Perhaps what one learns is that the modern and post-modern perception will always come down to personal interpretation and understanding of the concepts.

Furthermore, Gaynor Kavanagh once stated “museums are challenged to produce histories that are more compelling [...] and more sophisticated” (2005 p. 12). One is then left to question: in an attempt to make history more ‘compelling,’ is curatorship essentially weakening the importance of past events? Are museums and historical exhibitions clouding the truth? The following paragraph will aim to highlight that through historical exhibitions and more precisely the Sydney Jewish Museum’s Holocaust Exhibition, one indubitably comes to the realisation that the various ways society can memorialise the Holocaust can inevitably reshape our previous knowledge of history and progress and the present day in which we live. The Sydney Jewish Museum’s Holocaust exhibition is, as aforementioned, created in a highly post-modern fashion. Post-modern memorialisation of the Holocaust has often been noted as controversial. This ultimately brings up the question: does a historical exhibition of the Holocaust created in a modern manner, ultimately make responders perceive the events of the Holocaust in a different light, than an exhibition of the Holocaust in a post-modern way? Perhaps. However, on the Sydney Jewish Museum’s website, it states that,

Visitors will be provided with experiences and understanding of the events of the Holocaust by allowing them to meet, in a dignified and moving environment, people who were involved. The Museum combines the voices of those who have lived through the Shoah with concise text, audiovisual displays, primary source materials, and authentic images, offering a unique educational excursion. (‘About us’ n.d.)

Arguably, the way in which the Sydney Jewish Museum’s Holocaust Exhibition is created allows viewers a primarily reflective and interactive experience of the Holocaust. One feature of the exhibition includes highlighted interactive maps presenting the location of the concentration and death camps. Another feature displays a grandiose timeline of Jewish history surrounded by thematic displays and texts. An exhibition of The Ghettos takes visitors past a life-size sculptural relief called ‘Walking into the Ghetto.’ A particularly post-modern feature of this exhibition is the dimly lit enclosure visitors walk through, meant to recreate the enclosed nature of the ghettos. From explaining these few features, one can get an understanding that the interactive and highly visual and audio based exhibition is primarily post-modern.

Perhaps the post-modern memorialisation of the Holocaust truly encapsulates what the Jewish people endured. Or perhaps it distorts fact from the truth; responders receiving a highly personal view of the Holocaust. Is this better? Indeed, it allows room for responders to personally reflect on the Holocaust. However, it also allows for the actual truth of the Holocaust to be smeared by fiction and a false understanding of the event. The past can alter based on modern society and a present context. This can be exemplified through the era of modernity and post-modernity, which viewed the Holocaust in juxtaposing ways irrespective of the fact post-modernity is primarily “a continuation of modern thinking in another mode” (Stanford 2005). This is perhaps the dilemma we face today with memorialising the past in a post-modern way. Is it truth? Or a personal experience which dilutes the verity of the event?

Professor and theorist Marianne Hirsch’s notion of ‘post-memory’ is highly prevalent to this notion of truth and memory. According to Hirsch, post-memory can be defined as “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that [...] seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2012, p. 103). Hirsch references the post-modern, stating “it inscribes both a critical distance and a profound interrelation with the modern” (Hirsch 2012 p. 105) yet also concedes we are still “in the era of posts” (Hirsch 2012 p.105). Perhaps most importantly and most prevalent to this argument, Hirsch sees post-memory as a “consequence of traumatic recall at a generational remove” (Hirsch 2012 p. 107).

Renowned Polish academic Eva Hoffman has similar views to Hirsch. Hoffman concedes that a post-modern interpretation and memorialisation of the Holocaust destroys the actuality of the events. She states in her book, *After Such Knowledge*, “the second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into [...] myth” (Hoffman 2004, p. 145). Is this myth being fabricated from post-modern memorialisations of the Holocaust? Or is it merely the trajectory of human progress: to enshroud the truth of the past to not relive its painful memories? Perhaps with expositions like the Sydney Jewish Museum’s Holocaust exhibition society today are not memorialising past events but unknowingly fabricating the past.

However, if indeed the Sydney Jewish Museum Holocaust Exhibition was represented in a modern style, perhaps the exhibition would become completely caught up in the modern theory feature of “universalizing and totalizing claims” and its “hubris to supply apodictic truth” (Milchman and Rosenberg 1998, p. 2). Perhaps this ‘apodictic truth’ would similarly fail to highlight all truths of the Holocaust. That is, with the modern focus on rationalisation and apodictic truth, some of the personal survivor encounters and memories would be lost. Arguably, the personal survivors stories and the most important aspect of memorialising and remembering the Holocaust. Perhaps and most certainly arguable, the only modern feature of the Sydney Jewish Museum Holocaust Exhibition is the events that lead up to the Holocaust. For example, Hitler’s Rise to Power expose details the facts of his leadership and how he came to be, which is quite indisputable and best represented in a modern fashion of mere writing on the museum walls rather than an interactive feature.

## A Final Note

To conclude, it is now indeed apparent the multifaceted and intricate nature of history; most predominantly when viewed by the incongruous perspectives of the modern and the post-modern. History itself is often concealed by myth, truth and memory and when one then takes a post-modern approach to understanding events of the past, history's veracity perhaps becomes ever further out of man's reach. Historical exhibitions, though essentially created to preserve memory and memorialise the past, somewhat send man further from the truth. Furthermore, as Kavanagh states, an essential part of historical exhibitions and the holistic experience of a museum is "the visitor and the nature of [their] engagement with the museum" (2005 p.1) However, this personal and reflective post-modern engagement likewise takes man further from memorialising what actually occurred in the past. Perhaps then, what one can learn from this essay is that history can never be remembered in truth; it will always be altered by myth and memory and similarly reshaped by different viewpoints such as the modern and post-modern.

## Notes on Contributor

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