

Form – Architecture – Memory

November 9

Theme: The Social Relevance of Memorial Museums

World War II in Museums, Memory and Representation

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(Power Point p.1) I am telling nothing new when I say that museums are an excellent place for representing the history of the Second World War and for giving insight into this history. At the same time Museums have the ability to make this history meaningful and fixing it in the collective memory. As you know, worldwide there are various war and resistance and memorial museums and remembrance or memorial centres. Each has its own character, with varied presentations and diverse themes, differing per location. In many of these museums the history of the Second World War is the central theme. It's a history with a global impact with a meaningful reflecting on the present time. It makes that it is a history of today.



Over the years; the approach to the past, the substantive focus, and the representation – the performance, so to say - have been subject to change. These shifts can generally be connected with the history of the memory of the war, which in turn can take many forms

and is constantly subject to change. In a sense, one could argue that the dynamics of the memory determines

- which meaning is given to the history of the Second World War,
- the available knowledge of the past,
- and the questions that are asked.

(PP p.2) My presentation of today is based on a detailed research I have done to the situation of the World War 2 Museums in the Netherlands. My question was: in what way is the remembrance of the Second World War shaped by museums. How have museums interpreted their tasks and roles over the years in a changing society, and how has the representation of WW2 in the museums itself changed over time?

I would stress that that my study to the representation / imagination of the history of the war in museums, is a recent development. (It's an ongoing history) It is not just continuing to this day, it is also sheds it's shadow to the future. That means that a significant present-day component is interwoven into my research. Influential issues in my research are:

- the changing image of the war,
- claiming of the past, (the question of ownership)
- the meanings it has been given by different commemorative groups,
- and the influence of traditional and new actors.

(PP p.3) In the context of the theme of this panel session 'The Social Relevance of Memorial Museums' I will focus on two aspects:

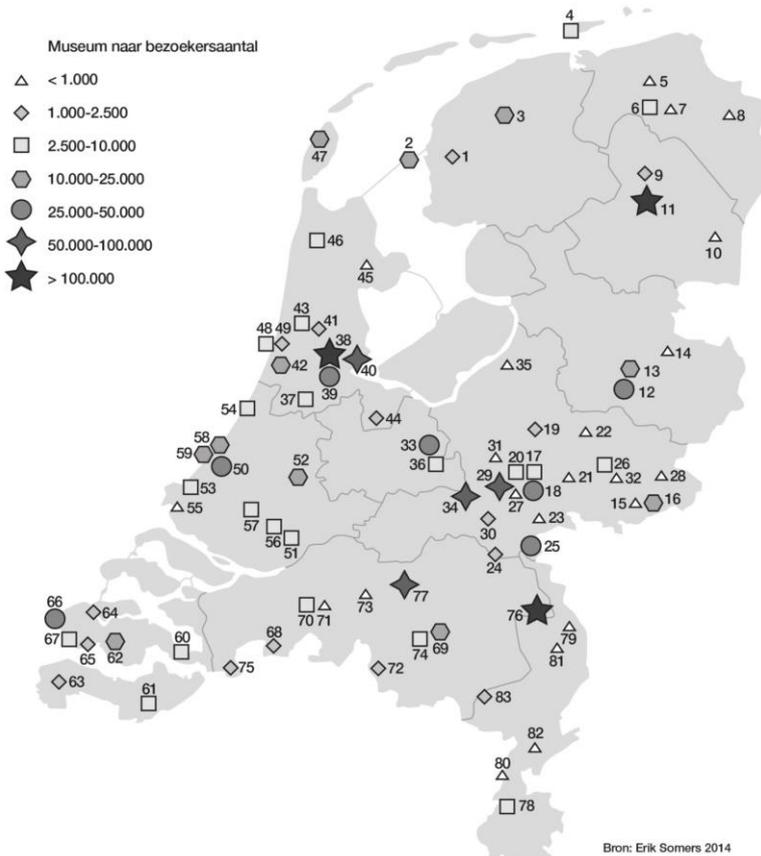
- The political memory of the war, or in other words: the moralising message that is determined by the museums and their presentations
- The changing representation of the war as it is shaped in concrete museum presentations



Although my research is mainly focused on the Dutch situations, I think that some of my findings are comparable with international developments. (Comparative international research would be an appropriate follow-up projects)

The situation in The Netherlands

(PP p.4) Speaking about the Dutch situation: Memories of the Second World War, in all its forms of expression and rituals, are deeply rooted. With their presentations, the war museums in the Netherlands constitute an appealing expression of historical culture. They keep the past alive and contribute to the historical consciousness of this formative episode. The museums have their own narratives, in which the historical events, with their dilemmas, personal choices, emotions, drama and perceptions, are addressed in diverse ways.



Almost seventy years after the end of the war in The Netherlands, there is still a strong, and even growing interest in the Second World War and its presentations in museums. The inventory I made shows that the Netherlands has 83 museums that are specialized in the history of the Second World War. Of these, eighteen institutions are official 'registered museums'. Of this number 40 percent of the museums has been founded

after the year 2000. In 2014 these 83 Dutch war museums welcomed a total of 1.300.000 visitors. For the Anne Frank House, in this figure I counted only the Dutch visitors. (The total

number of visitors to the Anne Frank House in that year alone ran to 1.2 million. 11% are Dutch visitors). Judging by the figures for ten landmark war museums, public interest in war museums has increased spectacularly in the period between 1996 and 2013: Visitors has almost doubled. Most museums (57 in total) receive no more than 10.000 visitors. Nonetheless, one-third of all visitors visit a small, often local; these are war museum with a military focus / dealing with war fare aspects.

Political memory; museums with a message.

(PP p. 5) Many museums were founded based on idealistic and political convictions: the presentation of the history of the war is often linked to a moralising message. The lessons of the past became a key issue in the politics of remembrance. I'll refer to the situation in The Netherlands, but please compare it with the developments in your own region. In the Netherlands, at the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s, political-social initiatives and organisations got a hold on the museum presentation of the war. The history of the Second World War was used to warn against alarming developments in society, such as right-wing extremism and reborn anti-Semitism. Many of the museums that still exist today were created in this period.



From these years on priority was given to the educational importance of museums. Information about the past had to be presented in relation to the present. Insight into the causes, background to and consequences of the Second World War had to raise

awareness of 'the dangers of fascism and racism in our modern national and international society'. In the mid-1990s, (government) policy was revised. Events and aspects from the years 1940 - 1945 relating to universal human rights were emphasised: freedom, democracy

and equality as fundamental pillars of our society. There was becoming a changing focus on other commemorative groups. But the most important shift in direction was the emphasis on the commemoration and shaping of memories of the persecution and terror of the war at the original, historical sites, in particular, the former Nazi concentration camps: The memorial museums. It was the period that former Camp Westerbork became popular historical site

In recent years, the moral-ethical message of Dutch cultural policy, which is partly defined by European policy, spread by the government has increasingly focused on the area known as active citizenship. War museums are also expected to contribute to promoting this message, if possible in the international, global context and paying attention to the multi-cultural society

It is remarkable, but also explainable, that in a period of globalization at the same time the many war museums fulfil an important local and regional function. This has been an development, particularly since the turn of the millennium, across the Netherlands. The number of small, private local war museums increased enormously. These museums have arisen from relatively individual, autonomous processes that do not always keep pace with prevailing historical views or remain in step with the transnational discourse of political memory, to which moral messages are usually linked. This development of parallel globalisation and localisation – in the literature also referred to the term ‘glocalisation’ - is illustrative of the rapid expansion and transformation of historical culture in recent decades. (I won't go into details now.)

In order to increase visitors' involvement in the history of the war, the second half of the 1990s saw the rise of a new favourite form of transfer among war museums: the emphasis is on personal stories. And this is still the situation today. The public is able to identify with individual experiences and personal testimonies, which, to an important extent, are still distant, factual history to the subjective memories of individuals.

Furthermore, there is the development that the war museums are not just a museum about an historical event but they are strengthening their function as memorials (memorial museums)

Changing representation

(PP p.6) At these times, war and memorial museums are facing a turning point and will have to familiarise themselves with new approaches. The generation that lived through the war passes away. That means that the memories of WW2 will be transferred in another, more indirect way. The bond with the public is no longer as self-evident as it was. New target groups do not have a 'direct' relationship with memories of the war. For them, the history of the period between 1940 and 1945 is truly the past.



(Resistance Museum Amsterdam, Junior Museum)

(Beside that several other factors also play a role in the way in which memories of the war are shaped, alters the relationship museums have to new audiences, and invites possible criticism of the older generation. Museums must respond to changing demands from the public and a changing relationship with the past.)

(PP p.7-13) Example: Westerbork (no text)

(Several other factors: a strong focus on visualisation and 'experience' in a globalized popular culture; an increasing mediatization and digitalizing of cultural heritage; a cultural sector involved with privatization, economic competition and commercialization; increasing and conflicting interests of youth education (school), an aging leisure economy; and growing

Euroscepticism and populism, partly in response to a developing multicultural society. This alters the relationship museums have to new audiences, and invites possible criticism of the older generation. Museums must respond to changing demands from the public and a changing relationship with the past.)

New presentations will be based on new concepts, in which authenticity, emotion, reconstruction, experience, visualisation, staging and representation will be vitally important and where archives, collections and stories can be connected by using new digital technologies.

(PP p.14) Relating to this: In today's museum heritage practice, 'authentic experience' seems to be the keyword. Now that the war happened a longer time ago and eye-witnesses are no longer able to tell their stories first-hand, there is, on the one hand, a strong preference for a new materialisation of memories – the experience of 'real' objects and 'personal' stories – and, on the other hand, a trend towards visualisation and experience, in which reconstructions of the past are important. In addition to the strongly individually-oriented historical experiences through contact with authentic objects or original sites, there is the experience that is evoked by a staged historical reality, with the help of directed narratives and reconstructions.

The focus lies on giving the visitor the feeling of 'experiencing' the past. Sensorial and emotional experiences are stimulated in the representation of the past. 'Experience and perceive' is the motto. Authenticity can be created by presenting a story that is wrapped in historical representation. Replicas, reconstructions or other interventions then determine the representation that must lead to a better understanding of the past. Staged authenticity then takes the place of material authenticity. Forms of presentation that better reflect the needs of the younger generation.

When using these new forms of presentation, it is the responsibility of the museum to find a balance between well-considered education and information, on the one hand, and emotion and sensation on the other. (and that can be a precarious balance)



Airborne Museum, Oosterbeek / Arnhem

(Furthermore museums are part of the present culture of leisure. That means that it is expected that in addition to offering information and insights, a visit to a museum – even when it concerns themes such as war, prosecution and mass destruction – will also be relaxing and entertaining. We see that the popularity of heritage tourism – visiting memorial sites – has increased over the years, and this offers interesting economic opportunities. Responding to today's 'experience economy', museums seek increasing cooperation with the private sector and with the tourism sector in particular. Concepts such as marketing, market orientation, the profit principle and cultural entrepreneurship are established in the war museum sector as well.)

To conclude: The expectation is that for the time being, the history of the Second World War will continue to appeal to a large audience. Important element in this is the present-day meaning attached to this period of the past. In a fluid and multiform culture of memory, the period between 1940 and 1945 has remained, above all, a moral reference point: this history gives meaning to the here and now, and – indirectly – also to the future. In recent years, the memory of war has been increasingly linked to attention to universal

human rights themes, and this can be expected to continue in future. In this context, the issues are ones of universality and globalisation; at the same time; however the focus on universal values is linked with concrete, imaginable, local and personal histories.

Two examples (no text)

- **(PP p. 15)** The Resistance Museum in Friesland, Leeuwarden (the war museums for the northern provinces in the Netherlands) <http://www.friesverzetsmuseum.nl/>



- **(PP p. 16-19)** The Dutch Resistance Museum, Amsterdam www.verzetsmuseum.org



Literature

- Aleida Assmann' *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit* (München 2006)
- Marianne Hirsch, *The generation of Postmemory. Writing and visual culture adfter the Holocaust* (New York 2012)
- Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and memory in the global age* (Philadelphia 2006)
- Erik Somers, *De oorlog in het Museum. Herinnering en verbeelding (The history of war in the museum, Memory and representation)* (Zwolle 2014)
- Karin Tillmans, Frank van Vree and Jay Winter, (eds.), *Performing the past. Memory, history and identity in modern Europe* (Amsterdam 2010)
- Paul Williams *Memorial Museums . The global rush to commemorate atrocities* (Oxford / New York 2007)
- Jay Winter, *Remembering the war. The great war between memory and history in the twentieth century* (New Haven / London 2006)



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