

Special Section on Perpetrator Sites: Introduction

Ingvild Hagen Kjørholt, Mario Panico, and Anneleen Spiessens

The enduring impact of collective violence permeates societies across the globe, shaping cultural imaginaries and influencing domestic and international political dynamics. Indeed, in moments such as ours, it is impossible to ignore the ways in which the Holocaust's traumatic legacy is mobilised in the discourse surrounding Israel's invasion of Gaza following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023. The ongoing brutal warfare in the Middle East serves as a stark reminder of the devastating impact of mass state perpetration, prompting reflection and unease, especially for scholars engaged in the study of Holocaust memory.¹ The connection we observe between memory politics and political violence is deeply unsettling and, in our view, underscores the pressing need for a critical re-examination of memorial practices and the notion of perpetratorship.

This special section of the *Journal of Perpetrator Research* discusses traumatic memory by focusing on perpetrator heritage sites and their materiality. Sharing the impetus of the highly influential 'spatial turn' in the Humanities and Social Sciences over the last decades,² we adopt space as a vital access point in our effort to trace, and critically discuss, the imprints of perpetration in contemporary material culture and physical spaces relating to different genocides. Our objects of study are current curatorial, educational, and artistic practices at some specific locations where perpetration took place in the past: former camps, camp commandant's houses, and SS officers' homes. While academic discourse frequently frames such locations as trauma sites with strong commemorative and funerary dimensions, often centring on the perspective of the victim, we adopt Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca's proposal to think of these sites as crime scenes as well. Conceptualising trauma sites as crime scenes, as the two authors write in their book *Geographies of Perpetration*, 'is not a matter of excluding the

1 Marianne Hirsch, 'Rethinking Holocaust Memory after October 7', *Public Books*, 15 July 2024 <<https://www.publicbooks.org/rethinking-holocaust-memory-after-october-7/>> [accessed 11 December 2024].

2 *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Barney Warf and Santa Arias (London: Routledge, 2009); *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn Between Disciplines*, ed. by Marijn Nieuwenhuis and David Crouch (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

figure of the victim or the complexity of actors involved, but rather a question of placing the focus on those who carried out the act in a precise space.³ Considering material sites as ‘witnesses’ and recentralising criminal acts and perpetrators within space enables an important critical shift away from the symbolic phenomenon of mass violence toward a more nuanced understanding of its potentially everyday nature.

Within the context of Critical Heritage Studies, the concept of ‘site of perpetration’ – a term that encompasses museums, monuments, buildings, and even entire neighbourhoods or cities – has long been at the centre of debates on the representation of those who committed crimes against humanity.⁴ How do we deal with the material traces of the concentration camps or the large monuments built during the Nazi dictatorship? Should they be knocked down and forgotten, or resemanticised and integrated into a more complex historical narrative? These are some of the questions addressed, among others, in two foundational publications that signalled the direction and the urgency of critical discussions on perpetrator sites: *Dissonant Heritage* by John E. Tunbridge and Gregory J. Ashworth⁵ and Sharon Macdonald’s *Difficult Heritage*.⁶ In recent years, research on this topic has been expanded enormously, with scholars adopting different epistemological perspectives and different methodologies, ranging from archaeology to architecture and Memory Studies.⁷ Approaching space as media, or even as texts or language, that transmit and speak memory, makes sites interesting sources for tracing the dynamics and diachronic changes of

3 Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, ‘Mapping Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence. An Introduction’, in *Geographies of Perpetration: Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence*, ed. by Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), pp. 7–20 (pp. 13–14).

4 See for instance William Logan and Keir Reeves, *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with ‘Difficult Heritage’* (London: Routledge, 2008); Sharon Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2009); *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*, ed. by Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); *Memory and Postwar Memorials: Confronting the Violence of the Past*, ed. by Marc Silberman and Florence Vatan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jirku and Sánchez-Biosca, *Geographies of Perpetration*.

5 J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester, NY: J. Wiley, 1996).

6 Macdonald, *Difficult Heritage*.

7 See, for example, Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017); Ann Rigney, ‘Materiality and Memory: Objects to Ecologies. A Response to Maria Zirra’, *Parallax*, 23.4 (2017), 474–78; Sabina Tanović, *Designing Memory: The Architecture of Commemoration in Europe, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); *Archaeologies of Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism and Repression: Dark Modernities*, ed. by James Symonds and Pavel Vafeka (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

memory. Studying perpetrator sites might therefore reveal much about a difficult past and about posteriority's diverse, institutional and community policies adopted to engage with it.

In this special section, we analyse space from the perspective of Cultural Studies and Memory Studies, and with a shared interest in 'reading' sites as signs. The contributions argue that a key feature of the perpetrator sites under investigation is their *indexical* relation to past perpetrations. They preserve a tangible contiguity with both the perpetrator and the perpetration itself, with the demonstration of this contiguity forming an essential part of their constructed meaning – or perhaps even the primary foundation of their importance. As Patrizia Violi argues in her semiotic analysis of memorial spaces, indexical trauma sites do not merely reconstruct or re-evoke past events that happened there, in the way that more common museums or memorials built *ex-novo* could do. Rather, they activate a direct link to the past, referring to 'something more cogent, something they have directly witnessed: these places are themselves *testimonies* of the past'.⁸ The idea of indexical sites as testimonies leads us to explore how this link between materiality and the past can exist, how it is constructed, or evoked. Our analyses focus, more specifically, on how the form and content of these sites, as well as the curatorial and artistic strategies employed, shape the cultural image of the perpetrator and his/her historical transmission. Key questions are: how do places that are directly or indirectly connected to the memory, life, or actions of a perpetrator become cultural objects that convey a more complex narrative of cultural trauma? What ethical challenges arise in representing and experiencing these stories? And how can artistic practices influence them?

While other understandings of war crimes and crimes against humanity rely on documentary evidence or human witnesses, our approach takes its cue from inanimate objects and spaces. Our inquiry unfolds through two central lines of reflection. First, we seek to broaden the notion of the witness, extending it beyond human subjects to include objects and material spaces, in the way that Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman suggest in their compelling account of the forensic analysis of Joseph Mengele's skull.⁹ Second, we examine how these

8 Patrizia Violi, 'Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory: Tuol Sleng, Villa Grimaldi and the Bologna Ustica Museum', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29.1 (2012), 39; emphasis in original.

9 On the relationship between materiality and witnessing see, in particular, Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Frankfurt am Main:

objects and spaces are activated as witnesses through the narratives constructed around them. Focusing on curatorial and creative practices that bring out the stories ‘hosted’ by an index-site provides a fresh perspective for studying the symbolic, material, and human interactions within that space.

This special section is the result of ongoing dialogues between the contributors and the broader academic community.¹⁰ These materialised, in particular, at a panel session involving the participants during the 7th annual Memory Studies Association conference in Newcastle, July 2023, entitled ‘Perpetrator Spaces: Preservation, Representation and Memory’. Through case studies of WWII atrocity sites in Belgium, Germany, Norway, and The Netherlands, the panel discussed the forms of preservation and artistic representations of violence in spaces connected to the memory of perpetrators and perpetration. Beyond the panel itself, this collective and ongoing conversation has moreover been facilitated by the Creative Europe co-funded project ‘Houses of Darkness: Perpetrator Perspectives’ (PI, Ingvild Hagen Kjørholt). The project aimed to explore perpetrator spaces at three European Nazi camp memorial sites – the Bergen-Belsen memorial (DE), Herinneringscentrum Kamp Westerbork (NL) and the Falstad Centre (NO).¹¹

Comprising four papers, our special section revisits and develops the themes of the Newcastle panel, with particular attention to the narrative and testimonial potential of perpetrator sites in our times. It opens with two articles that examine commandants’ houses and guards’ barracks – places that embody a strikingly complex topography as they are located both within the camp and at its periphery. While no direct physical harm was inflicted upon the prisoners within these domestic settings, the houses were nonetheless integral to the machinery of violence and cannot be disentangled from the broader system of perpetration, thus serving as prime examples of what Sharon Macdonald has termed ‘perpetration at a distance’.¹² The uncanny juxtaposition of the mundane domestic sphere and the latent crime scene invites a form of

Portikus, 2012).

10 All the essays in this subsection are the result of enriching dialogues the authors have had with numerous colleagues. Special thanks go to Sabina Tanović and Susanne Knittel who, with their invaluable advice and suggestions, made an important contribution to the realisation of this project.

11 For more information, see the project website: <https://housesofdarkness.eu/>.

12 Macdonald, p. 3.

memorialisation that specifically interrogates the dynamics between everyday human praxis and acts of extreme violence. As Ingvild Hagen Kjørholt and Mario Panico argue, artistic interventions can play a significant role in shaping the interpretation of such complex memorial sites. Their articles demonstrate how works of art, when strategically placed in the perpetrators' homes, interact with the existing space by adding a new layer of meaning that may contrast with both the way the former residents experienced the place and the conventional narrative of perpetrators as embodiments of pure evil.

Kjørholt's article provides a comprehensive analysis of the temporary exhibition 'Perpetrator Perspectives' (2022–2023) that was commissioned by the Falstad Centre, a state-funded memorial site dedicated to the history of a former Nazi camp in Norway. The exhibition features six art installations carefully distributed throughout the now refurbished commandant's house, which was originally constructed by the prisoners of SS *Strafgefangenenlager* Falstad to serve as residence and operational headquarters to the camp's last three commandants. Through a diverse array of media and materials, and by systematically referring to but also disturbing the intimate domestic setting of the home, the exhibition casts visitors as 'embodied viewers', inviting them into a closer proximity to the perpetrator's inner world. The article draws on Debarati Sanyal's and Michael Rothberg's notions of 'complicity'¹³ and 'implication'¹⁴ in order to explore how viewers are urged to re-examine their own role in the face of memory politics as well as contemporary injustices.

Panico's analysis focuses on two former perpetrator homes. The first is an SS-Auxiliary's house at the Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück in Germany, and the second is the apartment of Rubén Chamorro, who was the director of the former detention and torture centre ESMA in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 1976 to 1979. Building on Georges Perec's notion of the 'infra-ordinary' and reviewing a series of artistic interventions at both sites, Panico explores how objects connected to the everyday materiality of the perpetrator can provoke reflection on the ordinariness of evil. Art installations infuse these items with a sense of being 'haunted', or place them in stark contrast with the off-scene violence. By doing so, they unsettle our assumptions about the domestic and solicit deeper contemplation of the mechanisms through which violence is normalised, hidden, and later exposed.

13 Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

14 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

Michael Safarić Branthwaite's contribution, then, offers an artist's perspective that complements the scholarly analyses presented in the first two papers. His creative projects were inspired by, and presented at, two Nazi camp sites – the Commandant's House at Falstad and the former transit camp of Westerbork in the Netherlands – to explore the materiality of the Holocaust. Departing from conventional methods of representing atrocity, Branthwaite's works do not depict acts of violence directly. Instead, through manipulating or 'translating' the form of objects, presenting them out of context, or creating unexpected, even ironic, juxtapositions in the space, Branthwaite encourages viewers to reflect on these objects' connections to violence and perpetration. His work navigates the tension between presence and absence, the representable and the unrepresentable, the traumatic and the trivial, deliberately moving away from raw emotion to critically illuminate the complex relation between the historical event, their human actors, and the material traces they leave behind.

The curatorial strategies in the commandants' houses and Kamp Westerbork sharply diverge from the approach taken at Fort Breendonk in Belgium. This location, once a Nazi *Auffanglager*, is a place where violence was not distant but occurred within these very walls. Since 1947 the fortress has been a memorial-museum that immerses visitors in the 'Hell of Breendonk'. In the last article of the special section, Anneleen Spiessens demonstrates how the current tour exposes visitors to a series of highly charged, 'authentic' spaces, intended to make the horrors of the camp 'palpable'. While the museum succeeds in fostering empathic connections between contemporary visitors and historical prisoners through the materiality of the space, Spiessens contends, it falls short in other respects. By relying on a realistic, almost mimetic, mode of representation, compared to the artistic mediations in the previous case studies, Fort Breendonk fails to actively cultivate critical self-awareness concerning curatorial strategies. Moreover, the emphasis on the victim's perspective and the emotional distancing of the perpetrators excludes a more nuanced depiction of the diverse actorial roles and underlying structures of collective violence.

Together, the four contributions shed light on the varied approaches to the spatial and material dimensions of former perpetrator sites. The involvement of artists as agents of memory at Falstad, Ravensbrück, ESMA, and Westerbork is invaluable in revealing the layered nature of these spaces. Indeed, the discussed installations provoke a meditation on perspective and viewpoint: what do we see, exactly, and through

whose eyes do we see it? How did these spaces and objects hold different meanings to different individuals in the past? And how do we, as contemporary visitors, position ourselves physically and morally to them? Instead of indulging in complacent binary narratives of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, the artistic interventions implicate the visitor by highlighting the multiple roles and positions individuals may occupy in the context of collective violence. In contrast, the immersive, realistic scenography of Fort Breendonk tends to present the space and its material aspects in an unambiguous manner: as self-evident, authentic testimonies to the suffering of the prisoners and the sadism of the camp guards. Visitors are afforded a more comfortable position, distancing themselves from the perpetrator’s perspective and sidestepping any deeper reflection on their own complicity in contemporary injustices. Although artistic responses are not always easy to read, and may even lead to contradictory outcomes, the articles in this section suggest that they do have the potential to offer a more nuanced understanding of past atrocities and their contemporary resonances.

Work Cited

- Jirku, Brigitte E. and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, ‘Mapping Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence. An Introduction’, in *Geographies of Perpetration. Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence*, ed. by Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), pp. 7–20
- , eds., *Geographies of Perpetration: Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021)
- Hirsch, Marianne, ‘Rethinking Holocaust Memory after October 7’, *Public Books*, 15 July 2024 <<https://www.publicbooks.org/rethinking-holocaust-memory-after-october-7/>> [accessed 11 December 2024]
- Keenan, Thomas and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Frankfurt am Main: Portikus, 2012)
- Logan, William and Keir Reeves, *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with ‘Difficult Heritage’* (London: Routledge, 2008)
- Macdonald, Sharon, *Difficult Heritage: Negotiating the Nazi Past in Nuremberg and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2009)
- Nieuwenhuis, Marijn and David Crouch, eds., *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn Between Disciplines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)
- Niven, Bill and Chloe Paver, eds., *Memorialization in Germany since 1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

- Rigney, Ann, 'Materiality and Memory: Objects to Ecologies. A Response to Maria Zirra', *Parallax*, 23.4 (2017), 474–78
- Rothberg, Michael, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019)
- Sanyal, Debarati, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015)
- Silberman, Marc and Florence Vatan, eds., *Memory and Postwar Memorials: Confronting the Violence of the Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- Symonds, James and Pavel Vařeka, eds., *Archaeologies of Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism and Repression: Dark Modernities* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)
- Tanović, Sabina, *Designing Memory: The Architecture of Commemoration in Europe, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)
- Tunbridge, J. E. and G. J. Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict* (Chichester, NY: J. Wiley, 1996)
- Violi, Patrizia, 'Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory: Tuol Sleng, Villa Grimaldi and the Bologna Ustica Museum', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29.1 (2012), 36–75
- Warf, Barney and Santa Arias, eds., *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspective* (London: Routledge)
- Weizman, Eyal, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017)