

Exhibiting the Holocaust in its Immediate Aftermath: Exhibition Histories, Practices and Politics in the Immediate Postwar Period, 1944-1949

Dr. Rachel Perry

Fall Semester
Wednesday 12-15:00

Course Description

Exhibitions not only illustrate history, they construct it; the product of historical research, they are also historical texts in their own right. In the immediate postwar period, hundreds of exhibitions were staged that sought to tell the story of the recent past. Whether meticulously planned or ad hoc, permanent or temporary, travelling or site specific, these first exhibitions played a significant role in shaping public knowledge about the Holocaust. Their prevalence, popularity and impact have been vastly underestimated. Arguably, one of the most important media for conveying the Holocaust to the general public, these early exhibitions have received relatively little scholarly attention, in comparison with the media of photography and film for instance. Reconstructing and excavating these exhibition histories can tell us a great deal about how different nations, communities and individuals chose to remember, and what they privileged and understood about the war.

Already on the day after liberation, the process of Holocaust “museumification” was initiated in site specific exhibits erected in Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz and Majdanek by the liberating armies as well as by the survivors themselves. In addition to these more temporary or ephemeral exhibitions, there were those mounted in the DP camps by the survivors themselves, such as Tzvi Kaddushin. There were also the official, state sponsored “blockbusters” held in large, public venues in European capitals, organized by governments (such as *Crimes hitlériens* in France and *Warsaw Accuses* in Poland) as well as by special interest groups, such as the Communist Fédération nationale des déportés et internés résistants et patriotes (FNDIRP) and international organizations such as the United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC). And there were more unconventional “train-exhibitions” mentioned by Pieter Lagrou that traversed Belgium, stopping in 71 train stations and displaying works of art made by the inmates as well as ashes from the crematoria and models of the camps. These exhibitions cover the spectrum, sharing few common denominators and varying in their budget, resources, space, and tone (moralizing, educational, didactic or prurient); their use of media (some privilege photography, art work, sculpture, panoramic film theaters and dioramic constructions); their knowledge (or lack thereof, mounted by laypersons as well as professionals); and their function: whether to inform and educate (or re-educate in the case of the denazification exhibitions), commemorate or convince and/ or shock.

By excavating these exhibition histories, this project will examine how Holocaust memory was shaped in these first exhibitions. How were objects, images and

technologies deployed (films, dioramas and photographs)? What promotional material and ephemera were used (posters and articles)? What were the curatorial strategies and techniques used by the organizers? How were they received by their public? How were they shaped by national needs and/or respond to political demands? How did they help to construct and bind national and communal identity? How did they respond to or participate in the Allies' wider denazification program and how did they prepare the ground for the Nuremberg trials and legal issues of war crimes? What can they tell us about the canonization of certain photographs over others (those we designate as "iconic") as well as certain modes of presentation (aestheticization, sacralization, redemptive). Although most of these exhibitions were short-lived, many of the practices they employed set a precedent for curatorial strategies of presentation adopted many decades later by Holocaust museums.

Course Requirements and Grade Distribution: In this course you will select one exhibition or topic from the early postwar period to research. Working individually or in teams, you will

- review all primary and secondary sources and build an annotated bibliography
- create a museum display or a ppt
- present your research to the class

The **final grade** is determined by your own student self-assessment, a peer assessment and my evaluation of the overall excellence of the project.

Attendance and Class participation: Each class is divided into two parts. In the first, I will lecture. In the second, we will discuss strategies of presentation, problems in research and information retrieval, refine our research questions and conclusions together in a workshop/discussion forum.

Regular and punctual attendance is crucial. Because this class only meets once a week, you should come to class having completed all of the required reading and ready to discuss new concepts and arguments. PDF files of assigned articles may be downloaded or printed directly from the Moodle website. Cell phones should be turned off before class begins. Please notify me by e-mail if you cannot be present in class.

Office Hours: By appointment. I can be reached at 054-772-1169.
Email: perryrub@bezeqint.net

Course Schedule:

Week 1: **Introduction**

- Brainstorming session: What do you already know about the subject? What are your (pl) areas of specialization, languages, interest?

Week 2: **Exhibition history as a medium**

- Form Research Teams and member roles: each individual or group will be responsible for one specific exhibition or topic and create either a museum display of their own or an oral presentation coupled with a ppt.

Week 3: **Mining the archive**

- Develop Research Plan: What do we know? What do we not know? What was the overall impact of the exhibitions selected? Its reception?

Week 4: **Creating a Typology**

- Review of Primary Sources and Secondary Sources - build an Annotated Bibliography (with at least five-ten sources cited, including credible internet sources). Keep a running record of ALL of your sources -- book titles, authors, page numbers, Internet urls of imagery, et cetera.

Week 5: **Curatorial strategies** and scenography: motivation, curation, installation

- Begin building your display/ppt and presentation

Week 6: **Allied Exhibitions – in the Camps** site specific (Buchenwald, Dachau, Ordruf)

Week 7: **Survivor Exhibitions – in the Camps** site specific (Dachau, Majdanek)

Week 8: **Survivor Exhibitions in the DP camps**

Week 9: **Government sponsored and International Exhibitions** (UN, French Ministry of Information, Polish govt.)

Week 10: **Evidence: What was used?:** Artifacts, Photographs, Reconstructions (models and mannequins), Film, Witness testimonies

Dry run review of presentations/ppts – with my comments and suggestions to incorporate

Week 11: **Final Presentations**

Week 12: **Final Presentations**