

# Constructing the Communist Other: A Comparative Study of Museum Representations of Communism

By

Brianne Hwang

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Supervisor: Professor István Rév  
Secondary Reader: Professor Constantin Iordachi

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## Abstract

This thesis compares three museums' representation of Communism as presented to the Western visitor: the House of Terror in Budapest, Grutas Park near Druskininkai, Lithuania, and the DDR Museum in Berlin. These museums represent divergent approaches to the difficult and controversial subject of how to represent the nation's recent past. The aim of this thesis is to analyze each narrative of Communism as it is presented to a Western audience, and to elucidate the components of exhibition that contribute to creating a particular representation of Communism.

I argue that the House of Terror claims to own and impart "the truth" about the evil Communist Other and uses manipulative exhibition practices to relay this Truth. The narrative of Grutas Park is more ambiguous in that it fosters themes of victimhood and resistance, but does so inconsistently. The DDR Museum's optimistic representation of everyday life appeals to the trend of Communist Kitsch but still presents a critical view of life under Socialist dictatorship. I use blog entries and visitor comments to gauge the Westerner's reactions to these representations and museum experiences. These studies are situated within their political and national contexts, aligning their representations with cleavages in academic literature regarding how the history of life under Communism should be written.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Theoretical Framework: Approaching the Museum Narrative and Experience</b> .....	12
<b>Chapter I. Elements of Exhibition and Narrative</b> .....	25
<b>Setting and Practical Considerations: Location</b> .....	25
<b>Audience</b> .....	28
<b>Exhibition Design and Layout</b> .....	31
<b>Objects</b> .....	35
What can be Displayed? .....	36
Symbols and Signs.....	39
Objects as Evidence .....	42
Labels or the Lack Thereof .....	43
<b>The Element of Play</b> .....	46
<b>Objects for Consumption</b> .....	48
<b>Music and Sound</b> .....	49
<b>The Combined Effect- “What it was like”</b> .....	51
<b>Chapter II. Narrative Themes and the Completed Narrative</b> .....	55
House of Terror .....	55
The Communist Monster.....	57
Victims and Victimizers .....	60
Imparting and Discovering the Truth.....	62
Nurturing Preconceptions: the Totalitarian Model .....	66
The Usefulness of ‘Totalitarianism’.....	68
Grutas Park: Victimhood and Resistance .....	70
DDR Museum .....	77
<b>Chapter III. Political and Public Debates and a Present Perspective</b> .....	83
Exhibiting the Nation .....	83
<b>Present Day Political Motivations</b> .....	84
<b>History at Odds with Memory</b> .....	87
<b>Downplaying Terror: Emphasizing Banal Dictatorship</b> .....	89
<b>Disrespecting the Past</b> .....	94
<b>The Presence of the Past</b> .....	97
<b>The Multi-functionality of the Modern Museum</b> .....	100
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	104
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	113

## Introduction

From packages of Jamboree Spearmint Bubblegum to towering statues of the New Man, material remains and the memory of Central and Eastern Europe's Communist past have been collected and preserved by the efforts of a number of museums in post-Communist countries. As recognized guardians of memory, the museums offer a framework in which to deliver a specific narrative to the visitor through multi-sensory stimulus, going beyond the capacity of a narrative relayed by book or film: the visitor may be able to climb onto a cold statue of Lenin, enter via footage the no-longer secret trial of Imre Nagy, or taste an unappealing serving of "nostalgia borsch." For those who lived under a Communist regime, these elements may trigger personal recollection and remembrance. For the Western visitor, however, they construct narrative and deliver an experience that seemingly encourages historical understanding. This gained knowledge is made meaningful by empathizing with and partaking in another group's collective memory.

Thematically, these museums vary in focus from the reconstruction of everyday life under Socialism to the memorializing of past terrors. This comparative study will span three different thematic focuses in assessing representations of communism as manifest in three different national contexts. From the blatantly tourism-driven and sensationalist to more self-consciously "objective" and didactic, each museum confronts the problematic task of representing Communism with a different approach. The aim of this thesis will be to analyze these various approaches by assessing the elements that comprise a museum experience, and elucidating the narrative and narrative themes that are presented to the western eye. I will address the questions of whether these museums construct a distancing narrative that creates a

Communist Other, or whether the narrative is assimilating, emphasizing affinity between life under Socialist dictatorship and liberal democracy. Ample scholarship has shown that *othering*<sup>1</sup> has been a widespread practice in museums, and indeed can be located in the origins of the modern museum.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European gentlemen could display their status and worldliness by assembling cabinets of curiosities, rooms filled with antiquities and objects of ethnographic, natural, scientific, or artistic interest, for the viewing pleasure of their peers. As the name *Kunst-und-Wunderkammer* (art and wonder cabinet) suggests, objects worthy of inclusion should somehow be remarkable, capable of piquing the viewer's curiosity. While the practice of collecting objects of intrigue did not originate with the cabinet of curiosities- Stephen Bahn cites the medieval popularity of relics and shrines as the cabinet's antecedent,<sup>3</sup> and the Museum of Jurassic Technology lists Ptolomie's institute at Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and Noah's ark as spectacular predecessors<sup>4</sup> - the established practice of collecting consequently institutionalized the social convention of viewing these collections, thereby encouraging a taste for the bizarre and extraordinary.

The tradition of collecting objects of interest for display is the predecessor to the modern museum; indeed, some larger cabinet collections became some of the first museums opened to the public in Europe. The ubiquity and variety of museums today is a testament to their prominence in the makeup of Western culture. The function of the museum has since expanded and diversified, and museums now house an almost limitless scope of subject matters

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<sup>1</sup> Discussion of the background and nature of "othering" and its application to this thesis occurs in the Theoretical Framework chapter.

<sup>2</sup> See Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington D.C., 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Bahn, "Shrines, Curiosities, and the Rhetoric of Display" in *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances*, (The New Press: New York, 1995) 15-29.

<sup>4</sup> "Introduction," Museum of Jurassic Technology, <http://www.mjt.org/intro/genborch.htm> (accessed May 29, 2009).

beyond curiosities and art. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley's *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* adumbrates of the multi-functionality of today's museum: it can be a vault, a cathedral of culture, a school, a laboratory, a cultural center, a forum, a tribunal, a theater, a party, an advocate, a place of mourning, an artifact in its own right, and a tourist attraction.<sup>5</sup> This study will reveal museums of Communism taking on various combinations of these roles, and with differing aims and effects.

A more literal definition of the museum has been put forth by the International Council of Museums, headquartered in Paris, defining "a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment."<sup>6</sup> This functional description of the modern museum underlines its duty as an institution of education. Beyond the self-imposed mandate to educate, there exists an understanding between museum-goers and the museum that material presented within its walls is factual and necessarily true. In other words, simply having the label "museum" imbues the institution with authority and credibility. This culturally sanctioned form of educating and entertaining is the vehicle for the delivery of an illustrated, enlivened narrative.

As museum audiences expand, the role of the museum and the expectations of its visitors have changed. Andreas Huyssen contends that spectators are "looking for emphatic experiences, instant illuminations, stellar events, and blockbuster shows rather than serious and

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1998), 138-139.

<sup>6</sup> "Definition of Terms," *International Council of Museums*, under Icom Statutes, August 24, 2007. <http://icom.museum/statutes.html#3> (accessed May 4, 2009).

meticulous appropriation of cultural knowledge.”<sup>7</sup> The expectations of the modern visitor are not dissimilar from the experience of Renaissance cabinet viewers gazing at antiquities and oddities kept in glass cases in seeking to experience the fantastic, the weird, that which is foreign- with the understanding that data imputed in from within the sterility of a museum environment is necessarily educational and true- but museums must be on the cutting edge to retain viewer interest. The traditional conception of a museum as a preserver of “high culture” has given way to a new conception of the museum as a place where visitors can expect to be both entertained and educated. As such, the craft of curation entails the manipulation of multisensory stimulants in service of the high calling of educating the public. Gazing at the exotic has become a learning experience.

The notion of Othering has been used in museums to emphasize difference with regard to race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>8</sup> The study of museums and the history of museums, as developed and expanded in the 1980s, has been thorough in its attention to resultant political and ideological meaning. This study will differ in its emphasis on the exoticizing of a particular politics and ideology itself- that of the Communist Other, exoticized in both its manifestations as a system of terror and in everyday life. A comparable practice of othering in museums can be readily observed in museums of ethnography, wherein visitors can be captivated by the exoticism of the usually primitive and strange Other. Exploring the European construction of the other, the Hungarian Museum of Ethnography’s 2008 exhibition “The Other” states, “Humbled representatives of a despised culture, the other community serves here as nothing more than a propaganda tool in the service of the colonial cause or an exotic curiosity paraded

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<sup>7</sup> Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories* (Routledge, 1995), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Crane, *Museums and Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3.



for the pleasure of the European public.”<sup>9</sup> The Other here functions as a political tool that is effective because of its ability to captivate its audience. I argue that museums treat Communism in a similar way: crafted into an “emphatic experience” or “blockbuster show,” its exoticization too can serve as a political tool.

Evidence of the relevance of museums in revealing and keeping the past alive for political purposes abounded at the inaugural meeting and conference of the Foundation for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, which commenced on March 6, 2009 at the House of Terror in Budapest. Explaining the significance of the meeting’s venue, founding member and former prime minister of Estonia Mart Laar described the House of Terror as a place where visitors can “see, understand, and feel” the crimes of Communism.<sup>10</sup> Museums have been identified as a means of effectively delivering a specific narrative to the public: thus it is fitting that House of Terror Director Dr. Maria Schmidt’s address to the FICC called for the establishment of similar museums in Berlin, Brussels, and Washington D.C.<sup>11</sup> European parliamentarians, politicians- including Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán and several Fidesz representatives, former heads-of-state, journalists, and representatives from a number of museums of Communism, including several from the House of Terror, were in attendance. Museum and political representatives together worked during the weekend seminar to establish networks, initiate campaigns, discuss memorial projects, formulate educational models, and target politicians, among other initiatives designed to further worldwide condemnation of communist crimes.<sup>12</sup> The active participation of House of Terror (also serving as host) and

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<sup>9</sup> Hungarian Museum of Ethnography, 2008-2009 “The Other” exhibition pamphlet entitled, “Does the Other Community Consist of Primitives”

<sup>10</sup> Inaugural meeting, Foundation for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, March 6-8 2009, Budapest, Hungary. Video footage will be available on the foundation’s website <http://www.comunistcrimes.org/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

other museum representatives in the proceedings of this conference is evidence of the interrelations of museums and politics.

From the profusion of museums that attempt to preserve memory and a history of Communism, this study will focus on three institutions that represent vastly different approaches to representation: the House of Terror in Budapest, Grutas Park in Lithuania, and the DDR-Museum in Berlin. Other museums in Europe devoted to the memory of Communism and communist crimes include the Occupation Museum of Latvia 1940-1991 (1993), The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and Anti-Communist Resistance in Sighet, Romania (1997), the Museum of Communism in Prague (2001), the Museum of Occupations, Tallinn (2003), Museum of the Genocides in Vilnius, and Emlékpont (Point of Remembrance) in the south of Hungary (2006). Additionally, there are a number of museums devoted to more specialized related areas, such as the Stasi Museum in Berlin or the Communist Iconography Museum in Bucharest. I have chosen the three case studies because they represent a wide range of approaches to the topic, both in terms of exhibition layout and the material presented. These museums provide significant case studies because of all three have enjoyed popularity amongst both local and foreign audiences, and their impact is widespread. In addition to popularity, these institutions have received much of both acclaim and criticism, bringing them further into public awareness. I contribute to already existing scholarship with a comparative approach; the aim is not to simply compare and contrast these museums with one another, but to use them to explore the diversity of museal representations of Communism by assessing the narratives they present. The study of narrative will not be limited to a textual interpretation of narrative, but will include all elements of exhibition design that illustrate or in some way contribute to the overall narrative, resulting in museum experience.

Since opening in 2002, over three million visitors have passed through the House of Terror under 60 Andrassy út, formerly the headquarters of the Fascist Arrow Cross and Communist party secret police.<sup>13</sup> Its focus, as the name suggests, is the terror of the two regimes. Sponsored by Fidesz, the then in power right-wing government, it has been lauded by some for its powerful exhibition and criticized by others for its historical inaccuracies and deficiencies. The exhibition begins with Hungary succumbing to Nazi occupation in 1944, continues with Soviet occupation after WWII. Among other incongruities, critics have pointed out that although it purports to be a memorial to the terror of both regimes, the overwhelming majority of the museum is devoted to the Communist era.<sup>14</sup> To this and other criticisms, representatives of the House of Terror defend the institution by arguing that the museum facilitates a dialogue about Communism that is otherwise silenced by society, and that Communism is dominant in the exhibition because it lasted for longer.<sup>15</sup> I call into question this claim to fostering dialogue. Additionally, scholars question the exhibitions avoidance of addressing Hungarian complicity in the atrocities committed, denying any Hungarian agency, claiming innocence and ignorance. Whatever the response of Hungarian scholars, politicians, and the public, the response from Western visitors has been overwhelmingly positive. Guidebooks are largely uncritical of the House: most recommend it as a “must-see” sight in Budapest, thereby contributing to its popularity. Blog entries and comments show that most visitors also highly recommend the experience to others.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> “It is as if the Arrow Cross never intended to settle down until the end of time (‘resurrecting the thousand-year empire’), as if that party had been meant just as a short intermezzo, in contrast to the devious Communists who intended to rule for long and painful decades.” István Rév, “The Terror of the House,” in *(Re)visualizing National History*, edited by Robin Ostow, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 64.

<sup>15</sup> House of Terror representative interview by author, Budapest, Hungary, May 19, 2009.

Something between a museum and a theme park, Grutas Park in Lithuania opened in 2001 as the winning design in a contest to create a final resting home for Communist era statues. In addition to the Soviet sculpture exhibition, Grutas Park features a museum, zoo, Soviet-style playground, and numerous cafes and souvenir kiosks. Its theme-park atmosphere has earned it the nickname “Stalin World.” The park has been controversial since even before its opening, and like the House of Terror, visitor response has been overwhelmingly positive.

The final museum I consider is the DDR Museum in Berlin. Opened in 2006, it has received critical acclaim, including a nomination in 2008 for the “European Museum of the Year Award.” Since the museum is new and less controversial than some other museums of Communism, very little scholarship has been written about it. According to its website, the museum’s aim is to allow visitors to experience everyday life as it was under Socialism. It seeks to “reconsider existing clichés and [provide] a hands-on experience of history.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than displaying items in glass cases, items are meant to be touched and thereby experienced. Visitors are largely enthusiastic and positive in their reviews of the museum, and if judged by its growing popularity, it can be counted a success.<sup>17</sup> Its focus on the quotidian has caused some to suggest it produces too fond of a representation of the past.

The first chapter consists of an empirical exposition of the elements that go into the construction of a convincing narrative and an interesting experience. After addressing the practical considerations of location, audience, and exhibition format, careful attention will be paid to the use of objects: their origins, nature, and current function in their new museum home. I note the significance of including certain items in the display while leaving others out. Curators can assign meaning to the included objects by choosing whether to label and explain a

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<sup>16</sup> “The DDR-Museum- Life in the GDR,” <http://www.ddr-museum.de/en/> (accessed February 28, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> DDR Museum Press Kit.

given object with accompanying text or to allow the object to “speak for itself.” The aim is to assess how these various objects are displayed in terms of placement and context within the display. Attention to these aspects provides insight into how from the mundane (toilet covers at the DDR Museum) to the macabre (torture devices at the House of Terror) are invested with meaning.

Additionally, this chapter explores the relationship between objects, sound, layout, and other features in order to determine if and what hierarchy may be imposed on these elements in the creation of a convincing narrative. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley maintains that there has been a shift away from object and artifact centrality towards constructing an “experience” oriented museum visit focused on the visitor.<sup>18</sup> However, hands-on museums such as the DDR Museum have self-consciously brought the focus back to the objects themselves by shifting the role of the object from being something that is observed to something that is handled and thereby “experienced.” Visitor interaction- how it is encouraged or discouraged- will add to the discussion of the museum experience.

The second chapter attempts to identify the narrative forms each museum adopts for the delivery of information. It determines prominent narrative themes in the texts of each museum, inferring how these themes may be served by other elements of the museum experience. It also identifies themes that are left out- possibly deliberately excluded- from the museum narratives. Whether these themes emphasize similarity or promote distance from a Communist Other is examined.

Assessing the museums’ roles in the reinforcement or establishment of an understanding of Communism requires the identification of prevalent Western conceptions of communism, as

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<sup>18</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimbley, 138.

born of the Cold War and perpetuated thereafter. I start with the assumption that the Westerner's conception of communism is based on its categorization as a manifestation of totalitarianism, characterized by Hannah Arendt's explanation of totalitarianisms' of use of terror, violence, and propaganda, a single party state, state controlled economy, and the creation of personality cults. The second chapter will assess the extent to which museum narratives make use of this or other paradigms to effectively connect with Western visitors whose prior conception of Communism is rooted in the concept of totalitarianism.

The final chapter approaches the role of museums as sites of national collective memory and preservers or creators of national history. One of the recognized responsibilities of museums is to forbid the slipping away of past events, actions, and lives in order to ensure that the past stays present. The emergence of a memory discourse in the 1980s was accompanied not coincidentally with tremendous growth in the popularity of museums. Susan Crane succinctly defines the relationship: a museum is a storehouse for memories.<sup>19</sup> As sites of memory, museums have become sites where history- that of states, regimes, occupations, governments, groups, and individual lives- is not merely put on display, but is kept alive. Furthermore, this memorializing of history encourages presentism, viewing history, the past, in terms of the present.<sup>20</sup> The final chapter questions museums' attempts to keep the past present, exhibiting "living history," and evaluate their effectiveness. It also looks at how the "presence" of the past is asserted in museum exhibitions. Exhibiting national history is intensely controversial, and this chapter will identify key points of contention regarding each of these museums. It further situates these museums first within political contexts, examining the debates regarding their presentation of history. These issues are addressed in light of current

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<sup>19</sup> Crane, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Further discussion of presentism will occur in the Theoretical Framework chapter.

academic debates within literature questioning the most appropriate characterization of the Socialist past. I adopt this structure in order to build a supported argument about the political nature of these museums and the impact of the museum experiences on western visitors. It is important to understand first the “bones” of the exhibition as the components that motivate and illustrate the narrative in order to then view them as they may be affected by political and academic debates.

Museums of Communism, along with museums of foreign occupations, genocides, and atrocities of recent history, have secured places in the itineraries of many Western visitors. Countless guidebooks, online travel forums, blogs, articles, and travel channel specials advertise their existence and heighten their importance as must-see sites. As travel becomes easier and more accessible, tourists are venturing more frequently and to further destinations in pursuit of experiences. In addition to the possible sway of political motivation, the necessity of appealing to the seasoned traveler makes more challenging the task of relaying an objective history; what can perhaps be best described as one-upmanship adds to the problem of maintaining subjectivity amongst these museums. With still more museums being planned and opened, their reach with Western audiences is only likely to grow.<sup>21</sup> Study of these museums’ presentation of Communism, by way of convincing narratives and impressive experiences, is relevant to the present cultural and political affairs.

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<sup>21</sup> A House of Terror representative reported in a personal interview that plans for more museums of Communism in Hungary were in initial stages but have been halted on account of the current economic crisis. Interview May 19, 2009, Budapest.

## Theoretical Framework: Approaching the Museum Narrative and Experience

From the diversity of characterizations of the museum discussed in the introduction, I have chosen to approach the study of museums as the study of a narrative, adding this focus to consideration of the museum experience. In this section I address two theoretical issues of central importance to my topic: Othering and historical presentism as observable in museum practice. I also briefly address the well-developed fields of museums and memory, as well as the function of museums as presentors of national history. My methodology for analyzing museum narratives will be gleaned from a number of precedents in museal studies. Hayden White provides a framework for looking at narrative, while Paul Williams' *Memorial Museums* is used as a precedent in looking at elements of exhibition. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine's volume of articles, *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, provides a basis for looking at contemporary museums, museum practice, audiences, and the relationships between these elements. Published in 1991, the volume predates the emergence of museums of Communism; however, many of its articles address issues within the context of other museums that are applicable here.

As purveyors of history, museums make easy targets. Indeed, for historians who seemingly have no difficulty criticizing the scholarship of fellow historians past and present, history conveyed through multiple channels, as amalgamated in the museum's narrative, exposes the presented history to multiple channels of attack. In addition to the risk, possibly even the inevitability of inaccuracy, museums are particularly susceptible to common pitfalls of history writing Michael Kammen has outlined: prejudice, presentism, and selectivity.<sup>22</sup> Adding

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<sup>22</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, (London: Verso, 1994), 284.



to the complexity of presenting history is the complexity of forming and relating history of or as it relates to the nation.

All three of the museums discussed here are confirmation of Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone's assertion that the point of contestation of recounting a national history is the question of who or what is entitled to speak for the past.<sup>23</sup> With the House of Terror, it is the question of both: critics object to one political party (Fidesz) being the support behind a particular narration of history as well as contesting the accuracy and form of the narrative itself. At all three museums, "what" speaks is a point of controversy: should prison cells, jars of Spreewald pickles, or the busts of Marx and Engels be allowed to serve as the substance of a narrative about communism?

More generally, these questions fall within cleavages in academic literature on whether the history of Socialist dictatorships can best be conceived of in terms of the totalitarianism model or as social history. As discussed in the introduction, the preknowledge Western visitors bring to a museum of Communism is arguably formulated around the concept of totalitarianism as propagated during the Cold War with an emphasis on dictatorship, systems of terror, state-controlled economy, and monopoly of power. Alternately, Sheila Fitzpatrick's social history of the Soviet Union conceived of its history outside the totalitarian framework, arguing that a more complete assessment of history could be conducted from the ground up, opposed to the top-down regime imposed structure of totalitarianism. I show how the DDR Museum formulates a social history, using everyday life as the basis from which to build a history of the GDR.

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<sup>23</sup> Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., in *Memory History Nation*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 1.

## Museums and Memory

These museums serve a double-function as sites of memory, and therefore must be considered to carry a different if not heavier load than traditional museums of history or ethnography. My study joins a well-developed field of scholarship on the topic of museums and memory. Leaders in the field have explained the apparent need to preserve memory and history in the form of the museum in a number of ways. At the forefront of the discourse on sites of memory is Pierre Nora, who in his work *Les Lieux de Mémoire* conceives of museums as part of a group of places created to order the past in order to cope with modernity and the disintegration of organically formed collective memory.<sup>24</sup> More recently, a genre of museums whose stated purpose is memorialization has emerged, with memorial museums being established all around the world to commemorate atrocities and make them known to the public.

Paul Williams' *Memorial Museums: the Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities* provides a useful survey of precedents to and influences on museums of Communism that function as sites of memory and as museums.<sup>25</sup> Memorial museums, according to Williams, are a distinct branch of museums that aim to commemorate a historic event of mass suffering. This encapsulates the stated aim of the House of Terror, but I will also deal with museums that preserve not only the memory of suffering, but also of the memory of a bygone era and life therein. Explaining the apparent popularity of museums and memory can be done in a number of ways. David Lowenthal attributes memory's appeal to its provision of affirmative assurances:

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<sup>24</sup> Crane, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Williams' book also maps out the emergence of memorial museums and shows that more have been created in the last 10 years (from 2007) than in the past 100.

The ultimate uncertainty of the past makes us all the more anxious to validate that things were as reputed. To gain assurance that yesterday was as substantial as today we saturate ourselves with bygone reliquary details, reaffirming memory and history in tangible format.<sup>26</sup>

The museum as a place of reaffirmation suggests that museum visitors enter a museum exhibit primed for the reinforcement and perhaps expansion of existing knowledge and biases and less receptive to contrary information. Thus, it is not difficult for the Western visitor to reconcile the horrors of Communist crimes to a preexisting conception of the Evil Empire, or to appreciate the dreariness of life within a totalitarian system. Alternately, the presenting another's everyday life can be a reaffirmation of that which is familiar to the visitor. The didactic nature of the museum makes it an ideal place for such confirmation and entrenching of the visitor's preknowledge. My study will assume this particular conception of museum functionality as the basis for assessing visitor's receptivity to museum narratives.

### **Analyzing the Narrative**

Hayden White provides an explanation of what distinguishes a narrative from another form of historical literature, such as annals or chronicle: "Narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story."<sup>27</sup> Using White's conception of narrative, the aim of this chapter is to examine each museum's narrative accounts of Communism by looking at both the information (historical "fact") and the elements that bind it together. I assess the texts in relation to the elements that illustrate and enliven the narrative, creating the museum experience.

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<sup>26</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 191.

<sup>27</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 376.

To explicate the possible entrenchment of preknowledge, I analyze the construction of museum narratives of Communism using the precedents set by study of Holocaust museums, museums of Ethnography, and so-called “living history” museums. The study of objects will be central to the analysis of narrative: objects on display can, it will be argued, convey both a sense of presence of the past and a sense of otherness. Critically, I approach the museum not just as collections or display, but as its elements that comprise a narrative, which serves the purpose of delivering a specific, packaged text for the absorption by its visitors. I start from the basis that museums aspire to tell as story (though not always chronologically), and investigate its setting, use of devices, and moral conclusion where applicable.

### **Use of Objects**

Paul Williams calls Holocaust museums the “dominant frame of reference” for memorial museums. In particular, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a prominent influence in, among other commonalities, its use state-of-the-art of technology, powerful displays of artifacts, and the aspiration that visitors will leave the exhibition educated and moved to bear witness for the dead and the living.<sup>28</sup> Williams’ discussion of the categorization, valuation, and multi-functionality of objects displayed at memorial museums serves as a partial framework for my analysis.<sup>29</sup> He postulates that in memorial museums, artifacts and objects can serve both as primary evidence of a crime and as eye-witnesses to the

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<sup>28</sup> The exhortation “for the dead and the living, we must bear witness” was voiced by Elie Wiesel and is displayed at the end of the museum exhibition. See “Speaker Series – Special Episode: Memory and Witness,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <http://www.ushmm.org/genocide/analysis/details.php?content=2006-02-03> (accessed May 29, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Williams, 29.

crime, thus tangibly asserting the presence of the past.<sup>30</sup> I discuss the use of objects and artifacts in corroborating and substantiating claims of wrongdoing.

In establishing a framework for looking at objects, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimble's study of objects of ethnography and the agency of display provides a useful model. Objects on display are necessarily fragmentary- excises from their original setting. The new environment created with or for the excised object, whether *in situ* or *in context*, establishes the viewer's frame of reference, cuing the appropriate response and understanding of the object.<sup>31</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimble's discussion of exhibiting the quotidian will be particularly useful for the case of the DDR-Museum, which allows visitors to witness and *experience* everyday life in the GDR. These concrete ways of looking at objects- referencing their origin and adopted setting- facilitates analysis of their service to and possible manipulation for the larger narrative.

Study of objects should not be limited to the objects alone: indeed, their significance lies in their service to the larger narrative. Thus, I examine the method of exhibition as well as objects' relationship to the whole. Michael Baxandall emphasizes the importance of the label, which names the object, informs the viewer, and invokes value and meaning.<sup>32</sup> Others, including Spencer R. Crews and James E. Sims, have shown that the power of the room or exhibition space itself often overwhelms any textual accompaniment in assigning authority and voice to an object.<sup>33</sup> These observable features of museum narrative and its context will be supplemented by any additional sensory observations regarding auditory, olfactory, tactile, and visual ingredients in the exhibition. Museums have found multiple dimensions from which to

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>31</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimble, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," in *Exhibiting Cultures*, 35.

<sup>33</sup> Spencer R. Crews and James E. Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," in *Exhibiting cultures*, 160.

“reach” the viewer. I will view location as the setting of the narrative, labels as explanation, and sensory stimulants as illustration.

A museum visit cannot be summarized strictly in terms of its narrative, even if the concept of narrative is expanded to include its illustration, setting, and “enlivening.” The limitation on assessing narrative is that it does not account for memory and memorialization, a critical component in the makeup of the visitor’s museum experience. In order to account for the contribution of memory and the experience as it occurs beyond the intake of a narrative, I will apply a discussion of presentism and attempt to locate *presence*, using Eelco Runia’s conception of the term, within these museums.

### **Presentism in Museums: Bringing the Past to Life in the Context of Today**

Despite general scholarly consensus on the dangers of presentism in history, many museums have embraced the idea of viewing the past through the lens of the present as a means of “connecting” with viewers. This is observable in the superabundance of “living history” museums, which join tools of presentation and preservation to make the past live again. In this endeavor, museums are part of the “Heritage Industry,” which Ludmilla Jordanova holds responsible for the commodification of history.<sup>34</sup> Discussing the location of presence in his article “Spots of Time” in *History and Theory*, Eelco Runia describes an innate desire to seek the presence of the past: “we want to be affected. We go to great lengths and are willing to spend huge amounts of money to have ourselves affected by the past.”<sup>35</sup> Yet Runia adopts the position that these attempts to connect the museum visitor and the past are rarely successful.

<sup>34</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, “History, Otherness and Display,” in *Cultural Encounters: Representing Otherness*, Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street, eds., (Routledge: London, 2000), 248.

<sup>35</sup> Eelco Runia, “Spots of Time” in *History and Theory* 2006 (45).

Looking at visitors' blog postings allows me to evaluate whether Runia's skepticism is applicable to the museums I have selected.<sup>36</sup>

Unlike Runia, British historian Raphael Samuel does not question the success of living history museums in affecting the visitor, but attacks the idea of "living history" as an affront to the professional historian in his book *Theatres of Memory*:

It shows no respect for the integrity of either the historical record or the historical event. It plays snakes and ladders with the evidence, assembling its artifacts as though they were counters in a board game. It treats the past as though it was immediately accessible present, a series of exhibits that can be seen and felt and touched. It blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, using laser-beam technology and animatronics to authenticate its inventions and produce a variety of reality-effects.<sup>37</sup>

Instead of history, museums present the more immediately useful relative, heritage. What differentiations heritage from history, though the two undoubtedly overlap, is their use of the past: while history explores and explains, heritage clarifies the past and infuses it with present purposes.<sup>38</sup> It celebrates past victories, but also makes use of past suffering and defeat. Building heritage out of atrocities not only attempts to unify the internal community, it can enlist the sympathy of outsiders.<sup>39</sup> David Lowenthal discusses how history is altered to create heritage and outlines practices that may be observable in narratives about Communism: updating, or reshaping into a present form; upgrading, focusing on moments of glory and perceived righteousness; and excluding, erasing or leaving incomplete in service of a more noble heritage.<sup>40</sup> I address the question of whether museums profess to present history or heritage and whether and how the highlighted (or avoided) material judges the past. Alternately, the narrative can leave the appraisal of the past to the viewer. While it is inescapable that the

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<sup>36</sup> I will later discuss the methodology I will employ for using blogs.

<sup>37</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 197.

<sup>38</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, xv.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 143, 156.

viewer assesses the presented material from her present day vantage point, whether the museum frames history in a presentist manner is not inevitable.

There exists a symbiotic relationship between presentism and othering in museum narratives. Samuel argues, “Living history, so far from domesticating or sanitizing the past, makes a great point of its otherness, and indeed the brute contrast between ‘now’ and ‘then’ is very often the framing device of its narrative.”<sup>41</sup> Therein it can be seen that the problems of the othering overlap with the problems of presentism, which Lynn Hunts argues “encourages a kind of moral complacency and self-congratulation”<sup>42</sup> wherein we judge ourselves to be morally superior to something or someone else. In both, the creation of an inferior, oppositional entity is essential. My study argues that in the museum context, the creation of an Other provides closure by way of a moral conclusion.

### **Creating and Exhibiting the Other**

Assessing the potential ramifications of museums and their presented narratives, I make use of criticism of Orientalism, as made prominent in Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* and defended in later works. Though Said’s arguments and the historicity of his work are widely refuted, his characterization of Orientalism as a body of knowledge- based on ideas, beliefs, suppositions, and clichés- that form the basis of Western discourse about the Orient provides an angle from which to make observations on the creation of a Communist Other, in these cases delivered through a museum narrative which, like the Oriental Other, is a politically motivated mechanism. Said’s conception of Orientalism as a “fundamentally political doctrine” may in some ways be mirrored in some museal representations of Communism, wherein the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 284.

<sup>42</sup> Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” in *Perspectives*: May 2008, accessed March 15, 2009 <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2002/0205/0205pre1.cfm>



creation of an “Other” likewise serves as political doctrine. Outlined by Said, the dogmas of Orientalism include the absolute and systematic difference between the rational, developed, humane, superior West, and the aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior Orient, and that the Orient is something to be feared or controlled.<sup>43</sup> Critically, Said conceptualized Orientalism as *discourse*, here invoking Foucault, whereby the west could “produce” the Orient.<sup>44</sup>

*Exhibiting Cultures* also treats the creation of the Other in museums, with emphasis on ethnographic othering. Ivan Karp describes two strategies of exhibiting cultures: *exoticizing*, emphasizing difference, and *assimilating*, emphasizing similarity.<sup>45</sup> I discuss the emphasis of the narrative and further identify whether exoticizing or assimilating is done in a self-reflexive versus unacknowledged- and therefore arguably, manipulative-way. For example, the aforementioned *A Másik* exhibition at the Hungarian Museum of Ethnography presents material that is patently exoticizing; accompanying texts do not attempt to assimilate or deemphasize exoticism, but rather highlight the universality of the othering itself. Thus, exhibiting strategies are not confined to a binary delineation of either exoticization or assimilation, and it is this more nuanced perspective that informs my scrutiny of narrative possibilities.

### **Blogging: Shared Experiences, Reactions, and Lessons Learned.**

Methodologically, this thesis differs from past approaches to the subject of museal representation in its use of blogs as source material. The pool of blogs wherein visitors recount and evaluate their experiences offers a source of unsolicited, unprompted recorded reactions to these museums. I will use blog entries posted by visitors from English-speaking and Western European countries. Posts addressing some or all of these factors are of particular usefulness:

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Lyon Macfie, ed, *Orientalism: A Reader*, (New York University Press: New York, 2000), 104-105.

<sup>44</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, “Between Orientalism and Historicism” in *Orientalism: a Reader*, 287.

<sup>45</sup> Ivan Karp, “Cultures in Museum Perspective,” in *Exhibiting Cultures*, 375.

why the blogger chose to visit the museum, whether her opinion was favorable or unfavorable to the institution as a whole, what adjectives can be used to characterize the museum, what elements were judged to be successful- i.e. what she liked about it, what elements were unsuccessful, and whether or not she would recommend the museum to others. Most crucially, I look for “lessons” learned, and information and “knowledge” gathered from the museum visit, with attention to if the blogger indicates this information is new, surprising, or contrary to her prior conceptions. When indicated, it is noted whether lessons learned are reported as rooted in emotion or a gained understanding of history.

### **A Completed Narrative: Closure, Resolution, and Moral Truths**

Certainly, blog entries cannot be taken as official census data representing the reactions of all Western visitors. However, they can be used to gather a sampling of sentiments, opinions, and reactions of people- those who judged their visit to be worth writing about- who have “experienced” a given museum. I am interested in these reactions not just in their summary accounts of museum visits, but also because they may indicate the visitor’s receptivity to a presented narrative, and if and how these museums may be harmful. I would argue that a “harmful” exhibit is one in which the narrative is presented and received as complete and unmitigated truth without acknowledgement of alternative interpretations and unascertainable complexities. No amount of curatorial creative and technological innovations in museal presentation will evolve to encompass “truth,” and thus museum narrative cannot fairly be delivered as such. For the most part, historians have rejected the notion that there exists historical truth, like buried treasure, requiring a considerable amount of digging but

ascertainable nonetheless. Even so, it is still the design of some museums to create continuity and an unequivocal historical narrative.

As previously discussed, authority is implicit in the genre of museum; translating authority into the reserved right to package and deliver historical truth is misleading and problematic. Hayden White's discussion of forms of historical writings in his *The Content of the Form* makes a distinction between chronicle and narrative as genres not in the absence of narrativity in the chronicle, but in absence of a moral resolution:

The end of the discourse does not cast its light back over the events originally recorded in order to redistribute the force of a meaning that was immanent in all of the events from the beginning. There is no justice, only force, or rather, only an authority that presents itself as different kinds of forces.<sup>46</sup>

Both blog responses and my own observations will allow me to gauge the extent to which the museum narrative reaches this kind of resolution, or to what extent it encourages the visitor to grapple with the events and themes presented.

### **Limitations**

The breadth of this study necessitates the neglect of depth in certain areas. In depth explications of visuals (photography and video footage), sound and music, architecture and exhibition design, could comprise complete, separate studies, and already have in some cases. It will not expose the full extent of historical inaccuracies in these exhibitions, but will use examples in service of assessing the overall narrative and experience. Also, these case studies span three distinct political climates and post-communist experiences. I will map salient issues and controversies in order to elucidate potential influences on specific narrative approaches, but

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<sup>46</sup> Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form*, 20.

will not expound on the political climate of each study. These concessions will be made in order to form comparative analyses of the most important aspects and not to exhaustively

As a newcomer to the fields of museum studies and representation, my stated aims to “elucidate” and “explicate” are admittedly ambitious. However, I benefit from my qualification to represent the Western visitor for whom Communism is completely outside the realm of personal experience. As such, I approach a fresh, extremely controversial and politically charged subject from a relatively neutral position. Complete objectivity is unattainable. Nevertheless, I have to my benefit the awareness of my own subjectivity and can thus make a concerted effort to engage in self-reflexivity. With this stance, I can justifiably provide a critique of the culturally revered and sanctioned institutions that consciously bear the responsibility of educating and informing the public and should therefore be held to a high standard.

# Chapter I. Elements of Exhibition and Narrative

## Setting and Practical Considerations: Location

Whether visitors come to a museum as a spontaneous visit or as a planned excursion depends in part upon the institution's location. The House of Terror is located between two centers of tourist activity, Oktogon and Heroes' Square, on Budapest's most famous boulevard, Andrásy út. If the House of Terror does not merit a place on a tourist's itinerary independently, it is likely that tourists will encounter it while visiting other sites of Budapest.<sup>47</sup> Situated amongst the boulevard's neoclassical buildings, a large black "entablature" with the word "TERROR" cut out from the frame overhead distinguishes the House of Terror from its surroundings. It is designed to cut the building out of the city landscape, its history being too dark to allow it to simply blend into oblivion.<sup>48</sup> The museum's program states that "The building on Andrásy Boulevard<sup>60</sup> is itself the statue of terror, a monument to the victims,"<sup>49</sup> and as a distinctive monument in its own right, it draws the attention of passersby. In June 2009, the House of Terror will further draw attention to its presence with the erection of an additional monument to the victims of Terror near to its street front entrance.<sup>50</sup>

The DDR-Museum in Berlin is also centrally located, opposite Museum Island on the river Spree in the center of East Berlin. The museum is comparatively small, and its

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<sup>47</sup> One blogger describes this experience, "We found this museum just by chance. We were walking down Andrásy út heading to the Heroes' Square when we saw this grey building. We didn't know what it was, but we saw the name on the wall. We decided to go inside, and then we were surprised. This museum shows the terror history of Hungary, from the nazis to the communists. The rooms are very well organized, with a lot of information in all of them. I really learnt a lot of history in this museum. Don't miss it!" From "House of Terror Museum- Terror Haza Museum: Museum of Terror" by moscolin posted March 30, 2005.

[http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Europe/Hungary/Budapest\\_Fovaros/Budapest-436839/Things\\_To\\_Do-Budapest-House\\_of\\_Terror\\_Museum\\_Terror\\_Haza\\_Muzeum-BR-2.html](http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Europe/Hungary/Budapest_Fovaros/Budapest-436839/Things_To_Do-Budapest-House_of_Terror_Museum_Terror_Haza_Muzeum-BR-2.html) (accessed May 29, 2009)

<sup>48</sup> Interview by author with House of Terror representative, Budapest, Hungary, May 19, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> House of Terror Visitor Brochure.

<sup>50</sup> The future monument was announced at the Inaugural Meeting of the Foundation for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, held in Budapest March 6-8, 2009. It will consist of a T-shaped, three-meter high cutout from the former barbed-wire border between Hungary and Austria.

unobtrusive location under the riverside promenade is compensated for by ample signage advertising its offer for “A Hands-on Experience of History.” In comparison with the venerable institutions of Berlin’s Museum Island, the DDR Museum is a small enterprise that is not as obvious a tourist destination as the House of Terror in its city landscape. Nonetheless, the DDR museum has become a self-proclaimed success, supported entirely by ticket sales, since opening in 2006.<sup>51</sup> According to the museum’s own statistics, the majority of its visitors come by the recommendation of previous visitors. About 75% of the museum’s visitors, totaling 754,182 tallied on June 1, 2009, come from Germany, with slightly more of those visitors coming from western Germany than from the east.<sup>52</sup>

Conversely, Grutas Park epitomizes a tourist destination visited almost exclusively by tourists who, because of a particular desire or curiosity to visit, are willing to put considerable effort into getting there. The park can be accessed by car or via a 90-minute bus ride from Vilnius, with special instructions to the bus driver for a stop at Grutas, and a further twenty minutes on foot. Visiting the park from Vilnius requires most of a day and incurs expenses, when accounting for food and transportation, closer theme park than museum costs. Admission costs roughly \$7 US with no concession for students. Entrance to the House of Terror is approximately \$7, with a 50% concession for students. DDR Museum admission is currently 5.50 Euros for adults and 3.50 Euros for students. None of these entrance fees is prohibitive for the average Western tourist; it follows that a tourist’s decision to visit will be influenced by accessibility since time and not money is often the limiting factor in these instances. Nevertheless, Grutas Park has established itself as a destination in its own right, and not as a sight to be checked off an itinerary within a couple of hours. Indeed, the proposal for the

<sup>51</sup> “About us,” DDR Museum, <http://www.ddr-museum.de/en/museum/institution/> (accessed May 29, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> DDR-Museum Press Kit, September 30, 2008. <http://www.ddr-museum.de/en/media/downloads/> (accessed May 15, 2009).

creation of Grutas Park, submitted to the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture in 1998, emphasized its potential role in the development of tourism in southern Lithuania.<sup>53</sup> Founder Viliumas Malinauskas's stated goal of 1 million tourists per year reveals that the park targets foreign tourists in addition to Lithuanian visitors as a means of subsistence and profitability. Like Disneyland draws millions to the otherwise uninteresting city of Anaheim, Grutas Park relies on its own magnetism to attract visitors.

Though Grutas Park claims no particular significance in its location, its remote forest setting brings to mind the association of remote Soviet gulags, but also the association of Lithuania's vast forests with the "Forest Brothers" anti-Soviet guerilla resistance, which in 1945 included an estimated 30,000 Lithuanian men who lived and fought a resistance in the woods.<sup>54</sup> As Paul Williams suggests, the Park's remote location may be a boon to its appeal: "the commitment involved in traveling to and finding more obscure sites heightens the significance of the visit. It can also contribute to the institution's own sense of interpretive drama, in that its clandestine or remote location can help express the nature of the misdeed."<sup>55</sup> Before even entering the park premises, therefore, the visitor's experience begins with the anticipation of an unconventional adventure. The time involved in accessing the park makes it the focus of an entire day, while its remote setting and the significance of the woods indeed heighten the park's drama, and in turn the motivation to get there.

Thus, variances in location imbue a multiplicity of meanings onto the exhibitions they host, providing the setting for the material presented. The House of Terror building derives authenticity from its former status as the headquarters of both the Arrow Cross and Communist party secret police, making it the still-standing witness to two sets of crimes. Its location also

<sup>53</sup> "Founding History," Grutas Park, <http://www.grutoparkas.lt/istorija-en.htm> (accessed April 19, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1990*, 83.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, 79.

makes it a *lieu de mémoire*. The “haunted-house” ambiance, derived from the building’s past life, is used to full advantage in creating a chilling narrative. The location of the DDR Museum is not symbolic, but the small museum space is compensated in part by its central location and vigorous self-advertisement. By contrast, the vast, remote, and unique setting of Grutas Park adds to its intrigue and facilitates a theme park-like experience.

## Audience

Each museum caters its exhibition to the local national population and consequently narrates its exhibitions in Hungarian, Lithuanian, or German. The audience the museum chooses to target or include is indicated by the availability of translated materials. The DDR-Museum presents all texts, including information on its website, in both German and English. Although translations are not provided for all the original documents and video archives- for example there are no subtitles for the various DDR television programs played on period TV sets- no objects or sources are left unidentified in English. For Anglophone visitors, complete coverage of information in both languages facilitates the museum’s goal of providing “as complete a presentation of the GDR as possible.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, tours are available in German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Polish, and Russian.<sup>57</sup> The range of languages offered indicates that in addition to the domestic public, the museum targets a wide international audience.

Despite its billing as a museum of history, the House of Terror is limited in didactic function for Western visitors because of the lack of translated texts. As Anglophone visitors to the House of Terror have expressed repeatedly in guest comment-book entries, translations of

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<sup>56</sup> DDR Museum, *A guide to the permanent exhibition*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> “Guided Tours,” DDR Museum, <http://www.ddr-museum.de/en/service/education/guided-tours.html> (accessed May 8, 2009).



titles, videos, texts, and object explanations are infrequent (and unpredictable) occurrences throughout the exhibitions. Non-Hungarian speakers, for whom the language offers not even a hint as to what might be being said, are left to understand the museum on the basis of objects, pictures, videos, colors, music, sounds, and odors because of the lack of English translations explaining the contents of each room. Textual information is offered in short essay form on sheets of paper, providing some historical background on the theme of the room but offering limited insight into what is being displayed and what the various objects, photos, and videos are intended to represent.<sup>58</sup> Audio guides read aloud the texts provided in most rooms, but offer no further commentary, context, or explanation, and are available in Hungarian, English and German. Interestingly, there are no materials available in Russian despite the Soviet Union's omnipresence as a lead role in the House of Terror narrative.

Thus, the House of Terror establishes a clear hierarchy with Hungarian-speakers as the target audience, while providing a dry textual narrative for English-speakers which focuses on contextual information. These essay commentaries are not available throughout the whole exhibition: in some rooms, the visitor is left with absolutely no titles, labels, or textual explanations in English. By limiting the availability of explanatory texts, the museum encourages an experience that is emotional, informed by sensory stimulants, rather than textually didactic.

Given the House of Terror's large budget in comparison with other Hungarian state-sponsored museums, it is dubious that the lack of English language material is due to a lack of resources. Rather, it seems indicative of a conscious decision to privilege Hungarian language material and limit English material. The complete lack of Russian language materials is curious

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<sup>58</sup> István Rév's chapter on "The Terror of the House," in *(Re)visualizing National History*, by Robin Ostow, ed., addresses some of the historical inaccuracies in these papers.

given the prominent role the Soviet Union plays in the exhibition's narrative. It is worth considering the possible reasons why the museum would choose not to present its material to an audience it might hope to reeducate, or present its view of history to. Possibly, not serving the Russian language could be conceived of as one way that Hungary can now resist a language of imperial domination, formerly imposed upon them. At the aforementioned Communist Crimes conference, speeches and discussions consistently attempted to show continuity between Putin's Russia and totalitarian Soviet Union. Choosing to include Russian might be perceived as yet one more concession to the heirs of Hungary's former oppressor. This decision could also have been based on the assumption that Russian-speaking visitors also speak English.

In contrast, all texts at Grutas Park are available in Russian as well as Lithuanian and English. This is logical, given the country's proximity to Russia, but it also widens the audience to a larger pool of Russian speakers who might visit from neighboring countries. Texts in all three languages are displayed on the same physical level and with the same manner and degree of completeness. Thus, all visitors (assuming all visitors speak one of the three languages) are presented with the same information.

In addition to focusing on addressing a Hungarian audience, Maria Schmidt says that the museum's target audience is young people.<sup>59</sup> In order to reach this target demographic, designers have formulated an emotional experience, heavily reliant on visual stimulus. According to a House of Terror representative, the museum receives 200-300 school children as visitors each day.<sup>60</sup> The DDR Museum and Grutas Park target a broader audience, both in terms of age and nationality. This may be a reflection in part of the fact that both are privately

<sup>59</sup> János Pelle, "Interview with Maria Schmidt," *Hgv.hu*, August 31, 2006. <http://hgv.hu/english/20060831mariaschmidt.aspx> (accessed May 10, 2009).

<sup>60</sup> Interview by author, Budapest, Hungary May 19, 2009.

owned enterprises and therefore must rely on admission revenue to function. Again, the House of Terror's involvement with the Communist Crimes conference is revelatory of the extent to which it is proactive and persistent in disseminating its message about the crimes of communism to youth; conference participants discussed extant and planned outreach programs for schools and summer camps for children; further brainstorming of the most effective ways to reach young people occurred, with commendation to the House of Terror for its successful tactics; and Viktor Orbán spoke of the urgency and necessity of a textbook to be distributed to school children throughout all of Europe.<sup>61</sup>

### Exhibition Design and Layout

On the large scale, exhibition layout and design establish the framework for presenting material. The three case studies provide widely divergent examples of stylistic choices of structuring for exhibitions in ways that facilitate different ways of delivering information.

The layout of the House of Terror cultivates a one-way journey that is suited to presenting a narrative account with a beginning, middle, and end. It begins outside, when the visitor comes face to face with the portraits of victims of the terror- specifically those killed after the 1956 revolution- lining the outside walls of the building. The museum door swings open and admits the visitor who will spend approximately two hours learning about the terror that befell these victims. The visitor's first view is of the twin gravestones of the Arrow Cross and Communist eras at the end of the entrance hall. The lighting is dim and the visitor hears the first strains of the ever-repeating musical score, which will set the mood at key points throughout the exhibition. Before even purchasing a ticket, the visitor has been inundated with

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<sup>61</sup> For the forthcoming textbook, see FICC website, <http://www.communistcrimes.org/en/Initiatives/Featured-Projects--Research/Publications:-Communist-Crimes-Textbook>.

sights, sounds, and smells confirming that the building has earned its name as a house of terror. After passing in front of a tank in the open courtyard, ostensibly from which the smell of oil still exudes, the visitor is directed up the first official exhibition room.

At this point, the color scheme of red and black has been introduced in no less than the tombstones, walls and floor, ticket graphics, museum pamphlet, and stairway. This color scheme is logical, recalling the red five-point Communist star.<sup>62</sup> Each subsequent room is strikingly different from the last in color, material, and texture, effectively maintaining the visual interest of the viewer. For example, a black “Terror Passage” leads to a maze of 1-kilo blocks of white, mock pig fat, followed by a red-walled room of the Hungarian Political Police, and then the half-black/half-white room of Péter Gábor. This format of one-way traffic through changing sets carries the visitor through the four levels of museum space. It can be inferred that this format was chosen for the practical purpose that it is suited to telling a story- one in which the grim climax is revealed after a slow descent into the basement and its prison cells. Narrative closure, it will be argued later, is achieved in the final rooms before the visitor exits past the same tombstone memorial, possibly now with the insight that the Museum has sealed off the graves of these two terrors.

Both the DDR museum and Grutas Park assume more free-form layout. The main exhibition space of the DDR museum is one large room spatially divided by the scaled-down model of a Soviet-style housing series. Gray concrete apartment blocks serve as both section dividers and cases wherein objects and dioramas are displayed. There is no conspicuous privileging or ordering of information in the exhibition layout. The official museum guide explains that the exhibition’s design is intended to show that “What initially appears to be a

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<sup>62</sup> Additionally, for the Western visitor, red may carry connotations that signal danger (blood, poisonous berries, stop signs and traffic lights).

grey and dull monotony turns out to be a lively and colourful everyday culture once you take a closer look.”<sup>63</sup> Reversing this concept, the House of Terror features bright, colorful displays that upon closer inspection reveal a dark, sinister culture of fear. This is observable in the room of “The fifties,” where bright red voting booths are surrounded by colorful Socialist realism paintings, but behind a bisecting red wall with distorted pictures of Lenin, Stalin, and Rákosi, the bright colors are replaced by the browns and grays of surveillance equipment. In both instances, the effect is an inversion of expectation, adding if not an element of surprise, a sensation of uncovering a different, unexpected reality.

Another key feature of the DDR exhibit, touted on its website, advertisements, and publications, is its “hands-on approach to history.” The hands-on approach facilitates a voluntary atmosphere for visitor engagement. In other words, the visitor plays an active role in the creation of his or her museum experience. Conversely, the House of Terror experience is constructed to guide the visitor through a formulated experience; whereas the DDR museum allows the visitor to pick up a set of headphones and choose from a selection of DDR era records, the House of Terror greets the visitor with “a timeless scoring for string orchestra,”<sup>64</sup> which is at turns blaring and pulsating and mournful and slow, but altogether inescapable. Again, this serves the purpose of presenting a narrative that is absorbed rather than self-constructed.

The character of Grutas Park fits the general definition of a theme park in that it is a park built around a theme with the aim of entertaining visitors. In fact, it sometimes surpasses the typical amusements of a theme park, hosting its own Grutas Park beauty pageants and comedy festivals. Despite its theme-park character, Grutas Park also fits the definition of a

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<sup>63</sup> The GDR Museum, *A guide to the permanent exhibition*, 9.

<sup>64</sup> “About the House of Terror,” *House of Terror*. [http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/museum/about\\_us.html](http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/museum/about_us.html) (accessed May 4, 2009).

museum as laid out by the International Council of Museums as an institution which “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”<sup>65</sup> Grutas Park will thus be viewed as a hybrid theme-park/memorial museum because of its concurrent aspirations to entertain and amuse, and to preserve and educate.

Grutas Park is spread out over 20 hectares of land. Upon arrival, the visitor walks down a sidewalk between a cattle-car and wall of news clippings showing Grutas Park’s prominence in the local and international media, both favorable and critical. The first sight from within the entry gate is a large monument of a middle-aged woman, set on an island in a lake- an unprovocative sight where one might expect to instead be greeted by Stalin or Lenin. Although the visitor can follow designated loops that lead through the outdoor sculpture exhibition and to the various components (museum, picture gallery, library, etc.), the order in which each component is visited is not essential to making sense of the park. The visitor can walk off the blazed path to pose for a picture next to Stalin or simply to wander the wooded area. Wood buildings make up the Information Center, Gallery of Soviet art, Library, Café, Visitor Center, and Gift Shops. Components of graphic design adopt a red and black color scheme, also utilized in no less than the House of Terror, its affiliate Hódmezővásárhely Emlék Pont in the south of Hungary, the Warsaw Uprising Museum, the Museum of the Genocides in Vilnius, and Memento Park in Budapest.

The layouts of Grutas Park and the DDR museum encourage an exploratory, self-directed experience. By contrast, the House of Terror set up discourages interaction, preferencing a visual onslaught of videos, photographs, object displays, and *mise en scène*, to

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<sup>65</sup> “Definition of Terms,” *International Council of Museums*, under Icom Statutes, August 24, 2007. <http://icom.museum/statutes.html#3> (accessed May 4, 2009).

create an experience. The exhibition layout is therefore not incidental but a crucial factor, facilitating a particular method of display and style of visitor engagement.

Even after concluding the exhibition visit, there are ways in which the museum experience continues beyond the museum space. Visitors to any of these exhibits can take home books, museum guides, and souvenirs. Visitors may also keep photos taken driving the Trabi or sitting on Lenin's lap. Websites also provide a means of keeping visitors engaged: the House of Terror website offers forum discussions (albeit inactive), access to numerous video testimonies and speeches, and related news postings. On the DDR Museum website, the visitor can download teaching materials, peruse the online store, or follow the museum's blog. Grutas Park's website offers fewer features, but the park boasts the most extensive gift shop of the three, offering a wide range of souvenirs bearing the park's logo- a distorted hammer and sickle. These features, common to most modern museums, expand the borders of the museum experience, keeping information and relevant topics present in the visitor's mind, and calling to remembrance again the memorial experience.

## Objects

None of these narratives could be delivered quite as convincingly without the visual illustration and element of authenticity and historical factuality provided in part by the presence of objects and artifacts relating to the topic.

## What can be Displayed?

Theorists of museum display agree that what is left out of display is perhaps as telling and important as what is included.<sup>66</sup> Undoubtedly, there is a limit to the amount of material a museum can put on display: a Young Pioneer badge may be shown pinned to the uniform it was originally meant for, but the display cannot include the Young Pioneer himself, and thus it exists as a fragment. It has been excised from its original setting and replanted to serve a new purpose. Alternately, the same badge could be displayed as part of a collection with hundreds of similar pins, as is done in the Grutas Park Museum, to convey the vastness of awards, orders, and associations employed to manage and motivate the various levels of society. In museums of ethnography, items displayed in this collective, categorical manner can be more significant as part of a collection, adopting a more documentary function, than in their singularity.<sup>67</sup> Addressing the same time period and subject matter with different thematic approaches means that although the same items may be exhibited in different exhibitions, the manner in which they are displayed varies greatly.

Objects are the material realization of the DDR-Museum's mantra of providing a "hands-on experience of everyday life," the aim being to "fully understand an epoch"<sup>68</sup> by entering the lives of its people. From the hands-on everyday life experience it is hoped that the visitor can derive intimacy with life under Communism. These objects are arranged thematically rather than chronologically, so that instead of following a storyline with a beginning, middle, and end, it is intended that the visitor explore themes in no particular order.

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<sup>66</sup> See Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," in *Exhibiting Cultures* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley, *Destination Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimbley, 23.

<sup>68</sup> DDR Museum, *A guide to the permanent exhibition*, 4.



The thematic arrangement is still narrative, but in a more encyclopedic style wherein the narrative can be pieced together through the amalgamated vignettes.

The “hand’s on” element is central to the DDR-Museum experience. Visitors are invited (by a large permission-granting bulletin at the exhibition entrance) to leaf through DDR-era comic books, play pretend with kitchenware, feel the difference between DDR and Western blue jeans, and fiddle with the knobs and dials of Stasi surveillance equipment. Beyond tactile engagement, activity or “doing” is encouraged. Visitors can “drive” a Trabi through a virtual street scene and experience both the Trabi’s charm and irritating lack of power in comparison with today’s cars in a way that would not be possible by simply viewing the car as an exhibition piece, like impressive but immobile dinosaur bones. Permission- in fact encouragement- to handle what is put behind glass in other museums is novel and exciting. Thus, the new function of objects in this museum is one way in which the museum attempts to engage the visitor in accessing information without adopting a dramatic narrative or theme park tactics.

Items to be experienced at the DDR Museum can be compared to objects typically worthy of display in museums of Ethnography. Specifically, they both exhibit commonplace objects of everyday life that are unremarkable in their original setting. The fact that the DDR museum’s posted wish list for donations is topped by a toilet seat underscores the point that “commonplace things are worn to oblivion and replaced with new objects, or are viewed as too trivial in their own time to be removed from circulation, to be alienated from their practical and social purposes, and saved for posterity.”<sup>69</sup> An acquired toilet seat will thus be valuable because of the difficulties of its procurement and because of its new placement within the walls of the

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<sup>69</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimble, 25.

museum. Just as Marcel Duchamp's urinal became a *Fountain* when excised to be displayed as art, the toilet seat can become historically significant when displayed as part of living history.

Mundane objects can also be displayed in such a way as to take on a threatening quality. This tactic is employed in a number of ways in the House of Terror. Since the theme of the museum is the terror of the two regimes- Arrow Cross and Communist, depictions of everyday life are presented in a manner that embeds forms of terror as the focus of everyday life. The first method of display used is to create assemblages of assorted, normally unrelated objects. In the "Life under Communism" room, display cases house groupings of unrelated objects; for example, a wrench, police baton, schoolroom pencil sharpener, small portrait of Stalin, and other items are all caught in a tangle of wire. There is no accompanying English text, so rather than deriving meaning from text, the viewer can infer meaning based on context and surrounding objects. Arguably in this instance, the menacing quality of the police baton outweighs any neutral assessment of a wrench as an object used for building and construction. Shown in this setting, these objects corroborate claims of wrongdoing, substantiating the association of Communism and terror.

Another technique of presenting ordinary objects in a way that evokes fear is to create a dramatic *mise-en-scène* around an object. This is done with the black luxury car displayed in the House of Terror. It is surrounded by a transparent red curtain (allowing the visitor to see behind what is being "concealed"), animated by dramatic lighting, and accompanied by music. This threatening imagery is somewhat confusing, since it is the central element of the room of Resettlement and Deportation, which may cause the visitor to wonder whether deportees were transported in this sort of luxury vehicle.<sup>70</sup> No explanation of who the car belonged to, what its

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<sup>70</sup> According to Beverley James, the car was in fact used by Nikita Khrushchev on his visit to Budapest. Beverly James, *Imagining Post-Communism*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005, 3.

significance is, or what its function was is offered for the English-speaking visitor, but the visual and auditory effect of this tableau is evocative nonetheless. Hungarian newspaper postings on the wall offer no clarification.

In weighing the symbolic value of objects, their juxtaposition or how they are grouped is significant. In the House of Terror courtyard, the positioning of the tank against a background wall with the faces of victims signals to the viewer that the tank is a symbol of repression and violence rather than protection and defense. This manner of displaying objects in formulated tableaux contrasts to the DDR Museum's attempt to display items as they would have been found if one were to step back in time: clothes hang in closets or on a clothing line, dishes are stacked in cupboards, and toys are stored in drawers. From object positioning, the visitor derives an interpretation of the object that can either locate it as part of an explanatory or emotional display.

## Symbols and Signs

Susan Pearce argues that objects that are “brought into an arbitrary association with elements to which they bear no intrinsic relationship” operate as *symbols*, having only metaphoric association with each other.<sup>71</sup> Whereas objects in the DDR museum, intrinsically associated by their common history as items of everyday use, operate as *signs* of the whole they represent (everyday life in the DDR), their counterparts in the “Treasury” room and the room of “Everyday Life” serve as symbols of falseness, cheapness, and ersatz- metaphorically referencing the regime itself. In this way, the same teapot is polysemantic, to borrow Pearce's

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<sup>71</sup> Susan M. Pearce, “Objects as meaning; or narrating the past” in *Interpreting Objects and Collections* by Susan Pearce, ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 23.

term, defined by its relationship to the rest of the exhibit. The same object can be used to serve two completely different narratives.

In an inversion of this device of imbuing mundane objects with menacing qualities, some objects at Grutas Park are displayed in such a way as to strip away any residual power to intimidate, bringing them down to a human level at which they seem absurd rather than threatening. Next to the Lunapark playground, a large machine gun on wheels has been painted a conspicuously un-military shade of turquoise. The truncated busts of Lenin, Stalin, Marx, Engels, and Lithuanian Communist Party leaders are stripped of authority when placed on the ground without a pedestal amid the surrounding woods and grass. From being relocated into a remote area, a sort of mock-gulag surrounded by fence and monitored by watchtower, these monuments derive what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley calls “posited meaning,”<sup>72</sup> or meaning not present in their original contexts. Certainly these monuments were never intended to reside inside a recreation of the gulag system they employed.

Rather than assigning value and new meaning through object groupings, part of the DDR exhibition attempts to recreate the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* by reconstructing a DDR era apartment as completely as possible. Unlike many museum in situ displays, the visitor can sit on the couch and flip through channels on the television or handle kitchen implements in the tiny but serviceable kitchen. The result of the reconstructed apartment is a variety of the art of mimesis in situ, which museums frequently utilize in reconstructing period rooms, ethnographic villages, and other rebuilt environments.<sup>73</sup> To complete the mimesis, the visitor can play the role of the apartment’s inhabitant. Invoking further mimicry of “how it was,” the apartment is bugged and monitored by other visitors using Stasi surveillance equipment.

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<sup>72</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimbley, 3.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley argues that no matter how mimetic in situ installations may be- and certainly the DDR Museum strives for complete mimesis- they are not and cannot be neutral.<sup>74</sup> Since there did not exist one cookie cutter apartment during the DDR era, the museum curators could have chosen reconstructed the apartment in any number of ways, all of which might still closely imitate reality. In choosing to reconstruct an apartment, the designers opted for a cheerier rather than bleaker version of an era apartment. The result is somewhat charming and retro chic. The sky blue toilet, eroticized pictures of women, bright plastic kitchen appliances, and patterned wallpaper arguably corroborate the criticism that the exhibition appeals too much to Communist Kitsch.<sup>75</sup> Even display of the quotidian necessitates making the decision to relay a particular interpretation of a past by reconstructing one view thereof.

Furthermore, no matter how mundane the subject matter may be and how “objectively” it is presented, some critics take issue with the notion that history can be understood via a hands-on approach. Historian Raphael Samuel has been particularly vehement in his criticism, writing,

Living history is offensive to the professional historian. It shows no respect for the integrity of either the historical record or the historical event. It plays snakes and ladders with the evidence, assembling its artifacts as though they were counters in a board game. It treats the past as though it was an immediately accessible present, a series of exhibits that can be seen and felt and touched.<sup>76</sup>

The treatment of the past Samuels skeptically describes is precisely the approach of the DDR Museum. While it would be difficult to accurately assess the extent of a visitor’s gained

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>75</sup> The convincing mimesis of the installation caused one misguided blogger to write, “Yes, the toilet is in the living room.” Most likely the designer’s decision not to include a bathroom door was not a reflection of a typical DDR apartment oddity, but a practical choice. Still, this illustrates the point that viewers are apt to see a mimetic reproduction as a true reflection of reality. See Brian Boney, “Sunday Stroll through Old East Berlin” in *Berlin Durch Meinen Augen*, posted January 4, 2009 <http://boneyinberlin.blogspot.com/2009/01/sunday-stroll-through-old-east-berlin.html> (accessed May 22, 2009).

<sup>76</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, (London: Verso, 1994), 197.

historical knowledge, comments left in the visitor guestbook and made on relevant blog-postings suggest that many visitors do in fact view their visit as a learning experience.

### Objects as Evidence

Paul Williams' study of memorial museums postulates that objects in these museums are sometimes called on to serve as eyewitnesses to a crime.<sup>77</sup> At the House of Terror, like the Museum of Genocides in Vilnius, the reconstructed prison cells themselves serve as witnesses to the crimes committed within their walls. Additionally, the exhibition makes use of everyday objects as witnesses. In the "Gulag" room, independently uninteresting items- for instance a set of a metal plate, cup, and canteen- are given their own illuminated, glass display case in the center of the room alongside similar cases holding equally mundane items, such as a cap and pair of felt boots. The context, a replica of the interior of a boxcar periodically simulating motion, signals to the viewer that these objects, normally too humble to warrant treatment as artifacts, are in fact worthy of attention as witnesses to the tragedy of deportation. Serving as evidence, it is fitting that the objects are strictly for viewing and not handling by visitors.

On January 2, 2008, the DDR Museum announced the purchase of two giant slabs of the Berlin Wall- procured with great logistic difficulty- acknowledging in a press release that, "At the moment, there is no particular purpose of use for the pieces of the Berlin Wall," but stressing the advisability of the purchase of these two "contemporary witnesses."<sup>78</sup> The museum's personification of the slabs as witnesses is an example of the new valuation of something that has lost its usefulness and is lacking in visual merit. Should the museum choose to display the pieces at some point in the future, this would be a slight departure from its

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<sup>77</sup> Williams, 25.

<sup>78</sup> "Berlin Wall," *DDR Museum*. [www.ddr-museum.de/en/news/texte-rechts/berlin-wall](http://www.ddr-museum.de/en/news/texte-rechts/berlin-wall) (accessed May 10, 2009).

practice of displaying objects of everyday life, placed in situ or in context when an in situ replication is not feasible. Brought into a new environment, the slabs will become not just witnesses to the years of division, but also a symbol of division and the separation of East from West.

### Labels or the Lack Thereof

Museum scholars have debated the value and significance of the label in assigning meaning to an object. Michael Baxandall emphasizes the significance of the label as a device whereby an object is named and the viewer is cued as to the value and significance of the object.<sup>79</sup> Rather than letting objects speak for themselves (or as groups), exhibitions can utilize labels or give titles to “speak” for the inanimate object. The Warsaw Uprising Museum exhibit accompanied by text that goes beyond object identification: a box of marmalade is not a condiment but a source of life with its label reading, “In the starving Warsaw Ghetto, a box of marmalade *can* save one’s life.”<sup>80</sup> This label helps an otherwise humble box of jam achieve its illocutionary force by drawing attention to its potential to save a life; the result is a narrative label as opposed to a label for the purpose of object identification. Its narration in the present tense makes it all the more present and real as it stands as evidence. For the English-speaking visitor, objects in the House of Terror are left frustratingly unidentified. Without textual identification, the visitor relies on visual cues- surrounding objects, backdrop, color, and lighting- to deduce the objects significance in the display. Viewers do not rely on labels to identify props in a theater set or movie, and neither is it necessary for objects in the House of Terror to be thoroughly labeled in the manner of a traditional museum in order serve the larger narrative.

<sup>79</sup> Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” 35.

<sup>80</sup> My emphasis, Warsaw Uprising Museum exhibit, visited April 18, 2009, photograph by author.

In the absence a label, the viewer's desire to understand or find meaning in an object or image remains; thus a lack of text encourages the viewer to make her own interpretation of what she sees. The art of Shepard Fairey illustrates this phenomenon: when confronted with an unfamiliar image with no provided explanation (in this case, his iconic image "Andre the Giant has a Posse" with the unexplained command "OBEY") people create their own interpretation of the message, whether political, social, etc.<sup>81</sup> In the museum context, making an inference on one's own makes the process of interpretation seem self-directed, as though the viewer has drawn her own conclusion. In fact, the whole of the exhibition, every sound, sight, and smell, predisposes the viewer to a particular interpretation; what appears to be an independent conclusion is in fact directed.

Even when information is provided, it is often at odds with the effective manipulation of visual and sound effects. Several bloggers mentioned the chilling effect of being in the place where innocent people had been hung. In fact, the last sentence of the second page of the basement cellars information sheet informs the viewer that no executions took place on the premises- the gallows shown was relocated from Vác, thirty kilometers outside of Budapest, and executions did not occur on the site.<sup>82</sup> This point was missed by one visitor who reported, "I've gotten enough of a feel of the Hungarian language to somewhat effectively distinguish which of the people were executed there, which died of other means, and which were released. Most were executed."<sup>83</sup> The visitor conceives that he is discerning fact when in actually he is inferring misinformation from the evocative setting.

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<sup>81</sup> See Shepard Fairey, *Obey: Supply and Demand, the Art of Shepard Fairey* (Berkeley: Ginko Press, 2006).

<sup>82</sup> "Reconstructed Prison Cells" text.

<sup>83</sup> "Budapest," *Budapest-Blogabond*, posted October 11, 2008, <http://www.blogabond.com/CommentView.aspx?commentID=43564> (accessed May 20, 2009).



The DDR Museum groups objects by theme and accompanies them with a text that discusses the theme if not the individual items. Some items are identified in their singularity, but all are understood to be somehow related to the larger theme, whether it is travel, fashion, work, or school. Sanitary napkins are not labeled as such but fall under the categorical heading “Coming of Age.” Some objects merit their own explanatory paragraphs, for instance a small package of performance-enhancing drugs is attached to a discussion of doping. Other objects may be accompanied by an anecdote about a particular figure skater or music festival. Objects are not in a particularly emotive way, but are given equal value as displayed in the same gray cases. Conversely, objects in the House of Terror are not presented in a uniform manner, but serve largely as set pieces whose backdrops and placement are widely varied from room to room.<sup>84</sup>

Aside from the Soviet sculpture exhibition, the majority of items on display at Grutas Park are found in the Information Center and the Art Gallery. All items in the Grutas Park museum, statue exposition, and art gallery are also dutifully labeled with object identification and date. In most instances, labels include explanatory texts. In the Information Center, built to resemble the cultural houses of the 1950s and 60s, large groups of items are assembled by theme and identified by small paper reference numbers, which the viewer can then match to the corresponding description in what amounts to a cumbersome labeling system. The cut-and-paste labeling and decidedly un-modern display against mismatched particleboard backdrops seem to make fun of Soviet out-datedness in a manner that bears no hint of nostalgia. Using this clunky display style, the Information Center strives to “show and denounce the ideologized Soviet propaganda culture, pseudo-science, the aims, mechanism and forms of the Soviet

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<sup>84</sup> The House of Terror’s interior was designed by designer and architect Attila F. Kovacs, who has also worked on film and theater set designs. <http://www.attilafk.com/site.html>

ideology and propaganda, and disclose the genocide of the Lithuanian nation.”<sup>85</sup> This deliberately awkward curatorial technique mocks Soviet cultural mechanisms while “denouncing” its propaganda.

In some cases, labels may be unnecessary or even undesirable if the visual impact of the object is its primary importance. An example of this is the aforementioned tombstones in the House of Terror foyer. Candles burning in the foreground help to identify the marble slabs as tombstones. Neither artifacts nor evidence, the visual impact of the tombstones themselves serves the theme of Totalitarian terror by placing the two terrors, Arrow Cross and Communist, on an equal plane. The symmetrical tombstones- slanted inward at the top, directing the eye towards each other- imply symmetrical terrors. A label or explanatory text would be superfluous, or perhaps even detract from the impact of this visual. This is another instance in which the viewer can make a seemingly self-directed inference though it is actually informed by the dim lighting, dramatic music, and sound of a man sobbing in the next room. This allowance for individual interpretation is manipulative: it is not designed to encourage contemplation but adherence to a mapped-out emotional journey.

### **The Element of Play**

The DDR Museum and Grutas Park encourage play as an integral part of the experience. Next to the DDR Museum’s display of sports in the DDR, visitors can try their hand at an East vs. West foosball match. The center of the exhibition space also features an interactive digital game, which encourages competition in the vein of inter-factory competition. Finally, visitors can take home a number of play-related items from the museum’s gift shop, including model housing building sets, wind-up Trabi model cars, and board games like

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<sup>85</sup> “Information Center-Museum,” *Gruto Parkas*, <http://www.grutoparkas.lt/muziejus-en.htm> (accessed May 10, 2009).

“Overtaking Without Catching Up” and “Stalinallee.” Thus, the experience can continue outside the exhibition space.

Play is incorporated into Grutas Park in the form of a large, colorful Soviet-style playground called “Lunapark.” The park website explains that the playground allows children to “enjoy the swings at the playground (the Soviet times Lunapark) and find it interesting to imagine how and what kind of games their parents and grandparents used to play.”<sup>86</sup> Whether this in fact reflects the thought process of playing children is doubtful considering the normality of such playgrounds. It does however suggest to the adult visitor that fun and play existed during Communist rule.

The website gives no justification for its zoo, saying only by way of explanation, “young visitors are also amused by the inhabitants of the mini-zoo.”<sup>87</sup> Visitors who come to see an exhibition of Soviet sculptures can also come face to face with wild boar (also offered on the menu of the park’s café). The relationship of the zoo to Soviet times, the park’s theme, is left unstated and is perhaps non-existent. Nevertheless, the presence of wild boar, a camel, exotic birds, and other animals certainly foster a pervading tone of absurdity: here the analogy of Communism as a misfit import like a camel in a Lithuanian forest may be a misinterpretation of the park creators’ intentions, yet it may still be the perception of some Western visitors.

One interpretation of the zoo, though it is probably unintentional, is that the animals in cages are another comic manifestation of the symbolism behind the statue exhibition, which condemns Lithuania’s former oppressors to eternal confinement in the fake gulag. The parallel caging of these animals and the Soviet statues may be an unintended metaphor, yet it could be seen as the intentional Othering of former Soviet leadership and Lithuanian Communists, now

<sup>86</sup> “Lunapark,” *Gruto Parkas*, <http://www.grutoparkas.lt/lunaparkas-en.htm> (accessed May 2, 2009).

<sup>87</sup> “Zoo,” *Gruto Parkas*, <http://www.grutoparkas.lt/zoo-en.htm> (accessed May 2, 2009).

tamed by the model of successful capitalism- the park's creator, mushroom-canning millionaire Viliumas Malinauskas.

The House of Terror incorporates no such elements of play into its experience and is in no way geared towards small children. The suggestion that fun and play could and did exist between 1944 and 1989 is not found within its exhibition. Play and interaction emphasize sameness: the DDR museum's floor diagram for learning ballroom dancing steps popular in the DDR shows dancing to be the same act in the East that it was in the West. Fun and games is a form of *assimilating*, in the classification of Ivan Karp, recognizing the sameness of the strange Communist system.<sup>88</sup> Focusing on everyday life is assimilating because it shows the Other engaging in the same human activities- dancing, gardening, grocery shopping, relaxing- that the viewer is familiar with.

### Objects for Consumption

Extending the experience to gustatory realms, visitors to the Grutas Park cafe are offered the chance to literally taste what life was like under Socialism. Spare portions of Borscht "Nostalgia," Pap "Remembrance", Chop "Goodbye Youth" or a number of other menu options are served on cheap metal dishware, accompanied by weak Russian tea, vodka, or water. The prices are appropriately inexpensive as compared to the rest of the "normal" menu, and as pictured on the menu, none of the options look particularly appetizing. Choosing between two menus, the diner can choose to identify with the present by way of the regular menu, with its generous portions and wide variety of options, or the other Communist menu, sparse and unappealing. The concept of museums or exhibition spaces selling food is certainly not new; it is in keeping with the expansion of the role of the modern museum, now outfitted

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<sup>88</sup> Ivan Karp, "Cultures in Museum Perspective," in *Exhibiting Cultures*, 375.

with any combination of cafés, a gift shop, classrooms, lecture halls, etc. The House of Terror and the DDR-Museum also have their own cafes. The difference here is that food is used as another depth of experience rather than simply as sustenance for the weary viewer (who, incidentally, will not find many edible alternatives in the remote wooded setting of southern Lithuania). Through this menu, the visitor presumes to partake in something experienced daily by all people who lived under Soviet control, in spite of the continued presence of nearly identical beet soups on menus offering typical Lithuanian fare. In my experience, the fare was bland and unappealing. Offering a taste of life under Socialism adds another dimension to the Western visitor's understanding of what life was like under a Socialist system. In this way, the Park again falls more appropriately into the category of a theme park- where an experience may be highlighted by the chance to dine with Mickey- than that of a museum, despite its treatment of "serious" subject matter.

This opportunity to partake of the local fare makes a visit to Grutas Park feel in some ways like an ethnographic field trip to observe, taste, and experience what it is like being this Other. As part of the Othering mechanism, the *A Másik* exhibition at the Hungarian Ethnographic Museum described a number of "weird" dietary customs that may "cause surprise and repulsion when they seem irreconcilable with our own practices," with the point that all of our eating habits are "weird" in some ways.<sup>89</sup> At Grutas Park it is not so much *what* is being eaten that seems backwards and strange (arguably, borscht is the quintessence of commonplace in the region), but the *manner* in which it is served, emphasizing cheapness and poor quality.

## Music and Sound

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<sup>89</sup> A Masik exhibition guide, 6.

All three exhibits are accompanied in some areas by music. Party-approved tunes play from loudspeakers at Grutas Park, providing pleasant if uninteresting background music as visitors make their way around the sculpture exhibition. In the DDR museum, music is optional: visitors can pick up headphones and choose from a selection of popular records from the era. In both instances, the music is designed to transport the visitor back via period-appropriate, party-sanctioned music; it is another way in which an outsider can attempt to feel what it was like to be in that time period. Music is also a major element in the House of Terror experience, but it is used to a much different effect. The score by Ákos Kovács, is described in the brochure as a timeless score for strings that goes well with the museum's historical theme;<sup>90</sup> however this "stringed" orchestration is not limited to the traditional orchestral string section but includes at turns electric guitar, bass, and percussion. The result bears no relation to Communism or the presented time period. Rather, like a movie soundtrack, the music signals which emotions the visitor should experience, namely fear, horror, and sadness.<sup>91</sup> While the first two examples use music to transport the visitor to a different time, the latter uses music to influence the visitor's emotions.

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<sup>90</sup> House of Terror visitor brochure. Ákos Kovács is a Hungarian pop singer-songwriter. Choosing him as the museum's soundtrack composer may be part of the museum's goal of reaching a young audience.

<sup>91</sup> In addition to music, the House of Terror makes use of the emotions of the human voice: childrens voices read out the names of those sentenced to death after the 1956 revolution, and the choked sobs of a man greet (and bid farewell to) the visitor in the reception area.

## The Combined Effect- “What it was like”

*Cicero even advises the orator to prefer emotion to reason. Thus, the hearer should be “so affected as to be swayed by something resembling mental impulse or emotion rather than judgment or deliberation. For men decide far more by hate, or love, or fear, or illusion, or some other inward emotional reality.*

- Gary Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*

These elements support the suggestion that the theory put forth by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, positing that the focus on object and artifact in museums of ethnography is being supplanted by a focus on constructing an experience, is also true of the approach of some memorial museums. House of Terror director Maria Schmidt confirms that careful attention has been given to crafting an emotional experience,<sup>92</sup> and indeed all of these museums generate emotional responses, but to different degrees and manifesting differing emotions.

Parts of the House of Terror exhibition are also designed to transport the visitor back in time to experience “what it was like” by engaging and manipulating the visitor’s emotions. This can be seen when the visitor is directed by a museum employee into an elevator that leads the visitor to the next exhibition level, the basement of prison cells. When the doors shut, the elevator begins a very slow descent in darkness while a man in black and white video begins to describe in detail the process of executing a condemned prisoner. All of this occurs without forewarning that the elevator ride will entail more than a typical descent. One blogger’s entry testifies to the emotional power of the experience: “the most disturbing sharing of memory is the video shown in the lift, as a retired warder describes, matter of factly, how he cleaned up

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<sup>92</sup>János Pelle, “Interview with Maria Schmidt- A coming radicalization?- A Kadarist package,” *Hgv.hu*, August 31, 2006. <http://hgv.hu/english/20060831mariaschmidt.aspx> (accessed May 19, 2009).

after hangings.”<sup>93</sup> In fact, the video describes no such cleaning, yet the experience is counted as the visitor’s most memorable; in this visitor’s experience, the subordination of information to emotion has occurred.<sup>94</sup> The literal sinking feeling as the elevator descends, the sound effects like a condemned prisoner’s footsteps to the gallows, and the inescapable narration of an execution: these things do not just describe terror, they create it. Emotions thus engaged, the visitor is prepped to view the basement cells.

Several bloggers noted the emotional effect of the House of Terror in their entries. One visitor mentioned that English subtitles were provided for just some videos, but concluded, “to be honest these aren't needed, just watching the accounts of what happened is enough to feel the emotion in each piece. While walking through the building I had a rising feeling of fear, for no evident reason, I just think the emotions of such a place are hard to ignore.”<sup>95</sup> The House of Terror synthesizes a powerfully emotional experience, but it is a drama that is nonetheless believable in part because of its integration with object artifacts, maps, statistics, and “historical” background information. I will touch on the subject of reliving trauma and its relation to shared memory in the third chapter.

In the DDR museum, objects still serve as the basis for the experience, but are themselves to be experienced and not just observed. The fact that no subject matter is off limits,

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<sup>93</sup> Fergus O’Donohue, “The House of Terror in Budapest” in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, The Blog, posted March 21, 2009

<http://studiesirishreview.wordpress.com/2009/03/21/the-house-of-terror/> (accessed May 22, 2009).

<sup>94</sup> The aforementioned blog entry is one of several similar posts riddled with inaccuracies in which the blogger reports having learned a great deal. “I learned A LOT about Hungarian history that I never knew, especially about events leading up to WWI and all the way to the end of WWII. Obviously I knew that Hungary was effected by the Holocaust but there was so much more than what we scratch over in school.”<sup>94</sup> The House of Terror does not cover pre-WWII, yet numerous blog entries show a confusion of time and chronology in the exhibition. In spite of beginning with occupation and ending with the Soviet departure, the in between is a jumble of decades presented as one long terror.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Pegg, “Talking of Budapest” in Sarah Pegg’s Blog, entry posted May 7, 2009 <http://sarahpegg.blogspot.com/2009/05/talking-of-budapest.html> (accessed May 15, 2009).



from feminine hygiene to sex education, contributes to the sense that this is a complete picture of daily life. The exhibition relies on curiosity rather than emotion to compel the visitor to pull open drawers and don the Stasi surveillance headphones. The hands-on focus encourages an atmosphere and behaviors atypical of museum etiquette: people talking and laughing, moving at an irreverent pace, clustering around a diorama of nude volleyball players, and playing in a museum. If an emotional environment is fostered, it is one of nostalgia more than of fear or sadness. The conception of the DDR Museum as a nostalgic view of the past will be discussed in the next chapters.

Grutas Park too breaks traditional museum expectations, encouraging play but also allowing the visitor to mock and laugh at the exhibition. Opening on April fool's day, the park was inaugurated in an atmosphere of irreverence. The park celebrates Soviet holidays and holds an annual humor feast during which a whole cast of Soviet characters interact with the public. It is still the prerogative of visitors to treat the monuments with impudence that would be unimaginable during their tenure as State heroes. The large statues, outdoor stained glass installments, and art gallery are of visual interest in their own right, unlike the gray walls of the House of Terror cells or the kitchen appliances in the DDR museum which are interesting because of what they symbolize or illustrate- respectively, terror and everyday life. Although Budapest's Momento Park invalidates Grutas Park's claims to uniqueness as the only outdoor statue Soviet statue park, its combined elements indeed result in a unique park experience.<sup>96</sup>

There are no video screens, interactive kiosks, or computers incorporated into the Grutas Park exhibition. Wood stoves heat the various buildings, in which the lights are kept off except at the request of the visitor. The park is a twenty-first century creation self-consciously

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<sup>96</sup> See Paul Williams, "The Afterlife of Communist Statuary: Hungary's Szoborpark and Lithuania's Grutas Park," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 44:2 (2008). <http://fmls.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/44/2/185> (accessed May 24, 2009).

stuck in a bygone era, and in some ways, it more successfully fosters a sense of “what it was like” than the modern, innovative design of the DDR Museum. The specific narrative take on “what is was like” will be discussed in the next chapters.

At both Grutas Park and the DDR Museum, emotions still play a role, but the visitor is more likely to experience a wider range of emotions, including amusement *and* sadness. Emotions are not imposed on the visitor in the top-down manner of the House of Terror experience. As a grouping of objects, the set of surveillance equipment in the DDR Museum does not evoke fear; in the House of Terror surveillance room where six sets of headphones hang looped from the ceiling like nooses, stationed behind a bright red fake voting room, the objects themselves may trigger an emotional response. Arguably, the dominant emotion a Western visitor experiences at the DDR Museum or Grutas Park is surprise. Surprise at the size of the monuments, the variety of consumer products in the GDR, or as one blogger noted, the fact that preschoolers were only allowed to use the bathroom during designated group potty-breaks. These museums start from the same premise of representing and memorializing an aspect of Communism and combine elements of exhibition to create three drastically different experiences. The narratives and narrative themes presented within these experiences are the subject of the next chapter.

## Chapter II. Narrative Themes and the Completed Narrative

### What Makes a Narrative?

In addition to *displaying* objects, pictures, tableaux, and other visuals, museums *convey* information. Rather than simply listing facts or presenting information with no cohesive structure, exhibitions weave together information into a more coherent whole for the sake of comprehensibility. Information can be presented in the form of maps, videos, photographs, titles and subtitles, texts, information sheets, museum programs, interactive kiosks, and audio guides. Thus, all of these elements can be thought of as somehow related to or serving the exhibition narrative.

### House of Terror

*If our people and our country become the victims of these bloodthirsty and greedy Jewish tyrants, the entire world will fall into the clutches of this octopus; but if Germany can free itself from its grasp, then we may regard this greatest of all dangers as eliminated from the whole world.*<sup>97</sup>

– Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

*Whether because information was scanty or because direct contacts with people living in faraway lands was lacking, the European imagination projected onto these communities all sorts of fantastic visions, nurtured not only by legend and prejudice but also by disturbing realities, such as freaks of nature. Hence, cultural or racial differences came to be expressed in terms of deformity, whether at the physical or moral level.*

*-IS THE OTHER COMMUNITY PEOPLED BY MONSTERS? A MASIK exhibition, Hungarian Museum of Ethnography*

*Humanity is confined to the borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, to the village, so that many so-called primitive peoples describe themselves as ‘the men,’ thus implying that the other tribes, groups or villages have no part in the human virtues or even in human nature, but that their members are, at best, ‘bad’, ‘wicked’, ‘groundmonkeys’, or ‘lousy eggs.’*

- Claude Levi-Strauss, *Race and History*, 1952<sup>98</sup>

As characterized by Hayden White’s explication of literary genres, the House of Terror delivers a “history proper” because it provides narrative closure. Again, location plays a role in the take-home moral for the visitor. Travel writer Elizabeth Rosenthal reflects in her glowing

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<sup>97</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*. Vol. 2. 7th ed. (Munich: Eher, 1933), 703.

<sup>98</sup> *A Másik* exhibition guide, 4.

review of the House of Terror, “in some ways the House of Terror ultimately tells a tale in which good triumphs over evil. When you leave the House of Terror, you walk out on to Andrassy Street and can head right to some of the most freewheeling cafes, clubs and restaurants in Europe.”<sup>99</sup> Good’s triumphing over evil is precisely the narrative closure the House of Terror provides. Adding discussion of exhibition text to that of museum objects and sensory stimulation will shed light on how themes are reinforced and narrative closure is achieved.

Using descriptive language, the opinion and judgment of the creators is inserted into the exhibition’s texts. For example, the text describes the “horrible headquarters” where interrogations took place. After describing the torture and abuse prisoners were subjected to in great detail, the text concludes for the reader’s benefit that prisoners were “horribly mistreated,” rather than allowing the reader to draw the obvious conclusion on her own. Describing the headquarters as horrible is representative of the texts narrativistic style of relating historical information in a way that already evaluates, or makes a moral judgment about the presented information for the reader. In this way, the museum asserts its authority, inserting its point of view into the text. This point of view is the only view provided and is one that is difficult to contest; its judgment has been intertwined into the fact-based information. In the House of Terror guestbook, one visitor said, “I am taking home the papers from each room because they are bursting with historical information.”<sup>100</sup> For the western viewer, the fact that

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<sup>99</sup> Elisabeth Rosenthal, “A Wonderful Museum of Terror in Budapest,” *Globespotters*, The New York Times, posted August 20, 2008. <http://globespotters.blogs.nytimes.com/author/elisabeth-rosenthal/> (accessed May 24, 2009).

For further sentimental Western interpretations of Hungary’s current condition, see Marcus Mabry, “In Budapest, a Snapshot of a World Now at Risk,” *New York Times*, April 25, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/26/weekinreview/26mabry.html?\\_r=1&scp=2&sq=budapest&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/26/weekinreview/26mabry.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=budapest&st=cse) (accessed April 26, 2009).

<sup>100</sup> House of Terror comment book, June 7, 2009.

the texts relate historical events is readily apparent; that they are loaded with value judgments may not be.

### The Communist Monster

One literary device employed in the texts of the House of Terror exhibition is the personification of Communism, or the Communist system as a monster. Rather than explaining the implications of party ideology in practical application and discussing the ideology's evolution during the time period, "ideology" becomes a thing or monster that persecutes the Hungarian people relentlessly from 1949 to 1989. The "Life Under Communism" text states, "The Party's ideology, which they called Marxism-Leninism, and Stalinism respectively, spread its tentacles over the economy, cultural life education and daily life."<sup>101</sup> Incidentally, this same destructive force of Communist Ideology is reported in the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius- provider of the texts at Grutas Park- as embarking on the "physical and spiritual destruction of the Lithuanian people."<sup>102</sup> In both cases, the ideology itself seeks to infect and destroy an entire nation. Finally, meriting its own one-line paragraph, the "Life Under Communism" text concludes, "Terror cast its shadow over daily life."<sup>103</sup> Within this statement no information is offered, only this verbal imagery. Thus it is clear that the text of the exhibition is designed not to strictly relay information but to narrate a story of Terror in such a way that a particular moral conclusion is inevitable.

Illustrating the tentacles of the sickly, perverted Communist ideology, an unruly, browning (as though diseased) fake plant sits under a fluorescent lighting apparatus in the

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<sup>101</sup> It is perhaps this statement that lead one blogger to report, "I went to the House of Terror museum and learned about Hungary under Fascism and Marxism." "Budapest and Burchen," Steph in Switzerland Blog, posted October 12, 2008, <http://ttugly.blogspot.com/2008/10/budapest-and-brchen.html> (accessed May 20, 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Museum of the Genocide Victims, Vilnius.

<sup>103</sup> "Life under communism" text.

center of the Room of Everyday life, surrounded by colorful advertising posters and some randomly scattered consumer items. The exhibition does not ignore the existence of consumer products during Socialism, but the function of showing everyday items is not to explain or demonstrate everyday life, but to expose it as an inferior substitute to life in the West. The plant grows under artificial light, and so too must the system be fed by artificial means to sustain life. The fusion of display and text is seamless: the text becomes vivid and colorful through the dynamic display. Any potential for assimilating, wherein the Western visitor might recognize the similarity between products in the West and in socialist Hungary is negated by the sense that all is somehow diseased or ersatz.

The Communist monster is terrifying and pervasive, yet it is also clumsy, foolish, and bumbling. Its economic leaders had, “not an inkling of economic matters,” and even the head of the PRO (Political Security Department) had only four years of primary school education. Moreover, its agents of terror are dehumanized; perpetrators are not individual Hungarians but machines “taught to acquire a merciless hatred,” or perhaps animals, given over to their “baser instincts.”<sup>104</sup> Thus, “On command, its agents killed without hesitation.”<sup>105</sup>

Dehumanization has been used as a tool to breed and justify hatred by identifying a group or person as having failed to be a human being. Most famously and effectively, Hitler’s identification of the Jews as vermin justified their extermination, having made them a danger to non-Jews: “if Germany can free itself from its grasp, then we may regard this greatest of all dangers as eliminated from the whole world.”<sup>106</sup> Though it does not reach anywhere near this level of extremity (justifying murder), the dehumanization of Communists in the House of Terror’s rhetoric is enough to not only incite hate but also to justify it. As I expand in the next

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<sup>104</sup> “Internment” text.

<sup>105</sup> “Anteroom of the Hungarian Political Police” text.

<sup>106</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 703

chapter, demonizing Communism is very relevant to present day politics. The effect of these descriptions is that to the Western visitor, this unfamiliar ideology is shown and likely understood as morally deformed, monstrous, evil, and inhuman. Like European imagination of the Orient, these museum visits enforce and build on a conception of Communism (and by association, Communists) for Westerners as though it were a far away land, nurtured by legend, prejudice, and “disturbing realities.” Depicting the monster furthers the narrative and creates distance, again in the same way it has been argued that the monster served Western purposes in the study of Orientalism: “monstrous races, cannibals, troglodytes, dog-headed people and the like, that was essential and enduring, a trope that symbolized conceptual distance, that placed the Orient outside the West.”<sup>107</sup>

Although exaggerated or distorted, House of Terror indeed bases most of its narrative on historical events:<sup>108</sup> Soviet occupation, the 1956 revolution, deportations, and interrogations. It is not the aim of this thesis to suggest that the atrocities reported- brothers ordering the torture of brothers, courts ordering the execution of an underage boy- are in fact fabrications. However, presenting this information within a context intensely charged with emotion by means of stage lighting, dramatic music, and unpleasant smells, is manipulative in that it is designed to engender fear and create distance from the Communist Other.

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<sup>107</sup> Sardar, 24.

<sup>108</sup> Other sources have explicated historical inaccuracies in the House of Terror. See István Rév, “The Terror of the House” in *(Re)Visualizing National History*, Robin Ostow, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2008).

## Victims and Victimizers

Communism is also depicted as completely alien to Hungary: Soviet advisors were responsible for forcing Hungarians to “accept a lifestyle and a mentality totally alien to the Hungarian people.”<sup>109</sup> This depiction further widens the gap between the Communists and Hungarians, conceptually eliminating the spaces in which the two may have overlapped. Hungarians and Communists in this narrative belong to mutually exclusive categories. Portraying oppressors as forces from outside is the precondition for establishing victimhood; it is more difficult to maintain clear designations of victimizer and victim if, even in part, the victimizer comes from within.

As a self-described monuments to the victims, the House of Terror fosters the theme of victimhood both in text and display: “Deprived of its right to schooling, further education, homes, travel, and professional recognition- that is how Hungarian society vegetated in the era of the AVH and its successor organization.”<sup>110</sup> Even to the completely uniformed outside visitor, the idea that the whole of Hungarian society existed for over fifty years without homes, jobs, schools, or vacations would seem unlikely. However, in the context of a narrative in which each of the basic rights of humans are shown having been brutally stripped away, such a statement might not warrant a second glance.

Furthermore, the House of Terror is trenchant in its division between victimizers and victims: the final room in the exhibition defines victimizers as “all those who contributed to the creation and maintenance of the totalitarian systems during times of foreign dominance.”<sup>111</sup> The pictures of some who fit this definition, men and women both living and dead, cover the walls, but certainly hall of shame does not include every person fitting this definition, which, at

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<sup>109</sup> “Room of Soviet Advisors” text.

<sup>110</sup> “Room of Peter Gabor” text.

<sup>111</sup> “Room of Victimizers” display.



minimum, includes the entirety of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party. A plaque in this final hall reads "their lives before or after do not acquit them for their individual responsibility." In this message, it is clear that there is no room for repentance or reconciliation regardless of the circumstances or decades elapsed since the time of perpetration.

One group of people easily fit into the perpetrator category is State Security informants. János Rainer outlines three ways an agent could be co-opted into service: appeal to political conviction, material interest, or blackmail.<sup>112</sup> However, such nuances affecting why a person might become an informant are not addressed. For the narrative, the identification of perpetrators, now on the wrong side of history, is uncomplicated, uncontested and uncompromising. Rainer's study "The Agent: Fragments on State Security and Middle Class Values in Kádárist Hungary," traces the career of György Kátai, who was revealed in 1990 to have worked for thirty years as an informant on Jozsef Antall, the first democratically-elected Prime Minister of Hungary. He is shown to be neither a monster, nor a helpless pawn in the hands of the AVH. Neither was he particularly informative or useful in maintaining the power of the Communist party, and although Prime Minister Antall forgave Kátai and incorporated him into his office, Kátai would undoubtedly qualify for infamy in the House of Terror's Hall of the Victimizers. Kátai and the network of informants like him formed "the cement in Hungary's Soviet-type social order."<sup>113</sup> The unmasking of Kátai in this study reveals complexities; unmasking perpetrators in the Hall of Victimizers homogenizes many faces of evil.

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<sup>112</sup> János M. Rainer, "The Agent: Fragments on State Security and Middle Class Values in Kádárist Hungary" from *Trondheim Studies on East European Cultures and Societies* 22, October 2007.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

## Imparting and Discovering the Truth

Director Maria Schmidt has said in an interview, “One of the main purposes of the museum is accountability. Finally we can say this out loud: The Communist regime was *inhuman*. Finally we can teach children the *truth*.”<sup>114</sup> In professing to teach “the truth,” Schmidt is in effect saying that there exists exactly one true interpretation of history, and that the House of Terror holds a monopoly on that truth. Indeed, this was the motivation of the Communist Crimes conference participants’ initiative to produce and distribute a European-wide textbook, professing this “truth” and imparting it to students. The manner presenting information used at the House of Terror is compatible with this stance: information need not be critiqued, interpreted, or assessed because it already exists as the truth. In other words, there is no room or need for discourse on the subject matter since the truth exists and is now being revealed; other interlocutors would be superfluous, and so are shut out.

The implication is that since the House of Terror possesses the “truth,” information need not be presented objectively, only convincingly and powerfully. Therefore, the text is not limited to reporting occurrences or presenting information, but it includes value judgments like “the communists’ cruelty and brutality was boundless” and appeals to emotion.<sup>115</sup> The branding of the Communist regime and Communists as inhumane is treated as an obvious truism, substantiated by the incontestability of deportation, torture, murder, manipulation and other acts committed by the Communists as morally wrong. The museum aims to disclose the truth and uses the aforementioned sensory stimulants to condition the viewer to be emotionally receptive to its moral monologue. Instead of engaging the topic of atrocities committed by political

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<sup>114</sup> Thomas Fuller, “Memory Becomes Battleground in Budapest’s House of Terror,” *International Herald Tribune*, August 2, 2002. <http://www.culturasearchivo.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=pdf&sid=128&POSTNUKESID=fa4281a184db1145f8e755350a90f39b> (accessed May 10, 2009). My emphasis.

<sup>115</sup> “Cardinal Mindszenty” text.

ideologies by addressing the ideology and contextual circumstances, the House of Terror bring the issue to a moralizing level at which the ideology, perpetrators, and their actions are uniformly classified as evil.

Perhaps the most vivid manifestation of the rhetoric employed by the House of Terror can be seen in a transcribed address, given by Maria Schmidt at the opening of an exhibition, which informs viewers what the purpose of the exhibition is and prepares the viewers to see evil. Schmidt's address refers to the "satanic attempts to ignore history," "the sinister demons of our history," and "apocalyptic vision-evoking crime," all of which are living threats to attempts to "find peace."<sup>116</sup> The Christian-imagery used in the demarcation of good and evil could not be any more explicit. After hearing this address, visitors could then see elements of the exhibition, which have shown in the previous chapters as designed to create conceptual distance with the evil Communist Other. One could simply replace "Communism" for "Orient" in Said's interpretation of Orientalism as showing the absolute and systematic difference between the rational, humane, superior West, and the aberrant, inferior Orient that is something to be feared or controlled, to characterize the House of Terror's depiction of Communism.<sup>117</sup> The danger of the House of Terror is not that it shows the atrocities of the Communist regime; it is an appropriation of Terror, showing Communism strictly as something to loathe and fear, that is manipulative and dangerous.

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<sup>116</sup> From the Famine in the Ukraine exhibition, "The twentieth century that we have left behind us is terrible above all not for its horrors and endless genocides! The ceaseless lies make it so. The satanic attempts to wipe out the recollection of the horrors, nay memory itself, make it intolerable. The intention simply to purge the memory of humankind of their crimes. These hundred years are rendered horrible and intolerable because the sinister demons of our history successfully covered up and cover up the crimes they have committed, for which there is no forgiveness. [ . . . ] Ladies and Gentlemen! Arranging this exhibition was not an honour for the House of Terror Museum; it was an obligation. Because the past has to be able to speak and it is our task to listen to it, even if it is dreadfully distressing. Without this, neither the past nor we can find peace" – the complete transcription is available at [http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/temporary\\_exhibitions/previous\\_exhibitions/famine\\_in\\_the\\_ukraine.html](http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/temporary_exhibitions/previous_exhibitions/famine_in_the_ukraine.html) (accessed May 28, 2009).

<sup>117</sup> Alexander Lyon Macfie, ed, *Orientalism: A Reader*, (New York University Press: New York, 2000), 104-105.

Thus, Communism as something past remains something to fear in the present. What then, might be the usefulness of assigning the status of victimhood to the evil of Communist, or even of broadcasting atrocities through museums? David Lowenthal says that nations may be inclined to broadcast their sufferings for a dual purpose: “Atrocities are invoked as heritage not only to forge internal unity but to enlist external sympathy.”<sup>118</sup> One blogger’s entry reveals this to have been her experience: “The visit to the House of Terror was not so pleasant, but served as a necessary reminder of the sins of the past. It is good for us as Americans to have a deeper understanding of the difficult history that Hungary and its people have had.”<sup>119</sup> For a nation such as Hungary, found on the losing side of history in both WWI and WWII, this narrative could offer a measure of redemption for Hungary’s recent past by pointing to the atrocities it endured. Herein lies the usefulness of creating the Communist Other, creating distance and establishing superiority, with clearly demarcated victims and victimizers who come from the outside. Another blogger’s entry, “I learned so much about Nazis that lived in Hungary and mistreated people, and also about how Hungarians were treated during Soviet occupation,”<sup>120</sup> suggests that the narrative is more explicit in its identification Hungarian victims than Jewish, Roma, or other groups targeted by the Nazis: Nazi’s mistreated “people,” Soviets mistreated “Hungarians.” This blogger’s entry echoes the trope that the oppressors came exclusively from the outside, a designation that supports to the museum’s overall narrative.

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<sup>118</sup> Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 75.

<sup>119</sup> Jack and Cindy Ippel, “House of Terror,” Hope in Hungary Blog, entry posted February 3, 2009, <http://hopeinhungary.blogspot.com/2009/02/house-of-terror.html> (accessed May 18, 2009).

<sup>120</sup> Victoria Burke, “Budapest Day 2,” Travel Blog, entry posted May 21, 2009, <http://www.travelblog.org/Europe/Hungary/Central-Hungary/Budapest/blog-400701.html> (accessed May 22, 2009).

Indeed, the House of Terror's narrative is successful in enlisting external sympathy not only for its tragic past but also for present conditions, as reported in a number of blog entries similar to this one in sentiment:

This museum gave us an explanation as to why Hungary is the way that it is now. Many of the people we saw on the streets were probably alive during all of this- all of them affected by the communist party seeing that it ended less than 20 years ago. 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the population was exterminated [. . .] I knew terrible things happened under the communistic regime, but I didn't really know how it affected the people so closely for such a long time. It was sad and terrible, but a great reminder to us of how blessed we are to be living in a free society where we don't have to worry about being tortured and hanged, or even not having any food available on any given day.<sup>121</sup>

In this entry, the Othering of Communism has taken effect as described by Ziauddin Sardar:

The supposed knowledge derived from the Orientalist vision is based not on accuracy and utility but by the degree to which it enhances the self-esteem of the Westerner. It achieves this by making fiction more real, more aesthetically pleasing than truth. Orientalism is thus a constructed ignorance, a deliberate self-deception, which is eventually projected on the Orient.<sup>122</sup>

For these visitors, the museum offers a lens through which to view Hungary; it provides them with a new vision of Hungary's past. The visitors express having been profoundly moved by the experience: preconceptions are confirmed but deepened, empathy is generated, and gratitude is felt for the triumph of free society. Leaving the museum experience, these visitors' eyes have been opened- with misinformation- to a new sympathetic understanding based on what is received as a narrative of historic events.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Shea and Amy Owens, "Buda and Pest" in Living Our Dreams Blog, posted March 30, 2009 <http://sheamy.blogspot.com/2009/03/buda-and-pest.html> (accessed May 19, 2009).

<sup>122</sup> Sardar, 4.

<sup>123</sup> This was the experience of one travel blogger who wrote, "This museum was not particularly impressive, but very enlightening about why budapest is eastern the way it is, why today economically it is still suffering from the communists, and most importantly, budapest was the victim of the imposing policies of the facist Stalin. Many people were killed [sic]." From "Nazis and Communists" by seasonedveteran posted March 23, 2008. [http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Europe/Hungary/Budapest\\_Fovaros/Budapest436839/Things\\_To\\_Do-Budapest-House\\_of\\_Terror\\_Museum\\_Terror\\_Haza\\_Muzeum-BR-2.html](http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Europe/Hungary/Budapest_Fovaros/Budapest436839/Things_To_Do-Budapest-House_of_Terror_Museum_Terror_Haza_Muzeum-BR-2.html) (accessed May 29, 2009).

## Nurturing Preconceptions: the Totalitarian Model

The concept of totalitarianism is utilized in the House of Terror in such a way that Fascism and Communism are seen in the visual and textual presentation not as distinct ideologies but as two faces of the same evil. The manner in which the House of Terror represents Communism and Fascism can be seen as a manifestation of Hannah Arendt's explanation of totalitarianism in its depictions of the use of terror, violence, and propaganda, a single party state, state controlled economy, and the creation of personality cults. Indeed, Arendt states that "Terror is the very essence of its [totalitarianism's] form of government,"<sup>124</sup> so terror is a fitting theme around which to create and tell the story of totalitarianism. The House of Terror's presented version of Communism could also be fitted into the totalitarian model propagated during the Cold War by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, with its emphasis on dictatorship, terror, monopoly of force, centralized economy, and all-pervading importance of ideology.

The building at 60 Andr ssy Boulevard is the perfect setting for a narrative of totalitarianism, having formerly been in the service of both fascism and communism. Since it largely focuses on the Communist terror, these aspects of totalitarianism are more fully born out in its representation than in the museum's representation of fascism. Its portrayal of Communism and, to a lesser extent, Fascism reinforces the preexisting understanding of these foreign concepts that westerners bring as "preknowledge" to their museum visit. However, I would argue that it is not the specific representations of these dimensions of totalitarianism that ultimately inform the western visitor's reception of the exhibition; these aspects are creatively

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<sup>124</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: New Ed. With added Prefaces*, (Harcourt Trade, 1973), 344.

and powerfully portrayed, yet are overridden by an emotional, visceral response that is more influential in shaping the visitor's understanding.

The concept of Communism and Fascism as two manifestations of the same evil totalitarianism is persistently reinforced throughout the exhibition. The museum's insignia, ubiquitous throughout its building, brochures and website, juxtaposes the symbol of the Arrow Cross with the Communist red star, as if to say the two are equal. The first exhibition room, "Nazi Occupation," sets the tone for the rest of the exhibition: video of the Nazi and Soviet occupations line opposite sides of the same dividing wall down the middle of the room, equating the two occupiers while claiming Hungary's victimhood as a continuous tragedy. The "Changing Clothes" room also illustrates this idea in a video showing men and women undressing and redressing into different uniforms, demonstrating a seamless transition from one regime to the next. Meanwhile in the center of the room, uniforms of the two regimes rotate back-to-back, showing that they are on the same level, essentially interchangeable. In addition to equating the perpetrators, the courtyard wall features the faces of victims of each regime brought together without distinction to create one enormous (and doubly so because of its reflection in the water) group of victims. All these elements reinforce the depiction of Hungary's recent history as one of indistinguishable totalitarianisms and victimhood.

Like the House of Terror, the Museum of the Genocide Victims in Vilnius- which provides the texts for the Grutas Park exhibition- portrays the nation's history of dual occupation through a totalitarian framework. After entering the Museum of Genocide Victims (alternately and confusingly referred to as the KGB Museum) exhibit, the first display board the visitor sees, entitled "Losses during the occupation" enumerates by category first the losses

during the Soviet occupation and then losses during the Nazi German occupation.<sup>125</sup> All of these “losses” are listed so that the 200,000 Jews killed by the Nazis are lumped together with the 28,000 partisans and their supporters killed during the Soviet Occupation. All are counted as victims of genocide, just as the dead in the House of Terror are victims of the same totalitarian terror. By contrast, Grutas Park and its Hungarian Counterpart, Memento Park, are singularly focused on the Soviet era. Had the Nazi occupation lasted long enough to allow a sizable collection of statues to accumulate, one might speculate that the park may have expanded its scope.

### The Usefulness of ‘Totalitarianism’

The status of totalitarianism as an appropriate historical concept for explaining Fascism and Communism is contested. Historians today generally agree that the concept of totalitarianism is not a helpful analytical tool for describing or explaining historical reality.<sup>126</sup> Its inclusion in only some museums dealing with Communism reflects this ambiguous status. One argument against totalitarianism as a useful historical concept is particularly appropriate to its use in museums that purport to present horrific topics in order to facilitate dialogue: in his book *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Zizek Slavoj contends, “far from being an effective theoretical concept, [it] is a kind of *stopgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking.”<sup>127</sup> Further, Slavoj maintains that it serves the convenient political purpose of safely situating anyone who employs the term in the liberal

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<sup>125</sup> Museum of the Genocide Victims, Vilnius.

<sup>126</sup> Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>127</sup> Zizek Slavoi, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Verso, 2002, page 3.



democratic camp.<sup>128</sup> Western visitors to these museums may not be well versed in the political debates or history of the area, but they will likely be acquainted with the concept of totalitarianism. Borrowing Anson Rabinach's terminology, 'totalitarianism' is a semantic marker,<sup>129</sup> one that denotes terror, oppression, and evil. Thus, when the House of Terror makes references to the totalitarian systems in the exhibition texts, the western visitor will be able to situate the information into a frame of reference, likely pre-loaded with negative connotations.

At the inaugural meeting of the Foundation for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in 2009, participants and presenters repeatedly, although not unanimously, urged the linking of Communist crimes to those of the Nazis. Participants agreed that public perception of Communism is in general too soft and too forgiving, evidenced by the general acceptance (or at least indifference) to Che Guevarra t-shirts as compared with the public outrage ignited by Prince Harry's Nazi Halloween costume. By linking Communism to something that is more universally condemned, participants hoped to reshape any perceptions of Communism as defunct and innocuous. The totalitarian model is conscientiously used not as an analytical tool (which historians presently reject with near unanimity), but as a practical one whose function is to equate the crimes of Communism with the crimes of Nazism, and to unify the whole Socialist period as one of uniform totalitarianism.

István Rév's article "The Terror of the House" shows the many ways in which the House of Terror downplays the crimes of the Arrow Cross, persistently stressing its brevity and devoting to it little exhibition space in the museum, providing a much more thorough excoriation of the crimes of Communism.<sup>130</sup> Thus, it can be argued that as it is used in the House of Terror, the concept of totalitarianism is not a framework for the comparative study of

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Anson Rabinach, review article "Moments of Totalitarianisms", 100.

<sup>130</sup> István Rév, "The Terror of the House," 64.

two of regimes, nor a tool for assessing common intellectual origins and points of intersection of Fascism and Communism, nor a point of departure from which to assess the two regimes. Instead, is used to demonize Communism by in part its association with Fascism- invoked both as the Arrow Cross and the Nazis.

## Grutas Park: Victimhood and Resistance

*That word “resistance” has become very fashionable. We hear of the “spirit of resistance,” of “resistance circles.” There is even talk of an “inward resistance,” a “psychic emigration.” Not to mention those courageous and uncompromising souls who call themselves Resistance Fighters, men of the Resistance, because they were fined during the war for not blacking out their bedroom windows properly.*

- Gunter Grass, *The Tin Drum*

Discussing the narrative of Communism presented at Grutas Park is problematic because of the conflicting elements that inform it. While the presence of absurd, fun, and ironic elements at Grutas Park suggests a broader, non-moralizing interpretation of historical events, many of the texts themselves present narrative themes similar to that of the House of Terror’s categorical depiction of Communism as evil. Further, some texts delineate the historical actors along lines of victims (good) and perpetrators (evil), while the statue exhibition fails to adhere strictly to these binaries. In this section I argue that these disparities between textual narrative and the overall grand narrative exist because the texts were provided by the Museum of the Genocide Victims in Vilnius, an institute independent of the park. I will not discuss the Museum in detail, but will suffice to say that it bears a striking resemblance to the House of Terror in exhibition design, overall focus, and narrative themes.

The absurdities of Grutas Park leave the visitor with more questions than answers: is the seemingly out of place giant rooster statue intended to mock the statues of Communist leaders; am I supposed to be serious or is it ok to run around the park and pose for a picture on Lenin’s

shoulders, as is encouraged by Hungary's Memento Park<sup>131</sup>; why is there an acupuncture office next to the museum's information center; what is the significance of the hunting-lodge-meets-futurism interior decoration of the café, and was the lunch I just ate formerly a resident of this petting zoo? These questions and more that arise during the course of a park visit create a sense of unease as to what narrative the park intends to convey. Ambiguities about the nature of the park and its intended narrative are further complicated for the visitor who takes the time to read the accompanying texts in their entirety (not always an inviting prospect at an outdoor exhibition).

Translation for the English-speaking visitor contributes an additional layer of obscurity to the park experience. The texts disclose the crimes and suffering inflicted on the Lithuanian nation and allow for the unequivocal classification of Lithuanians as victims and resistance fighters.<sup>132</sup> In general, the texts translated for English speakers from the original are riddled with errors that render much of it incomprehensible. The English material is sometimes awkward, misleading, or even inaccurate. One example of this is the concluding statement of the short biography accompanying Stalin's statues, which gives the figure of "360 thousand citizens of occupied Lithuania, mostly of Lithuanian nationality, [who] were imprisoned, exiled to Siberia, and killed."<sup>133</sup> Were such a fact to be true, it would represent the extermination of a sizable portion of Lithuania's population: rather, 360 thousand more closely mirrors the combined number of Lithuanian citizens who were arrested, interrogated, imprisoned, deported,

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<sup>131</sup> A paid advertisement by Memento Park in the Budapest Funzine invites the visitor to interact with the monuments: "they can be viewed, touched, spoken about- heck, you can even climb on them!" June 4-17, 2009 Budapest Funzine, 23.

<sup>132</sup> The themes discussed here are present in the non-biographical texts, in other words the texts that do not accompany a single sculptural figure. In this section, references to "texts" will exclude the group of biographical texts. The other texts are comprised by material in the Information Center, Gallery, and some outdoor explanatory postings.

<sup>133</sup> Stalin statue text, personal photograph, Grutas Park.

and/or killed as reported in the Museum of Genocide Victims permanent exhibition,<sup>134</sup> or perhaps the figure refers to the estimated 350,000 deported from Lithuania between 1945-1949.<sup>135</sup>

In many ways, the exhibition's texts and the park's other elements are incongruous. The texts are indeed explanatory, giving a biography of each statue and identifying items on display. Despite this encyclopedic approach to text, wherein the text serve to provide information about a given person, place, thing, group, idea, or event, there exists amongst the amalgamated texts of the Information Center a *discontinuous* narrative that is not simply informative, but responsible for the dissemination of a theme of specifically Lithuanian national victimhood. While elements of the park and its statue exhibition leave room for questioning, contemplation, and criticism, there exists no intended, *continuous* narrative.

These themes adhere strictly to the binary of good versus evil. One way the texts foster the theme of victimhood is in establishing separate categories of "Lithuanians" and "red partisans," or Soviet supporters. The text discussing the Soviet partisans creates the division explaining, "Soviet activists, Red Army men, escaped prisoners of war and some inhabitants of Lithuania (mostly of Jewish nationality) formed the groups of saboteurs [Soviet partisans]. Half of the members of groups were people sent by the 'center' [Soviet Union]." The next sentence follows, "Native people didn't support Soviet partisans."<sup>136</sup> According to these figures then, the remaining half of the groups (non-Soviets) were formed by non-native inhabitants. Although these numbers do not add up, the text has established mutually exclusive categories of Lithuanians versus Soviets and their supporters.

<sup>134</sup> Photo by author, Museum of the Genocides, Vilnius.

<sup>135</sup> Thomas Lane, "Lithuania: Stepping Westward" in *The Baltic States*, (London: Routledge, 2002) 62.

<sup>136</sup> Photo by author, Grutas Park.

With the actors thus designated, the text reveals the atrocities perpetrated by the Soviet partisans: “when taken prisoner, Lithuanian soldiers were tortured to death: their eyes were put out, ears were torn off, they were shot to death by explosive bullets.”<sup>137</sup> The text also describes the murder of villagers (native people) all across Lithuania. What is missing here is the broader context, which does not justify the killings but would inform the viewer that these events were taking place during World War II. The text instead isolates Lithuanian suffering. In this same way, it is not enough in the aforementioned quote not only falsely claims that 360,000 citizens of Lithuania were imprisoned, exiled, and killed, but the text also insists that most of these victims were “of Lithuanian nationality.” In this way, a distinctly national narrative of victimhood and suffering is constructed.

A large section of the texts in the Information Center are devoted to the heroic deeds of the Soviet Resistance fighters who fought the Soviets for eight years. Lithuanians comprise the fighters, supporters- those who lived legally and provided fighters with material support, and signalers- those who facilitated communication between fighters and signalers. Thus, all Lithuanians can be fitted into one of these categories as part of the resistance. Indeed, the longevity of the Guerrilla resistance indicates a wide base of popular support. Nonetheless, the text allows for none of the complexities of guerrilla/civilian relations, which grew increasingly problematic as the struggle dragged on. Romuald Miiunas and Rein Taagepera’s history of the era, widely quoted and regarded as a neutral source based on assumptive statistics, explains, “opposition to every Soviet measure may have looked supremely patriotic at first, but as the years went by it became indistinguishable from social obstructionism [ . . . ] their national-liberation aura was increasingly transformed into an image of rebels who hit and ran, leaving

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

the civilian population to face the wrath of those in power.”<sup>138</sup> Consequently, more people began to collaborate with the Soviets, and thereafter became targets of guerrilla counterterror. These threads of the story of resistance are inconvenient to a grand narrative because they blur the established boundary between Lithuanian resistance and Soviet repression. If the aims of relating this narrative theme are to create internal unity and generate external sympathy,<sup>139</sup> a clear-cut narrative of Lithuanians versus oppressors better serves both aims.

After describing the emergence and operations of the resistance, the text frames their ultimate defeat in this way:

The guerrilla war was the most mass and tragic demonstration of the nation’s fight for survival. 50 thousand people participated in the war; 20 thousand of them were killed. Though the war was lost, it was not in vain. The guerrilla fights and the experience gained were remembered during the long years of the occupation.<sup>140</sup>

The assurance that the struggle- lives lost and hardships suffered- was not in vain is a common theme in memorial museums. The House of Terror website also declares its intent to “make people understand that the ultimate sacrifice for freedom was not in vain.”<sup>141</sup> Neither is the unequivocal categorization of those whose lives were lost as “good” unique to the Grutas Park and House of Terror narratives. Hayden White has shown that to narrativize is to create collectivity, giving a nation particular sense of itself. Narrativity provides meaning and enables the construction of a unique identity.<sup>142</sup> In this case, the identity sought for the collective is that of heroism and honor of resistance fighters. Benedict Anderson points out, “National Death has, so to speak, paid their bills and cleared their moral books. The National Dead are never killers.”<sup>143</sup> It would be imprudent to mention whether Lithuanian soldiers or resistance fighters

<sup>138</sup> *The Baltic State: The Years of Dependence*, 92.

<sup>139</sup> Lowenthal, 75.

<sup>140</sup> Text from “The Anti-Soviet Resistance,” Information Center, Grutas Park.

<sup>141</sup> “About Us” House of Terror website.

<sup>142</sup> White, *The Content of the Form*, 167.

<sup>143</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, 363.

too shot their enemies “to death by explosive bullets,”<sup>144</sup> since such an acknowledgement would problematize the unquestionable goodness of the Lithuanians who died in the conflict.

Although the overall narrative aggrandizes the morally pure sacrifice of its National Dead, the narrative texts accompanying the Soviet statue exhibition do not reciprocally denigrate the former heroes of Communism who are on display. The glorification of Lithuanian self-sacrifice seems even ironic when set in the same park that exhibits statues of Soviet heroes who were memorialized for similar heroic sacrifices. This point substantiates my argument that although it is abounding in assertions of the narrative themes of victimhood, sacrifice, heroism, and villainy, the park does not succeed in completing a grand narrative to which every element of the exhibition would eventually lead. The biographies of the figures on display in the statue exhibition, among whom Lithuanians figure prominently, mainly describe the lives and achievements these men (and the very rare women) in service of the Communist cause.

The visitor is introduced to these figures as they were: writers, soldiers, activists, and leaders- not evil or depraved criminals. Their biographies reveal that they too were “resistance fighters” and may also have been imprisoned, only on behalf of the other side. Encountering these figures makes the visitor aware that Communists in Lithuania were not exclusively made up of foreign oppressors, but also of Lithuanians. Some of the biographies disclose in conclusion that the person displayed, at one time worthy of his own monument, was eventually imprisoned and/or killed by the regime he served. For all those memorialized, their relocation into the mock-gulag is evidence enough of the final judgment on the ideology they served.

The sculpture exhibition leaves the impression that the figures on display are not dissimilar from figures that might be chosen for memorialization in a liberal democratic society. Associations are most likely different for Lithuanian visitors, but for the Western

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<sup>144</sup> Photo by author, Grutas Park.

audience, Vincas Andrievicius's biography likely will not elicit a strong emotional reaction or conjure up associations with history's most notorious villains: instead, he seems a fairly ordinary Lithuanian. Furthermore, the Grutas Park exhibition can only use what is available: texts can be written in any manner or tone, but a statue of Stalin, originally created to depict a pensive, intelligent, paternal figure can hardly be remolded to reflect a more suitably sinister visage.

The narrative of the statue exhibition overwhelms that of the Information Center, as the statues cover a much larger portion of the park, are more unusual, and more powerful visually. Visitors who blog about Grutas Park comment almost exclusively on the sculptures, making little or no mention of the Information Center. Thus, the binary between Lithuanians as resistance fighters and their supporters versus Soviet oppressors, established in the Information Center, breaks down when the visitor encounters "sameness" amongst those whom the Communists chose to memorialize as heroes; there is a plurality of voices at odds with one another in the overall exhibition.



## DDR Museum

*One, perhaps even the most important, of the ethnographic cultural-historical open-air museum's tasks is precisely to popularize. But in order to speak to the people in an intimate and winning way, science (or in this case, the museum) must be induced to step down from the pedestal that has been raised by academic aristocrats, in order to comply as much as is allowable with the demands of the masses. And the broader public requires watchability and liveliness; it wants to see the breath of life in the dead bones; it wants to hear the old instruments play with full sound.*

– Edvard Hammarstedt, museum assistant at the Nordic museum<sup>145</sup>

*On the ladder of evolution, the Orient was consistently way behind the West [ . . . ] Islamic law was not law in any real sense; neither was Chinese medicine worthy of being referred to as medicine; and the Indian civilization had no notion of rationality- genuine reason was the sole privilege of Western civilization.<sup>146</sup>*

- Ziauddin Sadar, *Orientalism*

The DDR Museum does not employ the term “totalitarianism” or refer to the DDR as a totalitarian state. Nevertheless, it is clear in the exhibited material that the SED (United Socialist Party of East Germany) somehow affected every aspect of life. Texts do not include the themes of victimhood, perpetration, or resistance that might be expected of a country-specific memorial museum. Instead, the exhibition presents textual material in “fun” ways: retelling old jokes about Honecker, disclosing rumors and speculation, recounting stories of significant sports victories. These modes of relaying information are all ways of treating subjects that seem trivial (children’s action figures) or frivolous (uses of synthetic fabrics in fashion), but are always related to the larger theme of “what life was like.” Vignettes and short descriptions comprise the narrative, which aims to show people enjoying life while tolerating or working around the eccentricities, inconveniences, and oppressive aspects of the system.

Compatible with its “hands-on” approach, the texts at the exhibition are relatively brief to facilitate less reading and more doing. Topics are generally covered in a paragraph, noticeably shorter than the page or more texts typical of Grutas Park and the House of Terror. Brevity is also a concept that characterizes the era in the texts. The exhibition’s first text “A

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<sup>145</sup> Mark Sandberg, *Living Pictures and Missing Persons: Mannequins, Museums, and Modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 178.

<sup>146</sup> Sadar, 5.

State Comes and Goes” is a good summary of the impression the visitor leaves with, that the DDR was a wacky aberration, a curious block of history that came and went and can be compared with but now has little bearing on the present day life of Germany. The narrative presented to the Western visitor depicts a strange, unfamiliar, and all-pervading but not all-bad system. The character of Communism that emerges is not so much the dangerous or morally deformed Other, but more like an uncle whose eccentric Trabi-loving, gardening and nude-volleyball enthusiast ways are an amusement but not a tremendous hindrance to the rest of the family. Communism may be cheap or inferior, but it is not treacherous or inhumane. Everyday life operated under odd circumstances, but it still operated, and possibly even thrived.

Texts attempt a balanced approach to each topic. A passage about long lines for certain consumer goods is accompanied by a chart detailing how and where various goods could be procured, in effect showing that inconvenience did not equate with severe deprivation. Furthermore, there is an avoidance of over-interpretation for the sake of an interesting narrative; a short passage about blue jeans says that wearing Western jeans was probably more a stylistic preference than an act of rebellion. In other words, sometimes things just were the way they were, independent of ideological influences.

Eschewing totalitarianism as a model for narrating DDR history, the museum also avoids assigning victim status to East Germans. East Germans are not portrayed as survivors. On the contrary, they sometimes thrive, sometimes suffer, and generally go about living daily life. There is no suggestion of society “vegetating,” as in the House of Terror; there is, however, a sizeable discussion of East Germans’ fondness for gardening. Neither is the narrative one of never-ending resistance (if only inward), though the text describes numerous sources of dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction and frustration with the inconveniences are described

weakening the State's "iron grip," figuring more prominently in the narrative than national resistance to the oppressive system in the eventual demise of the DDR.

If the House of Terror and, to a much lesser extent, Grutas Park, present the history of life under Socialist dictatorship using the model of totalitarianism, the DDR Museum is more closely aligned with social history in the vein of Sheila Fitzpatrick, endeavoring to write history with a new emphasis on everyday life and the private sphere, writing history "from below" and "from above."<sup>147</sup> Described by Ronald Grigor Suny, Fitzpatrick and "her students and close colleagues have shared with her a critical attitude toward the practices and aspirations of the Soviet regime but not the visceral hatred or disdain that passed for judgment in the Cold War years."<sup>148</sup> The DDR exhibit too is devoid of hatred and distain, though not wholly uncritical of the DDR regime or its practices. There are more active players in the DDR narrative: the regime plays a role, but mostly we see its repressive and ridiculous practices leading to its own breakdown; the Stasi plays a villain but is not demonized by the museum's inserted judgment; and most importantly, the DDR citizenry, who lack nothing material except choice, take the central role. The multiplicity of voices makes the narrative a broader look at life under Socialism.

In the absence of a victimhood motif, the visitor is still made aware that everyday life could be and often was under the surveillance of the Stasi. Though the Stasi's network of an estimated 100,000 full-time employees and 260,000 informers or "collaborators" in 1989 would potentially provide a ready source of easily demonized victimizers, this is not carried out.<sup>149</sup> The visual display accompanying the Stasi section is not dramatic- just a small desk

<sup>147</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalinism: New Directions*. London: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>148</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny in "Roundtable: What is a School? Is there a Fitzpatrick School of Soviet History?" in *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 24. <http://srch.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/publicnt/acta/24/roundtable.pdf> (accessed May 30, 2009).

<sup>149</sup> David Childs and Richard Popplewell, *The Stasi*, (London, Macmillan Press: 1996), 85-86.

stacked with outdated surveillance equipment. A photograph of Eric Honecker, leader of the GDR during the Stasi's peak period of strength and most likely unrecognizable to most non-German visitors, hangs above the desk. The texts stress the Stasi's pervasiveness and extensiveness. Nonetheless, there is no attention given to exposing individual Stasi employees or informants, no attempt to hold collaborators accountable, and no attempt to relate the individual suffering caused by the Stasi's measures. The state security apparatus is not made personal, but is abstracted as "Big Brother."<sup>150</sup> While the apparatus's functioning is discussed, there is no disclosure of what befell those it chose to arrest or detain. It is as though "Big Brother is listening,"<sup>151</sup> but not necessarily taking action. Neither does the exhibition demonize the Soviet Union; in fact, Stalin is left out of the exhibition altogether, and Lenin makes his only appearance in the form of a small bust. There is no pillory of individual leaders, Soviet or German, and limited mention of Soviet intervention in GDR affairs. This is a departure from the Grutas Park and House of Terror's detailed divulgence of the horrific acts of Soviet oppressors. By separating the discourse about everyday life from a focus on dictatorship or totalitarianism, the exhibition avoids a narrative of victimhood, in a sense striving for empathy without pity.

Without the narrative themes typical of museums of Communism, what does the DDR Museum rely on to drive its narrative? The answer may lie in what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley calls the "drama of the quotidian," the appeal of which is explained by John MacAloon: "one man's life is another man's spectacle."<sup>152</sup> Avoiding victimhood or dictatorship as central themes makes everyday life an obvious but potentially dull alternate narrative focus. It can be said, then, that the DDR Museum relies in part on the appeal of kitsch to arouse the

<sup>150</sup> DDR Museum, *A guide to the permanent exhibition*, 36.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Kirshenblatt-Gimbley, 45.

interest of visitors in lieu of intrigue otherwise generated by a dramatic story. That rather than creating a deformed, horrific Other, it appeals to our amusement at a tacky, backward Other? Perhaps observing the oddities of Communist everyday life allows us a certain amount of self-congratulation for our comparative normality; as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimbley says of kitsch, “the finger that points to the breach points to the rule.”<sup>153</sup> Comparable treatment of nudism as a mass movement and Stasi surveillance mechanisms lends credence to this suggestion. The DDR Museum’s response is that a narrower approach, focusing only on negative aspects of life, would be an attempt to demonize the past and would fall short of the museum’s responsibility to provide the viewer with as complete a picture as is possible.<sup>154</sup> However, this picture may be complete down to its authentic DDR era toilet paper roll (which is indeed authentic and is displayed with a request that it not be removed), and yet it can only capture one angle; a reconstructed apartment can only exist as a singular representation and cannot show the multiplicity of lifestyles which varied widely both within East Berlin and across East Germany. Further gradations are made in the accompanying texts, but the visual display is necessarily limited. When gauging by visitor comments and blog postings, the angle the DDR Museum presents- at least visually- is indeed optimistic.

On account of its tendencies towards Communist Kitsch and Ostalgie, the DDR Museum is often grouped with other tourist ventures that profit from outsiders’ curiosity about life in the DDR. Journalists and bloggers have compared the museum to other ventures such as the hostel “Ostel,” where travelers can book a bargain “scout bunk” for nine euros per night or choose to splurge on the “Stasi Suite.”<sup>155</sup> If the museum is simply pandering to and profiting

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>154</sup> DDR Museum, *A guide to the permanent exhibition*, 4.

<sup>155</sup> Tobias Schreier, “Reliving East Germany in a Berlin Hotel,” *Spiegel Online*, June 26, 2006. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,490847,00.html> (accessed May 20, 2009).

from nostalgia for DDR, which Anthony Enns views as merely a passing trend, the museum runs the risk of going out of style, like any other passing enthusiasm for the retro or vintage.<sup>156</sup> Still, most bloggers noted a dimension beyond nostalgia; one blogger characterized the exhibition not as overly-sentimental, but as a “sort of bemused appreciation for communist kitsch, but with recognition of the negative aspects as well.”<sup>157</sup> That Ostalgie holds an attraction for tourists does not negate most visitors’ desire for an “educational” experience.

In the overall narrative of the DDR Museum, a proclivity for Communist Kitsch is evident and yet, as one blogger writes, “Of course it wasn't all soap and personal culture.”<sup>158</sup> The Western visitor encounters a narrative that is assimilating- showing commonality between East and West- while consistently showing inferiority. The description of owners pampering their Trabis is charming, but the presence of the Berlin wall and the Stasi add seriousness to the playfulness of the exhibition. Still, some have argued that the museum is not serious enough. The next chapter details these debates as well as those regarding the House of Terror and Grutas Park. I will address the political debates concerning these museums’ versions of national history and representation of Communism. Outlining the current debates surrounding these museums will provide the contemporary context within which to view the experiences they provide and the dialogue they foster.

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<sup>156</sup> Anthony Enns, “The politics of Ostalgie: not-socialist nostalgia in recent German film,” *Screen* 48:4. <http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/48/4/475> (accessed May 20, 2009).

<sup>157</sup> “The DDR, Surveillance, and Informational Self-Determination,” Without a Traceroute Blog, posted February 3, 2009 <http://www.withoutatraceroute.com/2009/02/the-ddr-surveillance-and-informational-self-determination/> (accessed May 19, 2009).

<sup>158</sup> “DDR Museum in Berlin!” *Livejournal*, posted November 18, 2008 [http://community.livejournal.com/deutsche\\_kultur/217046.html](http://community.livejournal.com/deutsche_kultur/217046.html) (accessed May 9, 2009).

## Chapter III. Political and Public Debates and a Present Perspective

*You cannot know how it felt to have to hear these things and then repeat them because when I repeated them I felt like I was making them new again.*

–Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*

*Commemorative activity is by definition social and political, for it involves the coordination of individual and group memories, whose results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and in some instances, annihilation.*

–John R. Gillis, *Commemoration*

*Nationalism, or so it is said, is no longer a major force: globalization is the order of the day. But a reminder is necessary. Nationhood is still being reproduced: it can still call for ultimate sacrifices.*

–Michael Billings, *Banal Nationalism*

### Exhibiting the Nation

The interplay between museums, memory, history, and the nation has been the subject of much scholarship in recent years. In Benedict Anderson’s characterization of the nation as an imagined community, the museum can be seen as one powerful framework- in Anderson’s terminology, a “totalizing classificatory grid”-within which the nation represents itself.<sup>159</sup> According to Robin Ostow, the national museum creates a national narrative that emphasizes moments of grandeur.<sup>160</sup> In a sense, memorial museums reverse this concept, focusing on moments of tragedy, while still contributing to a national history. Relating a national history is a tremendous responsibility because of the interdependence of a nation’s perceived identity and its collective memory. John R. Gillis calls memory the sustaining the sense of sameness that is the core meaning of a group’s identity.<sup>161</sup> Reciprocally, what is remembered is informed by that identity. For a nation, this sameness is derived largely from a shared national history.

As bearers of a national history, these museums are political. Museums dealing with recent history in particular are unavoidably enmeshed in the difficulty of presenting material

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<sup>159</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983), 184.

<sup>160</sup> Ostow, 7.

<sup>161</sup> John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship,” in *Commemorations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

that is still fresh, controversial and precarious in contemporary politics. Beverly James shows in her *Imagining Postcommunism* that grappling with the communist past when reformulating national history can be a divisive or a unifying process. Practically speaking, museums dealing with the history of the Communist era must contend with the legacy of the Communist system and its remnant traces in contemporary political parties, specifically the presence of former Communist party members or their children on all ends of the political spectrum. It thus comes as no surprise that Grutas Park, the House of Terror, and the DDR Museum have all come under attack for their treatment of controversial subject matter, and have met these often virulent criticisms with equally staunch rebuttals. These three museums, formed in different political climates, narrate national histories with widely divergent methods, thematic focuses, and results.

### **Present Day Political Motivations**

At the request of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, The House of Terror opened six weeks before the 2002 national elections. It was built with government funding and completed in just eighteen months. Free admission was offered to all visitors, ostensibly with the aim of bolstering the platform of the soon-to-be-narrowly-defeated right-wing party Fidesz, whose campaign was strident in its attack of the Socialist opposition by way of linking the party to Communism and to the horrors perpetrated by the Communists.<sup>162</sup> Since then, the museum's administrators have not shied away from political engagement. In an interview with the New York Times, Director Maria Schmidt cited the Socialist's boycott of the opening as proof of the

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<sup>162</sup> Greg Spencer, "Star-Crossed Museum" in *Business Hungary* March 2002, Vol. 18 No. 3, [http://www.amcham.hu/BusinessHUNGary/16-03/articles/16-03\\_39.asp](http://www.amcham.hu/BusinessHUNGary/16-03/articles/16-03_39.asp) (accessed May 12, 2009).



party's true nature, "That shows it's a post-Communist party, and sometimes not so 'post.'"<sup>163</sup> Schmidt responded to the newly elected Socialist government's proposal to cut the museum's funding in 2002 by threatening to suspend giant inflatable figures of the communist parents of the current socialist government ministers from the building's awning.<sup>164</sup> In doing so, Schmidt would be emphasizing a connection between the current socialist government and the former Communist one, literally tying them to the House of Terror and, by association, to the crimes on display inside. Though not made explicit, this act would show continuity not only between the two governments, but also between their "crimes". Furthermore, Schmidt has been unequivocal and outspoken in her support of Fidesz and serves as an advisor to Orbán, a surprisingly outspoken political stance for the director of a museum- an institution typically conceived of as educational, objective, and politically neutral.

Interestingly, House of Terror representatives deny having present-day political affiliation. In an interview I conducted with a historian and exhibition curator since the museum's conception, he claimed that although the House of Terror was sponsored by Fidesz (during a time, according to the representative, in which Fidesz sponsored numerous cultural institutions and undertakings, such as the rebuilding of the Hungarian National Theater<sup>165</sup>), there is no political motivation, message, or affiliation whatsoever in the exhibition itself. The representative maintained that the exhibition is wholly and exclusively a combination of

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<sup>163</sup> Ian Fisher, "Hungary Tells Its Past and Stumbles on the Present" *New York Times*, April 20, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/20/world/hungary-tells-its-past-and-stumbles-on-the-present.html?n=Top/Reference/Times%20Topics/Subjects/A/Anti-Semitism> (accessed May 25, 2009).

<sup>164</sup> John H. Fund, "Culture of Coercion," *Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2006 <http://www.opinionjournal.com/1a/?id=110007935> (accessed May 25, 2006).

<sup>165</sup> Upon taking office, Fidesz stopped construction on the National Theater in its location in central Pest and relocated the project to a less central area of Buda, a controversial move.

historical facts and memory, allowing no room for the skewing of the information for political purposes.<sup>166</sup>

If the institution's political leanings are not apparent after viewing its exhibition, its website is replete with news articles about party politics and upcoming elections, allotting particular attention to Viktor Orbán. For a place that denies having ties to current-day politics, the House of Terror provides a surprising amount of information about Fidesz. This posted news brief, like many others that closely follow the activities of Fidesz, encapsulates the relevance of the House of Terror's narrative in present day politics:

26 February, 2006- The leadership of Fidesz requested Mária Wittner to stand as a candidate on the Party's national list. The freedom fighter of '56 accepted - reported Viktor Orbán after he had lit a candle at the House of Terror on the Memorial Day of the Victims of Communism.<sup>167</sup>

The political nature of Orbán's announcement, which follows his commemoration of the victims of Communism, suggests that in this instance he is acting not as a private individual but on behalf of his party; Orbán's symbolic act of lighting a candle conveys the message that Fidesz remembers and respects the '56ers. On account of her obstinate opposition to terror, Wittner, who was subsequently elected to parliament for Fidesz, represents an ideal opposition candidate to the socialists. Her personal history as a surviving freedom fighter renders her moral character unquestionable according to the good (those who resisted terror) and evil (perpetrators of terror) binary presented in the House of Terror.<sup>168</sup> By announcing a former freedom fighter's acceptance of her nomination at a place that insists that the struggle against

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<sup>166</sup> Interview with the author, Budapest, Hungary, May 19, 2009.

<sup>167</sup> "Orbán Lit a Candle," House of Terror, [http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/news/about\\_us/orban\\_lit\\_a\\_candle\\_1.html.html](http://www.terrorhaza.hu/en/news/about_us/orban_lit_a_candle_1.html.html) (accessed May 29, 2009),

<sup>168</sup> On October 27, 2008, the political blog Politics.hu reported that Maria Wittner was amongst those present when the radical rightwing nationalist paramilitary group Magyar Gárda, formed in 2007 at the instigation of extreme-rightwing party Jobbik's president, inducted four hundred new members. As a current member of parliament for Fidesz, her attendance drew criticism, to which she responded that no one in Fidesz had discouraged her from attending Magyar Gárda events. See <http://www.politics.hu/20080902/fidesz-mp-known-for-hungarian-guard-appearances-set-to-retire> (accessed June 1, 2009).

the Communist terror was not in vain, Viktor Orbán imbues the '56 Revolution with present-day political meaning and relevance. The implicit suggestion is that those who resisted the Communist terror in '56 are now on the side of Fidesz. This message, combined with the allusion to continuity between the socialist government and Communism, evokes the dividing lines of current politics as analogous to those dividing '56ers and the Communist oppressors.

It is unlikely that an institution with strong political interests, revealed in these articles and also in the proceedings of the Communist Crimes convention, is able to or even interested in presenting a historical narrative devoid of present-day political motivations. Western visitors are most likely unaware of these possible motivations and implications, yet these political affiliations are influential to the narrative visitors encounter.

### History at Odds with Memory

The interviewed representative from the House of Terror claimed the apolitical nature of the exhibition based on the argument that it consists only of historical fact and memory. Far from agreeing that this marriage of history and memory produces a perfect, balanced union, historians including Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and Raphael Samuels are in consensus regarding history and memory as antithetical. This equation is also problematic in that it denies the uncertainty of both historical fact and memory, what Hayden White calls the inexpugnable relativity of any representation of historical phenomena.<sup>169</sup> Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah locate the fallacy in the other half of the House of Terror's argument, showing that the alleging the certainty of memory presupposes "a direct correspondence between the experience and how

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<sup>169</sup> Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of the Truth," in *The History and Narrative Reader*, Roberts, Geoffrey, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 375.

it is remembered,” that cannot be claimed.<sup>170</sup> Therefore, the profession political neutrality by way of the sterility history and memory is fundamentally flawed.

The preponderant use of video testimonials is one way the House of Terror makes use of this model of drawing on memory as an indisputable medium for relaying history. Many of the videos are in black-and-white, despite having been recorded long after the advent of color film, lending an aged look that heightens their believability as direct links to the past. The highly emotional state of many of the interviewees (prominent in the first and last video the visitor sees in reception area) clouds their already doubtful capacity to tap into any direct correspondence with the actual experience which might render their testimonies the pure memories they are purported to be, and yet their emotional state generates sympathy in the viewer which would discourage critical assessment.

Relaying these memories to the viewer in video form rather than as transcribed testimonies is not only more interesting visually, it involves every visitor as a witness to the relived crime. Applying Dori Laub’s trauma theory, the interviewer present at the recording of the testimony serves as a witness to the story, thus a witness to the witness of trauma. Each time the video replayed, the crime is made new again, and the viewer too becomes a witness to the trauma witness, whether she chooses to or not; in this way, each repetition could be said to substantiate the crime.<sup>171</sup> The Western visitor does not just hear a report of crime, she becomes a witness to a trauma of the past. The video could be said to be transmitting trauma through language and visible emotional state of the interviewee in what is imagined to be an unmediated way. Conversely, neither Grutas Park nor the DDR Museum use video testimonials or oral histories as an ingredient in constructing the past. Both the DDR Museum and Grutas

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<sup>170</sup> Hodgkin, 2.

<sup>171</sup> Dori Laub, *Testimony*, (Routledge, 1992), 56.

Park play videos and television shows from the era, but do not involve the visitor in the trauma of others by way of testimonial.

The way in which the House of Terror uses videos, in combination with previously discussed elements of exhibition, results in the construction not of history, but of heritage in the sense described by Raphael Samuels: it “plays snakes and ladders with the evidence” and “treats the past as though it was immediately accessible present.”<sup>172</sup> But where Samuels takes issue with heritage as an affront to serious historians, this use of heritage disguised as history has, as it has been shown, very real political applications, making it more than merely offensive to academia. The House of Terror not only attempts to view the past through the frame of the present, it uses the past for present political purposes. In comparison, criticism of the DDR Museum illustrates a completely different root of controversy. Again applying Raphael Samuels, it could be argued that the DDR Museum does not just play with artifacts “as though they were counters in a board game,”<sup>173</sup> it encourages its visitors to do so as well. But while the DDR Museum’s approach may be an affront to the serious historian, but its method of delivery allows visitors to engage with and evaluate the material for themselves rather than handing down a conclusion in a unidirectional transfer of “knowledge.” What is charged, then, is not that the DDR Museum manipulates or dramatizes the material it presents, but that the material itself is unrepresentative of reality.

### **Downplaying Terror: Emphasizing Banal Dictatorship**

In a publication in the year 2000, six years before the opening of the DDR Museum, Wolfgang Ernst made the claim, “Never has a state been musealized as quickly as the GDR. [. . .] there was no time for its material relics to die and become rubbish: they became history

<sup>172</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, 197.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

immediately.”<sup>174</sup> Yet in the post-unification rush to musealize and commemorate, it was not until 2006 that a museum devoted to everyday-life was opened. Even though founder Peter Kenzelmann described “total surprise”<sup>175</sup> when he discovered in early 2000 that no such museum existed, it perhaps would have been more surprising for citizens of the former GDR to see their lives of a just over a decade ago so quickly mounted as an exhibition. So a discussion of the controversy raised by the DDR Museum must be viewed in light of the immediacy with which history has been formulated as such.

The main thrust of criticism of the DDR museum is that its presentation of everyday life is unrealistically optimistic and too forgiving of the reality of life in under dictatorship. The contestation of this representation of the past lies with the idea that everyday life is subject matter worthy of representing the past in the present.<sup>176</sup> A number of news articles published after the museum’s opening relate the indignation it provoked amongst its museum peers. Gabrielle Camphausen, president of the Trust running the Berlin Wall Documentation Centre and head of the department of political education at the Federal Authority for Dealing with the Files of the Former East German State Security Service argues, “Visitors can leave the exhibition with the impression that this was a slightly bizarre state in the 20th century. It doesn't become clear that this was a brutal dictatorship ... Imagine if someone had done such a museum on daily life during the Nazi era. People would criticize it, and rightly so.”<sup>177</sup> Historian Anne Kaminsky concurs, “The political system of the dictatorship must form the basis of any

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<sup>174</sup> Wolfgang Ernst “Archi(ve)textures of Museology” in *Museums and Memory*, Susan Crane, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 29.

<sup>175</sup> DDR Museum, *Guide to the permanent exhibition*, 5.

<sup>176</sup> Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, 1.

<sup>177</sup> Mathis Winkler, “Museum Takes Controversial Look at Mundane East Germany,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 18, 2006 <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2098951,00.html> (accessed March 30, 2009).

public commemoration of the former communist East Germany.”<sup>178</sup> Director of the memorial at the former Stasi prison Hubertus Knabe also doubts the suitability of depicting everyday life to fully show life under a dictatorship.<sup>179</sup>

The essence of these arguments is that dictatorship should be remembered as the core of this era. In a bid to rectify this perceived disservice to reality, the German Historical Museum put forth the special exhibition “Dictatorship and Everyday Life in the GDR.”<sup>180</sup> In a review, historian Andrea Brock implied that the Historical Museum’s treatment of the topic is much more complete than that of the DDR Museum.<sup>181</sup> One tourist who visited both exhibitions blogged about the difference in presentation at the DDR Museum, “these objects appear devoid of the immediate ideological loading that was readily apparent in the artifacts dominating the ‘Dictatorship...’ exhibition.”<sup>182</sup> Although I was unable to view this temporary exhibition, which closed in 2007, the title alone indicates that dictatorship played the most important role, as the basis from which one could grasp what everyday life was like.

Critical of more than just this approach to everyday life under Socialism without a core of dictatorship, other Berlin museums treating the DDR era see the presentation of life itself as faulty in that it is unduly nostalgic. Rudolf Trabold of the German Historical Museum questions the usefulness of a museum “on the level of ‘Goodbye Lenin’<sup>183</sup> – it’s filled with consumer goods from the DDR but there is no context. It’s sort of like saying, ‘Oh, wasn’t it all

<sup>178</sup> Ellis, Lisa. “A Glimpse on Life Under Communism,” *Atlantic Times*, August 2006 [http://www.atlantic-times.com/archive\\_detail.php?recordID=612](http://www.atlantic-times.com/archive_detail.php?recordID=612) (accessed March 30, 2006).

<sup>179</sup> Mathis Winkler, “Museum Takes Controversial Look.”

<sup>180</sup> Brenner, Jana. “New Berlin exhibition shows life,” *Reuters*, April 19, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/gc08/idUSL1968578820070419> (accessed May 9, 2009).

<sup>181</sup> Brock cites the fact that its exhibition, only part of a larger permanent collection, covers four times as much area as the entire DDR museum exhibition space Angela Brock, “DDR Museum Berlin,” *German History* 26 (2008): 109-111, <http://gh.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/26/1/109> (accessed May 10, 2009).

<sup>182</sup> Haidy L. Geismar, “Socialism could be fun. . . .?” *Material World*, posted June 26, 2007, [http://blogs.nyu.edu/projects/materialworld/2007/06/socialism\\_could\\_be\\_fun.html](http://blogs.nyu.edu/projects/materialworld/2007/06/socialism_could_be_fun.html) (accessed May 28, 2009).

<sup>183</sup> Refers to Wolfgang Becker’s 2003 film, which many consider the height of Ostalgie.

nice?”<sup>184</sup> Trabold’s complaint that the museum offers too comfortable a remembrance of East Germany taps into the controversial issue of “Ostalgie.” The word, a combination in German of “east” and “nostalgia,” refers to nostalgia for the GDR. For some, it is a harmless sentiment of fondness for the past, for others it represents a dangerous forgetfulness of past horrors and oppression. In the last chapter, it was argued that though the exhibition is suffuse with visuals that could be characterized as Communist Kitsch, the overall narrative is not apologetic or nostalgic for the Communist past. Nevertheless, the repeated voicing of this criticism suggests an acute sensitivity to these matters.

From these arguments it can be seen that on the point of controversy lies in whether or not life can be represented as anything but a constant state of suppression under a totalitarian system. For Peter Kenzelmann, director and founder of the DDR Museum, the answer is yes: without a central or even preponderant emphasis on terror or even the negative aspects of the DDR, the museum claims to have “taken the initiative to show what life was like.”<sup>185</sup> As argued in the previous chapter, the DDR Museum’s focus on history “from below” resembles the approach of “revisionist” social historians to life under Socialist dictatorship.

The lack of a victimhood narrative must be considered from within the particular context of Germany, whose national identity has been shaped by its history as the defeated aggressors of both world wars. Arguably, the guilt of the Holocaust stripped away Germany’s right to claim victimhood in any national narrative and has created a general wariness of nationalism. As Michael Billings shows, banal forms of nationalism are not reciprocally benign; thus, even museums, as national institutions, have the potential to breed malignant

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<sup>184</sup> Susan Stone, “DDR Living: Museum Offers ‘Ostalgic’ Look at East Germany,” Spiegel Online, July 20, 2006. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,427579,00.html> (accessed May 20, 2009).

<sup>185</sup> DDR Museum, *A Guide to the Permanent Exhibition*, 5.



nationalism.<sup>186</sup> Eric Hobsbawm has advocated the distancing of historians from political nationalism, referring to the myths of the German nation and language propagated by Johann Herder as an ultimately harmful source of national pride.<sup>187</sup> Such is the sensitivity to avoiding unseemly national pride that the opening of the German Historical Museum in 1987 was met with criticism that it might fuel a resurgence of nationalism.<sup>188</sup> Therefore, the chosen narrative of the nation, avoiding victimhood or heroism, may be a conscientious turn away from efforts to generate nationalism and an attempt to veer widely away from the path that lead to atrocities in the past. Instead, a focus on assimilation between East and West may be of greater usefulness to the contemporary political and social climate of unified Germany.

The nature of GDR democratization is significant in gauging the importance of an assimilating narrative. The absorption of East Germany into West Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany, resulted in former citizens of the GDR becoming, or at least in part being seen as, “apprentice democrats to the experienced west Germans.”<sup>189</sup> A narrative of victimhood would reinforce, narrativize, and broadcast the devastation of “feeling that their past lives, indeed, who they are, are of less value because they were on the “wrong side of history.”<sup>190</sup> Instead, the narrative presented displays to Germans and foreigners alike that the lives of GDR citizens were not all gray but colorful: like West Germans, they had homes, families, jobs, hobbies, and belongings of personal value. The narrative assimilates East and West Germans in many ways, and by doing so assimilates aspects of life under Socialist dictatorship and life in the liberal democratic West.

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<sup>186</sup> Michael Billings, *Banal Nationalism* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1995), 14.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Susan A. Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum,” *History and Theory* 36: 4, <http://www.jstor.org/> (accessed May 24, 2009), 55.

<sup>189</sup> Jennifer A. Yoder, *From East Germans to Germans? The New Postcommunist Elites*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

## Disrespecting the Past

Most critics of Grutas Park find fault with both the subject matter and the flippant manner in which it is presented. Mushroom-canning entrepreneur Viliūmas Malinauskas built the park using private funds, personally owned land, and statues on loan from the Lithuanian government. What some view as a tacky, inappropriate approach to sensitive subject matter is epitomized in Malinauskas's original vision of having visitors shuttled by cattle car from Vilnius to the park site, approximately 120 km away.<sup>191</sup> Vehement protests and the disapproval of the Lithuanian Cultural Commission squelched this plan, but the other elements of his vision were realized, forming the current park, nicknamed "Stalinworld."<sup>192</sup>

Shortly after Grutas Park opened, independent reporter Adam Ellick, wrote an extensive account of the arguments for and against Grutas Park. Most of the Park's critics- principally conservative politicians, about 60,000 survivors of Soviet prison camps, and the Lithuanian Catholic Church- expressed concern that it is unnatural and unhealthy to put villains on display, fearing the picturesque surroundings might trigger nostalgia.<sup>193</sup> Leonas Kerosierus, the outspoken voice of Labora,<sup>194</sup> a group of former political prisoners and partisans united in

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<sup>191</sup> Craig Nelson, "Stalin World Opens to Visitors," *Telegraph.co.uk*, June 24, 2001.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/lithuania/1314998/Stalin-World-opens-to-visitors.html> (accessed April 19, 2009).

<sup>192</sup> For visitors to Lithuania who wish experience first-hand the harsher aspects of Soviet times, the opportunity exists elsewhere, at the 1984 Survival Drama, which opened in 2008, trumping Grutas Park in its own invented Gulag-tourism and fusion of grim subject matter with theme-park presentation. At 1984, visitors pay approximately 20 euro to become citizens of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania for 100 minutes, during which they will be interrogated by the KGB (actors), visit a Soviet era doctor's office and grocery store, wear a gas mask, learn the Soviet anthem, and eat a meal of vodka and canned foods. The drama takes place at the site of a former Soviet bunker. Before the drama begins, participants must agree to terms under which, among other things, she may be subjected to "psychological and/or physical punishments." Of course, visitors agree to participate at their own risk. See <http://www.sovietbunker.com/en/index.php?pageid=3>.

<sup>193</sup> Some expressed their displeasure in rather violent ways, as in the case of one member of parliament who vowed to bomb the park after his term in parliament ended. See Adam Ellick, "A Home for the Vilified," *World Sculpture News* (Autumn 2001), <http://www.adam>

[bellick.com/archives/2005/06/a\\_home\\_for\\_the.html](http://www.adambellick.com/archives/2005/06/a_home_for_the.html), (accessed May 10, 2009).

<sup>194</sup> Labora's members carried out a short-lived hunger strike in an unsuccessful effort to prevent the parks opening. Ibid.

protest against the strike, equated displaying the statues to honoring murders and rapists: “Are there any monuments for Hitler or Goebbels?” Kerosierus asked.<sup>195</sup>

What Kerosierus seemed to miss is that the stated mission of the park is, in fact, to expose the “naked Soviet ideology which suppressed and hurt the spirit of our nation.”<sup>196</sup> Events like the character humor feasts, featuring Lenin, Stalin, and bands of Young Pioneers are designed to mock and laugh at these figures, not to honor them. Though Hitler may not be featured in any German theme parks, he has in fact come back to Germany as a character to be mocked, as reported May 18, 2009 in the New York Times in an article titled, “The Fuhrer Returns to Berlin, This Time Saluted Only by Laughs.” The article concludes that Germans are finally ready to laugh at Hitler: “amid the laughter of the German crowd, you can almost hear a page of history turn.”<sup>197</sup> The success of this performance is being counted as a sign that while not forgetting its past, Germany’s relationship to it has changed. In Lithuania too, Grutas Park is enabling a new relationship with the past, one in which laughter at any subject matter is permitted; it may be that this page can be turned more quickly than in Germany because it is not the nation’s own being mocked, but Soviet oppressors and collaborating villains. In any case, the ability to laugh at these figures strips them of any remnant power to intimidate.

A survey of blog entries gave no indication that visitors felt the statues on display were somehow being honored. In keeping with the park’s jocular mood, one blogger commented, “The soviets lost the cold war because they spent all their money on statues of Stalin I observed [sic].”<sup>198</sup> Another blogger said the park’s celebration of “all-things-Soviet in the extreme” did

<sup>195</sup> “StalinWorld,” *Baltics Worldwide*, <http://www.balticsworldwide.com/stalinworld/> (accessed May 28, 2009).

<sup>196</sup> “Aim of the Exhibition,” Gruto Parkas, <http://www.grutoparkas.lt/ekspozicija-en.htm> (accessed May 20, 2009).

<sup>197</sup> Michael Kimmelman, “The Fuhrer Returns to Berlin, This Time Saluted Only by Laughs,” *Nytimes.com*, May 18, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/19/theater/19abroad.html> (accessed May 18, 2009).

<sup>198</sup> “Stalin Coffee” Andrew’s Blog, posted December 28, 2005, <http://www.andrewsblog.net/?p=90> (accessed May 29, 2009).

not diminish the worst aspects of Soviet history, it brought them into remembrance.<sup>199</sup> An Erasmus student from Spain logged this thought, “What i found more curious in all this about Gruto Parkas is that, although communism was supposed, is supposed, to be a political and economic model where everybody is equal... again, and again, and again, the scultures of Lenin and Stalin repetead [sic].”<sup>200</sup> Texts at Grutas Park expound on the victimhood and heroism of the Lithuanian nation, yet unlike the House of Terror, mentions of sympathy for the nation were missing from the entries I reviewed; none of these comments bears the obvious imprint of the exhibition’s texts. Visitor comments include self-directed musings and conclusions, but no claims of having discovered Lithuania’s horrific past, such as are prevalent among blog entries about the House of Terror with regards to Hungary.

Hayden White points to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*<sup>201</sup> as one example of how tragic events can be presented in an unusual but vivid and masterful way. He calls the comic book an “absurd mixture of a “low” genre with events of the most momentous significance.”<sup>202</sup> Grutas Park takes extremely serious subject matter and presents it as a hybrid of “low” theme park and “high” museum. “As I try to focus my camera on Stalin's mustache and disperse the insects at the same time, stout Russian voices break into song and I just can't help myself any longer. I start to laugh,” one visitor wrote, describing. It seems then, that critics’ fear that the park disrespects Communism’s victims and glorifies oppressors is misplaced: there is no suggestion of disrespecting those who suffered, only the subversive laughter of visitors partaking in the mockery of former Communist icons.

<sup>199</sup> “Druskininkai, Lietuva” christlezone Blog, posted March 13, 2007, <http://christlezone.blogspot.com/2007/03/druskininkai-lietuva.html>, (accessed May 24, 2009).

<sup>200</sup> “Sovietiniu Skulpturu Muzieius,” Evidentemente Yo Blog, posted November 22, 2006. <http://evidentementeyo.blogspot.com/2006/11/sovietiniu-skulpturu-muziejus.html>

<sup>201</sup> *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* is a graphic novel that tells the story of a son trying to get his father to tell him about his experiences in the Holocaust. In the cartoon, Jews are portrayed as mice, Germans as cats, and Poles as pigs.

<sup>202</sup> Hayden White, “Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” 378.

In this strange format, Grutas Park endeavors to show a totalitarian society, but employs devices that show, like revisionist historians of the Soviet Union, that “society was something more than just a passive object of the regime’s manipulation and mobilization.”<sup>203</sup> The ubiquity of Lenin, Stalin, and now-villains of Lithuania’s Communist party on statues, artwork, shot-glasses, and sometimes caricatures enforces the notion of the omnipresent state and its iron-fist control, but the taste of watery borscht and a jaunt on the Soviet-style playground swings the narrative back to life in spite of the regime. With concurrent and contradictory elements, Grutas Park belongs to no one school of thought, defying classification as a unified narration of history.

### The Presence of the Past

*Who once wore chains, will always think  
That he is followed by their clink.  
-Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science*

At the root of these controversies is the problematic nature of representing the past, a specifically national Communist past, in the present. It is inevitable that the filter through which we intake information about the past is of the present, and as Lynn Hunt says, the tendency to interpret the past in terms of present concerns “usually leads us to find ourselves morally superior:”<sup>204</sup> it is not just the ideology and practice of Communism that is inferior, but we ourselves are found morally superior. Beyond the dangers of presentism in narrating history, these museums bear a monumental function in bringing historical events onto the present-day plane.<sup>205</sup> History is sought not for history’s sake, but for the sake of remembering. This study has spoken repeatedly of representations of the past, but it must also be shown that

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<sup>203</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Stalinism: New Directions*, 6.

<sup>204</sup> Lynn Hunt, “Against Presentism,” *Perspectives* (May 2002).  
<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2002/0205/0205pre1.cfm> (accessed March 10, 2009).

<sup>205</sup> Eelco Runia, “Presence” in *History and Theory* 45:1 (February 2006), 17.

the museum experience derives too from the “*unrepresented* way the past is present in the present.” I will argue that museums rely in part on “presence” to allow the museum visitor to experience history in a manner distinct from a strictly textual historical narrative.

Eelco Ruina’s article “Presence” in a 2005 volume of *History and Theory* posits that since the period of Representational history inaugurated by Hayden White’s *Metahistory* in 1973, it is not merely “meaning” that we are searching for in history, but “presence,” the term he uses to encapsulate “the unrepresented way the past is present in the present.”<sup>206</sup> Presence is “being in touch with reality,” and it is the search for presence that is behind the drive to commemorate.<sup>207</sup> Identifying the problem of continuity and discontinuity in historiography, Ruina argues that metonymy may be the concept best suited for reconciling discontinuity and our constant, if unrecognized, search for presence. Presence, he contends, is stored in metonymy, as a metaphor for discontinuity, or “humans’ inordinate ability to spring surprises on themselves.”<sup>208</sup> This surprise can occur in two ways: passively, being overwhelmed by what has been written or done before, or actively, being overwhelmed by what has been done before by fresh words or actions.

Why do we go to museums? The search for meaning alone is insufficient to explain the draw to memory, memorials, and museums as storehouses of these things. Taking Ruina’s naming of what we seek as “presence,” can we then locate presence in these museums? Adopting this model makes sense with regard to museum visitors, who come to learn about history, but also, as Andreas Huyssen argues, looking for emphatic experiences.<sup>209</sup> Perhaps

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>209</sup> Huyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories* (Routledge, 1995), 14.

“presence” can help explain what it is that transforms a narrative, enlivened with the discussed elements, into a museum experience.

At the DDR Museum and Grutas Park, the most prevalent emotion visitors reported experiencing was surprise. While this was not the dominant emotion reported by visitors to the House of Terror (having been bested by versions of ‘terror’ itself), its visitors also expressed wonder, dismay, and shock- all variations on surprise- at the atrocities displayed. Runia conceives of discontinuity as “our being surprised by ourselves.”<sup>210</sup> In the House of Terror, the visitor is surprised passively, while in the DDR Museum and Grutas Park, visitors are also surprised by design, but the experience is designed so that the visitor is affected by self-directed actions like walking through the statue exhibition or picking up museum artifacts. In all three, the effect of the exhibition is to overwhelm the visitor, whether by theatrics, atmosphere, impressive display, or novelty.

Furthermore, museums thrive on metonymy. Each Soviet statue at Grutas Park stands in for the town-square or space it used to fill. The cattle car now empty at the park entrance recalls hundreds of thousands of deportees. The numerous military uniforms and religious vestments bespeak the absence of their wearers at the House of Terror. Even an attempted representation of life in its entirety calls to attention the complete absence of a DDR citizenry to populate and animate the lifestyle preserved in the DDR Museum, a citizenry that though still living, has disappeared, re-identified and absorbed under the heading of Germans. Presence asserts itself in the museum through metonymy. Thus, the unrepresented past becomes part of the museum experience, an unseen component of the narrative the visitor encounters.

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<sup>210</sup> Runia, “Presence,” 6.

Ruina posits, “the more the monument is interacted with, the more it loses its “presence” and the faster it becomes a platitude.”<sup>211</sup> Novelty in these museums (though none are unique and all certainly draw on influences from other museums) is achieved with new techniques and concepts that ensure they do not lose their “presence” or ability to affect their audiences. The subject matter is intriguing in itself, but capitalizing on the creation of an innovative, manipulative, or unique experience surprises the visitor, going beyond expectation. Therein, according to Ruina’s model, the visitor will derive fulfillment in the museum visit, having come “in touch” with perceived historical reality. The presence of the past engages the visitor in an experience wherein the narrative- including all its possible proclivities to assimilating or distancing, historical inaccuracy, emotionalism, demonizing and victimizing, politicization, dramatization, simplification, and moralizing- can be received.

### **The Multi-functionality of the Modern Museum**

The debates and visitor reactions discussed in the preceding chapters are in part symptomatic of the ever-expanding job description of the modern museum. Reflecting on the aims of these museums, it can be seen that the presentation of material is both affected and informed by present day concerns, meaning that they necessarily adopt a presentist view of history.

As an educational institution it bears the responsibility of presenting information not only to school groups but also to individuals who visit with the intent to learn, expecting an objective presentation of history. Museums embrace this role, often having their own education departments and outreach programs, and almost always vowing to educate or enlighten the visitor in their mission statements. However, it has been shown that there is a crucial difference

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 18.



between educating the visitor and attempting to reveal or uncover the Truth to the visitor in a such a way that the visitor still presumes to have agency in the process of discovering.

As a forum for public debate, an exhibition can generate discussion and encourage a dialogue about controversial subject matter. Alternately, it can discourage interpretation and critical analysis: one effective way to close off debate is by linking Communism and every aspect accompanying it to the inarguable evil of murder. Constructing a museum narrative as a story with a moral ending fosters an emotional experience and may enlist external empathy, but does not encourage dialogue.

As a tourist attraction it must appeal to an audience who may, as seasoned travelers, require increasingly intense experiences in order to be duly affected. Accordingly, each of these institutions advertises their “unique experience,” whether because of its impressive statue collection, dual-headquarter location, or its break with “please do not touch the exhibit” museum protocol. Nonetheless, the entertainment value must not call into question the seriousness of the institution.

Museums must also operate as fiscally viable institutions, and everything from mowing the lawn to keeping the Trabi running costs money. Museums rely heavily on visitor recommendations to generate sufficient visitorship, and therefore strive for visitor satisfaction. This is especially critical for privately funded operations like the DDR Museum and Grutas Park, but is also applicable to the House of Terror, which derives about half of its operating funds from ticket sales.<sup>212</sup> Ensuring the visitor then is satisfied with the experience, and possibly having “come in contact with the past” is necessity in order for the museum to remain operational.

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<sup>212</sup> Interview by author, Budapest, Hungary, May 19, 2009.

As a memorial to those who suffered, it raises the issue of whether the suffering of victims is being dramatized or trivialized. The identification of victims adds further complications. When dealing with the complex issue of identifying victims versus perpetrators, it may again be convenient to reduce issues to be fitted into the binary of good versus evil. These museums exist because of an expressed obligation to preserve the memory of the past. This chapter has tried to show possible influences behind preserving the past as a specific representation and creating sites of memory.

Informing the public requires can be done be done in the form as a story, with attention to continuity and a moral ending; as a satire, taking jabs at previously untouchable subject matter; or as a pop-up, “Did you know?” choose-your-own adventure encyclopedia. The House of Terror tells a story in which visitor comes away not with questions, but with an “understanding” of what happened and its effect on the present. What the visitor is not aware of are the potential motivations behind particular representations. By contrast, the sheer strangeness of Grutas Park negates the possibility of achieving narrative closure despite the best efforts of the exhibition out-sourced texts. It demonstrates that a theme park atmosphere and a seeming shortage of tact can still allow for, even promote, laughter and mockery as subversion of a past oppression, as well as an opportunity to contemplate and question the past. DDR Museum also promotes a different relationship with the past that breaks with traditional museum etiquette, This seems contradictory: the solemnity of the House of Terror lends an aura of contemplativeness, though in actuality, less agency is afforded to the visitor, while the less serious moods of Grutas Park and the DDR Museum suggests less room for serious consideration or examination of the subject matter but actually provoke interesting questions. All three bring the past to the plane of the present through mechanisms that produce a powerful

experience whereby visitors come in contact with deformed and terrifying, tamed and ridiculous, or strange but not altogether unfamiliar Communism.

## Conclusion

*Do you know I once made thirty tests in my clinic. And what do you think? The patients who never read newspapers felt excellent. Those whom I specially made read Pravda [Truth] all lost weight . . . And not only did they lose weight. Their knee reflexes were retarded, they lost appetite and exhibited general depression.*

- Mikhail Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog*

This study of museum narratives and experiences has been directed through murky theoretical waters to precarious contemporary politics, addressing the nature of display, the practice of Othering, historical presentism and presence, memory, debates on totalitarianism, social history, themes of victimhood and resistance, and narrations of national history, all spanning three different contexts and approaches. None of these topics was treated exhaustively, yet their application to each case study served to point to the complexities and entanglements inherent to museal representations, their narratives, and the overall experience they craft. Communism as subject matter is all the more controversial, painfully fresh, and relevant to the present. So it can be said that this study too has engaged in historical presentism-viewing representations of the past in light of the history they present to today's society, showing Communism to thousands if not millions of inquiring minds. Nonetheless, it was not the aim to do so in order to pronounce a final moral judgment on which museums are "good" or "bad," but to identify the narratives and experiences they provide in order to assess whether they may be harmful. Let us reflect here once again on the function of the modern museum and consider practices and approaches that may be most beneficial in serving the functions of educating and memorializing.

Excessive concern over whether a trivial object like a pencil sharpener displayed in a particular manner, improperly labeled or injudiciously juxtaposed might be responsible for the miseducation of untold thousands of museum visitors would go beyond a museum's call of duty. What is more worrisome than an improper display case is that narratives of constructed continuity, clear-cut designations of moral value, and theatrical, convincing exhibition techniques leave no space for uncertainty, negotiation, or contemplation. In a way, they assume that the visitor is incapable of evaluating information and assessing presented arguments and versions of history. By presenting a narrative in the framework of the museum, museums may purport to foster an experience of *discovering* the truth about the past, when in fact they direct it in an unmitigated narrative, delivered by way of an engaging experience.

Innovative design and the enlistment of the most up-to-date technologies have not expunged the museal dilemma that an exhibition cannot recreate the past and must therefore exist as a representation of it. In order to attain coherence, representations are limited in scope; such an exhibition would be exhausting and unmanageable. What is more important than comprehensiveness is a self-reflexive approach in which the visitor is made aware that the view of the past on display is in fact a representation and not historical truth buttressed by moral truth; not a disclosure of the past, or a controlled, seemingly self-directed interpretation of the past, but a frame for dialogue. I do not mean to suggest that museums should eschew narrativity in delivering historical information and revert to the sterility of white walls and glass display cases as a show of solemnity and pseudo-objectivity. Narrativity shapes historical discourse into something more than a list of dates. It is useful, natural, and comprehensible. Nevertheless, adherence to decorum in engaging the visitor in a museum experience can ensure that the function of narrative is the presentation and not the manipulation of information.

I will clarify what I mean by decorum by using Gary Remer's discussion of the decorum of classical rhetoric. In his *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, Remer shows that the decorum of classical rhetoric approved the use of emotional appeals in oration when striving to sway the judgment or opinions of the masses. Emotional appeal is perhaps the most powerful tool the House of Terror uses to reach its audience, and purposefully so. Quintilian described emotions' power to deceive, discourage contemplation, and incapacitate reasoned judgment.<sup>213</sup> Likewise, Aristotle conceded the necessity of emotional appeals, even though "the arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts."<sup>214</sup> This allowance applied to the three main genres of oration: deliberative, judicial, and demonstrative, delivered by one practiced orator. In contrast to these genres of oration, dialogue, a subset of conversation, differed in involving two or more interlocutors addressing an indefinite question of an "indeterminate, unrestricted, and far-extending sort of investigation," which included the topics of "good and evil, fair repute and infamy, the useful and unuseful, besides moral perfection, [ . . . ] the State, sovereignty, warlike operations, political since and the ways of mankind."<sup>215</sup> As it has been argued, investigations into history should fall into this category of the indefinite, but are often presented instead as determined fact.

The hope in visiting these museums is to gain an understanding. For classical rhetoricians, understanding could be approached by way of questioning and interacting. The decorum governing dialogue dictated that appealing to emotion was a less refined, less beneficial form of argumentation than appealing to reason. In service of the goal of arriving at the higher truth- or the closest approximation thereof- rhetoricians were advised to forego

<sup>213</sup> Gary Remer, *Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration*, 21.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>215</sup> Cicero, *De Oratore* from "Humanism and the Rhetoric of Toleration," 31.

appeals to emotion or use of passions that would agitate or excite emotion.<sup>216</sup> Resorting to such tactics would corrupt reason and hinder the greater goal. Encouraging anger, ill-will, and fear are useful for persuading the masses, but would be a disservice to investigating the answer of most probability. It seems then, that persuading the masses is precisely the goal of the House of Terror: it aims to overwhelm us with a bombardment of sensory theatrics. Schmidt's claim, "finally we can teach the children the truth" calls into question the House of Terror's chosen pedagogy, which treats students (as well as older visitors) as the incompetent masses, *telling* a narrative of historical truth rather than engaging in dialogue, appealing to emotion and thereby discouraging the use of reason. Manipulation of both history and memory in this way leaves no room for contemplation.

In the absence of time travel, there exists no alternative to learning about history from our present perspective: presentism is unavoidable. Given this state of affairs, the best remedy that can be offered is an exhortation to self-reflexivity that would bring to the forefront an awareness of our present day vantage point and our own subjectivity. Though they may still rely on tropes of victimhood and national heroism, or pander to a fascination with Communist kitsch, Grutas Park and the DDR Museum serve a more useful didactic function in allowing space for contemplation and engagement. Furthermore, these exhibits leave the visitor with questions. One blog entry said, "Preserving these mementoes of the dark Communist past keeps those times alive for future generations to see and ask what they were about, ensuring that the spectre of Soviet domination never returns."<sup>217</sup> Communism is still depicted as dark dictatorship, but this conclusion is arrived at by seeing and questioning.

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<sup>216</sup> Remer, 35.

<sup>217</sup> Julian Worker, "Remembering Lenin," posted October 3, 2007  
<http://www.groundreport.com/Lifestyle/Remembering-Lenin> (accessed June 2, 2009).

Certainly, emotion still plays a role in the exhibition experience, but in a less imposed fashion. Accusations of tactlessness, indiscretion, or being too soft and uncritical may still apply. Both exhibit a Communist Other, one that was at times cruel and clumsy, but still human. Just as we cannot escape our present perspective, we are bound to a perspective rooted in our own context and experience. This is the premise from which the Hungarian Museum of Ethnography's *A Másik* exhibition begins. There is, however, the possibility to diminish one's ethnocentricity and expand awareness, as the exhibition states: "Our understanding of the rest of humanity hinges on the historical context and the amount of information and contacts we have with different peoples."<sup>218</sup> Twenty years after its dissolution in Central and Eastern Europe, communism remains a curiosity to Western visitors. Visitors to these museums come in part to make contact with a concept, system, and people outside their own experience. If the eradication or diminution of "ethnocentricity" is to occur, the historical context and information presented at these museums should be subjected to careful scrutiny and not merely the outraged protests of persons who misunderstand but strongly object to the museum's existence. The critical point of divergence in these representations of Communism is that the House of Terror, again, leaves no room for dialogue in its moralizing discourse of victim and victimizer, good and evil.

In addition to rejecting emotional appeals, classical decorum admonished invoking authority as a means of persuading ones fellow inquirers. Cicero warns, "In discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded. Indeed, the authority of those who profess to teach is often a positive hindrance to those who desire to lead; they cease to employ their own judgment, and take what they perceive to be the verdict of their

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<sup>218</sup> *A Masik* exhibition guide, 1.



chosen master as settling the question.”<sup>219</sup> The study of visitor blog entries has shown that museum visits often result not only in the visitor’s declared gaining of new knowledge (“We never learned this in school . . .”), but in his or her being able to make a final verdict, “This museum gave us an explanation as to why Hungary is the way that it is now”<sup>220</sup>. These museums carry authoritative weight and are regarded as culturally important institutions. They are embedded within their city landscapes as important landmarks and must-see sites for tourists, particularly those seeking to understand more of the place they have come to experience. In “educating” the public, museum should not abuse the authority granted by their status as cultural institutions, given the readiness with which we accept what is presented when a claim to authority is made. It is not enough ask questions and engage the visitor if only to lead down a preplanned path: the contestable nature of history and memory makes it more appropriate to ask genuine questions without a ready answer at hand.

Given our seemingly irrepressible appetite for museums, there is arguably room for museums covering a variety of aspects of the Communist era, as in Berlin where there exists the DDR Museum, the Museum of the Occupied Allies, the German Historical Museum, Checkpoint Charlie, and the Stasi Museum all tackling a different angle of the same period. A multiplicity of approaches, such as are represented in this study, may offer one way to achieve a “closest approximation” of an unknowable historical truth.

Berlin offers another example of how a single site can fuse memory and history, in the combination of Peter Eisenman’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe and the Dagmar von Wilcken’s Information Center, which lies below the Memorial. James Young’s report on

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<sup>219</sup> Remer, 34.

<sup>220</sup> Shea and Amy Owens, “Buda and Pest” in Living Our Dreams Blog, posted March 30, 2009 <http://sheamy.blogspot.com/2009/03/buda-and-pest.html> (accessed May 19, 2009).

the memorial shows that the memorial and the House of Terror strive for and achieve different goals: the Memorial discourages closure while the House of Terror aims for it; the Memorial leaves space for contemplation while the House of Terror crowds it out; the Memorial provides no answers while the House of Terror leaves none unanswered.<sup>221</sup> The Memorial has provided the framework for discourse, but does not deliver a monologue therein. It requires self-directed contemplation, but provides context in the accompanying Information Center, whose chief function is “to back up the abstract form of remembrance inspired by the Memorial with concrete facts and information about the victims.”<sup>222</sup> The House of Terror uses some facts and information in its narrative, but relies on its privileged position on the self-proclaimed moral high ground to deliver to its narrative, “the truth,” down to the masses. In doing so, it appropriates the same terrifying tactics, albeit in a much milder form, used by totalitarian systems- claiming exclusive ownership to the Truth.

Professing to hold the ultimate truth appropriates the same irrefutable authority that justified deportations, torture, murder, and the general denial of what we regard as our basic rights in Communist regimes, Fascist regimes, Christian crusades, and countless other atrocities. Laughter, actively encouraged at Grutas Park, is one way to relate to terror. Assimilating, as seen at the DDR Museum, is another; placing the sinister elements of dictatorship next to displays about potty training shows that dictatorship negatively affected but did reign over everyday life. Being able to laugh at something, or recognizing similarity makes it not scary. Fear is engendered by the monological seriousness of the House of Terror, while laughter shows that the viewer is above this and not afraid of it.

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<sup>221</sup> James Young, “Peter Eisenman’s Design for Berlin’s Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: A Juror’s Report in Three Parts,” in *(Re)visualizing National History*, Robin Ostow, ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

<sup>222</sup> “Information Center,” *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, <http://www.holocaust-mahnmal.de/en/thememorial/informationcentre> (accessed May 30, 2009).

If these approaches are more useful in addressing atrocities and a condemned era, might museums too play a preventative role in society? Again applying Remer, the key may be in promoting tolerance through adherence to the decorum of dialogue: though the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were a period of intolerance in which Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists alike advocated the death penalty as punishment for heretics, the Humanists' adherence to the dictates of classical rhetorical decorum required and fostered toleration of the "doctrinally deviant."<sup>223</sup> So too can adherence to the exhortation to appeal to reason foster and require toleration in the present. "So that it never happens again" has been proclaimed as the mantra of commemorations and as the justification for studying history with such frequency that it risks becoming hackneyed and thus ignored; nonetheless, it is still the desire of these memorial museums and the people who visit them to prevent future atrocities. Service to an undeniable truth and the assurance of opposing an ultimate evil is both a consolation to suicide bombers and the justification for the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Without reference to our present condition of subjectivity, even the banal institution of the museum can contribute to the destructive forces that drove the atrocities they seek to commemorate.

While it is impossible that any exhibition present a perfectly objective, balanced account of history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, it is not unreasonable to suggest that history presented with an awareness of the subjectivity of the museum as providing a representation of past events provides a more fruitful experience for the visitor. Before military intervention and economic sanctions are necessitated, toleration can prevent atrocities. If toleration can be one obstacle in the way of terror, and "never again" is the goal, inviting a dialogue about that which is unfamiliar is the most expedient course. Appealing to reason to will allow the Western

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<sup>223</sup> Remer, 1-2.

visitor to take ownership of complex subject matter and participate as an interlocutor in the pursuit of the of historical truth, or the closest approximation thereof.

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