

Perpetrators at a Distance: A Semiotic Inquiry into Fort Breendonk's Visitor Tour

Anneleen Spiessens

Abstract: This article presents an in-depth analysis of Fort Breendonk, a Belgian WWI military compound that was repurposed as a Nazi *Auffanglager* in 1940 and presently functions as a memorial museum. The camp quickly gained notoriety, even during the war, for the brutality of some guards and commanders, and for the abject living conditions of its inmates, who were systematically humiliated, beaten, starved, and worn down. Conceptualised as an 'indexical' trauma site, today's fortress bears witness to its violent history through its material essence. The study focuses on two key aspects: a review of curatorial interventions that bring out the site's testimonial qualities and emphasise its authentic features, and an empirical enquiry into user interactions with these features. Employing a spatial-semiotic approach inspired by Violi (2012) and Ravelli and McMurtrie (2016), the article demonstrates how Fort Breendonk's visitor tour combines visual, spatial, material, and linguistic strategies to create an emotional immersive experience of the 'Hell of Breendonk'. In particular, the curatorial approach hinges on a realistic, almost mimetic, representation strategy that facilitates empathy with the victims while creating moral distance from the sadistic perpetrators. The spatial analysis is triangulated with a qualitative examination of 200 TripAdvisor reviews that underscore visitors' profound engagement with the fortress's spatial and material aspects, attesting to the efficacy of some of the curatorial choices. The article concludes by raising critical questions regarding ethical curatorship and authenticity effects, as well as reflecting on the implications of victim-focused immersive techniques for the memorial's educational goals.

Keywords: Lieu de Mémoire, Authenticity, Indexicality, Semiotics, Spatiality, Audio Guide, Immersion, Visitor Research

Introduction

In the opening pages of W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz*, the unnamed first-person narrator encounters Jacques Austerlitz, an architectural historian, at Antwerp Central Station. Austerlitz travels across Europe in pursuit of traces of his biological parents, after discovering that he was placed on a *Kindertransport* by his Czech Jewish mother in the summer of 1939. During one of the men's 'Antwerp conversations', recounted by the narrator, Austerlitz explores the way

Journal of Perpetrator Research 7.1(2024), 119–158
DOI: 10.21039/jpr.7.1.166 © 2024 by the Author



outsized architectural projects, such as military fortifications, ‘cast the shadow of their own destruction before them’.¹ He illustrates this point with the armoured, concrete Fort of Breendonk, which was built before the outbreak of the First World War as part of a defensive belt circling the city of Antwerp but, upon completion, proved ‘completely useless’² because its architectural design was already overtaken by new developments in artillery and strategic planning. Prompted by his conversation with Austerlitz and an article in the local newspaper revealing that the fort had been turned into a Nazi penal camp during the Second World War, the narrator decides to visit Breendonk. By this time, in the summer of 1967, the site had become a national memorial. Contrary to expectations of encountering a Vauban-inspired edifice, the narrator is met with the fort’s misshapen contours:

[W]hat I now saw before me was a low-built concrete mass, rounded at all its outer edges and giving the gruesome impression of something hunched and misshapen: the broad back of a monster, I thought, risen from this Flemish soil like a whale from the deep. I felt reluctant to pass through the black gateway into the fortress itself, and instead began by walking round it on the outside, through the unnaturally deep green, almost blue-tinged grass growing on the island. [...] Covered in places by open ulcers with the raw crushed stone erupting from them, encrusted by guano-like droppings and calcareous streaks, the fort was a monolithic, monstrous incarnation of ugliness and blind violence.³

The narrator’s anxiety is triggered by the ‘unhuman’ sprawl of the fortress, which appears to him as a monstrous animal with malevolent eyes, limbs and claws, and body rising out of the pasture. He further emphasises the fort’s transcendent unsightliness, picturing a physically repulsive edifice that mirrors the human suffering that took place there. After inspecting the building from the outside, the narrator – literally and symbolically – descends into the darkness when traversing the fortress’s subterranean corridors, entering ‘a world illuminated only by a few dim electric bulbs, and cut off for ever from the light of nature’.⁴ The past is so palpably, even viscerally, present in the former prison camp that he feels the space closing in on him:

1 W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001), p. 19.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

4 *Ibid.*

I also recollect now that as I went on down the tunnel which could be said to form the backbone of the fort, I had to resist the feeling taking root in my heart, one which to this day often comes over me in macabre places, a sense that with every forward step the air was growing thinner and the weight above me heavier.⁵

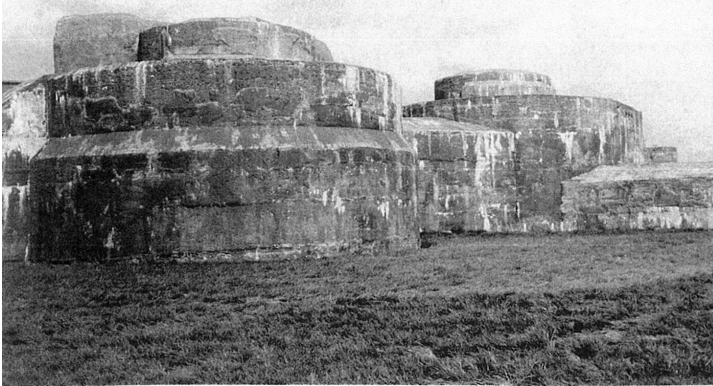


Figure 1. Picture of the fortress in Austerlitz (Sebald 2001: 21).

This vivid portrayal of Fort Breendonk, where the narrator encounters a stifling sense of entrapment and suffocation as he ventures further underground, prompts a pertinent inquiry into the mnemonic power of places. More precisely, it elucidates a site's ability to encapsulate facets of the past it has witnessed, to 'store' these fragments within its materiality, and to subsequently transmit them, across time, to future visitors. The narrator's profound engagement with the fort's space and materiality unfolds the prospect of an immersive, somatic and emotional experience that fosters a heightened awareness of the importance of remembering.

Whereas much of the existing scholarship on Fort Breendonk has been centred on historiographical analyses of the camp's formation, of the conditions endured by its prisoners, and of post-war justice,⁶ the present study aims to illuminate the distinct place-making strategies that the current memorial museum employs to facilitate its role as a

5 Sebald, pp. 21-23.

6 For instance: Pierre Buch, Ronald Linthout and Frans Selleslagh, *Breendonk: Les débuts...* (Brussel: CEGESOMA, 1997); Patrick Nefors, *Breendonk 1940-1945: de geschiedenis* (Antwerpen: Standaard, 2004); James M. Deem, *The Prisoners of Breendonk: Personal Histories from a World War II Concentration Camp* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015); Mark Van den Wijngaert and others, *Beulen van Breendonk: Schuld en Boete* (Antwerpen: Davidsfonds, 2019).

vehicle for memory. It emphasises the various and multimodal ways in which the visitor tour cultivates empathy for historical victims while ‘othering’ the perpetrators. Central to this examination are, on the one hand, a review of (spatial, visual, and auditive) curatorial interventions highlighting the fort’s authentic material features, and on the other, an empirical inquiry into visitor interactions with these features. Based on the premise that meaning and memory are constructed in a transactional process ‘between the institution and those who make use of its resources’, this analysis conceptualises the exhibition in Fort Breen-donk as a ‘*platform* for experiences’.⁷ It aligns with Lois H. Silverman’s visitor meaning-making paradigm,⁸ according to which museum visitors actively make sense of exhibits instead of passively absorbing information, while at the same time acknowledging that curators can ‘provide the right environment and setting for the desired customer experiences to emerge’.⁹ Both dimensions – exhibition production and reception – will be explored for Fort Breendonk.

The following section first provides a concise overview of the fortress’s intricate history and elucidates the contemporary memorial’s mission. Section 3 sets out a theoretical and methodological framework that underscores the notion of ‘indexical’ trauma sites in addition to that of *lieux de mémoire* and positions the memorial museum as a ‘spatial text’ that is designed to be read, interpreted, and felt by the visitor. The analysis proceeds to scrutinise the visitor tour in Section 4, exploring how curatorial interventions capitalise on the authenticity of the place to unlock testimonial potential. The argument posits that the curators seek to re-actualise the past through a variety of multimodal devices that create strong sensory and emotional involvement, encouraging visitors to empathise with the camp prisoners while being distanced from the perpetrators. The spatial-discursive analysis is complemented in Section 5 by an exploration of TripAdvisor reviews offering valuable insights into international visitors’ engagement with the space

7 Tom Hennes, ‘Exhibitions: From a Perspective of Encounter’, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 53.1 (2010), 25–6.

8 Lois H. Silverman, ‘Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age’, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 38.3 (1995), 161–70.

9 Bernd H. Schmitt, *Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to Sense, Feel, Think, Act, Relate to Your Company And Brands* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1999), quoted in Jan Packer and Roy Ballantyne, ‘Conceptualizing the Visitor Experience: A Review of Literature and Development of a Multifaceted Model’, *Visitor Studies*, 19.2 (2016), 131; see also Stephan Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From Narrative, Memory, and Experience to Experientiality* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), p. 43.

and demonstrating the efficacy of specific curatorial approaches. This segment of the paper expressly addresses the burgeoning call, in the field of Museum Studies, for empirical research probing into visitor responses, particularly in the context of ‘dark’ subject matters.¹⁰

Fort Breendonk’s Historical Reiterations and Contemporary Mission

The Fort of Breendonk, initially designed as a military protective installation for the Belgian army, was repurposed several times in the course of the 20th century. At each juncture of its historical evolution, the site has been inscribed with new meanings. Not unlike many other crime-scenes-turned-memorials, the fort has been in ‘permanent flux’:¹¹ old structures were erased, overwritten, rearranged, or repurposed, resulting in a palimpsestic superposition of temporal layers. The fort’s initial architectural plan, conceived in 1908, is based on a sideways H (the back of the crab’s body in the imagination of Sebald’s narrator) with narrow structures – or caponiers – extending outwards from each end of the rear wing (its ‘limbs and claws’).¹² The front wing of the H, on the north side, housed administrative offices and workshops, while a cobblestoned corridor led to the rear wing containing the soldiers’ barracks.¹³ By the time Germany invaded Belgium in 1914, as Austerlitz explains, the defences had already been eclipsed by advanced artillery, leading to the fort’s swift capitulation.

During World War II, the German SS requisitioned the fort as an *Auffanglager* or prison camp for Jews, resistance fighters, and political opponents of the Nazi party. Though not officially a concentration camp, ‘the difference in title meant little’, as Breendonk became ‘the entry into the larger SS concentration camp system’ for many prisoners

10 Diana I. Popescu, ‘The Potency of Design in Holocaust Exhibitions. A Case Study of The Imperial War Museum’s Holocaust Exhibition (2000)’, *Museum and Society*, 18.2 (2020), 219; Robert Neather, ‘Translation, memory, and the museum visitor’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Memory*, ed. by Sharon Deane-Cox and Anneleen Spiessens (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 155–169 (p. 166).

11 Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, ‘Mapping Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence. An Introduction’, in *Geographies of Perpetration: Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence*, ed. by Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), pp. 7–20 (p. 12).

12 Sebald, p. 21

13 Deem, pp. 16–17.

who were later deported elsewhere.¹⁴ Originally designed to keep the attacker *out*, the fortification now became a penitentiary facility to keep the inhabitants *in* and was equipped similarly to a concentration camp. The SS had barbed wire installed and reconfigured the original soldiers' barracks on the south side into primitive dormitories for the inmates, confinement cells, and a *Revier*. In 1942, the fortress's gunpowder store was converted into a torture chamber for the 'enhanced interrogation' of resistance fighters. The north side of the fort near the entrance gate was rearranged primarily as Gestapo interrogation rooms, SS offices, a canteen, workshops, and stables – all services for the SS staff.¹⁵ For reasons that are only partially addressed in the exhibition, Fort Breendonk gained notoriety for the brutality of some of the prison guards and commanders, and for the harsh living conditions of its inmates who were systematically humiliated, beaten, starved and worn down. Some of them were tortured and executed without trial. Approximately 3,500 men and women would experience 'the Hell of Breendonk'.

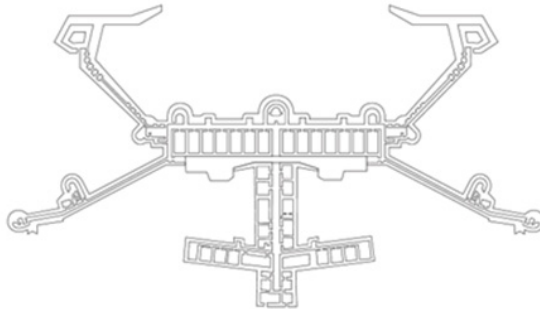


Figure 2. Map of Fort Breendonk, 1914 (Deem 2015: 25).

After Liberation, in September 1944, the fort briefly resumed its role as a camp when resistance fighters imprisoned some 750 alleged collaborators or 'incivics'. The guards of the new camp indulged in excesses as well, taking advantage of the power vacuum right after the war. During this short period, which is known as 'Breendonk II', the site experienced some minor changes, such as walls being repainted. By the end of 1944, the fortress was brought under the Belgian Ministry of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Patrick Moreau, *Systematiek en willekeur: Het verhaal van de politieke gevangenen uit het arrondissement Mechelen* (Berchem: EPO, 2004).

Justice's remit and put to use as an official internment centre until 1946, to relieve the overpopulated prisons.

In 1947, the fortress was repurposed one last time and declared a National Memorial (*Nationaal Gedenkteken*) by law. Spearheaded by a former Resistance member, this law aimed to formalise commemorative practices in the future by placing their administration in the hands of the survivor community while sanctifying the fort as a central emblem of Belgian patriotism. The modest museum established in the *Revier* showcased artifacts illustrating daily life in the camp, offered historiographical insights into the rise of German fascism, and presented documents that helped visitors situate Breendonk within the broader network of concentration camps.¹⁶

The electoral successes of the far-right party Vlaams Belang in the early 1990s revitalised the memory of World War II and the significance of Fort Breendonk. Within the context of a newly conceived civic education, the fortress underwent restoration and was endowed with a revised museography aimed at transforming it into a political and moral warning against the perils of extremism. Additionally, memory pedagogy was institutionalised and memory politics further centralised, as a 2003 law placed Fort Breendonk under the direct oversight of the Belgian state.¹⁷ Fort Breendonk's current mission is partly grounded in the 1947 memorial law, yet it also embodies the new focus on human rights and ethical responsibilities, echoing themes found in numerous contemporary memorial museums.¹⁸ The mission encompasses two primary objectives: firstly, 'to tell the story of the victims of German repression' and, secondly, 'to encourage visitors to draw connections between the historical context and contemporary socio-political circumstances'.¹⁹ In the words of site manager Herbart Beyers, visitors

16 *Fort van Breendonk* (Raad van Beheer van het Nationaal Gedenkteken van het Fort van Breendonk, 1983), p. 103-108. In the initial years following the memorial's establishment, visitors could 'listen to audiotaped testimonies of former prisoners in five different locations within the fort' and view an 'audiovisual presentation' in the former registration office (p. 98). Unfortunately, I have not been able to recover the specific contents of these audio(visual) materials.

17 For a comprehensive overview of the memorial uses of Fort Breendonk, see Bruno Benvindo, 'Les autorités du passé. Mémoires (in)disciplinées du camp de Breendonk, 1944-2010', *Journal of Belgian History*, 42 (2012), 48-77; Tine Jorissen, 'Breendonk: het Fort. De wording van een memoriaal voor de mensenrechten.' in *België: een parcours van herinnering*, ed. by Jo Tollebeek and others (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008).

18 See for instance Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), p. 4.

19 [Anon.], 'Educatief aanbod: Inleiding', *Breendonk Memorial*, n.d. <<https://fortbreendonk.be/educatief-aanbod-inleiding>> [accessed 18 December 2023].

to Fort Breendonk are propelled to embrace a role as responsible and ‘vigilant’ citizens, attentive to indicators of totalitarianism and actively committed to ‘safeguarding the principles of democracy and freedom’.²⁰

In its current form, the exhibition is made up mainly of the authentic camp spaces, only four of which are reconfigured as documentary ‘museum’ rooms that focus on the personal histories of 21 prisoners, the broader network of concentration camps, and post-war justice. The museum caters to visitors through audio-guided individual tours, group-guided visits, and educational materials (in French and Dutch) to assist teachers. In 2023, Fort Breendonk attracted 110,000 visitors, with school groups accounting for 70% of the total number.²¹

Indexicality, Authenticity, and the Museum as a Spatial Text

Fort Breendonk strives to accomplish its dual goal by providing its visitors with an immersive experience in an *authentic* setting, one that facilitates a deeper understanding of the suffering endured by the former prisoners. While the fortress may hold a peripheral status in the larger landscape of World War II concentration camps – it clearly lacks the scale and notoriety of Auschwitz, for example – its present significance lies in being one of the best-preserved camps in Europe. In this sense, the fortress continues to attract sizeable audiences due to its distinct status as a *lieu de mémoire*. Although Pierre Nora’s term encompasses both ‘material and non-material’ entities, material vestiges of the past offer a tangible and visible connection. They ‘materialize the immaterial’, Nora underlines, creating converging, temporal-spatial frameworks that aid in recalling past events that happened at these specific locations.²² In our present era, when living memory-cultures based on oral transmission – Jan Assmann’s ‘communicative memory’²³ – tend to erode, physical spaces act as the living body of memory and constitute anchor points through which the past becomes accessible for those

20 Herbart Beyers, ‘De missie van het Nationaal Gedenkteken Fort van Breendonk’, *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, 132 (2021), 133.

21 Personal e-mail conversations with Nico Theunissen, historian and staff member of the War Heritage Institute, and Jef Vrelust, site manager of Fort Breendonk, on 9 February 2024.

22 Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’, *Representations*, 26 (1989), 19.

23 Jan Assmann, ‘Communicative and Cultural Memory’, in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 109–118.

who have not experienced it first-hand. Aleida Assmann and Jay Winter posit that physical *lieux de mémoire* are, in fact, 'sites of second-order memory' where memories are localised and then transmitted to new generations lacking personal recollection.²⁴ Breendonk is such a place where individuals 'remember the memories of others'.²⁵

To elucidate the relationship between the materiality of Fort Breendonk and the past it remembers, this article draws on Patrizia Violi's semiotic approach, and specifically on her concept of 'indexical' places. Contrary to Nora's broader focus on general memory sites, Violi's term spotlights sites that exist as material testimonies of *traumatic* events. The link between the physical trauma sites and historical events, Violi argues, can be qualified as 'indexical', since the place functions as an 'imprint' of what happened there.²⁶ In our case, the fortress points both to the suffering of the prisoners and the violence inflicted by the guards. Indexical trauma sites are not merely reconstructions or re-evocations of what is no more. Rather, they refer to 'something more cogent, something they have *directly witnessed*: these places are themselves testimonies of the past'.²⁷ Violi further examines the implications of this spatial contiguity, contending that it fosters a specific relationship with the temporal dimension, allowing contemporary visitors to 'sense' the place.

A semiotic approach is particularly useful for analysing Breendonk due to its attention to curatorial interventions that bring out the site's testimonial potential. Although the fortress is promoted on its English-language website as a place that simply 'exudes the horror' of the past,²⁸ indexicality in general is not a property 'naturally' embedded in the physical place but the result of 'a semiotic process that transforms imprints into traces, i.e. signs recognised and interpreted as such'.²⁹ Transforming a place that was once the location of violent events into a memorial or museum necessitates *semiotic work*. An important aspect of that work consists of emphasising the authenticity of any remaining

24 Aleida Assmann, 'Das Gedächtnis der Orte', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft Und Geistesgeschichte*, 68 (1994), 17.

25 Jay Winter, 'Sites of memory', in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by S. Radstone and B. Schwarz (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 312–324 (p. 313).

26 Patrizia Violi, 'Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29.1 (2012), 39.

27 *Ibid.*, 39, my emphasis.

28 [Anon.], 'Breendonk Memorial home page', *Breendonk Memorial*, n.d., <<https://breendonk.be/en>> [accessed 06 November 2023].

29 Violi, 39.

traces because the link between past and present is established precisely through the persistence of material elements over time. For Fort Breendonk to become an indexical place – in order for its material elements to function as ‘signs’ of a violent past in a museal environment – marking the site’s authenticity is crucial.

In the following section, I present an analysis of Breendonk anchored in Violi’s framework and drawing on Ravelli and McMurtrie’s discourse-analytical method of ‘reading’ exhibitions. In their co-authored book *Multimodality in the Built Environment*, they define museums as ‘spatial texts’, that is, as three-dimensional, multimodal assemblages in which different semiotic modes – material and non-material, physical and discursive – are co-deployed to create meaning.³⁰ Their model specifically foregrounds users as part of the meaning-making process, exploring how people are positioned in, move through, look at, and engage with their (designed) environment. In the authors’ own words, spatial texts are the ‘synthesis of building, space, content, and user’.³¹ The double focus on materiality and users is thus not only consistent with recent views in Tourist Studies, it also dovetails with Violi’s framework of indexicality and embodied experiences. Indeed, the memorial-museum of Fort Breendonk is designed not just as an object to look at and reflect upon, but also as a place to be in and to feel.

Fort Breendonk’s Visitor Tour

1. ENTERING THE CAMP UNIVERSE: BOUND SPACES

The following ‘thick description’ of the tour is based on my first-hand, on-site observations³² and concentrates primarily on organisational and interactional aspects of space that highlight Fort Breendonk’s ‘indexical’ qualities. Specifically, it seeks to comprehend how various components of the exhibition are integrated into a meaningful composition, and explores the potential emotional effects generated by the built environment.

³⁰ Louise J. Ravelli, *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 121.

³¹ Louise J. Ravelli and Robert J. McMurtrie, *Multimodality in the Built Environment: Spatial Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

³² My two visits to Breendonk date from 13 June 2023 and 12 January 2024.

One of the major organisational resources for museums to create a coherent 'text' is the direction and control of visitor pathways.³³ Navigational paths are established through vectors, such as arrows, lights, staircases, corridors, and lifts, that facilitate movement and 'draw attention to the connection between spaces'.³⁴ As Tony Bennett famously posited in his work on museums, through 'organized walking', 'an intended message is communicated in the form of a (more or less) directed itinerary' and the visitors' gaze is transformed into a 'sequentialised practice of looking'.³⁵ Pathways can be flexible or rigid, minimally or maximally controlled, and practices range from predetermined one-way-only routes with no option to backtrack, over suggested traffic flows indicated by wayfinding resources, to unstructured environments that allow random visitor movement.³⁶ Each option carries implications for the way museum visitors interact with distinct parts of the built environment, and influences the development of the museum narrative as it unfolds through movement.

In Breendonk, an extensive trail guides visitors in and around the fortress, with stops at locations illustrating the harsh camp life. While there are not many physical barriers that funnel visitors to follow a single path or direction (I could, for instance, backtrack to take additional photographs), there is evidently a preferred sequence for visiting the fort, and certain points feature navigational vectors that considerably restrict visitor movement. The preferred trail is signposted by red arrows, opened doors or fences, and architectural elements such as bridges and tunnels.

In contrast to Sebald's narrator in 1967, who took the liberty to bypass the entrance gate and first explore the fortress from the outside, contemporary visitors are more effectively steered to follow in the former prisoners' footsteps. Similar to the inmates, they commence their journey into the camp universe by crossing the bridge over the moat and walking through the monumental gate, which leads to a dimly lit underground tunnel.

This segment of the tour effectively demonstrates the intricate connection between organisational and semantic levels, as the navigation-

33 David Dean, *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1996), quoted in Ravelli, p. 123.

34 Dean, quoted in Ravelli, p. 124.

35 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 186-187.

36 Ravelli and McMurtrie, p. 133.

al pathway is maximally controlled by the bridge and tunnel, leaving visitors with no exit options other than retracing their steps. Such an arrangement has been characterised in other contexts as ‘a form of entrapment’ that serves a didactic purpose.³⁷ At Fort Breendonk, indeed, progressing through the massive grey gate, flanked by barred windows and bearing ‘guano-like’ salt deposits on the concrete surface, signifies not only the transition from outside to inside, but also from freedom to incarceration.



Figure 3. Bridge over the moat and entrance gate.
Photo by the author, 13 June 2023.

From an interactional perspective, the beginning of the tour also offers ample opportunities for visitors to inspect, and emotionally engage with, the building’s material aspects. Ravelli and McMurtrie posit a direct correlation between space and affect, asserting that ‘the way people talk about how they feel in a space is directly related to the materials and intangible resources used in that space’.³⁸ A similar impact of material and sensory aspects of exhibition design on visitor ‘mood’ has been observed in studies of Holocaust museums where dark environments and narrow passageways intend to ‘disorientate or make

³⁷ Dean, quoted in Ravelli, p. 133.

³⁸ Ravelli and McMurtrie, p. 77.

the visitor feel uneasy, evoking some of the horror of dislocation of the Holocaust'.³⁹ In particular, Ravelli and McMurtrie use the semiotic principle of 'binding' to describe 'the ways in which differently proportioned spaces affect users' sense of (in)security'.⁴⁰ In this light, Breen-donk's main corridor, which is the first area to discover within the fort, can be categorised as a typical 'bound' space. Its dimensions, along with its texture and ambience, have the potential to induce negative feelings of discomfort and insecurity: the tunnel is dark and opaque due to the black paint on the walls, the near-absence of daylight, and the low ceilings; the walls are made of stone, a cold material which, in addition to the underground position of the fort, transforms the corridor into an inhospitable, cool, and humid environment; furthermore, the cobblestone flooring hinders easy walking.

The first room accessible on the right side of this corridor is the SS canteen. Because the place occasionally served as a courtroom, it now displays photographs of twelve Belgian resistance fighters who were tried there and immediately executed. The display starkly contrasts the room's dual role as a place for casual leisure for the SS but one of fatal judgement for the victims. The rear wall of the canteen is adorned with a fresco depicting an eagle, a swastika, and a skull. It features the motto *Meine Ehre heisst Treue* (My honour is my loyalty) in Gothic lettering, which was a way for the Nazis to effectively assert the fortress as German territory at the time. The 'sequentialised' visitor flow, as per Bennett's terminology – crossing the narrow bridge, entering through the monumental gate into the dark underground tunnel, then being confronted with Nazi symbols – contributes to an oppressive atmosphere. Consequently, the start of the tour is designed to make a strong impression on visitors and clearly aims to replicate the experience of prisoners entering the camp.

2. LIFE AND DEATH IN THE PRISON CAMP: A TESTIMONIAL PROJECT

Another key section in the fort is the rear, or south, wing. Again, an underground corridor serves as a vector for visitor progression, connecting the different rooms. Although this corridor is not painted in black, it is considerably narrower compared to the main tunnel and completely sealed off from the outside world, devoid of any daylight. Entering this area is a rich sensory experience: beyond the visual element of darkness and the tactile sensation of enclosure, the scenogra-

³⁹ Ravelli and McMurtrie, p. 77.

⁴⁰ Ibid.



Figure 4. Entrance corridor. Photo by the author, 12 January 2024.

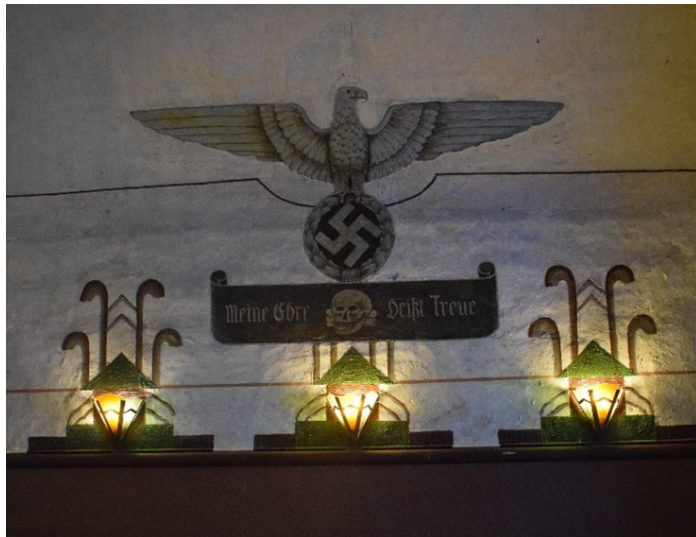


Figure 5. Detail in the SS canteen. Photo by the author, 13 June 2023.

phy engages the visitor's sense of hearing. The corridor resounds with the voices of people yelling in German and others screaming in pain. These voices emanate from the second room where a loop video details the inmates' daily routine through re-enacted scenes, covering activities from *Bettenbau* (bedmaking, following strict rules) to forced labour and torture. Visitors are thus immersed in Breendonk's auditory universe, which is described by one of the prisoners in an audio installation as 'unbearable', especially at night.

The corridor grants access to several dormitories, nearly all of them furnished with rudimentary bunk beds and straw mattresses, and some equipped with chamber pots, stoves, tables, and bowls. Visitors proceed to the confinement cells where political prisoners were held for several days or weeks. The solitary cells represent the extreme end of the boundedness scale: measuring 1.50 by 1.90 meters and a metal grid and barbed wire forming the ceiling, they are just large enough for a person to stand in. The wooden benches were only lowered in the evenings, thereby allowing prisoners to sit or sleep on them. Additionally, the cells are noteworthy for the 'texture' of their walls, which bear literal spatial inscriptions in the form of powerful testimonies. While most graffiti is degrading, a few remain in good condition, such as those in cell no. 15. A wooden step stool invites visitors to peer through the wicket of the closed cell door and discover a head of Christ carved into the rear wall's plaster by one of the prisoners. The left wall carries a religious inscription from a desperate Flemish prisoner – *H Hart van Jezus, ik stel al mijn vertrouwen op u* (H[oly] Heart of Jesus, I put all my faith in you).

Returning to the corridor, visitors move towards the torture chamber designed for 'enhanced interrogation', situated in the former gunpowder room in the southwestern corner of the building. This space is pivotal for envisioning the physical proximity between torturers and their victims, serving as a key example of how Fort Breendonk portrays the perpetrators through the pain they inflicted on others.⁴¹ The architecture creates suspense, for the visitor and for the inmate, as the tunnel does not offer direct access to the chamber. Instead, a meandering, labyrinth-like path leads to the so-called *Bunker*. The room is circular in shape, devoid of windows, and its stone floor features a shallow gutter across the width of the room. The space is presented in an almost bare state, nearly empty, with the exception of a few props that, in con-

41 I would like to thank Mario Panico for his numerous insightful comments and questions on an earlier version of this article, here and elsewhere, which greatly contributed to clarifying and refining my argument.



Figure 6. Dormitories. Photo by the author, 12 January 2024.



Figure 7. Confinement cells. Photo by the author, 12 January 2024.

junction with the gutter, serve as potent triggers for the imagination: in the room's centre, suspended from the ceiling, is a hook and pulley; on the floor, wooden wedges; against the wall, a wooden table with three iron pokers and a stove.

The *Bunker's* setup exemplifies Violi's view that the emotional impact of visiting trauma sites relies on the evocative power of indexical traces that enable visitor to 'not only see something of this terrible past, [but] also imagine that which cannot be seen'.⁴² As Jean Améry later recounts in his compelling narrative of his time in Breendonk, *At the Mind's Limits*, inmates would be hoisted by their hands tied behind their backs, causing a dislocation of the arms and shoulders, and then dropped with their knees and shins on the wooden wedges.⁴³ Blood and urine could flow away through the drain. It is not difficult to envision the fortress's underground tunnels, initially designed to provide protection for the Belgian soldiers, resonating with the screams of prisoners from the Nazi torture room.

The tour continues into the 'Jewish barracks' which host an exhibition on the persecution of the Jews and the broader camp universe. Subsequently, visitors are guided outside the fortress to the execution ground. In terms of boundedness, the execution area is notably unbound because of the expansiveness of the terrain and its permeability as an open-air space lacking walls and ceilings. However, 'ambient' factors⁴⁴ such as light, colour and temperature – all variable features depending on the weather – significantly contribute to the perception of comfort or security in this place. My first visit to Breendonk, under the scorching sun in June 2023, contrasts with my second visit in the freezing winter of January 2024, during which the execution ground struck me as a grim and desolate site. The beige gravel square comes into view after a five-minute walk around the fort. A series of nine wooden execution poles immediately catches the visitor's eye, along with make-shift wooden gallows on the opposite side – a simple platform and elevated beam resting on the caponier. Like the instruments in the torture room or the bunk beds in the dormitories, these elements serve as indexical traces of both suffering and perpetration, marking the authenticity of the place and prompting the visitor's imagination. No written information is provided except for a list of names of execut-

42 Violi, 39.

43 Améry, Jean, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

44 Ravelli and McMurtrie, p. 77.



Figure 8. Bunker or torture chamber. Photo by the author, 13 June 2023.



Figure 9. Execution ground. Photo by the author, 12 January 2024.



Figure 10. Latrines with video testimony. Photo by the author, 12 January 2024.

ed persons and a commemorative plaque reminding visitors to ‘enter this space with respect – people died here for your freedom’.

In fact, the absence of textual information is a distinctive feature of Fort Breendonk. The tour is designed as a succession of ‘charged spaces’:⁴⁵ sombre and oppressive settings, characterised by factors such as limited dimensions, lack of daylight, opaqueness, cold, or desolateness. To facilitate spatial interaction and allow these places to ‘speak for themselves’ – to ‘exude the horror’ as suggested by the English promotional text – historical or contextual information is reduced to a minimum. ‘The places and the facts speak for themselves. Any further commentary is superfluous’, states the memorial presentation booklet from 1983.⁴⁶ While the final parts of the tour, after returning from the execution ground and re-entering the fortress, form a more traditional ‘museum’ setting with contextual information, the majority of the site lacks text panels. Occasionally, discrete video testimonies are placed, such as in the latrines, where they give the floor to former prisoners explaining what happened in the room, what it was used for, how they experienced it, and which emotions it unlocks today. Less discrete but equally nonverbal are the life-size photos of inmates, as seen in one of the dormitories where a picture of postman François Vander Veken shows his dramatic weight loss during the stay.

Overall, spatial, auditory, and visual cues take precedence over textual resources, transforming Fort Breendonk into a *testimonial* rather than an epistemological project.⁴⁷ Similar to Violi’s examination of Tuol Sleng, we can conclude that curatorial interventions in Breendonk work towards an immediate (non-mediated) access to the past, relying on sensations and impressions to create ‘a museum to be felt rather than to be known or understood’.⁴⁸ The museum is primarily conceived not to offer detailed historical and geopolitical background explaining the ‘whys and wherefores’ of the prison camp; instead, practices of design and display centred around the authenticity of the site foster a sensory and emotional experience that enables visitors to envision the ‘how’.

45 Popescu, 38.

46 Fort van Breendonk, p. 100.

47 Violi, 52.

48 Violi, 48.

3. AUTHENTICITY EFFECTS

I have demonstrated that Breendonk's memorial strategy relies on the evocative power of the site's unmediated, authentic indexical traces. However, authenticity is never a natural given in a museal context. Converting a place of extreme violence into a museum sooner or later involves grappling with the 'authenticity paradox':⁴⁹ by trying to conserve the authenticity of the traces, the functional transformation of the site inevitably provokes a certain loss of authenticity. Jonathan Culler unpacks this paradox very eloquently when discussing the tourist's quest for 'the real thing':

The paradox, the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes.⁵⁰

Authenticity, Culler argues, is a sign relation. It is a quality that derives from its markers, whereas our idea of the authentic is, traditionally, the unmarked – hence the dilemma. In Breendonk, authenticity is marked and created through a variety of curatorial processes. While some of them concern purely 'technical' matters of conservation and restoration (one of the major challenges is humidity and water seepage, concerning, in particular, the epigraphic sources in the confinement cells), others urge us to reflect on ethical forms of representation and memorialisation.

Certain sections within the fort, in fact, underwent restoration to look more authentic or, more precisely, to better cohere with the tour's focus on the Nazi period. Notably, the fresco with gothic lettering in the SS canteen was removed (covered with white chalk) by the Resistance when they took over the prison in 1944. Similarly, the dark entrance corridor was repainted in brighter colours with the aim of 'imparting a less sombre ambiance to the entire area'.⁵¹ Both alterations were reversed after 1947 at the initiative of the new memorial's Board of Directors, led by former resistance members who sought to return 'their' fort to its original state.⁵² The gestures of covering and uncover-

49 Violi, 42.

50 Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 164.

51 Board of the National Memorial of Fort Breendonk, p. 93.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 94-97.

ing, of overwriting and re-writing, reveal the overlapping temporalities embedded in this memorial site, and emphasise the semiotic work carried out by the board and the curatorial team. Their interventions in these specific areas can be characterised as instances of 'pathemic restoration'⁵³ because they clearly aim to elicit a heightened emotional response from visitors. In their current design, the stark black hue of the main tunnel and the presence of a swastika in the canteen serve as the commencement point of the visitor tour. Although they are not uncontroversial and occasionally attract far-right militants,⁵⁴ they are designed to evoke feelings of unease and confinement in visitors that may resemble the former prisoners' experience.

In the southern part of the fortress, authenticity effects are achieved through the introduction of props or the refurnishing of rooms. Newly added bunk beds and mattresses now occupy the dormitories, alongside tables, stools, and cupboards; windows have been blacked out to mimic the original space. The torture chamber, which captivates the imagination, was, in fact, completely dismantled by the camp guards shortly before the liberation of Breendonk in an attempt to wipe out the traces of their crimes.⁵⁵ The room has been restored to its original state for the museum, and torture instruments were reintroduced based on testimonies of both victims and perpetrators.⁵⁶ Outside the fort, the gallows and poles on the execution ground are recent replicas. The artefacts enhance the immersive experience, reinforcing the notion that the materiality of the place provides immediate access to the past. It is noteworthy, however, that the distinction between original, reconstruction, and replica is never explicitly stated on site, for instance on information panels. The analysis thus unveils the tacit semiotic process of 'place-making', underscoring the curatorial interventions necessary to create this authentic *lieu de mémoire*.

53 Violi, 44.

54 In 2019 a man gave the Hitler salute in the former SS canteen. He was brought before the criminal court of Mechelen and found guilty of Holocaust denial and incitement to hatred and violence. See Bruno Struys, 'Extremrechtse groep brengt Hitlergroet in nazikamp Breendonk', *De Morgen*, 23 November 2019, <<https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/extremrechtse-groep-brengt-hitlergroet-in-nazikamp-breendonk-waar-honderden-mensen-het-leven-lieten-b794f11a/>> [accessed 02 September 2024]; Dries Hiroux, 'Lid van rechtse groep die Hitlergroet bracht veroordeeld tot 6 maanden cel met uitstel', *vrtnws*, 2 June 2021, <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2021/06/02/breendonk-veroordeling/>> [accessed 02 September 2024].

55 Dimitri Roden, 'Het Auffanglager Breendonk, 1940-1944', *Sporen van herinnering*, 25 (2017), 7.

56 Board of the National Memorial of Fort Breendonk, p. 93.

4. THE AUDIO GUIDE: THE UNTRANSLATED PERPETRATOR

The immersive and testimonial nature of the visit is heightened by the complementary audio guide available at the entrance for individual visitors. Rather than providing contextual information, the audio guide offers a series of situated testimonies describing daily life in the camp. Activated by pressing the number corresponding to the red panels at specific locations, it serves as a vector directing visitor movement and focusing attention on 'visit-worthy' spaces. Excerpts are concise, ranging between one and two minutes.

The first excerpt is played a few meters behind the (original) 'STOP / HALT' sign at the iron gate, warning unwanted guests that whoever crosses this point 'will be shot dead'. Without any introduction, excerpt no. 1 opens with a testimony by former prisoner Edgard Marbaix, who published his wartime experience in 1945 in French. The testimony is read out in the present tense, with deictic elements referring to the here and now of the museum visitor starting the tour:

The grey doors facing us ... Left and right, barbed wire fencing; the concrete towers of the fort rise before us; the lonely plains all around ... And fear has filled our hearts with dread and will never leave us ... Fear, because it is Breendonk facing us, the Gestapo concentration camp in Belgium. Breendonk-Death!⁵⁷

Following this translated quotation from Marbaix's book, a more conventional narration, still in the historic present, unfolds, delivered with a different intonation ('voice 2') to mark the contrast with the testimony:

April 1943: Prisoner 1966 Edgard Marbaix arrived at the Fort.

The narrator details the exact circumstances of Marbaix's arrival in Breendonk in 1943, emphasising that the camp had already gained a certain reputation by that time. The prisoner in 1943 and the contemporary visitor thus share the understanding that 'Breendonk equals death', revealing a common frame of reference despite the temporal difference. Furthermore, the audio guide leverages the authenticity of

57 Patrick Nefors, 'Audio guide for the Breendonk Memorial (English version)', *Nationaal Gedenkteken van het Fort van Breendonk* (2004). The transcription of the audio guide was provided by Nico Theunissen. The guide was written by historian Patrick Nefors in Dutch and translated into English and French by unspecified translators.



Figure 11. Location of the first audio excerpt. Photo by the author, 13 June 2023.

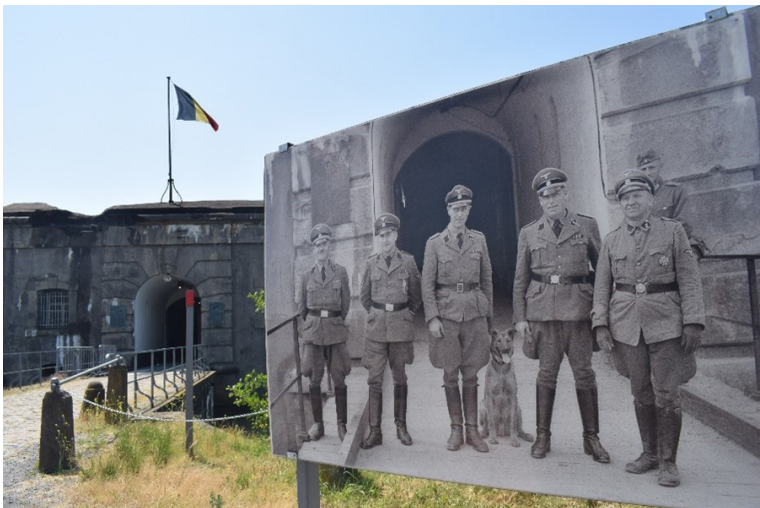


Figure 12. Entrance gate with picture of German SS. Photo by the author, 13 June 2023.

the place to bring the past closer. Today's visitors see what the former prisoners saw at the time: the grey entrance gate, the barbed wire fences, and the concrete structure of the fort rising before them. The 'us' in the original witness report, referring to the group of incoming prisoners ('the grey doors facing us'), becomes even more inclusive in the audio guide, referring to the visitors as well.⁵⁸

After describing the fort and its surroundings, Edgar Marbaix expresses his emotions using the same inclusive 'we': 'fear has filled our hearts with dread'. The audio guide encourages, if not identification then at the very least, empathy with the prisoners. Visitors are invited to enter the fort with them, accompany them through the various stages and settings of their imprisonment, and share sensory and emotional experiences while walking through the spaces they inhabited. The use of deixis, verb tense, voice, and pronouns create converging temporal-spatial frameworks, drawing visitors into the camp universe and contributing to the re-actualisation of the initial trauma experience.

After the first two audio excerpts, the focus transitions from victims to perpetrators. Or rather, it is not so much a shift in focus as a simulation of what incoming prisoners would encounter upon arriving at the camp. Walking up to the gate, the visitor/prisoner suddenly faces five members of the German SS at the bridge. A large photo positioned at eye level features the notorious camp commander Philipp Schmitt with his dog Lump in the centre, flanked by four officers. The fact that this picture was taken by Otto Kropf as a Nazi propaganda image is notable but remains undisclosed to the visitor.⁵⁹ Proceeding across the

⁵⁸ It is essential, in this regard, to note a few inconsistencies in the English translation that might disorientate attentive listeners. While the English speaks of 'grey doors' and 'concrete towers', the French audio guide, presumably based on Marbaix' original testimony, more accurately mentions 'la porte sombre' [the dark gate] and 'les bétons du Fort [qui] s'allongent devant nous' [the concrete structure of the fort that extends before us]. Indeed, no doors or towers are visible on this location.

⁵⁹ Many scholars investigating visual material have challenged the naïve assumption that (perpetrator) photographs can stand alone and create meaning. They consistently underscore the need to bring into consideration not only what is (or is not) visible, but also additional facets such as the production, distribution, or use of the images. Photos can mirror the unequal power balance between the SS and the prisoners, and uninformed viewers cannot automatically understand the underlying mechanisms that led to the collective violence. See for instance Ulrike Koppermann, 'Challenging the Perpetrators' Narrative: A Critical Reading of the Photo Album "Resettlement of the Jews from Hungary"', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.2 (2019), 101-129; Christophe Busch, 'Looking without Seeing: Visual Literacy in Light of Holocaust Photography', *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, 15.1 (2023), 147-65; Michelle E. Anderson, 'Perpetrator Trauma, Empathic Unsettlement, and the Uncanny: Conceptualizations of Perpetrators in South Africa's Truth Commission Special Report', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 95-118.



Figure 13. Pictures of German SS in the former enrolment office. Photo by the author, 13 June 2023.



Figure 14. Pictures of Flemish SS in the former enrolment office. Photo by the author, 13 June 2023.

bridge to the actual fort, a third audio excerpt is played in the tunnel. Once more, it is not the narrator's voice opening the excerpt but the voice of a witness. This time, the voice actor impersonates a German SS soldier delivering four new prisoners: *'Heil Hitler! Vier Stück eingeliefert!'* Significantly, while the victims' testimonies are always translated into the language of the audio guide (Dutch, French or English), the perpetrators' voices are in German and remain untranslated. In this particular case, we hear orders shouted in German, followed by the narrator's voice partly translating and explaining the dehumanisation process that starts when entering the camp: 'From now on, a *Stück*, a number, no longer a human being.' The translation strategy – which in this case amounts to preserving the German – again urges visitors to fully adopt the prisoners' perspective: hearing a soldier shouting at you in a foreign language you do not necessarily understand, may create confusion and instill fear. The evil perpetrator, on the contrary, is linguistically kept at a distance.

5. THE SS OFFICE: THE SADISTIC SS

Upon exiting the first corridor, visitors can proceed into a small building located within the fort's courtyard. This is the former SS office where incoming prisoners were enrolled. No fewer than twelve audio tracks are suggested here, each corresponding to one of the SS members depicted in the enlarged photos. The left panel displays six German SS – four men, a woman, and a dog – while the right panel features six of the most notorious Flemish SS, who were locally recruited as guards. As with the audio segment at the camp entrance, the guide seeks to create distance between the listener and the perpetrator through a combined strategy of presenting disturbing psychological profiles and using a specific tone in the narrator's voice.

Each track begins with basic biographical details, including the age of the person depicted, their birthplace, affiliation with the Nazi party or the SS, arrival at Breendonk, role within the camp, and eventual trial and sentencing. This brief, factual overview is followed by a psychological profile intended to reveal the sadistic tendencies of these individuals, largely derived from testimonies given by former prisoners or by the SS members themselves during court proceedings. Numerous unsettling anecdotes are recounted. For instance, deputy commander Hans Kantschuster is reported to have 'pushed a prisoner into a boiling pan,' while Flemish guard Richard De Bodt is described by former

prisoner Jean Blum as ‘the most dangerous SS guard in the camp’ and ‘deeply sadistic.’ Fernand Wyss, another guard, presents himself as ‘motivated by the love of violence,’ with the audio guide noting that ‘at least sixteen Breendonk prisoners were beaten to death or murdered by him.’ Even the camp commandant’s wife, Ilse Birkholz, was not unknown to the prisoners: ‘She came to watch when they stood naked in line waiting for the showers or if they relieved themselves in the yard. She also, cake in hand, came to watch the starving prisoners doing hard labour.’ The narrator continues that ‘she did love animals and enjoyed horse riding.’ While historians acknowledge that little concrete evidence exists regarding Birkholz’s motivations or specific conduct in the camp,⁶⁰ the audio guide deliberately adds the cake detail and contrasts the woman’s affinity for animals with her treatment of human beings. Additionally, the inclusion of the commandant’s dog, Lump, in the list of ‘German perpetrators’ – he is said to have bitten a prisoner to death in the torture room – suggests a parallel between the behaviour of the Breendonk perpetrators and that of animals. This choice conforms to stereotypical portrayals of Nazi perpetrators as beasts and, in a way, may resonate with visitor expectations.⁶¹

The audio guide further increases the ethical distance between perpetrators and visitors through its tonal choices. Whenever the SS officers’ self-incriminating statements are included, they are delivered by the English voice actor in a particularly distinctive tone. Although these statements are translated, rather than being presented in their original German or Dutch as was the case in the shouted commands in the tunnel, the tone is clearly intended to convey the evil personality of the speaker.

Fort Breendonk on TripAdvisor

The spatial analysis of the visitor tour, which uncovered the semiotic potentialities of the exhibition design, will now be triangulated with a series of TripAdvisor reviews that provide a more comprehensive un-

⁶⁰ Van den Wijngaert et al., p. 24.

⁶¹ See Kjell Anderson ‘The Perpetrator Imaginary’, in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Erin Jessee and Kjell Anderson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23–48. (p. 26) where he remarks on the ‘beastialisation’ of perpetrators in artistic and literary representations; and Caroline Pearce ‘The Role of German Perpetrator Sites in Teaching and Confronting the Nazi Past’, in *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*, ed. by Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 168–177 (p. 248) where she reflects on visitor expectations being based on clichéd images of Nazis as sadistic killers and beasts.

derstanding of how international visitors effectively interact with the various multimodal elements that make up Fort Breendonk's tour. The focus on visitor response is consistent with the recent 'performance turn' in Tourist Studies, which focuses on practices, affect, and embodied actions, rather than on representations and given meanings. As Jonas Larsen and John Urry contend, tourism scholars now conceive of places as 'unstable and contingent enactments', emerging 'only when and as they are reproduced and contested through being used and performed in specific ways'.⁶²

The dataset was collected on 20 December 2023 to encompass the 200 most recently published TripAdvisor reviews, covering the period from October 2015 to November 2023. All reviews were gathered in their original, non-translated versions. We can reasonably assume that (almost) none of the reviews are related to school excursions, and that the majority of the visitors used the audio guide to navigate their way through the fort (explicitly mentioned in 87 cases). Alongside textual material, the collected data features site ratings and photographs taken by the tourists. In order to perform a qualitative content analysis, all reviews were manually coded in NVivo 14 software to identify recurrent themes and tropes related to the visitors' emotions and interaction with the fort's spatial components. Themes were later cross-referenced to unveil potential connections.

The detailed visitor descriptions of physical spaces, paths, and movements in Breendonk unmistakably accentuate the site's indexical and interactional qualities. The analysis shows that a significant majority of reviewers (142/200 or 71%) depict their visit as emotional, ranging from 'memorable' (54 reviews) to 'moving' or 'sad' (55), and 'chilling' or 'horrific' (54). Breendonk's atmospheric qualities are frequently mentioned: the military complex is perceived as a 'macabre' (026e)⁶³ 'gloomy' (032e), or 'lugubrious' (011f) place where 'emotion is palpable' (014e) and the mood 'special', 'unspeakable' even (005e, 015d, 074d, 193d, 171d, 180e).

62 Jonas Larsen and John Urry, 'Gazing and Performing', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29 (2001), 1112.

63 Reviews are numbered chronologically and labelled according to language: review 001 refers to the most recent review (November 2023) and 200 to the least recent one in the corpus (October 2015). Language labels are 'e' for English, 'f' for French, 'd' for Dutch, 's' for Spanish and 'i' for Italian. All English translations of foreign language review excerpts are mine. It is important to acknowledge that users select their preferred language for writing reviews, which may be their native tongue, an official language in their country of residence, or a lingua franca they feel comfortable using. Caution must therefore be exercised in drawing direct correlations between language use and nationality.

Specific areas in the fortress seem to have left a lasting impression, as they appear more frequently in reviews. Among them are the most evidently ‘bound’ places, such as the tunnels, which are reported to be cool or cold (15d, 122e), damp (45i, 81s), long and spooky (63d, 45i), or simply ‘impressive’ (42s). The confinement cells equally elicit strong emotional responses: ‘small and dark’, they leave the company of an Italian reviewer ‘oppressed by sadness’ (*oppressi dalla tristezza*, 009i). The way reviewers connect material aspects – dimensions, texture, and ambience – to a specific emotion showcases Breendonk’s ‘interactional’ potential. The torture chamber and execution ground are also described by several reviewers. Both sites are reported to be ‘truly poignant’ (045i), with the torture chamber ‘[sending] chills down our spines’ (041e) and leaving an indelible mark as ‘a sight I’ll never forget’ (079e).

It is noteworthy, in this regard, that many reviewers, while commenting on the state of the fortress, underline its ‘authenticity’, sometimes assuming that not a single intervention was made since the end of the Second World War. Of the 44 reviewers referring to the memorial’s fine state of preservation, 11 are under the impression that everything is ‘real’ (083d), ‘original’ (070d), kept ‘entirely intact’ (193d) ‘as it was during the war’ or ‘as the Germans left it’ (116e, 117f, 157s, 162d, 176e). The bunk beds and dormitory furnishings are explicitly mentioned (010d, 070d), while 2 reviewers are impressed by the execution area which ‘still has bullet holes and ropes’ (187e) and allegedly features the ‘original’ gallows and firing squad posts (169e).

Upon examination of the visual data collected, Breendonk’s entrance gate emerges as the most frequently photographed location, featuring 53 times in a total of 38 reviews. Acting as a pivotal transition point between outside and inside ‘the hell of Breendonk’, the gate has assumed emblematic significance for international tourists. Following closely behind is the execution ground as a popular spot for picture taking, appearing in 34 photographs. Subsequent locations capturing attention include the dormitories (24 photos) and the tunnels (21). Conversely, less frequented sites for photography include the latrines, the remembrance room, the workshops, the washbasins, the forced labour site, the courtyards, or the museum documenting the history of Breendonk at the end of the tour. A recurring pattern, akin to that found in the textual material, is the prevalence of highly ‘bound’ spaces (such as the tunnels), and areas that have been reconstructed yet are perceived as ‘authentic’ by tourists (such as the execution ground and dormitories).

The fortress's role as a gateway to the past, then, is underscored by visitors describing the sensation of being immersed in a past time and sinister universe (*immersive*, *plonger* [to plunge], *onderdempelen* [to submerge] in 014f, 017d, 030f, 101f, 115f, 174f, 194d); others indirectly convey how they feel 'transported' to the Nazi era (051d, 087s, 101f, 118s). It is suggested, akin to Sebald's novel, that the fortress somehow encapsulates the pain and suffering of its former prisoners, as one reviewer recalls 'how much pain transpired from those walls' (095e), while others evoke 'spaces saturated with pain and horror' (098f) and 'walls [that] practically ooze sadness and despair' (191e). The choice of words – *to transpire*, *saturate*, and *ooze* – suggests that the violent past has left a physical imprint.

As a result, the fort's indexical, testimonial qualities convert a visit into a traumatic re-enactment, as reviewers express a profound connection to the pain endured by historical prisoners. By navigating through the space and engaging with its texture, they build a body memory of the traumatic events that happened here. 'As soon as you walk across the moat road into hell', one visitor writes, 'you will feel the hardship and pain' (116e, see also 003f). Others confirm that the various areas of the fort make you feel and understand 'the suffering', 'the misery', and 'the fear' of the inmates (011f, 002d, 049d, 050d, 083d, 089f, 095e110d, 151f). 'One step inside and you feel this in your bones', a North American visitor reports (191e). It becomes evident that many visitors project their own experience of the space onto the former prisoners in an effort to envision 'what it must have been like' (008e, 026e 083d, 137d, 174d). Significantly, 3 reviewers reflect on how the cold they experienced in the fortress must have affected the victims at the time: 'I would recommend [...] to bring a sweater as it is cold inside, although with what the prisoners went through there, it seems like such a petty thing to suggest' (122e, see also 032e, 081e).

In sum, the examination of Tripadvisor reviews offers a valuable lens for probing the nuanced ways in which Fort Breendonk resonates with international visitors. Overall, they corroborate that curatorial interventions emphasising the boundness or authenticity of key areas in the fort indeed result in an emotional, immersive experience that turns visitors into 'co-owners of the traumatic event'.⁶⁴ As such, Fort Breendonk serves as an illustration of the prevalent trend among contemporary memorial museums to offer 'experientially oriented en-

64 Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 57.

counters',⁶⁵ urging tourists to live imaginatively through the experiences of historical victims. By making use of architectural or scenographic elements, these institutions ask visitors to 'identify with other people's pain, adopt their memories, empathise with their suffering, reenact and work through their traumas'.⁶⁶ The resulting 'empathic unsettlement'⁶⁷ is seen as instructive, promoting pro-social behaviour, and motivating visitors to aid in the prevention of future atrocities.

Notably, 25% of the visitors explicitly reflect on their visit as a reminder of the hardships endured by the prisoners, describing their stories as 'inspirational' (108e) and their actions as 'heroic', emphasising that they were undertaken 'to secure our freedom' (001e, 110d, 168f). Only 13,5% of the visitors mention perpetrators when they summarise the lesson of their experience. In these cases, they recall the 'barbarity' or 'cruelty' of the SS guards, with some (16 reviews) extending the lesson to a broader contemplation of humanity's potential for inflicting 'evil' on fellow humans: 'the monster is man' (035f), or 'how evil can a man be?' (195d). These reflections often accompany expressions of incomprehension, such as 'how is it possible that men have been capable of doing such things?' (178d)

It must be noted that there is a striking uniformity, both in terms of structure and content, across individual TripAdvisor reviews originating from geographically disparate locations. Despite the profound emotional impact of the Breendonk tour, a substantial number of visitors expresses appreciation for the valuable 'lessons' learnt and frames the visit as ethically meaningful. The overwhelmingly positive rating – averaging 4.65 on a 5-point scale, with only slight variation across scores – underlines the perceived significance of the visit, viewed as a symbolic gesture and a moral obligation of 'dutiful exposure'.⁶⁸ Out of 200 reviewers, 49 highly recommend visiting Breendonk, while an impressive 77 deem the fort an absolute 'must see'. Visitors consistently underscore the importance of remembrance ('never forget' is advocated in 22 reviews) and prevention (calls for 'never again' expressed in 30 reviews).

65 Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 1.

66 Ibid.; see also Violi, 44; or Sophie Oliver, 'The Aesth-ethics of Empathy: Bakhtin and the Return to Self as Ethical Act', in *Empathy and its Limits*, ed. by Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 166-186.

67 Dominic LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 78.

68 Rachel Hughes, 'Dutiful Tourism: Encountering the Cambodian Genocide', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 49 (2008), 328.

The trend towards homogenisation can be partially attributed to the specific dynamics of the TripAdvisor platform. Reviews often exhibit a degree of self-referentiality or circularity, as prospective visitors frequently consult existing reviews prior to crafting their own, thereby framing their perception of the site and influencing the topics discussed.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, our findings are consistent with the sole existing study on Breendonk visitor responses conducted to date, which is based on a questionnaire survey of 101 participants. This study revealed that nearly all of the respondents (98–99%) acknowledge the duty to remember and emphasise the importance of educating future generations about the dangers of extremism.⁷⁰

Conclusion

A spatial-semiotic analysis of Fort Breendonk's visitor tour and audio guide, triangulated with an empirical enquiry into user interactions with spatial and material features on site, indicates that this memorial museum is designed and experienced as a powerful immersion into the past. However, notwithstanding the evident success of the museum in appealing to our shared humanity and in forging profound, emphatic connections between contemporary visitors and historical prisoners, the exhibition does have three notable shortcomings. The first pertains to what I call ethical curatorship, the second involves the immersive experience, and the third concerns the victim-centred approach. Each of these aspects, I argue, affects the tour's ability to fulfil one of the memorial's educational missions – to inspire critical citizenship.

Firstly, the spatial-discursive analysis revealed a series of authenticity effects achieved through restoration of areas to their pre-Liberation state (main corridor and fresco) and the introduction of historical artefacts or replicas in other instances (dormitories, torture chamber, and execution ground). None of these interventions are acknowledged on-site or in the audio guide, and TripAdvisor reviews suggest that they go largely unnoticed. The consistent portrayal of the fort as a direct, unmediated, and, therefore, unquestioned gateway to the past is problematic because it obscures the process of research, selection, re-presenta-

69 Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Timothy Williams, 'A 5* Destination: the Creation of New Transnational Moral Spaces of Remembrance on TripAdvisor', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 35 (2020), p. 228.

70 Marielle Bruyninckx, Dimitri Cauchie and Marijke Demoustiez, 'Ethical Education and the Duty to Remember: Emotional Experiences of Visitors to Breendonk', in *INTED2021 Proceedings* (Hainaut: University of Mons, 2021), p. 3838.

tion, and re-semiotisation inherent in all exhibition work – or, indeed, in broader memorial initiatives.⁷¹ Particularly concerning are objects likely to provoke visceral reactions, such as the torture instruments. They warrant a more careful framing in order to raise awareness of curatorial choices, but also to prompt reflection on the history of these artefacts and the various ways in which we can respond to them today.⁷² As noted in the TripAdvisor reviews, the immersive approach and concurrent lack of self-reflexivity about representation and conservation strategies hinder many visitors from distancing themselves and critically evaluating the exhibition's components; instead, spaces and artefacts are perceived as authentic and neutral 'evidence'.

My second point addresses the role of empathy and vicarious witnessing in achieving the museum's educational goal, which consists of nurturing a generation of citizens that can lever their understanding of Breendonk's history to intervene in contemporary situations of injustice. While it is widely recognised, particularly among Holocaust scholars, that exhibition designs aimed at eliciting emotion and creating 'charged' spaces have indeed the potential to induce a 'crisis of witnessing' in visitors, urging them 'to be performative',⁷³ Gary Weissman has rightly observed that the practice of vicarious witnessing neither 'requires nor guarantees much in the way of historical and moral comprehension'.⁷⁴ Similarly, Christophe Busch has argued that merely looking at (pictures of) atrocities does not automatically foster a critical understanding of the mechanisms underlying collective violence.⁷⁵ To encourage active social or political engagement from museum visitors, it is essential to couple 'affect and thought'.⁷⁶ The challenge for Fort Breendonk, therefore, lies in its approach, which presently relocates visitors in a frozen past, intensifying emotions like pain, suffering, and fear, without necessarily engaging their cognitive faculties. The scarcity of information panels and the choice of a realistic, quasi-mimetic representation strategy, barely counterbalanced by distancing tech-

71 Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics', in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), p. 4.

72 See Popescu, p. 227.

73 Felman and Laub, p. 53

74 Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 210.

75 Busch, p. 160.

76 Simon I. Roger, *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 200. See also Jaeger, p. 30.

niques, may increase the potential for empathic unsettlement, but it falls short of equipping visitors with the means to discern the intricate mechanisms underpinning structural state violence, let alone identify them in contemporary situations.⁷⁷ The duty to remember alone does not ensure a future free from injustice.

What further complicates the educational setting in Breendonk is the victim-focused approach, which urges visitors to identify with the camp prisoners while distancing themselves from the sadistic SS guards and officers. This emphasis on the victim's perspective is characteristic of what Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider describe as the prevailing 'cosmopolitan memory mode',⁷⁸ a framework that emerged from the transnationalisation of memory discourse and the development of a global human rights movement after 1989. Scholars investigating recent visitor responses in 'dark' tourist destinations have identified a global 'script'⁷⁹ that governs on-site tourist behaviour and post-visit interpretations, rooted in this cosmopolitan repertoire. The script positions individual tourists within a 'transnational moral order'⁸⁰ where they can empathise with historical victims and thereby affirm themselves as 'morally upright members of the community'.⁸¹ As a result, visits to dark sites often serve as 'a social tool' to delineate us/the good from them/the bad.⁸² The TripAdvisor reviews of Fort Breendonk reveal a similar script in action, spurred by the portrayal of 'good' victims and 'evil' perpetrators on-site.

However, the cosmopolitan framework has been criticised for oversimplifying historical events in ways that 'hamper a critical understanding of their complexity' and for failing to prevent new instances of fascism and racist violence.⁸³ There is a growing call these days to

77 A markedly distinct approach is adopted at Kaserne Dossin, the Holocaust and Human Rights Museum in Mechelen, Belgium. See Philippe Mesnard and Anneleen Spiessens, 'Interview with Herman Van Goethem (Kaserne Dossin): "Clearly, this Museum Constitutes a Work of Collective Memory"', *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, 120 (2015), 34-41.

78 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, 'Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5.1 (2002), 87-106.

79 Buckley-Zistel and Williams, p. 223.

80 Ibid.

81 Annalisa Bolin, 'On the Side of Light: Performing Morality at Rwanda's Genocide Memorials', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology*, 7 (2012), 204.

82 Gila Oren, Shani Amir and Yaniv Poria, 'Dialectical Emotions in a Dark Heritage site: A Study at the Auschwitz Death Camp', *Tourism Management*, 82 (2021), 1-10.

83 Anna Cento Bull, and Hans Lauge Hansen, 'On Agonistic Memory', *Memory Studies*, 9.4 (2016), 395; Valentina Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right*, trans. by Alastair McEwen (New York, NY: CPL Editions, 2020).

recognise a broader spectrum of possible actions during crises, including a nuanced portrayal of perpetrators that could ‘shake visitors out of a distancing, event complacent idea about the past’,⁸⁴ and to incorporate the grey zones of human behaviour, including ‘complicity’⁸⁵ or ‘implication’.⁸⁶ In an effort to balance its binary victim/perpetrator scenography, Fort Breendonk devotes one museum room to ‘bystanders’ and ‘witnesses’, including figures such as the contractor responsible for construction in the camp and the mayor of Breendonk. The impact is questionable, as both the accompanying text panels and audio tracks are rather succinct and extremely factual and presented only at the conclusion of the tour, after visitors have already navigated the camp’s most emotionally charged victim spaces. Considered in this light, Fort Breendonk’s primary representational strategies, with a strong emphasis on immersion, emotion, and empathy with the prisoners, risk foreclosing a deeper exploration of the multifaceted nature and multiple actors of the violence that the fortress bears witness to, and potentially undermines the memorial’s educational goals. Indeed, it risks leaving visitors to wonder, ‘how is it possible?’

84 Susanne C. Knittel, *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York, NY: Fordham University, 2015), p. 168; see also Caroline Pearce, ‘The Role of German Perpetrator Sites in Teaching and Confronting the Nazi Past’, in *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*, ed. By Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 168–177.

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

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

Works Cited

- Améry, Jean, *At the Mind’s Limit: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986)
- Anderson, Kjell, ‘The Perpetrator Imaginary’, in *Researching Perpetrators of Genocide*, ed. by Kjell Anderson and Erin Jessee (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 23–48
- Anderson, Michelle E., ‘Perpetrator Trauma, Empathic Unsettling, and the Uncanny: Conceptualizations of Perpetrators in South Africa’s Truth Commission Special Report’, *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.1 (2018), 95–118
- Arnold-de Simine, Silke, *Mediating Memory in the Museum: Trauma, Empathy, Nostalgia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

- Assmann, Aleida, 'Das Gedächtnis der Orte', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 68 (1994), 17–35
- Assmann, Jan, 'Communicative and Cultural Memory', in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 109–118
- Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995)
- Benvindo, Bruno, 'Les autorités du passé. mémoires (in)disciplinées du camp de Breendonk, 1944-2010', *Journal of Belgian History*, 42 (2012), 48–77
- Beyers, Herbart, 'De missie van het Nationaal Gedenkteken Fort van Breendonk', *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, 132 (2021), 132–33
- Bolin, Annalisa, 'On the Side of Light: Performing Morality at Rwanda's Genocide Memorials', *Journal of Conflict Archaeology*, 7 (2012), 199–207
- 'Breendonk Memorial home page', *Breendonk Memorial*, n.d., <<https://breendonk.be/en>> [accessed 6 November 2023]
- Bruyninckx, Marielle, Dimitri Cauchie, and Marijke Demoustiez, 'Ethical Education and the Duty to Remember: Emotional Experiences of Visitors to Breendonk', in *INTED2021 Proceedings* (University of Mons, 2021), 3834–41
- Buch, Pierre, Ronald Linthout, and Frans Selleslagh, *Breendonk: Les débuts...* (Brussel: CEGESOMA, 1997)
- Buckley-Zistel, Susanne, and Timothy Williams, 'A 5* Destination: the Creation of New Transnational Moral Spaces of Remembrance on TripAdvisor', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 35 (2020), 221–38
- Bull, Anna Cento, and Hans Lauge Hansen, 'On Agonistic Memory', *Memory Studies*, 9.4 (2016), 390–404
- Busch, Christophe, 'Looking without Seeing: Visual Literacy in Light of Holocaust Photography', *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, 15.1 (2023), 147–65
- Culler, Jonathan, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988)
- Dean, David, *Museum Exhibition: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1996)
- Deem, James M., *The Prisoners of Breendonk: Personal Histories from a World War II Concentration Camp* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015)
- 'Educatief aanbod: Inleiding', *Breendonk Memorial*, n.d. <<https://fortbreendonk.be/nl/educatief-aanbod-inleiding>> [accessed 18 December 2023]
- Erll, Astrid, and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction: Cultural Memory and its Dynamics', in *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), pp. 1–13
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992)
- Fort van Breendonk* (Raad van Beheer van het Nationaal Gedenkteken van het Fort van Breendonk, 1983)

- Hennes, Tom, 'Exhibitions: From a perspective of encounter', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 53.1(2010), 21–33
- Hiroux, Dries 'Lid van rechtse groep die Hitlergroet bracht veroordeeld tot 6 maanden cel met uitstel', *vrtnws*, 2 June 2021, <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2021/06/02/breendonk-veroordeling>> [accessed 2 September 2024]
- Hughes, Rachel, 'Dutiful Tourism: Encountering the Cambodian Genocide', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 49.3 (2008), 318–30
- Jaeger, Stephan, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From Narrative, Memory, and Experience to Experientiality* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020)
- Jirku, Brigitte E., and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca, 'Mapping Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence', in *Geographies of Perpetration: Re-Signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence*, ed. by Brigitte E. Jirku and Vicente Sánchez-Biosca (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021), 7–20
- Jorissen, Tine. 'Breendonk: het Fort. De wording van een memoriaal voor de mensenrechten', in *België: een parcours van herinnering*, ed. by Jo Tolleboek and others (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008), pp. 220–233
- Knittel, Susanne C., *The Historical Uncanny: Disability, Ethnicity, and the Politics of Holocaust Memory* (New York, NY: Fordham University, 2015)
- Koppermann, Ulrike, 'Challenging the Perpetrators' Narrative: A Critical Reading of the Photo Album "Resettlement of the Jews from Hungary"', *Journal of Perpetrator Research*, 2.2 (2019), 101–29
- LaCapra, Dominic, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2001)
- Larsen, Jonas, and John Urry, "Gazing and Performing", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 29.6 (2001) 1110–25
- Levy, Daniel, and Natan Sznajder, 'Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5.1 (2002), 87–106
- Mesnard, Philippe and Anneleen Spiessens, 'Interview with Herman Van Goethem (Kazerne Dossin): "Clearly, this Museum Constitutes a Work of Collective Memory"', *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, 120 (2015), 34–41
- Moreau, Patrick, *Systematiek en willekeur: Het verhaal van de politieke gevangenen uit het arrondissement Mechelen* (Berchem: EPO, 2004)
- Neather, Robert, 'Translation, memory, and the museum visitor', in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Memory*, ed. by Sharon Deane-Cox and Anneleen Spiessens (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 155–169
- Nefors, Patrick. 'Audio Guide for the Breendonk Memorial (English version)', *Nationaal Gedenkteken van het Fort van Breendonk* (2004)
- , *Breendonk 1940–1945: de geschiedenis* (Antwerpen: Standaard, 2004)
- Nora, Pierre, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–24

- Oliver, Sophie, 'The Aesth-ethics of Empathy: Bakhtin and the Return to Self as Ethical Act', in *Empathy and Its Limits*, ed. by Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 166–186
- Oren, Gila, Shani Amir and Yaniv Poria, 'Dialectical Emotions in a Dark Heritage Site: A Study at the Auschwitz Death Camp', *Tourism Management*, 82 (2021), 1–10
- Packer, Jan, and Roy Ballantyne, 'Conceptualizing the Visitor Experience: A Review of Literature and Development of a Multifaceted Model', *Visitor Studies*, 19.2 (2016): 128–43
- Pearce, Caroline, 'The Role of German Perpetrator Sites in Teaching and Confronting the Nazi Past', in *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*, ed. by Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 168–177
- Pisanty, Valentina, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right*, trans. by Alastair McEwen (New York, NY: CPL Editions, 2020)
- Popescu, Diana I., 'The Potency of Design in Holocaust Exhibitions. A Case Study of The Imperial War Museum's Holocaust Exhibition (2000)', *Museum and Society*, 18.2 (2020), 218–42
- Ravelli, Louise, *Museum Texts: Communication Frameworks* (London: Routledge, 2006)
- and Robert McMurtrie, *Multimodality in the Built Environment: Spatial Discourse Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2016)
- Roden, Dimitri, 'Het Auffanglager Breendonk 1940-1944', *Sporen van herinnering*, 25 (2017), 4–8
- Roger, Simon I., *A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014)
- Rothberg, Michael, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019)
- Sanyal, Debarati, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2015)
- Schmitt, Bernd H., *Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to Sense, Feel, Think, Act, Relate to Your Company And Brands* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1999)
- Sebald, Winfried G., *Austerlitz* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001)
- Silverman, Lois H., 'Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 38.3 (1995), 161–70
- Sodaro, Amy, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018)
- Struys, Bruno, 'Extremrechtse groep brengt Hitlergroet in nazikamp Breendonk', *De Morgen*, 23 November 2019, <<https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/extremrechtse-groep-brengt-hitlergroet-in-nazikamp-breendonk-waar-honderden-mensen-het-leven-lieten-b794f11a/>> [accessed 02 September 2024]
- Violi, Patrizia, 'Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 29.1 (2012), 36–75

- Weissman, Gary, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004)
- Wijngaert, Marc Van den, Patrick Nefors, Dimitri Roden, Tine Jorissen, and Olivier Van der Wilt, *Beulen van Breendonk: Schuld en Boete* (Antwerpen: Davidsfonds, 2019)
- Winter, Jay, 'Sites of memory', in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. by Susanah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 312–324

Anneleen Spiessens is an Associate Professor at Ghent University and is affiliated with the Department of Translation, Interpreting, and Communication.