Dark Tourism: a new moral peril?

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On the outskirts of Vilnius is a packaged reminder of Lithuania’s repressed era under the former Soviet regime. 1984: The Survival Drama is one of many visitor sites littered throughout the Baltic states, whereby the brutality of a totalitarian political system is (re)presented for contemporary touristic consumption. This attraction, where the macabre is marketed, is part of a wider dark tourism phenomenon, where tourists specifically visit sites of death and disaster. Examples include Ground Zero, Chernobyl, the Killing Fields, and Pearl Harbour. But dark tourism has a long history, ranging from the Roman gladiatorial games, to public medieval executions, to guided morgue tours of Victorian England. Today, however, dark tourism in general and this Lithuanian attraction in particular, raises moral dilemmas by interpreting and selling a disturbing past. Specific dilemmas revolve around whether it is right for tourists to gaze upon death, pain and suffering, and whether it is just to exploit tragic history for either political or commercial gain. The answer, of course, is down to moral relativism and ethics of the individual; but for me, dark tourism has a potentially positive role to play in how people, in a largely secular society, can confront and contemplate death and tragedy, and address moral concerns of how particular deaths and tragic events have occurred. Dark tourism can provide a useful social space in which individuals can extract meaning about a particular tragic event, be educated about how and why it occurred, and judge for themselves as to what implications it may have for their own lives and wider community.

In the case of the 1984 visitor attraction, it too offers a new social space, and it is perhaps unsurprising that this former KGB interrogation centre shares it name with George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty Four, a prophetic novel of a totalitarian regime and surveillance society. Whilst this became reality in the former Soviet Union, the Orwellian prediction that “there will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life,” is somewhat unfounded with the ‘new’ 1984 visitor experience. Tourists are actively encouraged to be curious about the ‘process of life’ as they enter a pseudo ‘traumascape’ of repression and authoritarianism. However, questions must be asked about the authenticity of this visitor experience. In reality, under the Soviet regime, individuals
were murdered, tortured or isolated for holding particular political and cultural beliefs. Of course, a tourist attraction can never replicate that emotion and level of pain and torment, but it can represent reality with thoughtful and accurate interpretation. That said, several Lithuanians who lived under the former Soviet regime have added their own narrative and experience to the 1984 attraction, and as a result, it is as real as the ‘paying visitor’ will tolerate. However, with an apparent selective recall of the Communist era, some Lithuanians at least may reflect upon their past as a time of self-assurance and social cohesion. The danger of this is to negate the rancorous lessons of totalitarianism and romanticize history, air-brushing out the persecution which brought suffering to so many lives. What the ‘1984 visitor experience’ therefore does is to contextualize brutal events of a Communist past for the present-day individual, providing them with a place to reflect and to be educated in an entertainment environment. For this reason, dark tourism offers new spaces to present and debate tragic history, and these new spaces of ‘edutainment’ can inform individuals and offer them ethical guidance for the future. Though, the moral peril, of course, is how dark tourism sites interpret periods of tragic history, and subsequent meanings that individual tourists may take. Ultimately, 1984: The Survival Drama, like all dark tourism attractions, will need to balance accurate interpretation with perceptions of exploiting dark history.

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THIS ARTICLE WAS WRITTEN BY PHILIP STONE FOR THE GUARDIAN NEWSPAPER (UK), AUGUST, 2008.