

Kathryn Agnes Huether, “Guiding or Obscuring? Visitor Engagement with Treblinka’s Audio Guide and Its Sonic Infrastructure,” in *Understanding Visitor Experience at Holocaust Museums and Memorial Sites*, ed. Diana Popescu (Oxfordshire, England: Routledge, December 2022).

Orcid ID: 000-0002-9328-908X

Abstract: Unlike the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Site, the Treblinka Extermination Camp Memorial Site in Poland lacks its original infrastructure. Destroyed by the Nazis in 1943, the site offers no physical indicators of its history. Prior to the summer of 2018, visitors experienced Treblinka solely in its temporality. The site now offers an audio guide that directs visitors via the free mobile phone application, “AudioTrip.” With headphones, visitors are guided through the memorial site with commentary on fifteen points that are interspersed with readings of survivor memoirs and coupled with ‘dark’ musical addenda. While the audio guide provides historical context that is otherwise lacking, its theatrics detract from critical visitor engagement. This chapter examines the Treblinka audio guide specifically for its sonic qualities and their resulting visitor impact and argues that the musical motifs and sonic elements curate a normalized and monolithic understanding of Treblinka, one that reflects “holo-kitsch,” and challenges the possibility of critical visitor engagement.

Keywords: Soundscapes, Treblinka, Audio Guides, Curation

Introduction

What can one see at Treblinka today? Unlike other infamous sites of Nazi crimes, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka’s original infrastructure no longer remains; destroyed by its own architects in 1944. Sites like Treblinka confront Holocaust memory and engagement with, as Holocaust scholar Daniel Reynolds refers to it, “what has been erased,” no longer hosting an infrastructure of genocide, marked by a memorial (Reynolds, 2018: 87). Visitors to the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial museum site can see material evidence as they walk amongst the original barracks that now host exhibits displaying objects taken from prisoners and victims—suitcases, shoes, eyeglasses, and even human hair— and are strongly encouraged to engage a guide-educator to direct them through the site. Visitors to Treblinka, in contrast, are confronted

with the difficulties of navigating the memorial on their own, limited by the few informational placards and a small museum. Guided, in-person tours at Treblinka are rare, not accessible on-site, and must be arranged in advance. Thus, while visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau often leave inundated with information regarding the site's history, such historical context is frequently lacking after visits to Treblinka.

A non-profit Polish/Israeli organization, "The Memory of Treblinka Foundation," took over the site's preservation and museum responsibilities in 2016. The Foundation's primary objectives were two-fold: to strengthen visitor awareness of Treblinka, and to increase historical knowledge reception at Treblinka. With this agenda in mind, the Foundation inaugurated a Treblinka memorial website, initiated changes and updates to the memorial site's museum, and, to account for the lack of on-site guided tours, produced and curated an audio guide that visitors could download and listen to on their cellular phones. The audio guide's lead curator, Agnieszka Haska, wrote that the "Foundation wanted to create an historical guide for tourists coming to Treblinka, as the percentage of individual tourists is rising, yet the educational infrastructure remains quite poor" (Haska, 2019). The Treblinka audio guide was designed with the hope that even if visitors came to the site with no prior knowledge, they would come with their phones.

At the beginning of the forest pathway leading to the site, visitors are greeted with a placard hosting a QR code and instructions to download the "AudioTrip" phone application. "AudioTrip" operates by GPS and guides one along a designated route, providing narrative at selected points throughout one's visit. The app can also be operated manually, allowing a visitor to choose what point they are at, or to listen out of order. AudioTrip provides a highly shared, yet individual tour guide experience right from one's phone. While the listener hears the same story during the guided tour, each listener's engagement with the guide is separate and private as the tour is received from behind the enclosed auditory space of one's headphones.

Since the soundworld—the curated sonic compilation of the narrative, including the musical motifs, narrator's voice, and additional sound effects—created by the audio guide is among the most intriguing elements of this work, this chapter will focus on its *sonic* elements. In so doing, I argue that the Treblinka audio guide disconnects the visitor from the site itself and supplies the listener not with history or performative art, as other audio guides have been described - but offers a sonic form of "holo-kitsch" (or "Holocaust fatigue) and a normalised

soundworld of trauma (Schulte, 2020: 3). I begin with a brief discussion on Treblinka memorial site's development and function, and on the broader tendencies towards "normalisation" within Holocaust memory. I then provide a close analysis of the audio guide and its fourteen points whilst engaging in a critique of the audio guide's soundworld as juxtaposed to Treblinka's ambient soundscape – the living, real-world sounds of the site. In my analysis, I highlight two distinct instances – (1) the musical underscoring; and (2) the vocal dubbing and the narrator's voice – that contribute to a monolithic and standardised (i.e. normalised) curation of Treblinka and thus of Holocaust memory. I focus on the audio guide's content to illuminate the practical difficulties that emerge in creating an audio guide generally, and the ethical implications of creating and mediating an audio guide for a site of Holocaust memory specifically. I draw on my own ethnographic observations, interviews, and surveys of the audio guide to assess Treblinka visitors' site engagement through the sonic lens of the audio guide.

History and Context—Treblinka

Visitors to Treblinka begin their experience at the edge of a gravel parking lot on the northern edge of the memorial. A forest pathway leads towards the larger clearing that was once the site of Treblinka II—the killing centre that hosted gas chambers and prisoner arrival points.

Treblinka II is one of the three killing centres built by the Nazis as part of *Aktion Reinhardt* between 1941-1943. Bełżec, Sobibör, and Treblinka were selected with care, chosen for their proximity to a railway, small town, and a forested area; these were sites for mass murder that were intended for impermanence, built quickly, and destroyed even faster. A forced labour camp was established at Treblinka in 1941, and Treblinka's killing centre was the last of the three *Aktion Reinhardt* camps to be built in 1942. Between 700,000 and 900,000 Jews and approximately 2,000 Roma were murdered in the fifteen months of its operation (Arad, 2018: 119-126). The Treblinka death machine worked around the clock with as many as 10,000 victims in one day. Of the 400,000 Jews of the Warsaw ghetto, 250,000 lost their lives at Treblinka.

The enormity of Treblinka's past can be difficult to grasp for visitors to the site who want to learn and engage critically with the site's material history. The site was transformed into a memorial landscape designed in 1955 by artists Adam Haupt, Franciszek Duszeńko, and Franciszek Strynkiewics, and, as described by the memorial's website, aiming to commemorate

and memorialise the victims (2019). A paved pathway leads visitors from the forest pathway through the memorial. Parallel to the first section of the pathway there are concrete slabs that signify the train tracks that brought the victims to their deaths. The south-eastern section of the clearing hosts a sea of 17,000 memorial stones of different sizes, that abstractly resemble a Jewish cemetery - matzevot - positioned around a central and defining granite monolith which stands as a “symbolic tomb for all those who died there.”



Figure 1: Treblinka Monolith and Matzevot, November 21, 2019 (Image by Author)

Behind the monolith lies yet another memorial structure that demarcates the crematorium with its hallowed rectangular structure filled with black basalt.

It was not until 1983 that the memorial was equipped with historical information and a small museum, The Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom in Treblinka. Informational placards, positioned throughout the memorial site, provided historical context that related to the memorial structure and to the original infrastructure of the site. It, for instance, mentioned Nazi's use of railway cars, the selection and arrival process, and offered some information about the crematoria. This information was confined to a small placard and included more than four paragraphs for each point. The restructuring of Treblinka as a memorial site made it difficult to also position it as a site of education and information, a challenge which The Memory of

Treblinka Foundation attempted to grapple with when they took over the site in 2016. The audio guide they developed seeks to address this challenge.

“Holo-Kitsch” and Normalising the Holocaust

History is determined both by the event and by its representation. How it is received by subsequent generations results from its curative shaping, described by Yosef Yerushalmi, as determined “not at the historian’s anvil, but in the novelist’s crucible” (Yersushalmi, 1982: 98). A scholar’s role in history is crucial; yet, public engagement with history is more broadly ascribed by the films, TV shows, artworks, and novels of the culture industry. The aesthetics of these products – the colouring, satirizing, musical underscoring – define the historical subjects portrayed, often sacrificing historicity for normalised entertainment.

The Holocaust is no exception. In the decades since, there are numerous debates centred on how, and even if, the Holocaust should be represented. The immediate aftermath saw a focus on the *if*, affiliating the Holocaust with the rhetoric of ineffability and incomprehensibility (Cohen, 1981; Eckhardt, 1980; Fackenheim, 1988; Jäckel, 1988; Sanbonmatsu, 2009); however, in the last twenty years we’ve witnessed a dynamic shift from *if* to *how*, and the ethics of mediating and aestheticizing the Holocaust, resulting in scholarly and public endorsements of ‘acceptable’ forms of Holocaust representation – two veins of thought that often, yet not always, align (Lang, 2000: 18; Mandel, 2001; Rothberg, 2000). From these endorsements emerged a “Holocaust canon”, a compilation of Holocaust representations that share similar moral and ethical messages and aesthetic approaches (colouring schemes, survivor testimonies, and musical underscoring, etc.). This canon reflects forms of “Holo-kitsch” and normalisation.

The term “Holo-kitsch” was first employed by artist Art Spiegelman, author of *Maus* the first Holocaust comic (and first comic to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize). Spiegelman aimed to outline what he *didn’t* want his Holocaust art to be, citing Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* as a prime example. “Holo-kitsch” to Spiegelman, was Holocaust representation that one could easily identify with, depictions that were “patronizing, false to history, and sadly, false to human nature” (Billen, 2003). Holo-kitsch draws from a normalising tendency, which, as described by Holocaust scholar Gavriel Rosenfeld, “at its most abstract level, it entails the replacement of difference with similarity ... a process through which a specific historical legacy comes to be viewed like any other” (Rosenfeld, 2015: 7).

The Audio Guide – Overview

Audio guides, or audio walks are ubiquitous at sites of Holocaust memory, albeit in variegated forms. There are several examples of audio guides designed to be experienced on sites of erasure such as Treblinka. The Gusen concentration camp site in upper Austria curated an audio walk, *The Invisible Camp*, described as a “performative engagement with history” (Schult, 2020: 13). The audio walk’s curator, artist Christoph Mayer created a “collage” of memory, bringing together more than 30 voices of survivors and perpetrators, a narrator, and musical elements. In a different vein, members of Kraków’s “Festival” in 2019 designed an audio “walk” of the Plaszów concentration camp in Kraków that could be experienced from home during the COVID-19 pandemic (“ALT Tours,” 2020). The tour was a live stream of an actual tour taking place in Plaszów where the guide described the features of the site, played excerpts of recorded survivor testimonies, and of musical motifs during longer walking intervals.

The Treblinka audio guide is a combination of these examples. It features a central narrative voice, survivor testimonies, musical motifs, and additional sonic elements. Nonetheless, the Treblinka audio guide lacks the sonic nuances of the Gusen and Plaszów audio guides. With headphones over their ears, visitors transcend the temporal reality of the Treblinka memorial site as the audio guide constructs a soundworld about Treblinka’s infamous past, its material history reimaged and thematised, a process of curating that I illuminate in my analysis of two distinct instances (1) musical underscoring; and (2) vocal dubbing and narrative voice.

The English version of the audio guide’s content is narrated by one male voice and is composed of historical information and excerpts from nine survivor testimonies and memoirs. While the audio guide is also available in Hebrew and Polish, this study is dedicated solely to the English reception. The narration is underscored with musical segments and other sonic elements. These include chimes, solo piano lines, a gong, train whistles, discordant strings, and a prosthetic recreation of the forest’s ambient soundscape. All these sonic elements accompany the introduction and the subsequent fourteen guided stops associated with the memorial site at Treblinka II. At each stop, the audio guides provide general background information and includes survivor testimonies and site-specific history. The guide includes the following stops: Introduction; Site Map (1); Cornerstone (2); The Symbolic Gate (3); Camp Well (4); Tracks

Branch Off (5); Map of the Camp (6); Loading Platform (7); Store Houses (8); Memorial Stones (9); Monument (10); Infirmary (11); Grate (12); Edge of Camp (13); and Clearing (14).

The app directs visitors through the site of mass murder, prompted (if you were using cellular data) by GPS to move on to the next segment, each stop is introduced by an eerie, almost ghostly musical accompaniment –a short, discordant musical segment described in musical terms as a series of minor seconds and chromaticism, and in non-musical terms as spooky or eerie, haunting –before transitioning to the spoken narrative for that specific stop. In addition to the spoken narrative are musical additions that emotively heighten the gravity of the historical information and of the survivors’ testimonies.

Theatrical musical underscoring can dramatically alter how the public receives a film about the Holocaust. In the case of *Schindler’s List*, the non-diegetic sound and music were used almost exclusively for the Jewish victims, while the diegetic operated in a more perverse way and morally framed the Nazi perpetrators. Musical underscoring and accompaniment for audio guides operates in a similar, yet less nuanced, fashion. Upon first listen, the musical underscoring is repetitive and predominantly used to reinforce the narrator’s vocal inflections. Paweł Sawicki, the Memory of Treblinka Foundation’s chair, explained the primary focus for the musical underscoring:

When we created this guide our most important concern was the text and the general message. Music was of course good support. We wanted to show the fate of innocent people sent for their death without any rational reason and reduce to the minimum [any] description of the perpetrators. We wanted to talk about the victims. Message was very strong. Music was chosen rather to calm people. Definitely we didn’t want to play with emotions (Sawicki, 2019).

Unfortunately, Sawicki’s hope that the musical underscoring would not “play with emotions” was not the case (as revealed by visitor reactions to the guide), and the desire to both support the victims and their memory while also simultaneously providing a “calming” effect emerges as sonic conflict within the audio guide. Sonically speaking, the Treblinka audio guide follows this process of normalisation with its musical underscoring, which is no different than Hollywood dramas dedicated to trauma and horror, yet dramas whose subjects are completely fictional, or historically far removed from the Holocaust. Behind the headphones, the existing

sound marks of the Treblinka's ambient soundscape is dulled, if not completely diminished: the chirping birds blocked out, the buzz of insects muted, the soft breeze of the rustling leaves silenced. The audio guide's script fills the void of absent information at the site, but with implications.

The Audio Guide: Analysis

Musical underscoring

'Extermination Camp, Treblinka Two.' These are the first words listeners hear after downloading the Treblinka audio guide. The voice of the male narrator introduces the site, being followed by a melancholic solo piano triad and a gust of wind. After the musical introduction, the narrator's voice begins again:

Places laden with memories should not remain silent. Listen to their voices. Listen to the story of the Holocaust as told by the survivors and witnesses, as told in the words of writers and historians who try to ensure that the truth is not forgotten. [...] Please use headphones to listen to the recording so as not to interrupt the silence and disturb other visitors to this unique place of memory.¹

The solo piano and sounds of wind return, this time joined by recordings of rustling leaves and chirping birds. This musical section plays in a continuous loop as the listener follows the forest path to the clearing that hosts the memorial structure. As visitors move from one stop to the next, they are accompanied by the continuous piano line in tandem with the prosthetic forest soundscape.

When the visitor reaches the memorial entrance, at the stop called *Site Map (1)*, the audio guide sonically announced it with a gong strike. *Site Map (1)* presents the site's history prior to its transformation into an *Operation Reinhard* death camp, beginning with its usage as a forced labour camp for Poles and Jews in 1941, transitioning to its selection and development into a death centre in May 1942, and concluding with Soviet war correspondent, Vasily Grossman's 'voice' and his observations of the site in 1944, after it was dismantled.

¹ All audio guide transcriptions are the author's.

Despite the guide's initial request that visitor "listens to the story of the Holocaust as told by the survivors and witnesses", the sonic qualities of those different voices are absent as they are re-voiced by one single male narrator. This is the first instance of "vocal dubbing" that I will discuss in more detail shortly. As the narrator reads Grossman's words, there is no change in vocal quality. Functioning, conterminously with the narration, the musical underscoring brings an abrasive and discordant string as accompaniment to the words uttered by the male narrator: "This infertile desolate area was selected and approved by SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, for the construction of a universal scaffold" (Grossman, 2014: 37). At the end of the reading of Grossman's words, another gong strikes and the solo piano line returns, instructing the listener to move to the next stop *The Cornerstone (2)*.

Cornerstone (2) discusses the foundational stone from Treblinka's original infrastructure that was discovered and placed within the site's memorial landscape in 2013 and uses the cornerstone as a lead to describe the deportation and arrival process of the victims. At this point, visitors walk next to a reconstructed monument signifying Treblinka's railroad. Accompanying the visual of the railway, the narrator's voice reads a passage from Treblinka's stationmaster, Franciszek Zabecki:

The first transport with 'deportees' left Małkinia on Thursday, 23 July 1942, in the morning. The rolling train could be heard from afar not only due to the rumbling of its wheels on the bridge of the River Bug, but also due to the numerous rifle and machine gun shots fired from the train's escort. Like a vicious reptile, the train rolled into the station. Its wagons were loaded with Jews from the Warsaw ghetto... The same was repeated with the other wagons of the train. I myself often heard the cries of the poor souls.

When the narrator says, "rolling train" the visitor can hear intense string lines in tandem with train sounds to reference the site's historical soundscape. The music conveys a sense of urgency and adds a layer of horror to the narrative, described by some visitors as "something that would accompany a horror film" and "not appropriate to accompany a site such as Treblinka"; one visitor went as far as to state, "no music would be better, the facts are horrific enough." The discordant strings persist as the narrator ends his role as Zabecki and transitions back to the historical narration, providing information on the choice to use trains by the Nazis, before

transitioning yet again to introduce the voice of Jewish prisoner and Treblinka survivor, Samuel Willenberg. The narrator voices Willenberg's account of arrival at Treblinka:

The train stopped at the station. Opposite ours, on the other track, was another train filled with people, just like ours. They asked where we were from. When we asked them, they said they were from Warsaw...

Again, train sounds return, followed by the striking of the gong and the solo piano line signalling to the visitor that it is time to move to the next stop *The Symbolic Gate* (3).

Here visitors are introduced to five musical themes that continue for the remainder of the audio guide: (1) the solo piano line, signalling transitions; (2) the prosthetic soundscape accompanying the solo piano line which cites the ambient soundscape (3) the gong, indicating a stop's conclusion; (4) discordant strings, alluding to the site's horror; and (5) train sounds, referencing the mass deportation and murder. These five themes function as the audio guides *leitmotifs*, yet with less nuance, as with each re-use, their impact is hollow, leaving the listener with only a vague semblance of horror, and conveying a monolithic and normalised understanding, rather than a nuanced soundworld of complexity.

Vocal Dubbing and the Narrator's Voice

"Listen to the story of the Holocaust as told by the survivors and witnesses" states the audio guide, and throughout the duration of the audio guide visitors will hear nine *different* textual voices (Vasily Grossman; Franciszek Zabacki; Samuel Willenberg; Jakob Krzepicki; Richard Glazar; Dawid Nowodworski; Jakub Rabinowicz; Rachela Auerbach; Jechiel Rajchman; and Jankiel Wirkeni) impersonated by the voice of one single male narrator. The soundworld created by the Treblinka audio guide not only detaches individual testimonies from the physical bodies that housed them, but from the vocal qualities that once shaped and nuanced them in their initial release into the world. The survivor's voice serves as a common entry point for Holocaust history. Programs such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *First Person*, the USC Shoah Foundations Testimony Archive, and the Yale Fortunoff Archive all serve as platforms for such voices to be heard and recorded, but these recordings are of the *real* and *living*

voices of survivors. This practice indicates that something of significance resides within the living voice itself.

By vocally dubbing the survivor accounts, the audio guide removes any unique and individual emotive affect that resides in the original voice of the survivor. For example, Samuel Willenberg's – the last living survivor of the Treblinka revolt that took place in 1943– testimony is used more than once throughout the audio guide. His first-person account was documented in multiple formats and by many organizations, including in his written memoir, *Surviving Treblinka* (1989), and in vocal recordings for Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The audio guide curators include a passage from Willenberg's written memoir that recounts the moment Willenberg realised his sisters were dead. Below are three excerpts from Willenberg's account which reveal how literary and oral memories differ. One can note that the oral testimony is far more detailed in comparison to the one included in the audio guide's script:

Example 1– Literary Memoir, Samuel Willenberg's Surviving Treblinka (1989)

...Bending again, I lifted a small brown coat which had belonged to my little sister Tamara. A skirt worn by my older sister Ita clung to it—as if in my sister's embrace. I was holding a coat and a skirt which had belonged to my sisters. Mother had lengthened the sleeves with bits of green cloth. Mother's efforts to free my sisters had been futile, I understood (Willenberg, 1989: 56).

Example 2—Oral Interview (1989)

...among all those clothes lying there, I saw my sister's coat, which I knew was hers because she had the sewn-on cuffs: entirely green cuffs. It was a brown coat. But there hadn't been anything in the ghetto. So mother had sewn on this green fabric. Because she'd grown up, she was six. And we'd arrived there [the ghetto] before...during the war I mean, 1941. And I see that it's my sister's coat. I can't speak. And underneath the coat I saw my sister's skirt. Navy blue with white stripes. I understood that they'd been brought to Treblinka from the ghetto. Mother's connections hadn't helped (Willenberg, 2019).

Example 3—The Treblinka Audio Guide Script (2016)

When I stooped to pick it up, I noticed a flash of a familiar colour. I leaned and extracted a small brown coat of my younger sister Tamara, along with a skirt that belonged to my

older sister Ita. I held that skirt and that coat, with the green cuffs, which our mother had sewed on in the ghetto...

When engaging in a comparative reading, the audio guide's text makes Ita's and Tamara's fates unclear, choosing a more poetic portrayal and leaving out key facts and context. Willenberg's written memoir also provides less detail than his oral testimony, but the written memoir is still more detailed than the audio guide's revised version.

Upon further analysis of Willenberg's voice in his oral testimony, one can hear a layer that is not present with just reading and that is absent in the narrator's dubbed version. This vocal affect is particularly strong when Willenberg comprehends his sisters are dead. When Willenberg's testimony is read by the narrator's voice—the same voice that reads nine other individual accounts—the noticeable voice crack in Willenberg's oral testimony over the realisation of his sisters' death is absent. This individual emotion is lost in all nine accounts as the sole narrator recreates their testimonies, a curative decision that contributes to conveying a standardised and monolithic understanding of the Holocaust, effectively flattening any emotive and relational sonic nuance present within the living voices of survivors.

Observations: Visitor Engagement

Susan Sci emphasises that when visiting a memorial site, individuals make a conscious choice and “are willing to leave their private lives and enter into the public via engagement in an act of remembrance in the co-presence of others” (Sci, 2009: 43) a choice that is mediated by elements beyond a visitor's control. In the case of the Treblinka memorial site, as it is interacted with from the curated soundworld of the audio guide, visitors are confronted with a complex, and somewhat contradictory, phenomenological experience. Visually and temporally, the ambience suggests absence and regrowth. In the summer, the beautiful greenery, and vibrant butterflies clash against the memorial's greyscale monolith and pseudo-matzevot. Sonically, the ambient soundscape evokes life, not death: chirping of birds, rustling leaves, faint conversations of other site visitors. In contrast, the audio guide changes this ambient soundscape by complementing the greyscale memorial, rather than the living forest and its life, and cites horror, trauma, and death. The experiences of these two worlds by the site visitor – while both grounded within the visitor's emotional response –do not originate from the same place. The *physical* engagement with Holocaust site is purely phenomenological and non-linguistic, and frequently what visitors

desire. Kerry Whigham writes that such engagement is “quite distinct from the ways of knowing offered by the history book or the memorial monument,” and that these “sites of memory are...liminal spaces” (Whigham, 2020: 223). By physically being at these sites, one is encountered with the sight, smells, sounds, of life, that stand as witness to the deaths. Treblinka’s material infrastructure is gone, but only the materiality that was built and placed there by humans. The trees, the wind, the grass remain, the same ecology shared between the past and the present, ecologies that “speak so poignantly of mourning and absence, of powerlessness and inhumanity” (Feldman, 2008: 9). This draw to the physical was reflected in Treblinka’s guest book – observed on all five site visits – with frequent sketches of trees, flowers, and butterflies. These sketches were the main additions to the book, with other attributes of dates, Stars of David, or brief statements by visitors along the theme of unspeakability.

From behind the headphones, the audio guide’s curated soundworld challenges this ecology and the potential of liminality from engagement with the physical space, and replaces it with a different form of emotion, one that was intended by the guide’s curators as I have demonstrated through the musical background. Nonetheless, this intent misfires and instils a technologically experiential process of mediated memory, or a form of “prosthetic memory,” as Alison Landsberg describes it, a memory that “emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past” (Landsberg, 2004: 2). Perhaps the misfire is because visitors had the expectation that their visits to Treblinka would be unmediated and immediate, and deriving from the site’s physicality, not the audio guide. The inclination to respond emotionally is shared amongst visitors who emotionally respond in some way. There are several studies on emotional response at Holocaust sites, each largely acknowledging to some degree that “emotional response is an important motivation for tourists at Holocaust memorial sites” (Feldman: 2008; Golańska: 2015; Reynolds: 2018), but what is central to these studies is that the emotional response derives from a degree of physicality, *not* a narrator, guide, or accompanying tour book. Many visitors to Treblinka opt for the full use of the audio guide, while some only partially, and others forego it entirely. Those who place headphones over their ears replace the potential for reflection with a highly thematised and curated soundworld of Treblinka’s past – a sonic spectre, or ghost, that positions the audio guide listener within a world of horror – as a male narrator guides the visitor through the site, accompanied by musical motifs that affect the visitors emotionally, described by some visitors as eliciting “terror,” “horror,” and “despair.” The

Treblinka audio guide, then, does not offer a nuanced and critical engagement with the site's complicated history, but rather a normalised conception of the Holocaust, one that evokes a monolithic understanding, a singular and unnuanced understanding that encompasses themes of trauma, without engaging in specifics.

My research at the Treblinka memorial site included five site visits over the span of three years: two in summer, one in fall, and two in winter. Interviews were conducted with users of the audio guide following three of these occasions and done via email with willing participants after their visits, noting that their participation would be anonymous (23 participants; age range 22-67; predominantly Polish, American, or Israeli backgrounds). Other elements of site ethnography derive from my own observations at the site, my personal engagement with the audio guide, interviews with audio guide curators and members of the Memory of Treblinka Foundation, and from an examination of the Treblinka memorial site's "guest" book on all five visits.

Groups to the site were either smaller, with 2-3 members, or quite large, with 15 or more individuals. In turn, the larger groups were predominantly school groups – I could hear discussion and moments of teaching from their instructors – or Israeli youth voyages. The latter was often accompanied with some additional performative element, an essential component of these trips, described by Feldman "the most intensive encounter of Israeli youth with the Shoah" (Feldman, 2008: 2). The intensity derives from the strict programming, a combination of ritual and performativity, that is consistent amongst all the voyages. For example, one winter visit in November 2019, I observed an Israeli youth group stepping down from two large tour buses, and then proceeding to the centre of the memorial, the monolith, where a mic and stereo system had been set up for them. The next thirty minutes consisted of a memorial service where students sang, recited prayers, and concluding with a reading of what was presumably the victims' names. The Israeli youth group did not engage with the audio guide (a Hebrew version was not yet available); however, there were a few additional visitors to the site that did, including a young couple from the United States and a college student who was studying abroad in Warsaw. They had heard about the audio guide prior to their trip and downloaded it before they got to the site. They noted that while they tried to engage with the audio guide, the memorial ceremony often made this difficult, but that they were more interested in observing the ceremony than putting their headphones on and walking through the site. The college student particularly emphasized the memorialisation, and a state of reflection was what they sought out, and that they would

listen to the audio guide upon returning to Warsaw, noting that they did not find it necessary to engage with the guide at the physical site, and that the guide's historical information could be accessed and listened to later.

That winter day hosted the most visitors I ever witnessed at the site; on other visits the total number of site visitors never ranged more than twenty, including myself, and it aligned with a theme shared with my other Treblinka site observations: a desire for reflection. Such a theme often stood in conflict with the audio guide usage. During a summer visit, one visitor stated that, while she used the audio guide for most of her visit, she only partially engaged with it, and noted that she intentionally removed her headphones and turned off the audio guide, stating that "there were certain moments in which [she] sought reflection and reflection only, and the audio guide did not deliver." On this same visit, I observed an individual's frustration with another site visitor who had downloaded the audio guide upon arriving at Treblinka but did not have headphones with them and chose to listen to the audio despite this. The first individual was noticeably upset with the second's choice to "invade his sonic space" by not using his headphones and articulated to me in an email the following month that "technology should not even be allowed at such a sacred site."

Additionally, audio guide usage resulted in an element of distraction. From the same summer visit outlined above, a group of 10 university and graduate school aged students (7 Americans, 1 Canadian, 1 German, and 1 Spanish) visited Treblinka with the audio guide prepped and headphones ready to use; however, following the first point's narration, half of them removed their headphones and did not return to the guide, writing that "I turned it off because it distracted me from thinking about where I was ... Although I was unfamiliar with the layout of the camp and much of the information given in the guide, I felt that I got in touch with the memorial more thoroughly without the guide." He went on further to note he found the musical motifs to be the most negative elements of the audio guide, and that "to hear of buildings, gas chambers, etc. makes it difficult to "feel" the memorial."

While most visitors described the guide negatively, some interviews offered a more positive, or perhaps saw potential, in the audio guide. One of the graduate students who had visited Treblinka once before wrote:

At first I thought it [the audio guide] took away from the experience but the more I reflect I feel that it actually greatly enhanced it. The first time I visited I went along without any such guide. That was a profoundly reflective experience for me. This time I learned so much more and the guide's use of personal testimony has made the visit remain much sharper in my mind.

Regarding the musical addendums, listeners reacted with the most displeasure. One visitor commented that “[he] did not appreciate them in the slightest,” and that he did not “need or want sound effects when engaging with sites of mass atrocity; what is sought is not theatrics or entertainment, but a reflective space.” Conversely, another voiced that she “found the music annoying, predisposing visitors to a specific mood (sadness, pity) ... no music would have been preferable.” One visitor described the guide as detracting “from the emotionally and spiritually reflective experience that many people desire or need on such a visit,” while another stated that they “found the technology...a very isolating experience.”

These responses aligned with other visitor comments that conveyed that the audio guide took away from the reflective and memorial nature of the site. Compared to the visitor responses, we can notice a disconnect between the curators' intent and the actual experience; nonetheless, the intention of the audio guide curators was not to create a reflective sonic space, but rather to produce an “historical guide” with the aim at conveying information, not reflection. One visitor noted that while “the content was informative, the horror sounds detracted from his learning engagement,” and he wished he could have muted the musical motifs in order to “fully learn the site's history.”

My site observations and interviews with site visitors reflect the two possible worlds of experience offered at Treblinka, that of the physical and of the audio guide, two worlds that offer a wide range of experiences and historical engagement with Treblinka, but two worlds that do not quite coalesce. Usage of the audio guide has additional complications beyond the morally questionable use of music and sound. For instance, while the audio guide can be downloaded by anyone, many visitors do not know about it until they get to the site itself. This would not be a problem if all visitors have access to cellular data or Wi-Fi; however, many visitors are international and are not using a data plan and would not be able to download the app even if they wanted to. Haska acknowledged this implication, stating that the audio guide's designers even thought about setting up a Wi-Fi hotspot, yet this posed many technical and financial

difficulties; and since, there was not a large PR campaign to promote the audio guide, the public's awareness of its existence is not known.

Conclusion

What can sound tell us, and what does a sonic engagement at sites such as Treblinka offer? Sound artist and writer Salomè Voegelin suggests that a “focus on sound art...allows for the conceptual and material articulation of another sphere that is not apart from the one we customarily refer to as the real one, which is not a parallel fiction, but is a real unseen that opens and gestures towards the idea of alternatives” (Voegelin, 2018: 5). In many ways, this is exactly what the Treblinka audio guide offers, as it presents a secondary soundworld that can be engaged in addition to the physical memorial site, but this makes a discordant note with the site's commemorative nature.

While the audio guide does provide historical context that might otherwise be missing for a visitor to the Treblinka memorial site, it does so by detracting from visitor engagement with the physical experience of the space itself and takes away from the visitors' own confrontation with the site's absence. By placing headphones over one's ears and tuning into the curated audio guide, visitors are removed from the present reality of Treblinka and are confronted not with absence, but with a highly emotive sonic spectre of Treblinka's infamous past. Treblinka's material infrastructure is gone, but only the materiality that was built and placed there by humans. The trees, the wind, the grass, remain – the same ecology shared in the past and the present. There is something to be learned from this physical world. What this ‘something’ is can be personal to everyone, but it is essential to one's critical engagement with the site, an engagement that is either fully muted or partially dampened by the site's audio guide.

Is the curated soundworld of Treblinka's audio guide historically accurate? No, and as I have demonstrated, it cultivates the potential for not only *misunderstanding* the Holocaust, but of normalising and relating it to everyday trauma. The thematised dialogue and musical cues create a symbolic sonic re-enactment of Treblinka's past, but in so doing, take away from the site's ambient commemorative nature, replacing it with a problematic soundworld that does little in the way of cultivating critical and moral reflection.

Reference List

- “ALT Tours.” *FestivALT*. <http://festivalt.com/alt-tours-booking>. Accessed on day? August 2020.
- Arad, Y., 2018. *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 119-126.
- Billen, A., 2003. “The Mouse with the Sting in his Tale.” *The Times*. December 2, 2003.
- Cohen, Ar., 1981. *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust*. New York:
Crossroad Publishing Co.
- Eckhardt, A., 1980. “The Holocaust and the Enigma of Uniqueness: A Philosophical Effort at
Practical Clarification.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social
Science*, 450, 165-178.
- Fackenheim, E., 1988. *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought*. New York:
Schocken Books.
- Feldman, J. 2008. *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag: Youth Voyages to Poland and the
Performance of Israeli National Identity*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Haska, A. 2019. Interview by Kathryn Huether. Email Interview. July 29, 2019.
- Golańska, D. 2015. “Affective Spaces, Sensuous Engagements: In Quest of a Synaesthetic
Approach to ‘Dark Memorials.’” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21(8), 773-
790.
- Grossman, V., 2014. *The Hell of Treblinka*. O. Reznik, trans. Scotts Valley: CreateSpace
Independent Publishing Platform.
- Jäckel, E., 1988. “The Miserable Practice of Insinulators: The Uniqueness of the National-
Socialist Crime Cannot be Denied.” *Yad Vashem Studies*, 19, 107-113.
- Kielman, A., 2018. “Sonic Infrastructures, Musical Circulation, and Listening Practices in a
Changing People’s Republic of China.” *Sound Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 4
(1), 19-34.
- Landsberg, A., 2004. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the
Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lang, B., 2000. “The Representations of Limits.” In S. Friedländer, ed. *Probing the Limits of
Representation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mandel, N., 2001. “Rethinking ‘After Auschwitz’: Against a Rhetoric of the Unspeakable in

- Holocaust Writing.” *Boundary*, 2(28), 203-228.
- Reynolds, D., 2018. *Postcards from Auschwitz: Holocaust Tourism and the Meaning of Remembrance*. New York: NYU Press.
- Rothberg, M., 2000. *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rosenfeld, G., 2015. *Hi Hitler!: How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sanbonmatsu, J., 2009. “The Holocaust Sublime: Singularity, Representation, and the Violence of Everyday Life.” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 68(1): 101-126.
- Schult, T., 2020. “Christoph Mayer’s *The Invisible Camp—Audio Walk Gusen*.” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 16(1), 1-40.
- Schulze, H., 2013. “The Corporeality of Listening: Experiencing Soundscapes on Audio Guides.” In K. Bijsterveld, ed. *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*. New York: Columbia University Press, 195-208.
- Sci, S.A., 2009. “(Re)thinking the Memorial as a Place of Aesthetic Negotiation.” *Culture: Theory and Critique*, 50(1), 41-57.
- “Treblinka II-Commemoration,” <https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/commemoration/>. Accessed on September 20, 2019.
- Voegelin, S., 2018. *Fragments of Listening: The Political Possibility of Sound*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Whigham, K., 2020. “Reading the Traces: Embodied Engagement with the Past at Three Former Nazi Concentration Camps.” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 26(2), 221-240.
- Willenberg, S., 1989. *Surviving Treblinka*. New York: Basil Blackwell in association with the Institute for Polish Jewish Studies.
- Yersushalmi, Y., 1982. *Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Washington Press.