



‘A more active participation in both site and performance provides the opportunity to actually embody ‘site’. Audience members may rub up against other audience members, making the reading of the performance experiential in multiple ways, rather than limited to the end-on approach prescribed by many forms of theatre architecture.’ With reference to a performance that you have seen, evaluate your experience of space in performance; what effects did the performance’s spatial practices create?

Imogen Hibberd

The Killing Fields in Choeung Ek is one of the most prevalent sites of remembrance of the autogenocide by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. It is a space where over 20,000 people were taken to be killed in mass graves, and is now a well-known memorial for the victims massacred by the communist regime, as well as a popular tourist site. Despite this, ‘the Cambodian genocide has been almost absent from popular representation’¹ making this space necessary for the education of tourists and to respectfully memorialise the past. Pierre Nora discusses the importance of such sites of memory in a globalised society where collective memory is disappearing due to the rapid progression of history and dominant historical narratives. He believes real environments of memory, where memory arises spontaneously, are no more, therefore we need ‘lieux de mémoire’ to ‘stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalise death, to materialise the immaterial’². *The Killing Fields* achieves this through the preservation of its history, and its function as a memorial and tourist site. Nora argues that modern memory relies on this materiality to remind and encourage remembrance, and *The Killing Fields* uses the horrific remains of the site to create a tour which brings these memories and the history to life, through a narrative performance of reliving and practicing the space. It may be said that sites of memory, such as this, are imbued with such historical intensity that they can speak for themselves, but they are designed by curators and tour guides to create a mnemonic experience which stays with the audience after they leave. Young also argues that ‘by themselves memorials remain inert and amnesiac [...] For their memory, these memorials depend completely on the visitor’,³ highlighting the necessity of the tourist in the performance of the site and maintenance of a collective memory.

This essay will be discussing how the tour of *The Killing Fields* can be regarded as an immersive theatrical performance, as the space creates a narrative of a forgotten history through the curatorial dramaturgy of this lieu de mémoire. It may not be immersive as it is traditionally understood, but there is an interesting debate to be had as to what immersive theatre is. Machon, a leading practitioner of immersive theatre, discusses how it is impossible to define as a genre but can be understood by its participation ‘on a deep, embodied level’⁴ emphasising ‘contact, tactility and immediacy’⁵. *The Killing Fields* tour can be considered as an immersive performance, as the tourist is constantly encouraged to imagine the horror that happened there, engaging with the site of death by physically walking through it and interacting with tangible elements. This essay will be focusing upon two key scenes of the tour, the Buddhist stupa and the mass graves, which are completely disparate in their ‘material, symbolic and functional’⁶ manifestation, but are essential to the performance of this site of memory. These will be analysed as to how the lieu de memoire is constructed spatially, to create an experience of immersive emplacement in an imagined narrative of the past, confronting the audience with the ‘other’. This experience will be discussed using theorists to illustrate how the space does this physically and mentally, and what affect it has on the audience, particularly concerning its ethicality. Throughout, this

¹ Emma Willis, *Theatricality, Dark Tourism and Ethical Spectatorship: Absent Others* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 130.

² Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire’, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), p. 19. <<http://www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~ewa/Nora,%20Between%20Memory%20and%20History.pdf>> [accessed 17 April 2017]

³ James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 37.

⁴ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 142.

⁵ Ibid., p. 122.

⁶ Nora, *Representations*, p. 18-19.

site of memory will also be questioned in terms its ethical justifiability, and whether it is humane to use a grave yard as a lieu de mémoire, or a necessity, as Nora argues, to maintain the memory of the atrocity in a globalised society.



The space of *The Killing Fields* begins with a path leading up to a Buddhist stupa, therefore this architectural structure acts as an 'experiential base line'⁷ and serves to foreground the expectations for the rest of the performance. Stupas were traditionally a burial tomb for Kings, but evolved into a religious monument to honour the living. They are intended to be placed at the four corners of a crossroad to imply an awakened state of mind, perhaps suggesting how the site of memory you are entering will awaken your mind to new imaginings of the history it holds. Pallasmaa discusses space in terms of hapticity and sensuality, focusing particularly upon architectural affect, emphasising how buildings should be apprehended through the body and the senses. The instant affect of the stupa on the audience was profound, as 'architecture frames, structures, re-orient, scales, refocuses, and slows down our experience of the world and makes it an ingredient of the embodied sense of our own being'⁸, suggesting how the monument mentally and physically impacted upon the individual's presence in the space. It could be argued that the stupa halts time, as it is a tall pillar in the centre of the flat landscape of *The Killing Fields*, disrupting the continuity and as 'buildings address our body and sense of bodily balance [...] and movement'⁹ the stupa impacts your spatial reality, forcing you to stop and look up at its overpowering presence. This could be said to be a presage of the shocking experience you are walking into, creating an ominous feeling through the death it memorialises, but it also may be orienting *The Killing Fields* as space of respect and reverence through its silent, structural power. Furthermore, Pallasmaa argues architecture can 'contain and hold time'¹⁰ and as the stupa is an embodiment and memorialisation of the history of the tragedy, it forces us to not only remember this horrific past, but be transported back into that time in the immersive experience.

Alongside analysing the stupa from Pallasmaa's architectural perspective and its mnemonic purpose, the space can be thought about in terms of Soja's theory of the 'Thirdspace' which aims to create a postmodern space where dominant, historical and social practices are critiqued and reconsidered. His theory arises out of a synthesis of Foucault's concept of the heterotopia and Lefebvre's spatial triad, to encourage new contemplations of spatiality. Thirdspace is a dual mode of thinking about space; the First space, a real, epistemological understanding of space, and Second space, the imagined, cognitive representations of spatiality. The combination of these creates 'an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life'¹¹, through a method of analysis called 'thirthing-as-Othering'¹² to reject imposed binaries and explore a multiplicity of alternative choices. The stupa can be considered as a Thirdspace due to this postmodern geographical understanding, as the purpose of *The Killing Fields* may be to break boundaries between cultures through the historical presentation of the genocide as a warning of an act that should never be repeated. Inside the stupa there are approximately 8,000 skulls encased in glass, each marked with a different colour to distinguish age, gender and mode of murder. They are layered on top of one another going up each side of the building vertically facing outwards and looking down at *The Killing Fields*, giving the appearance of the dead watching you as you tour the site.

⁷ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), p. 122.

⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰ Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image*, p. 78.

¹¹ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 10.

¹² Ibid., p. 5.



Consequently, the stupa provides an introductory space in the performance where you are confronted directly with the 'Other', as skulls are emanations of the past signifying absence, in this case the people's graves you will be walking on. Ultimately, this provides performative force to the monument by humanising the victims using the face and introducing them as characters in this narrative. This creates a shocking and fleeting moment where the 'trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality'¹³ are collapsed and rebalanced to create a new understanding of *The Killing Fields* and life. The Thirdspace achieved is epistemically 'real' (First space) as you are in the physical location where the massacre happened, evidenced by the marked mass graves surrounding the stupa, but you are also encouraged to imagine (Second space) the history of the space and the actions that took place there. This is achieved by presenting the audience with the skulls of the dead and the murder weapons in this memorial stupa, providing sensuality of the space through its haptic perception and tangibility, activating "the interior architecture" of the imagination¹⁴ to relive the atrocity. Consequently, the combination of the real and imagined space creates a temporary Thirdspace where the individual is forced to question and reject notions of the 'Other', which here is embodied through the skulls. The massacre itself was due to the government wanting to create an agrarian society, and the killings were non-discriminatory, apart from suspicions of having traitorous thoughts against the government. The Thirdspace created by the stupa and the skulls, therefore questions a more general 'othering' as you are inclined to think about humanity in its entirety, not in terms of typical binaries. This suggests the site of memory is creating a space where exterior societal values are put into question, through the manipulation of the genocide to elicit emotional reactions in the audience. On the other hand, it could also be argued that the roles in this performance are reversed, placing the audience member as the actor. By positioning the skulls to look down upon *The Killing Fields*, places them as an audience spectating the actions of the tourist. This imbues a sense of authority and power to the dead through their panoptical gaze over the space, making the tourist feel a sense of blame and guilt for intruding in *The Killing Fields*. Subsequently, this sense of 'Othering' created by the Thirdspace may also be reversed, implicating the audience member as the 'other'. They are made to feel uneasy and ostracized by the sheer mass of skeletons, making them uncomfortably aware of their own living condition in the place of death. This encourages audience introspection and critique of their own lives and position regarding societal binaries, as the skulls of the dead watch and judge them.

This sense of blame imposed by the stupa may be examined in terms of Levinas's postmodern vision of ethical philosophy, and his concern with the traditional emphasis on 'being'. Levinas argues that instead of living life focused on our own goals and own 'being', our ethical responsibility lies in 'an infinite obligation towards [the] 'other''¹⁵, which may be comparable to Soja's emphasis on the 'other' in his theories on Thirdspace. As Soja focuses on breaking down binaries and finding spaces and moments where the 'other' is non-existent, Levinas argues in a similar way that to meet the other as yourself is your ethical duty. This assimilation with the 'other' is apparent through the Stupa scene of *The Killing Fields* as it is forcing the audience to visually experience and question the repercussions of the genocide and provides evidence of the scale of death through the display of skulls, which are intrinsically linked to the lives of the people. This coincides with Levinas's notions that participants should see performances as 'an opportunity to experience an encounter with someone else [...] and to

¹³ Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Machon, *Immersive Theatre*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Nicholas Rideot, *Theatre & Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 52.

assume ethical responsibility for the fragile life of the other'¹⁶, and in *The Killing Fields* we are confronted with the symbolic epitome of the fragility of human life through the human skull. This corresponds to his focus upon the face as a representation of 'the otherness of the other as it appears to us in the encounter',¹⁷ emphasising the importance of a face-to-face confrontation as a place an ethical bond can manifest. Subsequently, it could be argued that through the stupa's omniscient presentation of the skulls, which are essentially remnants of the living face, the audience is asked to bear witness to the deaths of the Cambodian people and assume an ethical responsibility for them. In Levinas's own terms, 'A face is a trace of itself, given over to my responsibility, [...] It is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving'.¹⁸ This reiterates the idea that the stupa makes the audience member uncomfortable with their superior position, but the issue with this concept is the culpability imposed on the audience as they were not at the genocide. Furthermore, what is controversial about Levinas's ethical philosophies regarding the other in this space, is the notion of who the other is as they are traditionally regarded as those in need, but the 'other' in *The Killing Fields* is dead. This incertitude will be discussed further regarding the mass graves scene of the performance.

After passing the Buddhist stupa, the audience are guided through areas where different moments of the massacre happened, telling a story of what the people went through when they arrived at Choeung Ek. The performance ends at the arguably most poignant part of *The Killing Fields*; concluding by walking through the exhumation pits, to finally stop and reflect at the few remaining untouched mass graves. Some of the largest are marked by wooden open-sided hut structures which provide cover over the graves and have a bamboo fence around, which visitors put bracelets on marking it as a lieu de memoire.



The edge of this space is where hundreds of women and children were taken to be killed, so that their bodies fell directly into the pits. Throughout you are asked to imagine the horrors of these events and what the victims would have gone through, using the curatorial dramaturgy of the site to bring it to life. Using Bachelard's theory of imagined and poetical space, this mnemonic narrative can be analysed focusing particularly on the deliberate spatial arrangement of the mass graves, and how its retelling of a dark past implicates you ethically by emplacing you in the event. Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* elucidates immersive practice, analysing how the design of a space becomes 'imbued with dream values'¹⁹, and can unlock imagination and elicit emotional and personal responses. The architectural and spatial design of the mass graves as historically formed and manipulated by a curator can be analysed through Bachelard's idea of 'topoanalysis' which is 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives'.²⁰ The scene at the mass graves immerses the audience in the intimate moment of the victims' deaths, asking us to stand at the edge of the hut and look down at the empty space of ground where the dead are buried. By marking the space with the huts, this allows for a narrative that would otherwise lay dormant to be unlocked, through 'a phenomenology of what is hidden'²¹. Poetic, spatial manipulation in immersive practice, such as this, allows for the memory and

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁷ Rideot, *Theatre & Ethics*, p. 53.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 91.

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 17.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

²¹ Ibid., p. xxxvii.

history of the space to be 'opened up as felt, lived and imaginative poetic in both and epic and intimate manner'²², reimagining the space as a memorial for the dead and scene in *The Killing Fields* narrative. Furthermore, Bachelard describes a 'passionate liaison of our bodies'²³ with the space and the memories it holds, this is apparent in the moment the audience walks through the exhumation pits and stands at the edge of the mass graves. You physically make the journey that you imagine the Cambodian women and children would have taken, from the previous part of the narrative tour to the edge of the pit where you would meet your death, creating a psychological identification with the victims. The surrounding fence gives a sense of height and what it would have been like to look down into the pit before falling to your death, as Bachelard argued, much like Pallasmaa's theories, that certain architectural forms have their own lyrical discourse that resonates a similar response in the receiver's body, imagination and emotional memory. Furthermore, the use of bamboo to create the fence alludes to the make-shift weapons used by executioners to kill or beat the victims. The positioning of the bamboo in between the audience and the graves the audience adopts the perspective of the executioner, creating a poetic imagination which the audience 'inhabit[s] with intensity'.²⁴

This sympathetic introspection that the narrative, poetic design of the space creates, relates to Levinas's notion of ethical responsibility to the other, as the audience is positioning in the performance creates a sense of moral culpability. This curatorial dramaturgy may 'assist us in making social and political arrangements that minimise the negative consequence of one individual actions for the rest of society',²⁵ as an affective result of the reimagination and participation in the horrors of *The Killing Fields*. By confronting the audience with the other in this immersive imagination of the past, it imposes a sense of guilt upon them, but it also begs the question of whether the audience is morally responsible like Levinas maintains. The audience members were not involved in the Pol Pot regime; therefore it may be argued that it is not necessary for this poetic manifestation of space be performed to them. Perhaps, instead, it should be the tourist board who made *The Killing Fields* a site of memory who should be questioning their culpability in creation of a space of ethical dubiety. Furthermore, Levinas's notion of the other is uncertain in this scenario as the other may be perceived as the victims buried at the site, but as they are no longer in need, the infinite obligation Levinas proposes may in fact be directed elsewhere. The politics of who the other is, is questionable, perhaps it may be the fellow audience members as Levinas defines performances as ethical encounters as a way of 'recognising our mutual vulnerability [to] encourage relationships based on openness, dialogue and a respect for difference'.²⁶ Consequently through the mutual inhabiting of the space in a shocking immersive experience, a consanguinity is created between audience members imposing a collective introspection regarding the other. Or, perhaps, the other is in fact a general societal 'othering' which is used to question binaries and boundaries that are prevalent in our lives, as was discussed regarding the impact of the stupa.

In conclusion, we are drawn to sites of memory, such as *The Killing Fields*, to educate ourselves, memorialise the events and pay our respects to the dead, but by practising in it the horror becomes unnervingly real. Through the haptically and psychologically imposing architecture of the stupa, the creation of the Thirdspace to break down binaries, and the poetic space of the mass graves, the site of memory creates a historical narrative that seeks to immerse the audience in an experience of the past and question their understandings of the 'other'. Whilst Levinas discusses theatrical performances as an ethical encounter to elucidate his philosophies regarding our responsibility to the other over ourselves, in the process of expressing mutuality and uniting people in this immersive performance of *The Killing Fields*, it may be considered unethical. Using a genocide to create this realism and sensuality of space, through the skulls, for example, it may be considered ethically problematic. Whilst inhabiting the space and reimagining it through these poetic means may be immoral, it may also be necessary to maintain a collective memory. In immersive practice 'the original, visceral experience remains affective in and subsequent recall within the embodied memory of the work',²⁷ creating a haunting experience which affects the audience in an emotional way. Furthermore, the poetics of the space and the narrative allows for the restoration of forgotten spatial practices, as through embodying the space as an actor or audience member, the space comes alive through performative means. A space can become a 'lieu de memoire only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura'²⁸ and through the immersive performance of *The Killing Fields* tour, the affect of the space remains with

²² Machon, *Immersive Theatres*, p. 137.

²³ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 15.

²⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxxviii.

²⁵ Rideot, *Theatre & Ethics*, p. 12.

²⁶ Rideot, *Theatre & Ethics*, p. 54.

²⁷ Machon, *Immersive Theatre*, p. 143.

²⁸ Nora, *Representations*, p. 19.

the audience through the recollection of the sensuality and 'othering' long after they leave. Consequently, this lieu de memoire resists the progression of history, functioning as a mnemonic space that memorialises a shocking and important event.

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