

Jaeger, Stephan. *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum: From Narrative, Memory, and Experience to Experientiality*

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Stephan Jaeger's book is an important contribution to the extant knowledge on museal representations of World War II (WWII) and, more broadly, to museum studies, memory studies, and public history. Consisting of nine chapters, a prologue, and a conclusion, it examines how WWII museums work with narrative, historical fact, memory, and emotion to help visitors "comprehend or experience" the past (8).

Chapter 1 combines an introduction to the book and a discussion of its theoretical framework. Among other things, it provides a useful categorization of history and war museums (21–32), on which the rationale behind the author's selection of the museums analyzed is partially based.

Chapter 2 focuses on Jaeger's core theoretical concepts: "the ideal visitor" and "experientiality." Both deserve a closer look. In my opinion, the book's key contribution—besides insightful and engaging case studies—is its utilization and development of the concept of experientiality. To exhibition analysis, the concept came from narratological research. In a 1996 article, "Experience, Experientiality, and Historical Narrative: A View from Narratology," Monika Fludernik defined experientiality as "the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'" (12). Jaeger argues—and later demonstrates—that this concept can be successfully used as an analytical tool "with which to examine the representational and narrative potential of an exhibition" (49). However, Jaeger continues, to make it useful to exhibition analysis, one must consider not only how the museum constructs, simulates, and stages the past but also how the resulting exhibition is received. Through their "own individual perceptions, selections, and routes through the museum space," a visitor acts as an active "mediator . . . for experientiality" (48–49). Museum visitors, Jaeger elaborates, "possess and express the consciousness needed to perform the experientiality of the museum" (49) and thus "fill the shell of the exhibition" (42).

Methodologically requiring a reckoning with an exhibition's reception though not engaging in visitor studies (although some welcome ethnographic elements are present), the author turns to the idea of an "ideal visitor." In a diversion from Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich and others, who see this as a kind of perfect museum goer for whom an exhibition is planned and who can perceive all its intended messages, for Jaeger the "ideal visitor" comprises "the semiotic and aesthetic potentialities of the museum space" that can be evoked (43).

This "ideal visitor" stayed on my mind throughout the book, perhaps because of the author's varying—and seemingly evolving—ways to invoke them. The first half of the book tends to present the ideal visitor's response to an exhibition somewhat preemptorily: "visitors feel like they can immerse themselves in a variety of perspectives" (107) and "the visitor must react, so that they do not become detached from the exhibition" (137), to give two examples. Later, the language changes to include more flexibility: "visitors might ask themselves" (196) or "most visitors are probably less likely to engage" (293), which corresponds much better with the essential connotation of potentiality attached to "the ideal visitor." I wonder about the researcher's role in this. Is the professional museum goer the ideal "ideal visitor?" Can "the ideal visitor," in addition to realizing a maximum of an exhibition's potentialities, also see its manipulative and foreclosing techniques? Or is it the researcher's prerogative? Some reflection here would be helpful.

While the introductory theorizations are not always easy to grasp, the following three chapters clarify them well. Dedicated to the three types of experientiality—“restricted” (ch. 3), “primary” (ch. 4), and “secondary” (ch. 5)—developed by Jaeger, each chapter offers a brief theoretical preface and analyses of three museums. In the author’s theorization, restricted experientiality means that an exhibition’s potential experientiality is limited through a master narrative or an imposed memory pattern. Among the museums that offer this type of experientiality is the Warsaw Rising Museum (Poland), which establishes “a staged impression of factuality, while fostering visitors’ empathy with the insurgents and developing feelings of nostalgia for the past” (87–88). Primary experientiality implies a mimetic relationship between a museum’s simulation of the past and the past itself. The relevant case study that drew me in most is that of the Bastogne War Museum (Belgium): its exhibition simulates the past using recurring fictitious characters that “are constructed as composites from many eyewitness accounts of the [Bastogne] battle” (117). These characters “network” with other elements of the exhibition, “diversifying and sometimes counterbalancing the narrative” and creating space for interpretation (126–27). While this approach “risk[s] immersing visitors in a way that prevents them from realizing that these characters are constructed” (127), various distanciation techniques mostly allow the museum to avoid that risk, argues Jaeger. Finally, secondary experientiality is not mimetic in nature; it allows visitors to have “structural” experiences of the past that differ from the actual past: visitors are “not tempted to believe that they are re-experiencing past perspectives” (128). The Bundeswehr Military History Museum in Dresden (Germany), my favorite case study here, manages to do exactly that, Jaeger demonstrates.

The next four chapters are dedicated to “The Transnational” (ch. 6), “The Holocaust and Perpetration in War Museums” (ch. 7), “Total War, Air War, and Suffering” (ch. 8), and “Art in Second World War Museums” (ch. 9). Because it is impossible to do this rich book full justice in a short review, I will only mention here the case study that I found most illuminating for personal reasons, namely that of the Museum of the World War II in Gdańsk (Poland), in chapter 6. I had followed the debates around the museum’s creation, its innovative transnational approach, the Polish ruling party’s interference, and the change of the museum’s leadership, but I did not know the effect all this had on the final exhibition. In October 2022, I visited the museum and was surprised, not to say disconcerted, by a mixture of transnational elements and an acute national(ist) framework. Jaeger’s analysis deepened my understanding of the exhibition, especially those parts that create secondary experientiality and allow—despite the museum’s overall closed historical structure—for “continuous openness” and interpretative freedom (201).

The concept of experientiality, Jaeger shows, provides an additional dimension to the close reading of an exhibition. However, the focus on an exhibition’s “potentiality,” in its combination with “the ideal visitor,” seems to be simultaneously a strength and a weakness of this approach. Its strength, besides highlighting how a visitor can experience an exhibition, consists in fine-tuning museum researchers’ methodology. An approach that many of us have often used half-intuitively acquires, in Jaeger’s rendering, methodological rigor. The weakness, in turn, lies in the—potentially huge—gap between “potentiality” and the actual experience of an individual visitor. Jaeger knows this well, writing in the conclusion:

The theoretical comprehension of experientiality in and of itself is probably insufficient for museum professionals to understand the effects of the exhibitions they design. In a practical sense, experientiality studies could be combined with empirical visitor studies in order to understand the frames to which the majority of visitors of an institution react (307).

This is relevant not only for exhibition creators. In fact, it would be an interesting task for future research to operationalize the concept of experientiality for reception studies.