

## **Beyond aura and contamination: a response to Sturdy Colls and Ehrenreich**

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The challenge of manifesting absence lies at the core of Holocaust representation and memorialisation. The exhortation to remember – *Zakhor* – is a refutation of annihilation, and forms the basis for cultural survival and revival. Treblinka and the other Operation Reinhard camps represent the immaterial culture of the Holocaust at its most extreme: to physically annihilate the Jewish population of Eastern Europe, and then to obliterate all traces of the crime itself. Against this historical background, efforts to materialise the Holocaust through memorials, museums, excavations, artefacts, landscapes, and the bodies of survivors themselves are bound up in discourses of resistance and defiance.

Sturdy Colls and Ehrenreich's paper takes a novel and important approach to Holocaust artefacts through the lens of heritage value. The notion that an object's value is contingent upon its spatial, temporal, and socio-cultural contexts is fundamental to material culture theory. The distinctive contribution of this paper lies in its detailed examination of the overlapping and often wildly disparate frames of valuation that these extraordinary objects move through and between: from the mercenary interests of the looters to the spiritual and historical contexts of a Holocaust museum.

This begs the question of whether we can meaningfully use the term 'value' for such fundamentally different contexts, as well as the potential harms of this conflation, and the intellectual contortions that it might require. Despite the best efforts of cultural economists, there is still no satisfactory means of reconciling cultural and economic values. Whether or not beauty is truth, truth beauty, there is no straightforward means of ascribing it/them a cash price, and we might even be a little wary of any attempt to do so. Some objects such as holy relics have such extraordinary religious or cultural significance that they are placed beyond economic value, and we might wish to put some extraordinary Holocaust artefacts such as the diary of Anne Frank or the *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign at Auschwitz into this category of 'beyond price'.

It is worth picking apart this question of non-economic value a little further. Cultural economist David Throsby proposed a typology of cultural values that ranges across aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic, and authenticity values (Throsby 2000: 28-9). However, the greater value for this study and similar exercises lies in Throsby's proposed (e)valuation methods for cultural values. This set of tools includes 'mapping' – the contextual analysis offered by Sturdy Colls and Ehrenreich – and the closely related 'thick description' and 'content analysis' (Throsby 2000: 29-30). However, his toolkit also includes

'attitudinal analysis' on either individual or group scales, based on established social research methods. This suggests a possible future direction for the analyses begun by Sturdy Colls and Ehrenreich, and one that would set them on a more secure footing.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the perceived values of Holocaust artefacts is the sharp disparity between the perception of victims' objects – valorised 'almost to the point of sacred status' – and Nazi or perpetrators' objects, which are now practically the archetype for the contagion heuristic and the sense or ostentatious performance of disgust (Nemeroff and Rozin 1994). My curiosity here lies in the obvious ambiguity and (particularly in archaeological contexts) the uncertainty of whether an artefact 'counts' as victim or perpetrator material culture, and how this impacts upon its various values. Is it possible for a Holocaust object to hold all six of Throsby's categories of cultural value – from aesthetic and spiritual to symbolic and authenticity – while uncertainty remains as to its 'good' or 'evil' aura?

The contagion heuristic is of interest in this study also for its curious absences. Given that Nazi antisemitism drew so heavily on tropes of parasites, vermin, and infestation in its dehumanisation of Jews, how did the looted possessions of Holocaust victims – from rucksacks to gold pens – avoid the contaminating aura of Jewishness? Was there a cultural 'cleansing' mechanism in place – an 'Aryanization' of Jewish objects to match that of Jewish businesses – or were any feelings of disgust swept aside by waves of acquisitive fervour? Germans buying bargain Jewish furniture at auctions might have found this easier than their poorer compatriots who received Jewish clothes from welfare charities with the yellow Stars of David still attached (Bajohr 2007). Perhaps, like the Polish looters, they satisfied themselves in the 'post-Jewish'-ness of their newfound possessions.

The temporal organisation of this paper takes us only up to the present. What are the future values of Holocaust material culture? One current challenge in Holocaust education and representation is the dwindling population of survivors, whose testimonies have carried such a powerful commemorative burden (Pearce 2020). The upsurge in efforts to digitise and replicate survivors as holograms suggests a salvage-ethnography approach to this impending loss. As the number of survivors with first-hand memories of the Holocaust and the capacity to share them plummets, inevitably a greater weight – of proof, of storytelling, of humanising and individualising the victims – will fall on the material culture.

Across the broad category of Holocaust objects, sites, monuments and landscapes, it is inevitable that some will carry a greater burden than others. It is likely that the relatively untapped resource of buried material culture will rise in value(s) significantly. It remains to be seen to what extent archaeologists will be able to make their presence felt in a field dominated in numerical and economic terms by looters.

Ultimately I remain unconvinced that the concept of 'value' is capable of containing or expressing the strength and variety of the impressions that Holocaust artefacts conjure into being: sacredness, hauntedness, moral contamination, 'Jewishness' or its absence, the sickening non-existence of a murdered population, the promise of wealth, the Benjaminian aura of authenticity, and the frenzied certainty of fraudulence. Finally, alongside these countless significant properties I would draw attention to the additional layer of *Unheimlichkeit* that an object obtains through being encountered in archaeological contexts of burial and excavation (Moshenska 2006). To study the values of Holocaust material culture we need greater conceptual clarity, ethical uncertainty, new words, and a strong stomach.

## References

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