

# Towards an Understanding of Visitor Perceptions of 'Dark' Attractions: The Case of the Imperial War Museum of the North, Manchester

A. Craig Wight

J. John Lennon

Caledonian Business School  
Glasgow Caledonian University  
Glasgow, UK

**Abstract:** Governments and other authoritative stakeholders are faced with dilemmas regarding the representation of sites associated with death and disaster in the context of tourism visits. Not least of these are the owners and managers of museums in the UK which are concerned with the commemoration of war-related events. This paper contributes towards an understanding of how visitors perceive interpretation employed by museums using modern and traditional exhibition techniques. The hypothesis that visitor perceptions of 'dark' issues in museum can be influenced using commentary and 'live interpretation' will be tentatively confirmed. The 'sanitised' war museum paradigm will be contrasted with modern and thought provoking exhibitivite techniques used within the Imperial War Museum of the North, Manchester.

The paper will introduce the phenomenon of 'dark' tourism and confirm a documented level of interest in this area. It will review interpretations of 'dark' sites and particularly, interpretation provided by the Imperial War Museum of the North, Manchester, UK. Research based on visitors to this museum in 2004 is cited in order to identify critical success factors in interpretation used by this Museum.

**Keywords:** Imperial War Museum of the North, dark tourism, interpretation, thanatourism.

## List of Abbreviations

BPS	The Big Picture Show
IWM	Imperial War Museum (London)
IWMN	Imperial War Museum of the North
MOD	Ministry of Defence
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

## Introduction

An increasing number of authors are addressing the attraction of death and disaster in the context of tourism behaviour (Lennon and Foley, 2000; Seaton, 1996; Dwork and Van Pelt, 1997). A common theme that emerges is the problem that faces governments and other authoritative stakeholders in representing sites associated with this phenomenon, within the bounds of veracity and appropriateness. Many 'dark' attractions are viewed by some as exploitative, over-commercialised or sensationalised. The result of such representations may mean that information can be presented to visitors in an inaccurate way. This may leave some (individuals) with reflections or opinions which are based

on the influence of the exhibitor, and are perhaps non-factual, or erroneous. One of the dangers may be the outright distortion of historical facts leading to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of events. The paper seeks to explore the impact on visitors of various communications media used in the Imperial War Museum of the North (IWMN).

### **Dark Tourism and the Significance of War**

The nexus between war and tourism according to Seaton (1999) has been a widespread and long established phenomenon. Thanatourism has involved the movement of visitors to sites associated with recent and historic incidences of death and disaster. These range from 'primary' sites, such as holocaust camps to sites of celebrity deaths. Seaton (1999: 131) highlights the significance of 'secondary' sites (such as museums and memorials) and these are described as "... symbolic representations of particular deaths, in locations unconnected with their occurrence." Seaton (*ibid.*) cites five motivations for travelling to 'dark' sites as:

- travel to witness public enactments of death;
- travel to see sites of mass or individual deaths after they have occurred;
- travel to internment sites of, and memorials to, the dead;
- travel to view material evidence/symbolic representations of particular deaths;
- travel for re-enactments or simulation of death.

The memories of warfare, according to the literature, last for generations. War is packaged into so many sources of entertainment aimed at all generations, ranging from video games to theatre, war re-enactments and films. Smith (1998: 219) develops the five motivational perspective suggested by Seaton (1999) and relates them to war and tourism under the categories of:

- emotional tourism;
- military tourism;
- political tourism; and,
- future war tourism.

Lennon and Foley (2000) give further clarification to war and its relationship to tourism using the term 'dark tourism'. The authors emphasise the problems that face tourism bodies / related organisations in presenting sites to the public. Of further interest (Lennon and Foley, 2000) are the remarks made by these authors on the use of media and other forms of oral and non-oral commentary styles used at sites. The consequences of some of this interpretation can include,

at best, incorrect or poorly communicated information and, at worst, falsifications of historical fact.

Holocaust sites are examined in the context of 'dark' attractions in Beech (2000) with particular reference to defining the types of tourists who visit. The author identifies visitors who have a personal connection with the site e.g. survivors, relatives etc., and general visitors with no direct or indirect connection. It is suggested that these tourists are 'buying' distinctly different products / experiences with different product lifecycles.

To develop the theme of representation of thanotourism sites, Duffy (1997) suggests that Holocaust museums (primarily in the United States) are challenging the traditional paradigm of representation. The writer argues that the European Holocaust has become a 'popular' concept reinforced by films (such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*) and the serenity of wartime commemoration. Such popularity has led to the questioning of the purely descriptive methods often employed by owners of museums with a Holocaust theme. Indeed, Duffy makes mention of the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam and its increasing association with contemporary intolerance, focusing on right wing political movements in Europe.

This change would appear to be a shift in the way that some museums wish to convey information to the visitor. Rather than simply presenting information on historical events, an attempt is made to 'modernise' the meaning. In order to develop this argument, the following discussion will examine interpretation and representation, firstly in general terms, and then in the context of war museums.

## Representations and Interpretation

The context of motivation has to be understood in terms of interpretation, which can be defined as,

"A set of communication techniques of varying degrees of effectiveness in varying situations which can be used to get particular messages across to particular groups of people. Interpretation becomes an adjunct to the communications industry."

(Uzzell, 1992: 5)

The quotation is given further context in its application to museums,

"The heritage industry is in the business of mass communication, and the boundary between museums and media, and that between reality and fantasy, between myth and mimesis in both sets of institutions is becoming increasingly blurred, increasingly indistinct."

(Silverstone, cited in Uzzell, 1992: 138).

There are a number of observations, which have been put forward in the study of the relationship between war and tourism motivation, and it is also feasible to suggest that the reasons for tourist visits are multifaceted. It may be argued that visitation is driven by emotion, which may range from genealogical interests and nostalgia visits, to raw curiosity. The fact that emotion is considered to be one of the primary motivations (Smith, 2003) may have implications when considering the presentation of information (see Siegenthaler, 2003). Indeed there is a mix of further motivations evident, including entertainment, curiosity and education.

Seaton and Lennon (2004: 2) argue that the media play a crucial role in visitation and perceptions of sites. Indeed, the authors suggest (using the example of the murder of school children in Dunblane, Scotland in 1997) that in Britain, "they (the media) have periodically constructed a meta-narrative of moral panic around it (thanatourism), through sensational exposes of dubiously verified stories."

However, the 'chronological distances' (the length of time since a tragic, or 'dark' event has occurred) inherent in historic memorial sites such as Auschwitz (Lennon and Foley, 2000), or in some museums, may be more difficult to bridge in terms of accuracy using commentary and interpretation methods. In both situations, it can be argued that commentary often sensationalises the event, or offers an abridged or biased communication of historical events.

Further evidence of distorted interpretation is given in the tourist guide books analysed by Siegenthaler (2002) in his research on dark sites. According to this author, victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings are almost absent from both text and illustrations. It is suggested that such remembrance is selective, and outside of time and historical circumstance. Emphasis is placed on encouraging the tourist to view each city in a post-war context, rather than raising wartime concerns. Indeed, one remembrance website and online museum (<http://www.csi.ad.ip/ABOMB/>) contains a quote by its designer (Professor Mitsuru Ohba) posted as follows,

"The website is neither meant to condemn nor condone the bombing, but is meant as a way for people to express their views on how to achieve peace, on what peace is, and other thoughts about peace. We hope that everyone will write in their thoughts."

The mission statement of this website is to provide all readers with accurate information concerning the impact that the first atomic bomb ('Little Boy') had on Hiroshima. Once again the 'darker' issues associated with the historical event are eschewed, and the website visitor's attention is drawn to the importance of peace, as opposed to the 'darker' aspects of war. The relevance of the methodologies used to present information on the Japanese bombings have implications for tourist interpretations of dark / thanatouristic sites.

## **Museums and the Centrality of Interpretation**

To legitimise the importance of interpretation in the 'arena' of dark tourism in museums, it is necessary to review existing literature. Uzzel (1992) challenges the role of interpretation in changing attitudes and behaviour. This author considers the lack of papers examining the effectiveness of interpretation in the museum environment. One critical difference between interpretation and conventional instruction is acknowledged by Ham and Krumpal (1996: 2) who argue that,

"Interpretation, by necessity, is tailored to a noncaptive audience - that is, an audience that freely chooses to attend or ignore communication content without fear of punishment, or forfeiture of reward as in an academic setting where students must pay attention to course material in order to pass exams and receive good grades. Audiences of interpretative programmes . . . freely choose whether to attend and are free to decide not only how long they will pay attention to communication content but also their level of involvement with it."

This infers that museum visitors are also likely to be selective not only in terms of the materials that they view, but also about their level of interaction and the subsequent opinions they form.

An analysis of the development of contemporary museum exhibits is made by Alsford and Parry (1991). They acknowledge that 'live interpretation' has become a popular interpretative technique and suggest that the technique existed during the first half of last Century, in the form of guided tours. The trend towards more modern methods, it is suggested, has evolved as a result of the increasing use of 'popular culture' in the form of media such as magazines, film and television. These methods include the use of audio and visual museum media incorporating technology such as television screens and loudspeakers. It is argued that such methods of interpretation may engage the intellectual participation of visitors,

". . . by encouraging them to register their own judgements on the issues. Slavery, funerals, crime, temperance and religious revivals are among the value-ridden subjects which have been tackled."

*(Alsford and Parry, 1991: 9)*

Interactive exhibits, according to Fernandez and Benlloch (2000) are an example of modern interpretative communications media employed by some museums in order to present information in such a way as to capture and hold the attention of the visitor. It is argued that interactive techniques employed by museums are a valuable learning resource for visitors, particularly from schools and colleges.

Retention capacity has an important role to play when considering visitor interpretation in museums. From the point of view of the museum, it must use methods which are valued by the visitor (such as theatre and sensationalism) in order to sustain attendance revenues. Perkins (1999: 2) questions the authenticity of artefacts when they are complemented with (or replaced by) informational displays or interactive exhibits.

The phenomenon of the 'heritage spectacle' is examined in Walsh (1992) where it is noted that the reconstruction of historic events has been going on for at least a century. Walsh acknowledges the use of multi-media and interaction in the Imperial War Museum, London. The museum's centre-pieces are the 'Blitz Experience' and the World War 1 'Trench Experience'. In reviewing the Trench Experience it is noted that (Walsh, 1992: 111),

"The installation invites the public to relive a moment of history . . . Once inside each visitor feels the full impact of the battlefield with gun flashes, smoke, sound re-enactment and authentic smells"

Walsh calls into question the authenticity of such representations, claiming emphasis lies on the authenticity of form, rather than that of experience. In this sense, it would seem that interpretative techniques used, particularly in heritage museums, have influence over the preservation and appreciation of exhibits by the public.

Whitmarsh (2000) argues that the commemorative aspect of war museums directly affects their style of interpretation. The literature also contends that war museums historically seek to focus on 'safe' and uncontroversial ('sanitised') subject matter. Specifically, the author claims technology is a frequent theme within war museums, since this aspect of war is usually accepted, rather than questioned.

The next section of this paper will focus on the Imperial War Museum of the North (IWMN) which purports to offer the visitor an impartial insight into the human and social costs of war (Forrester and Walker, 2004).

## **The Imperial War Museum of the North**

The flagship war museum within the UK, The Imperial War Museum (IWM) in Lambeth Road, London was created in 1917. In total there are also four other IWM sites, which are: Duxford, Cambridgeshire; the Cabinet War Rooms, London; HMS Belfast, London; and, the IWMN in Manchester. The IWM London is the primary resource centre for all these sites. Artefacts and exhibits are released to the Northern museum at the discretion of the IWM London who receive these, in the first instance, from the Ministry of Defence (MOD).

The IWM is comprised of permanent exhibitions offering specific areas of interest to its visitors, including the Cabinet War Rooms, the Holocaust

Exhibition and the Crimes Against Humanity Exhibition. The IWM London also contains various thematic art galleries and provides learning resources for students and other interested parties.

The IWMN was opened in July 2002, and attracted 384,000 visitors in the first part-year of operation (July 2002 to March 2003). The operators estimate some 280,000 visitors in the second year. The museum does not charge for admission. The IWMN is located in the Salford Quays area which comprises hotels and attractions including Old Trafford (the Manchester United Football Club stadium), the Lowry Project (encompassing The Lowry Designer Outlet), The Plaza and The Digital World Centre. The museum was designed by leading contemporary architect Daniel Libeskind and the building itself is considered to be one of the primary features of the museum which is often the focus of writing (see for example Forrester and Walker, 2004; Handley, 2002). The exterior is made almost entirely from aluminium and is intended as,

“... a visionary symbol of the effects of war ... The building is based on the concept of a world shattered by conflict, a fragmented globe in three interlocking shards. These shards represent conflict on land, in the air and on water.”

(<http://www.iwm.org.uk/north/background.htm>)

The interior was also designed with the intention to address social issues of warfare and was set out ‘awkwardly’ in order to intentionally disorientate the visitor. The principal message that the IWMN wish to communicate to visitors is the idea that ‘War Shapes Lives’, indeed this is inherent in the museum’s marketing slogan (IWMN, 2002). The museum attempts to communicate this notion primarily through the use of a mixture of interactive displays including audio-visual media. The IWMN brochure states that, “The Museum’s collections reflect people’s varied experience of war ... The Timeline (explained later) puts people’s experiences into a chronological framework” (IWMN, 2002).

Crucially, the IWMN wishes to explore and represent a social side of war, rather than provide an opportunity for visitors to ‘marvel’ at large displays of ‘sanitised’ technology. The social experience is confirmed in Handley (2002) who noted, “Through its bunker-like entrance the human perspective takes over and the museum’s marketing label – War Shapes Lives – is given full meaning ... The enormous main exhibition space gives way to six ‘silos’ (small enclosed areas concerned with specific themes) housing more intimate exhibitions ... Experience of war, its legacy, women and war, impressions, science and the effects of war.”

The author goes on to panegyrisé the museum as a place of imagination and innovation. The Silos referred to in this article are one of five features which

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are paramount to the experience of the IWMN. These are listed (IWMN, 2002) in Table I.

**Table I: Five Features of the Imperial War Museum of the North**

Feature	Description
1. The Big Picture Show (BPS)	This is what the museum assert is their main attraction and is an audio-visual 'show' exploring war. Images are projected onto every wall (and people around walls) filling the entire Exhibition Space with a quite loud and highly visual short film (circa 15 minutes). The three films listed in the 2004 brochure are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Children and War</li><li>• Why War?</li><li>• Weapons of War</li></ul>
2. The Timeline	This is a large mural spread around the perimeter of the Main Exhibition Space that offers a chronological, visual tour of warfare throughout the twentieth century. The events cover the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War and images of the September 11 <sup>th</sup> , 2000 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, USA.
3. The Silos	Six towering 'enclaves' each with its own intimate sub-theme. These are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Experience of War</li><li>• Women and War</li><li>• Impressions of War</li><li>• Empire, Commonwealth and War</li><li>• Science, Technology and War</li><li>• Legacy of War</li></ul>
4. 'Time Stacks'	Within each silo the visitor can 'call up' objects from the museum's collections by touching a button, and in some cases actually examine historical artefacts.
5. The Viewing platform	At the entrance to the museum (which is designed to mimic an air shard) there is an elevator which transports visitors 150 feet up to a platform.

There are other ancillary features which include a café, a restaurant and the 'Green Room' which is a designated learning area. The IWMN hosts a number of events throughout each calendar year which are referred to as 'Special Exhibitions'.

The museum was selected as an appropriate 'dark' attraction in which to carry out empirical work on visitor interpretation / perception in an attempt to offer some insight which may be significant for the broader arena of 'dark tourism'. In the next section of the paper, reportage of the research will be provided.

### Research Findings

Permission to visit the IWMN to carry out intercept questionnaires was sought and granted with minimal restriction. Questionnaires were administered over



three periods in early 2004, for some eight days in total. Interviews were conducted with visitors who had recently exited the Main Exhibition Space. Some 150 responses were gained over the eight-day period, and the main findings are detailed below.

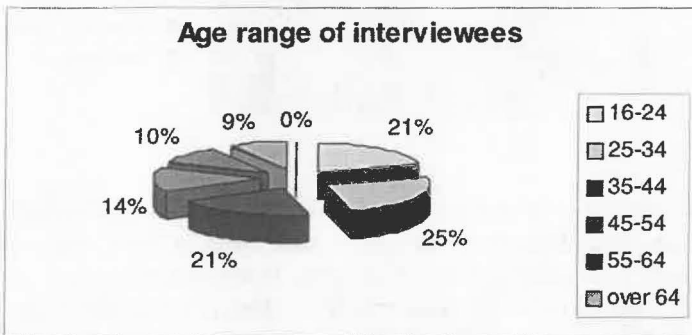
Since the desired sample of respondents was reasonable (n=150) the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 11.5 (SPSS) was selected to analyse data. It should be noted that the primary limitations associated with this research were those of time, location and sample. The research was carried out only at a particular time of the year (late January to late February). In addition, another researcher was distributing separate questionnaires during the second visit to the museum, which meant that the interview sample was effectively reduced to around 50% of the total visitors during this time. A gender analysis of all interviewees is presented in Table II.

**Table II: Gender Analysis of Visitors Interviewed**

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	77	51%
Female	73	49%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100%</b>

The interviewer was asked to refrain from questioning any visitor under the age of 16. An almost even split between genders is apparent from Table II. The range of ages of the interviewees is presented in Figure I.

**Figure I: Age Range of Interviewees**



The final analysis of basic information, place of residence of interviewees, is presented in Figure II.

Figure II: Place of Residence of Interviewees

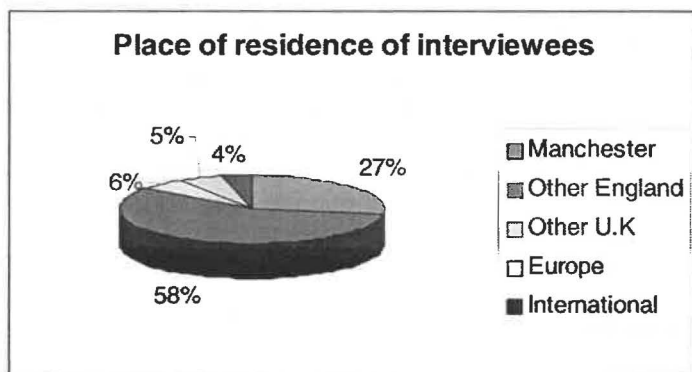
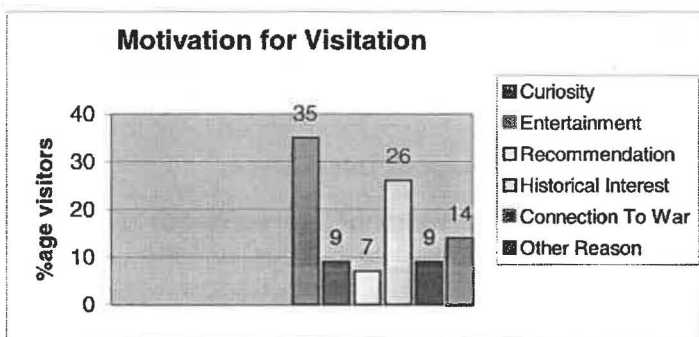


Figure III presents findings on the reasons why interviewees visited the museum.

Figure III: Motivation for Visitation to the IWMN



The majority of interviewees came to the museum to satisfy curiosity, perhaps confirming the claim by Slade (2003) that visits to 'dark' sites can often be incidental. The next significant category is visitors motivated by historical interest, whilst a minority of interviewees identified that they were motivated by a personal recommendation from a third party. The mix of motivations tentatively confirms the argument given in Kotler (1994, cited in Beech, 2000) that each type of visitor is 'buying' a distinctly different experience.

The other significant piece of analysis is the likelihood of interviewees visiting a similar attraction in future, which the interviewer clarified as meaning 'any

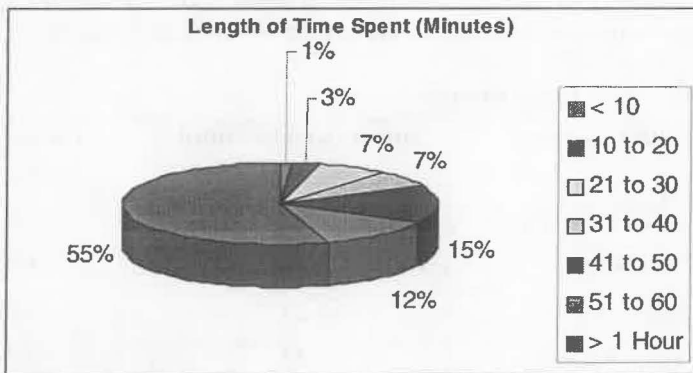
attraction associated with war and conflict'. The findings are presented in Table III.

**Table III: Future Visitation to Other 'Dark' Attractions**

Likelihood of Visiting a Similar Attraction	Number of Interviewees	Percentage
Very Likely	86	57%
Likely	42	28%
Not Sure	13	9%
Unlikely	7	5%
Very Unlikely	2	1%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100%</b>

The results confirm a high level of interest in this type of attraction, with only 15% of the sample suggesting any aspiration to rule out visiting a similar site. Other motivational data included the number of interviewees who bought items from the shop and the length of time spent in the museum. Figure IV presents data on the amount of time visitors spent in the museum.

**Figure IV: Time Spent by Interviewees in the IWMN**



More than half of the interviewees (55%) spent over an hour in the museum, with a further 27% spending at least over 40 minutes (the longest visit was three hours). The fact that a significant majority spent over an hour in the museum may go some way towards confirming that media and interactivity captivates the audience and holds the visitor's attention (Fernandez and Benlloch, 2000).

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The literature review set out some of the main methods by which museums and other 'dark' sites set about influencing visitor interpretation. At least five significant methods of presenting information to visitors in such a way as to influence interpretation were identified. These can be listed as:

- the use of multi-media, or 'live' interpretation (Alsford and Parry, 1991);
- the use of displays;
- the use of interactive exhibits (Fernandez and Benlloch, 2000);
- providing human commentary, including tours;
- captivating imagination and holding attention (Ham and Krumpel, 1996).

The following analysis in the context of IWMN attempts to measure the extent to which this element of the IWMN's aims / mission was realised.

### Interpretation of Multi-Media ('Live' Interpretation)

The Big Picture Show is considered by the museum as their 'unique selling point', and they suggested that this feature was perhaps the most celebrated aspect of the visit. The finding for 'enjoyed most' confirms the level of interest with a majority of 39% identifying this aspect as the most enjoyable feature. One hundred and twenty-seven of the visitors interviewed, or 85%, confirmed that they had experienced a 'show' whilst in the museum. In order to assess how influential this feature was, visitors were asked to identify the theme of the show they had watched (from three possible themes available). The results of visitor interpretations of this feature are detailed in Table IV.

**Table IV: BPS Themes Identified**

<b>BPS Theme</b>	<b>Number who Identified this Theme</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Weapons of War	44	34%
Why War?	23	19%
Children of War	26	21%
Other Response	32	26%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>100%</b>

One third of interviewees watched the 'Weapons of War' show, whilst only 19% recalled having viewed 'Why War?' Some visitors watched more than one show. In these instances, individuals were asked to recall the most memorable show in order to yield a result indicative of preference, thus providing a measure of their most memorable interpretation. The results confirm high interest in

this multi-media feature, thus supporting the hypothesis of the paper, that opinions on 'dark' issues are influenced by commentary, or 'live interpretation'.

Table V presents data on how much of the written information interviewees read during their visit.

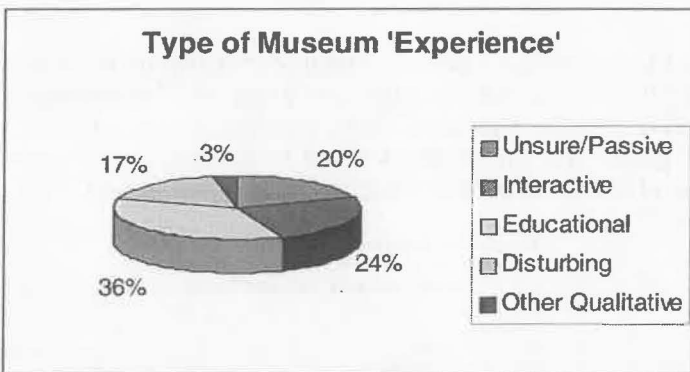
**Table V: Estimated Percentage of Written Information Read**

Percentage of Information Read	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of all Interviewees
0 - 25%	41	27%
25 - 50%	44	29%
50 - 75%	31	21%
75 - 100%	34	23%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100%</b>

No significant majority is apparent, yet there is a slight bias towards interviewees who read around '25-50%' of written information. Further analysis reveals that the more visual information read by visitors, the more likely they were to leave the exhibition with thoughts on contemporary war events.

Visitors were asked to describe the museum 'experience' and the findings were subsequently grouped into typologies, as suggested by Wickens (2002: 834). Figure V presents these typologies as arranged through analysing the adjectives used to describe the 'experience'.

**Figure V: Visitor Perceptions of Experience Provided**



The graph in Figure V confirms that a majority of visitors realised the aims of the museum which were to encourage discussion, education and interactivity.

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Further analysis reveals what interviewees thought the museum was 'trying to show people (about)' and typologies are listed in Table VI, followed by Table VII which details data on visitors who were reminded of a contemporary war-related event.

**Table VI: Typologies of Interviewees – What the Museum Communicated**

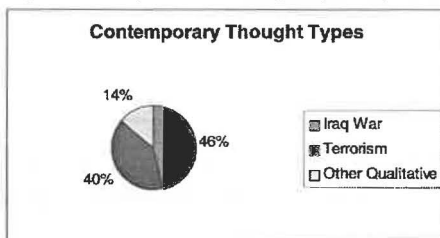
Perception of Museum 'Message'	Number Identifying this 'Message'	Percentage of Total
Uncertain / Passive	24	16%
'Human' Value Identified	55	37%
Historical Message	21	14%
Futility of War	39	26%
Other Qualitative	11	7%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table VII: Number of Visitors Who Were Reminded of Contemporary War**

Contemporary Thought Confirmed	Count of Interviewees	Percentage of all Interviewees
Yes	112	75%
No	38	25%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure VI presents typologies of visitor interpretation of the museum message. A majority of visitors who identified the 'human side' of war were reminded of a contemporary warfare issue. There are clearly only a limited number of contemporary war events which could be cited by interviewees, the most popular of which emerged as terrorism and the War in Iraq.

**Figure VI: Categories of Contemporary Thoughts**



The IWMN assert that they encourage discussion through the use of tours and 'sessions' during which people can handle objects and ask questions (IWM, 2002). Two data sets were produced to test this. The first was the ratio of people who asked staff for further information and this consisted of only 15% of interviewees. Only 10% of interviewees handled any of the objects in the museum, and 8% of these handled an 'uncovered' object, for example the tank (as opposed to handling an object during a scheduled 'handling session').

## Conclusions

The aim of the research was to shed light on the techniques used by the IWMN to influence visitor understanding of the museum context. The paper confirms the high level of interest in visitation and interpretation of sites associated with death, disaster, and warfare. Existing literature has assessed the difficulties involved in representing exhibits and information to the visiting public in an accurate, impartial light.

The IWMN is considered by some theorists to be a revolutionary heritage centre which views warfare not through the technology 'lens', but through the 'lens' of the social, or human impacts of war (Handley, 2002; Forrester and Walker, 2004). The museum manager interviewed during the early stages of the study described the museum as an interactive learning centre which tries to convey the 'human cost' of war. Visitors to the museum appear to realise, or appreciate this as they interpret the museum as an educational and interactive heritage centre which emphasises the social element of warfare. Typologies of visitors became apparent during the analysis of adjectives used by respondents to describe experiences and reflections of the museum empiricism. Essentially, these comprised interviewees who found (through qualitative analysis) the museum to be:

- interactive;
- educational;
- implicit of human suffering (including contemporary suffering, for example in Iraq);
- alluding to the futility of warfare since war is 'about people'.

As is the case with most primary research, several methodological limitations arose throughout the course of the study. Research was conducted only at a particular time of the year, only on visitors to the IWMN, and only on interviewees over the age of sixteen years. The findings identified five critical success factors employed within the museum. They can be considered 'critical' in the sense that they most influenced visitor interpretation within the research sample. These methods were effective in influencing visitor interpretation through:

- the use of multi-media;
- the use of displays;
- the use of interactive exhibits/displays;
- providing human commentary;
- capturing visitor imagination and attention.

The fact that few visitors made comments on the third and fourth categories suggests that either:

- the museum fails to provide an interactive experience; or (more likely),
- the primary research was conducted at a time when very few tours and handling sessions were only scheduled for a particular reason or reasons.

The subsequent visitor typologies identified justify the argument that media and commentary influence visitor interpretation within the 'dark' museum environment. A high percentage of interviewees identified that war 'is about people' and the museum is concerned with the social aspects of warfare, as the mission statement of the museum suggests.

The most significant finding from the research is the fact that a niche age-group may have been identified. The age group which most frequently identified the social costs of war (conveyed via the Museum's use of multi-media) has emerged as the 25-34 age group suggesting that thanatourism may have a particular niche, perhaps more influenced by, or attracted to related methods of representation.

Whitmarsh (2000) argues that the commemorative aspect of war museums directly affects their style of interpretation. This is quite apparent in the IWMN, where the primary attraction is considered to be the Big Picture Show. This state-of-the-art multi-media exhibit appeared to have the greatest effect on people, in terms of conveying the 'human cost' of war. The Time-line exhibit demonstrates the fact that the museum is both commemorative and contemporary in style. The murals and exhibits on recent war-related events around this feature seemed to impact significantly on the visitor's overall interpretation as so many identified in the research. Visitor interpretation can be considered a crucial factor in successful museum management in terms of maximising visitor retention capacity and motivating visitors to return.

The findings thus represent a useful pilot study of visitor interpretation and impacts on visitors in sites associated with 'dark' tourism. This paper has implicitly outlined the differences between what can be classified as a 'primary' or 'secondary' thanatouristic site. The IWMN is explicitly in the 'secondary' category, since it is a commemorative institution located away from any 'primary' war site. It would be of value (to the domain of visitor interpretation



of 'dark' attractions) to conduct similar research at a site where an atrocity or war-related event took place. For example it would be useful to carry out primary research in Auschwitz, or at Omaha Beach. It would also be of further interest to analyse the reactions of visitors to a primary 'dark' site, where the exhibits are perhaps of a more sensitive and/or controversial nature.

The IWMN was created in order to give audiences in the North of England access to the national collections. The focal point of the museum is to convey the message that 'war shapes lives'. The findings from this research confirm that the visitors interpret the museum context in this way, and that the exhibits and multi-media used in the museum are well received in achieving this aim. The findings also confirm the mission statement in showing that people are 'encouraged to understand contemporary issues relating to war'.

The IWMN can be considered a successful and innovative museum, combining architecture with modern exhibition techniques in order to convey a 'social' message to visitors. It is an important addition to the Imperial War Museums in the UK and it widens public access to the collections. This paper confirms a level of interest in the museum, and also confirms the mission of the museum, 'to stimulate interest in conflict and its impact on society'.

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### *About the Author*

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**Mr Craig Wight** works within the Moffat Centre for Travel and Tourism Business Development. His research interests include Dark Tourism and information systems and technology in the travel and tourism supply chain.

**Professor John Lennon** is the holder of the Moffat Chair and is Director of the Moffat Centre for Travel and Tourism Business Development, providing leadership in relation to the Centre's research and consultancy activities. His research interests include: Dark Tourism; benchmarking and best practice; national tourism organisation and operation; heritage and visitor attractions; and, measuring the impact of tourism events and activities.