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ON THE BEAT: STORIES FROM 1914-1918. A FRESH APPROACH TO INTERPRETING CRIME HISTORY AT BISHOP'S STORTFORD MUSEUM

Dorian Knight¹

Abstract

Following the donation of a rare collection of policing documents from World War I, Bishop's Stortford Museum displayed these remarkable accounts in a temporary exhibition entitled 'On the Beat: The Great War 1914-1918.'² Within this article I aim to theorise the problematic aspects of museum exhibition design and the construction of meaning within the context of exhibiting historical policing archives. This will be achieved by addressing specific elements within the gallery space, including the use of colour, atmosphere and emotion as well as the primary communicative approach of employing graphic novels and comic strips. I endeavour to illustrate that using a thoughtful, targeted and multimodal exhibitionary complex is a highly successful means of disseminating policing history to a broad audience.

Keywords: police archives, policing history, policing during World War I, Bishop's Stortford Museum, exhibiting archival material

Introduction: The Policing Archive at Bishop's Stortford

In a speech outlining the commemorative plans to mark the centenary of World War I in 2014, the Prime Minister David Cameron declared that the government wished to 'put young people front and centre in our commemoration and to ensure that the sacrifice and service of a hundred years ago is still remembered in a hundred years time.' He went on to state that 'we stand ready to incorporate more ideas because a truly national commemoration cannot just be about national initiatives and government action, it needs to be local too.'³ Consequently, as noted by Phipps in her recent paper on war and commemoration within the United Kingdom, 'the Heritage Lottery Fund set aside money for community projects and local remembrance to successfully take place', with the intention of particularly targeting young people.⁴ As a result, a successful bid for a Heritage Lottery Funded grant of £88,000 in partnership with the Hertfordshire Archive and Local Studies HALS, enabled the Bishop's Stortford Museum exhibition 'On The Beat: Stories From 1914-

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² The exhibition ran from 4 August 2014 until 20 January 2015.

³ David Cameron, Speech at Imperial War Museum on First World War centenary plans, 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans/>, accessed 17 January 2015).

⁴ Amanda Phipps, *Exploring the First World War Through Theatre in Education: A Case Study in Bishop Stortford* (in press, 2015).

1918'. This display highlighted local stories from World War I as detailed in contemporary police accounts found following the redevelopment of the town's Victorian police station. These records (in total 102 volumes and 15 assorted bundles) were received due to an extraordinary gift donated in the 1990s to Bishop's Stortford Museum and Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (see Figure 1).⁵ These comprised a collection of Hertfordshire police documents from the 1840s to 1919 ranging from general occurrence books to charge sheets and constable's journals. Forming the backbone of the exhibition, these papers (following conservation treatment funded by the National Manuscript Conservation Trust and the Radcliffe Trust, required due to severe water damage as well as mould and pest infections) provide a unique insight into policing at home during the conflict. Indeed, it must not be underestimated how valuable this archive is as an historical repository of crime within the United Kingdom. As illuminated within an internally produced rarity assessment, 'only West Sussex has a comparable coverage of the First World War period and very few late 19th century records survive elsewhere in England.'⁶

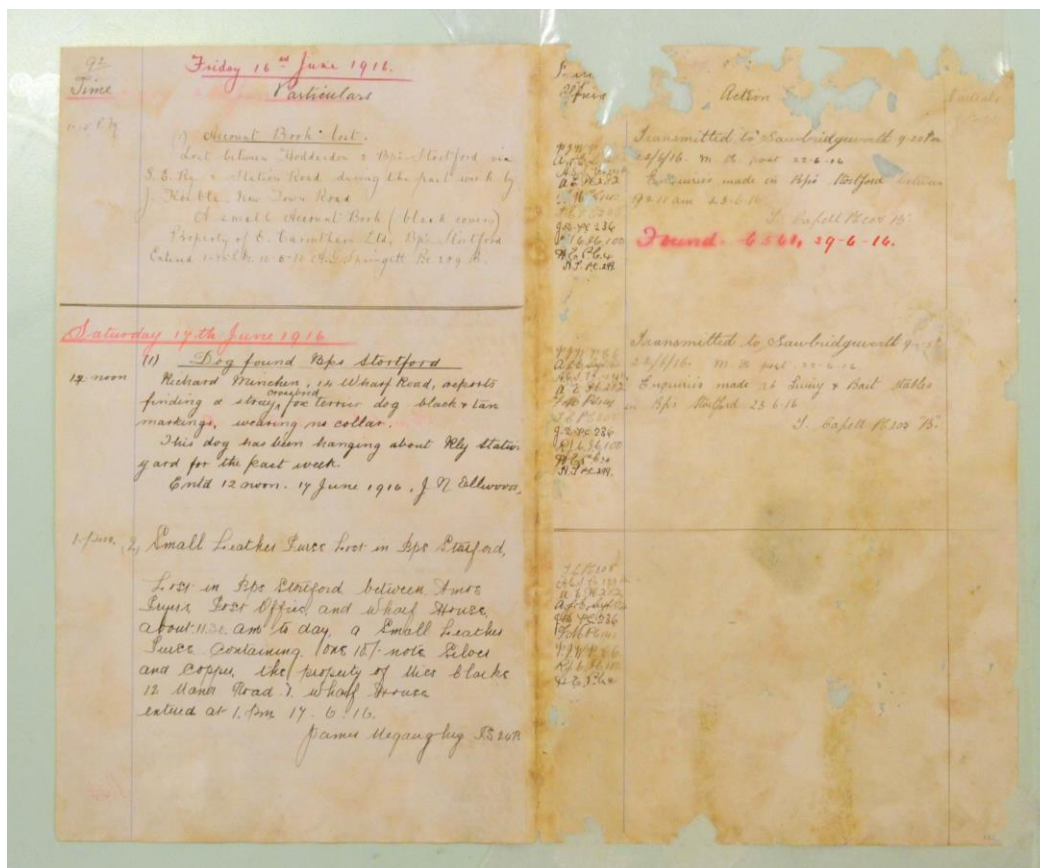


Figure 1: Copyright Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies

⁵ At the time of writing these records are not publicly accessible. However, they are shortly to be made available on the Herts Past Policing website, available at: <http://www.hertspastpolicing.org.uk>.

⁶ Nicholas Cornell, *Bishops Stortford Police Records – Rarity Report* (Unpublished, 2014).

Interestingly, the war inevitably meant that the police force in Bishop's Stortford was required to deal with a range of social problems never experienced previously. As highlighted within the exhibition space, a policeman's typical day at the time could involve reports of foreign spies by the railway station, the attempted suicide of a returned soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or a theft from the local orchard. These incidents also necessitated the police to adapt their working methods due to the distressing circumstances of the time; for example, many of those arrested argued that their issues were created by wartime conditions, concerns the exhibition aimed to fully explore.

Within this article I am concerned with problematising both the visual elements of exhibition design and the way they produce meaning as well as the unconventional curatorial methods chosen in communicating this within the gallery space. The aim is to open up and analyse the process of constructing meaning from both a visual and interpretive point of view within the context of the subject matter of police documentation during World War I, thereby illuminating how criminality and policing can be constructed through the prism of the museum exhibition.

1 Telling the Narrative within the Museum Space

As the criminologist Robert Reiner phrases it; 'policing in Great Britain has always been as much a matter of image as substance.'⁷ Indeed the police force and the crimes they manage have been represented in innumerable different ways through equally diverse means and methods. These range from televised police dramas through to contemporary novels, with each medium playing to different strengths in the manner it creates representations and narratives of policing and crime. The museum exhibition as one such medium has received relatively little extant scholarly attention in its representations of policing and crime. Although the details of what this entails is primarily addressed below, it is worthwhile briefly theorising on how the curatorial team at Bishop's Stortford broadly conceptualised the museum space for this project.

Traditionally within the museum sector, disciplinary boundaries comprising of curators, graphic designers and architects as well as other roles are highly

⁷ Robert Reiner, 'The Dialectics of Dixon: The Changing Image of the TV Cop' in Mike Stephens and Saul Becker (eds.) *Police Force, Police Service* (Macmillan Publishing, 2004), 11-32, 11.

compartmentalised. This is partly due to the nature of the material that is worked with, respectively artefacts, visual interpretation and architecture. Within this wide spectrum of material and activity, in recent museological thought narrative is the linking dialogue between these sub-disciplines, potentially facilitating the creation of powerful and embodied museum experiences. This concept of narrative is particularly strong within the gallery space due to its multidimensionality and multimodality. Following Macleod *et al.*⁸

Whereas storytelling in literature is determined and confined by the linear arrangement of text on a page, in cinema to visual images on a screen; and in traditional theatre to the static audience with its singular perspective, the museum represents a fully embodied experience of objects and media in three-dimensional space, unfolding in a potentially free flowing temporal sequence.

Bearing this in mind the staff at Bishop's Stortford decided to take an approach that recognised the inherently spatial character of museum narratives as a means of connecting with human perception and imagination at the deepest level. Thus the following pages chart aspects of the range of interpretive approaches addressing notions of visitor experience in the making and experiencing of the 'On the Beat' project. Following Macleod *et al* again on their theoretical approach:⁹

At its heart is a vision of the museum space as theatre, as dramatic ritual, as a telling of the world in miniature, and as a site where space and place making connect with human perception, imagination and memory.

2 Interpretive Challenges with Graphic Novels

In curatorial meetings at the museum from fairly early on it became clear that particular challenges for the project at Bishop's Stortford would include presenting the material effectively. The collection of documents although a treasure trove for historians of crime do not lend themselves well to public display and accessibility, being damaged and fairly inconspicuous as artefacts and thus lacking any overt visual appeal.¹⁰ Additionally there were concerns of content; as the record's stories were perceptibly out of living memory there was a curatorial desire to engage empathy amongst visitors, to illuminate the cataclysmic effect the war had both on individuals and all levels of society as manifest through police documentation. For

⁸ Suzanne Macleod *et al*, 'Introduction: Museum Making: The Place of Narrative', in Suzanne Macleod *et al* (eds.) *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (Routledge, 2004), xix-xxiii, xxi.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See the following publication that provided inspiration on exhibiting objects that are visually un compelling: Francesca Monti and Suzanne Keens (eds.) *Museums and Silent Objects: Designing Effective Exhibitions* (Ashgate Press, 2012).

these reasons it was decided by the curatorial team to take a fresh approach to interpretation and enlist the services of students from Middlesex University's Illustration Department. Working in partnership with the curatorial team, the idea was formed to tell these accounts using both graphic novels and a singular digitised graphic narrative thereby communicating these stories through a unique combination of text and sequential illustration that works within its own aesthetic vocabulary. For the reasons outlined below this approach seemed eminently suitable for an exhibition concerning historical crime and policing.

The graphic novel is a relatively new medium that has grown out of the comic book, with a controversial history that is creative, engaging and renowned as a vehicle frequently used for exploring social issues.¹¹ At the root of this, as the scholar Bradford W. Wright notes in his seminal history of the comic book and the graphic novel, this is the core concept of societal relevance;¹² comics had always dealt with pressing social issues, ranging from the Vietnam War, civil rights, feminism and environmentalism, frequently questioning old assumptions and challenging established authorities instead of endorsing traditional values. This has stemmed from two competing cultural streams: firstly the often politically motivated and self-consciously leftist explorations of social and political issues that challenged the orthodoxy; and secondly from the publishing industry's commercial imperative to innovate in times of slumping sales. As Wright puts it, 'taking their cue from trends of youth culture, comic book makers have often concluded that there was a sizable demand for entertainment that had something meaningful and political to say about the world.'¹³ Following on from this, as Versaci writes;

the marginality of comics has allowed comic book creators to take advantage of others (dis)regard for them in order to create representations that can be both surprising and subversive. If one characteristic of good literature is that it challenges our ways of thinking, then comics' cultural position is such that they are able to mount these challenges in unique ways.¹⁴

This idea is related to the concept of 'multiple literacies', a notion within educational theory that has become common parlance in recent years due to 'the rapid growth in new communications technologies and a growing interest in how people themselves

¹¹ Gretchen Schwarz, 'Media Literacy, Graphic Novels and Social Issues', *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education*, 7(4) (2007), 1-11.

¹² Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 223.

¹³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 234.

¹⁴ Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as literature* (Continuum, 2007), 12.

experience literacies.¹⁵ Thus, literacy can no longer be understood as a single, knowable quantity that is both narrow and standardised, but rather it encompasses many different perspectives, including that of the graphic novel. In this case it conveys a very visceral, immediate and easily accessible sense of the catastrophe that the war brought to a small English town, enabling communication of the stories that lie penned within the police records (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Copyright Michael O'Brien and Bishop's Stortford Museum

In the words of Nancy Slonims, programme leader at Middlesex, 'I think using mediums such as the graphic novel and animation to tackle the stories from Bishop's Stortford allowed us to translate these accounts into something that felt incredibly fresh and easy to connect with.'¹⁶ This is underlined by comments from the exhibition's guest book. These include: 'very evocative and well presented' (anonymous, 30/8/2014); 'an innovative way to tell the personal stories' (anonymous, 4/9/2014); 'brilliant and imaginative use of graphic art' (anonymous, 31/12/2014) and 'a really great idea to combine the great stories and artistic interpretations – really amazing work' (anonymous, 26/9/2014). Additionally, the exhibition's graphic novels

¹⁵ Gretchen Schwarz, 'Graphic Novels, New Literacies, and Good Old Social Justice', *ALAN Review* summer issue (2010), 71-75, 73.

¹⁶ Nancy Slonims, 'BS Film Compressed'. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhgDZ9UrVvU&feature=youtu.be> (2014, Accessed 12 November 2014).

seemed particularly successful with school groups, a great boon considering the governmental specifications for engaging young people with World War I commemoration through local initiatives, as outlined in the introduction to this article. However, although museum staff believed this interpretive approach to be beneficial within the context of the project which is suggested by the comments above, other aspects of exhibition design had to be carefully considered and scrutinised as elaborated upon below.

3 Curating for a Stiff Upper Lip: Spatial Storytelling within the Context of the English Wartime Experience

i) Emotions, Personal Stories and Clothing

Within museums there is frequently the implicit assumption that knowledge is both one-dimensional and transferable, with these institutions seldom revealing doubts or multiple angles.¹⁷ As such, many museums have aimed, or at least have been traditionally seen to produce 'truthful' presentations of reality.¹⁸ In contrast, the curatorial team at Bishop's Stortford were interested in an open, subjective and, most importantly, an emotive approach where there was the potential for sensorial and empathetic interpretations of the collection, to be strongly encouraged by the exhibition design. Indeed, the emotional responses elicited by objects within the museum environment have garnered recent critical attention;¹⁹ following Watson there is now a recognition that 'museums and galleries are places where people feel as well as think.'²⁰ This turn towards emotions has particular relevance for the exhibition at Bishop's Stortford.

In his seminal study of the French nation, Reddy writes on the use of emotional management styles by leaders and rulers to ensure national success.²¹ After Watson (in press), 'working with ideas adopted from the discipline of anthropology he [Reddy] argues that each nation adopts a range of emotional expressions.'²² What is insinuated is that emotional responses can be culturally constructed for the benefit of

¹⁷ See: Eilean Hooper-Greenhill. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (Routledge, 2007).

¹⁸ See: Annette B. Fromm et al (eds.) *Museums and Truth* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

¹⁹ Sandra Dudley (ed.), *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (Routledge, 2009).

²⁰ Sheila Watson, 'Feeling, Emotion and the Nation: Museums, History and the Evocation of the Senses' (in press 2014).

²¹ William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (2002, Cambridge University Press).

²² Watson, 'Feeling, Emotion and the Nation', (in press).

a particular nation. In their 2005 publication, Winter and Prost compare both the common French and British emotional responses to World War I; namely that the British adopt a critical perspective which presents the loss of life as futile and a waste, in comparison with the French attitude which understands the war to have been one of national survival. In turn the German view, that the war was not lost but the German people were unfairly punished at Versailles, colours the narrative of that conflict. Thus any emotional reaction elicited by a particular object or photograph, gallery space or painting, is mediated through the historical context in which the narrative is placed.²³

As an exhibition primarily focused on aspects of the First World War experience local to both England and the town of Bishop's Stortford, the conventionalised national narrative outlined above regarding British perception of the war was explored through exhibition design, examined below and strongly encouraged by the use of personal stories.

Following Watson, 'emotional connections are made through the use of narrative devices which enable us to place ourselves in the story',²⁴ contemporary research suggests that we engage with stories to the extent that 'the same brain regions that are active in real-life situations fire up when a fictitious character encounters an equivalent situation. This response occurs whether we read or see an image in a film and can involve emotional responses'.²⁵ Although this empathy with characters (either fictitious or real) may be most commonly thought of as associated with both literature and film, I posit that it is also very possible to conjure up the person behind the story within the exhibitionary and museum framework as well, as was attempted in the gallery at Bishop's Stortford. This was accomplished in a number of ways.

The exhibition uses a video, with a running time of a little over five minutes, presented in the style of a graphic novel with a running commentary on the wartime experience within the town. This is part of a common strategy used by museums to elicit emotional engagement with narratives through audio. In this case a very monotone voice (read from a contemporary script authored by the curatorial team and voiced by a member of the artist's team) insinuates the sheer stupidity of

²³ Watson, *Feeling, Emotion and Nation* (in press) summarising Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*. (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

²⁴ Watson, 'Feeling, Emotion and the Nation' (in press).

²⁵ Jessica Marshall, 'Gripping Yarns', *New Scientist*, 2799, (2011), 45-7; 46.

sending young men to war and to their death, with a focus on how banal death became at the front. This sentiment is bought to the fore by the concluding speech that states 'yet police report that much like the day before and much like the day after, it was just another day in Bishop's Stortford', emphasising the link between death and the commonplace. During the clip a dying soldier silently falling, flailing, through the darkness is portrayed on screen with the names of men from Bishop's Stortford killed in the conflict briefly flickering up on the screen to be read before disappearing again. By drawing attention to the wartime experience through a deliberately dispassionate tone, a very local sense of loss is presented, as the restrained statement that describes suffering deliberately masks deeply elegiac sentiments. Indeed British visitors accustomed to the restrained statement which describes suffering may be moved as much by the lack of overt emotion in the voice as by the tragic story being told.

Although the exhibition is primarily told through graphic panels and a video clip as elaborated upon above, several artefacts are also displayed, albeit sparsely. At key points within the exhibition, contemporary clothes, most noticeably a police uniform and women's dress, along with other small personal items such as postcards are shown behind vitrines (glass display cases in museological terminology). This has theoretical implications, following Welchman:

the vitrine serves as a general term governing the rezoning of objects as they enter into collections ... In this condition the vitrine is first and foremost a marker of difference. It separates the objects or things it contains from their contexts, puts them into relation with other objects, alike and dissimilar, and above all, perhaps, serves to reinforce both the intrinsic and aesthetic values of what it displays.²⁶

This has particular relevance for the use of clothing. As Nevinson points out on the use of costumes within museum galleries, this 'helps to make history more vivid by showing what clothes historical characters actually wore.'²⁷ Recourse to fashion theory may enable us to understand this process. Melchior writes that clothes with exhibitions 'have a unique potential to produce presence within the context of interpreted meaning.'²⁸ Presence here can be understood as the materiality of objects. Although potentially applicable to any museum artefact, clothes achieve this

²⁶ Jon. C. Welchman (ed), *Sculpture and the Vitrine* (Ashgate Press, 2013), 2.

²⁷ John L. Nevinson, *Clothes and the Historian*, (1971), 3, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/cos/hd_cost.htm, accessed 17 January 2014.

²⁸ Marie Riegels-Melchior, *Fashion Museology: Identifying and Consenting Fashion in Museums*, (2011), 3, https://www.inter-disciplinary.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Oxford_fashion_exploring_critical_issues_PAPER_MarieRiegelsMelchior.pdf, accessed 17 January 2015.

effortlessly as it is very easy for a museum visitor to imagine wearing the items, with no prior knowledge needed. Summarising this view, Wilcox writes 'clothes are short hand for being human.'²⁹

ii) Colour, Atmosphere and Light

In an exhibition with few core artefact displays, meaning had to be incorporated not only based on the collection, but on the overall design, achieved by the curatorial team utilising the key concept of atmosphere. Atmosphere, as suggested by the German philosopher Gernot Böhme can be defined as:

a prototypical 'between' phenomenon. Atmospheres fill spaces; they emanate from things, constellation of things and person. The aesthetics of atmospheres shifts away from the 'what' something represents, to the 'how' something is present.³⁰

A museum exhibition is always composed and assembled by a team of professionals with particular world-views. Of course the narratives within the exhibition space could be communicated with words and panels, but the use of atmosphere creates meaning 'on another level, connected with memories, feelings and experiences' and is intimately connected with spatiality.³¹ Indeed amongst certain museum designers the use of atmosphere has always been the case; Bäckström (2010) highlights the colours, smells, and noises as a means of enabling patriotic feeling within Skansen Museum in Sweden.³² Likewise Watson on Musée des Monuments Français notes the

somber lighting in specific areas to support narratives of decline and ... a brighter setting for periods of progress, thus drawing on the imaginations and emotions of visitors to elicit an embodied, sensory understanding of the idea of French history and art.³³

The exhibition curator at Bishop's Stortford focused particularly on the sensorial experiences of light and colour to evoke the policing narratives.

²⁹ Claire Wilcox, 'I try not to fear radical things', in Claire Wilcox (ed.) *Radical Fashion* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2003), 1-6, 1.

³⁰ Gernot Böhme, 'Atmosphere as Aesthetic Concept,' in Confurius Gerrit (eds.) *Constructing Atmosphere* (Berlin: Landalos Architecture Art Culture, 1998), 112-5, 112.

³¹ Outi Turpeinen, 'Recombining Ideas From Art and Cultural History Museums in Theory and Practise', *Nordic Museology*, Vol.2 (2006), 83-96.

³² Mathias Bäckström, 'Loading Guns with Patriotic Love: Artur Hazelius's attempts at Skansen to remake Swedish society,' in Simon J. Knell *et al* (eds.) *National Museums: New Studies From Around the World* (Routledge, 2012), 69-87.

³³ Watson, 'Feeling, Emotion and Nation', (in press).

The washed out sepia of the graphic novels and panels convey both the utter exhaustion caused by the conflict as well as the emotionally charged and tumultuous atmosphere of the times, as can be seen in the picture below. The colour of the walls, painted grey, represents the dismal and monotonous effect of war. Likewise, the handwriting on the panels is made small and intimate in order to engage the visitor's sympathy. Finally, the room's sparse yet bright lighting is, occasionally and depending on where one stands within the exhibition space, suggestive of an interrogation lamp. In their totality, these elements shift the exhibition away from a fully coherent and chronological narrative towards a rather more disjointed atmosphere, deliberately engendering a sense of unease and negative emotional responses that reveal the horrors of the war to the museum visitor, thus bringing the police stories vividly to life (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Copyright Kremena Dimitrova and Bishop's Stortford Museum



Figure 4: Copyright Daniel Duncan and Bishop's Stortford Museum

Conclusion

There were of course inevitable issues in developing the exhibition as a result of the curator liaising with illustration students. As programme leader at Middlesex University, Nancy Slonims says:

this was a live brief with tough and challenging material to work from, this project has demanded respect and integrity due to its subject matter and the fact that these are original police records relating to real people suffering the traumas of the First World War.³⁴

Certainly the need for detailed historical accuracy made the project challenging for the students, yet according to one member of the artists' group, 'the fact that although there were strict guidelines regarding accuracy means a necessity to be more creative.'³⁵ Additionally, curatorial practice and exhibition design dictates a precise methodology in developing a clear exhibition narrative that occasionally clashed with the creative process of the artists.

Yet the finished exhibition looks sleek, modern and highly polished with very high visitor numbers. On the feedback form, visitor comments included: 'fascinating - a

³⁴ Slonims, film.

³⁵ Ibid.

different way to tell the personal stories' (anonymous, 13/9/2014) and 'marvellous exhibition and drawings - bringing the war and its details to life' (anonymous 17/11/2014). Much has been written on the benefits of new social media technologies as tools for publicising research and engaging new people with crime history. However, as the curatorial approach to this exhibition indicates it is not just the obvious social media choices such as Facebook and Twitter that can achieve this; multimodal and holistic interpretive methods such as the use of the graphic novel and thoughtful consideration of atmosphere and emotion in relation to the subject matter can be highly effective in disseminating research to a wider audience. This is intrinsically connected to the medium of the museum; as I hope this article successfully formulates, the exhibition space can be a highly profitable means of exploring historical policing and criminality. As one visitor comment puts it: 'everyone should see it' (17/11/2014).