

Introduction

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The museum is said to be undergoing a 'renaissance'. In Britain, new museums are being set up at the rate of one a fortnight. In France, the government museum-building programme initiated with the Pompidou Centre has included the Musée d'Orsay, an imaginative restoration and re-use of one of Paris's grandest railway stations, and the La Villette complex, an 'urban park' enclosing the 'world's largest science museum'. In West Germany, the Frankfurt city council is creating eleven museums along the River Main by 1990. In Japan and the USA, the museum boom is on an even bigger scale. Attendance is likewise on the increase, symbolized by the queues for 'blockbuster' exhibitions such as the Vienna one at the Pompidou Centre, which was kept open until 2 am because of the demand.

The numbers quoted in the press reports, promotional literature, and speeches reflect the fashion for hyperbole in the guise of science. None the less, they also point to significant developments – the renewed desire on the part of governments, cities, and private individuals to invest in museums; the museum as architectural innovation and hub of urban redevelopment; the rise of the museum director as star. Furthermore, the museum itself has been changing. It has become a place for visiting exhibitions, eating, studying, conserving and restoring artefacts, listening to music, seeing films, holding discussions, and meeting people. In fact, often the museum is no longer a building at all, but a site, as in the case of open-air versions, and is found in the country as well as the town. Nor is the simple institutional definition able to account for references to a 'museum society', which, as the threatened introduction

of a quota on visitors to Venice indicates, is an idea that is materializing under our eyes.

'Museum', therefore, is a word acquiring new significance as the twenty-first century gets nearer, and is likely to be a key term in the wider debate over what it means to live in an old continent.¹ Not the museum in the narrow sense of a particular building or institution, but as a potent social metaphor and as a means whereby societies represent their relationship to their own history and to that of other cultures. Museums, in this sense, map out geographies of taste and values, which is an especially difficult and controversial task when it is necessary radically to redraw the maps in response to major social change. Although some new museums are trying to develop a role for themselves which is future-oriented and promotes innovation, the past is still the main concern.

History, however, is less and less seen as synonymous with the work of professional historians and the realm of books. If that view has long been anachronistic, it is only relatively recently that the many ways in which 'history' is made and remade, from personal memories to rituals of remembrance, have been seriously studied.² These have shown that history is used as a political resource whereby national identities are constructed and forms of power and privilege justified and celebrated; alternatively, or additionally, they have pointed to the resistance and opposition expressed through recourse to other traditions. Museums, precisely because their function has been to present ideas to a wider public in three-dimensional and accessible forms, have become an important vehicle for representing the past, and, therefore, have been drawn into the debate.

A major reason for putting together this collection of essays is to participate in that debate, and provoke angry responses as well as friendly ones. Several contributors are highly critical of some museums, which they see as peddling myths about the past, and they are all 'opinionated' rather than 'balanced'. In other words, they have 'something to say', and were asked to contribute on that basis. The collection is not, therefore, designed to be representative or comprehensive. Instead, its purpose is to identify some of the major changes currently taking place in the museum world, to open them up to discussion, and to follow up criticism with constructive proposals. The brief to contributors was also to write for the non-specialist, because there is no shortage of publications on museums, but there is little that is both critical and interesting to a wider public. Whereas a lot of controversy and discussion

surrounding television has involved professionals, politicians, academics, and even the 'general public', the debate on museums has tended to be limited both in its participants and subject matter. Usually it has concerned admission charges or saving a painting 'for the nation', while the bigger issue of what museums are and should be doing is discussed by the professionals within the four walls of their institutions.

A quick glance at the notes on contributors will show the reader a mixture of 'museum professionals' with curatorial or educational posts and researchers, most of whom are not exclusively concerned with museums. It is hoped that this combination provides perspectives from both the 'inside' and the 'outside'. Someone responsible for the diplomatic and financial as well as the collecting and exhibiting sides of acquiring, say, a North American Indian head-dress, sees things differently from the outside observer. National museums, especially, are like icebergs because only the tip – the public face – is visible to everyone. At the same time, the outsider can criticize more freely, even questioning the premises which professionals take for granted, and can identify more with a visitor's point of view. The aim of providing different perspectives is, furthermore, reflected in the comparisons drawn with other countries (notably Australia, the USA, and Canada), and the inclusion of two pieces dealing specifically with French examples. The latter are especially valuable because they come out of a rich tradition of social history and sociology, and relate to an ongoing national debate on culture and politics.³

The organization of the book, in fact, echoes the division of labour between museum professionals and those studying the museum from the outside. The first and last parts are written entirely by the researchers looking in, while the central section contains essays by practitioners in the field. It should be added, however, that such an allocation of roles was never conscious. The main idea was to group the essays according to the main debates taking place in and around museums. So Part 1 is primarily devoted to the representation of history through the idea of heritage; Part 2 covers a variety of issues that are specific to types of museums (for example science museums) and to museums as institutions, but also issues of wider significance (for example the status of the oral within our culture); Part 3 deals with the museum public.

These divisions should make it easier for the reader to identify the key problem areas, such as the part museums play in representing our history to us. However, they should not be taken as

hard and fast, and the reader will find out interesting and unexpected convergences and divergences between contributions for him or herself. This introduction will simply point the way, therefore, by showing some of the main themes which recur through the book.

Heritage and nostalgia

Part 1, 'The landscape of nostalgia', focuses on the rise of the open-air museum, starting from the premise that the idea of heritage now embraces everything labelled 'historical evidence', which, in Hoyau's words, goes from 'miners' cottages or public wash-houses to the halls of Versailles'. In fact, Hoyau's essay examines the process whereby the definition of heritage has been expanded, showing a surprising convergence in the aims of the ethnohistory movement of the 1970s and the policies of the French government, which in 1979 set up a Commission for the Ethnological Heritage. He writes: 'This new project represents not so much a desire to preserve and celebrate the "monumental" academic past as an attempt to promote new values on the basis of a thoroughly transformed conception of tradition and the national heritage'. Hoyau has been criticized for underestimating the extent to which the transformation of the national past has been won by 'the people', and for overestimating the importance of official cultural policy in attributing meanings to the past.⁴ None the less, his discussion of the search for utopias in the past rather than in the future is full of fascinating insights.

Bob West and Tony Bennett, meanwhile, explore parallel themes through case-studies. West examines the pioneering Ironbridge Gorge Museum as an instance of 'political economy'; he argues that 'the new museum business has helped transform popular perceptions of the past . . . innovate ways of representing history . . . and fundamentally altered the environments and economies of places like Ironbridge'. He is highly critical both of the Trust itself, and of the role of some labour historians in supporting the project, which is analysed in terms of the involvement of historical tourism in the history-making business. Bennett, in a similar vein, speaks of Beamish as exemplifying a British ability 'to transform industrialism from a set of ruptural events into a moment in the unfolding of harmonious relations between rulers and ruled'. In addition, however, he traces the history of the open-air museum back to Scandinavian and American forerunners, showing how radical impulses were replaced by conflict-free notions of the past. He also points to

alternative ways of representing 'the people'; the People's Palace in Glasgow and contemporary museum practice in Australia are compared favourably with Beamish.

'Bias' revisited

Part 2, 'Museums in a changing world', contains a variety of essays in which the perspective is very much that of the curator or museum professional. Although many themes and preoccupations unite the authors of Parts 1 and 2, the feel and the insights the latter bring are the insider's. If the view 'from afar' is more sweeping and panoramic, the perceptions here are more aware of the constraints (including the need to get official clearance for publishing articles such as these), and of the task of translating ideas into the three-dimensional forms of objects to be collected and exhibited.

A professional ethos, or aspiration to professional status, is expressed, in this case, in demands for autonomy from political interference, whether from left or right.⁵ However, it also leads to a rejection of the corporate spirit, and the corresponding attachment to concepts of 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' associated with an older and more conservative generation. Most of the contributors from museums are members of the Museums Professional Group, Social History Curators Group, and Women, Heritage, and Museums (WHAM) which are radical pressure groups inside the museum world. There is probably also, as Brian Durrans suggests, a generational factor at work. A new, highly educated generation has entered the museums in the past decade and questioned the status quo, including, as Gaby Porter says, the dominance of men and male perspectives in the profession.

In her essay 'Policy and politics', Sue Kirby sets out the main public controversies over museums in recent years. She discusses not only the financial pressures put on museums by inflation and government meanness but also the principles put at stake when charges are introduced, collections sold, and sponsorship increasingly relied on. These are the questions that have traditionally occupied the profession, the press, and politicians. In the last few years, however, disputes have extended to the question of 'bias'. The accusation has particularly been levelled in cases said to involve financial or political interference. Sue Kirby cites the case of British Nuclear Fuel's pressure on the Science Museum which resulted in the exclusion of material on social and economic aspects

of nuclear power, and refers to the way museums of labour history have been dependent on the local political situation.

The term 'bias', however, implies intentionality and assumes the yardstick of objectivity. It is more an index of controversy than a tool of analysis. So the reader will find that terms such as 'representations' or 'ideology', which refer to structures or patterns of thought and behaviour that individuals are often unaware of, are preferred by most authors. Gaby Porter, for example, in her piece on representations of domestic life, analyses how women have either been excluded or marginalized in museum accounts of history because of the way inequalities and ideologies are translated into museum language. It is not so much that individual male curators consciously discriminate against women, but that deeper processes of ordering reality are at work, leading to decisions such as the one at the Science Museum to place domestic appliances 'in the basement beside the schools' entrance and the children's gallery, a long way down from the technological achievements above'.

Alan Morton and Brian Durrans, dealing respectively with museums of science and ethnography, find their workplaces caught up in a sometimes bizarre relationship to time and change. The former fantasises about the paradox that science museums are 'almost the victims of the very progress they collectively applaud', imagining a 'museum of museums' as examples of 'late-nineteenth and twentieth-century follies marking the triumph of consumer society'. Brian Durrans, meanwhile, writes: 'Ethnographic museums are influenced by the time-machines we conventionally use to represent other people's societies'. In fact, a model of time as 'progress' or 'evolution', moving from lower to higher forms, underpins the philosophy of the late Victorian museum and its spatial organization. Moreover, imperialism, nationalism, and the ideas of a confident dominant class gave direction and purpose to the institutions. Both authors, therefore, make critiques of this legacy, which is far from superseded, despite the decline of empire and British competitiveness.

If it is useful and necessary to show how museums are themselves the product of history, that does not resolve the problem of their future, unless, of course, they are simply abolished or allowed to die. It means inventing a new role for the museum, and developing the special properties of the medium. Thus, for Brian Durrans, the collections of unique artefacts are likely to hold an even greater fascination tomorrow than they do today, and 'there

are formal qualities in physical objects that communicate values across cultural divides and by doing so confirm a shared human destiny'. The ethnographic museum, once the embodiment of imperialist ideas, now offers possibilities for cross-cultural comparison in a spirit of openness and exchange. However, making museums address the key issues and debates in contemporary societies, such as the relationship between the First and the Third World, or the use of science and technology for military purposes, risks the controversy they have traditionally avoided.

So far in this introduction reference has largely been made to 'objects' or the visual aspects of the museum, thereby reiterating what McLuhan has called the 'sensory bias' of the culture.⁶ As Jeremy Silver writes about sound: 'The exclusion of the oral by the written has often accurately been perceived as reflecting the cultural and historical exclusion from documentation of the people least likely to contribute to printed publications'. Despite the fact that, in Marion Segaud's words, 'sound makes space comprehensible; it introduces time, rhythm, action, all of which are the active ingredients of daily life', this dimension of our experience is largely unexplored in museums. If anything, museums dedicate themselves to 'the qualities of stillness and quiet... associated with "serious" learning processes'.

The situation is, however, changing. Jeremy Silver refers to the technical developments making it possible to store and, crucially, to get easier access to sound in archives, and to the pioneering work of oral historians and others in establishing the importance of sounds and voices in our culture. He examines the different uses sound is put to – from the music industry to radio and theme parks – and argues that 'suitable critical discourse' has yet to be developed enabling us to understand and explore sound more fully.

The public's point of view

In Part 3, 'Sociology of the museum public', the perspective shifts again as we peer in from the outside. This part analyses the composition and behaviour of visitors. Before moving on, however, it is worth noting that the public has already been interestingly brought into accounts in both Parts 1 and 2.

The contributors in Part 1 can legitimately be described as critical consumers. Bob West, in fact, is quite explicit about this role: 'Being a critical critic is the only way I can enjoy the Ironbridge

Gorge Museum, and I constantly eavesdrop in the hope of finding kindred spirits'. Living in the immediate vicinity of one of the sites of the open-air museum gives him special insights, which combine with those acquired in studying contemporary culture. Familiarity, ironically, makes the museum 'strange' in a way it is not for the outsider. Tony Bennett, who asks the reader to treat museums as 'texts', has a similar interest in deciphering the messages encoded in the very fabric of the historical surroundings. If we cannot change a Beamish, at least we can read it as a 'crash course in the bourgeois myths of history'.

The contributors in Part 2, on the other hand, are at the other end of the communicative chain. Their job entails, among other things, organizing displays. It is interesting, therefore, to find an inquisitiveness about and respect for visitors' opinions rare in a profession in which, in Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's words, the curator is firmly positioned as 'expert in "his" subject, and the visitor equally firmly as "below" this level of knowledge'. Brian Durrans, for instance, advocates a much greater involvement of the public than simply providing 'hands-on' experiences: 'Much more exciting is the idea of harnessing the imagination, insight, and experience of visitors via participation in organizing exhibitions, and even allowing non-professionals to mount displays.' Such strategies disclose the relative nature of curatorial or institutional knowledge, show the museum as a process rather than as a finished product, and encourage visitors to see themselves in an active role.

Part 3 contains essays more aware of the barriers dividing the public from museums and the scale of ignorance about who the visitors actually are. While curatorial attitudes have a part in determining the relationship of the museum to its visitors, they are one factor among many. The profession has, for instance, always attached great importance to free admissions, seeing it as a right. Yet, as Nathalie Heinich observes in relation to the Pompidou Centre, 'the (relative) absence of an entry charge, which may at one time have been seen as a key weapon in the battle to democratize culture, has little actual impact on visitor numbers, since the barriers to culture are themselves cultural not economic'.

Museum architecture provides a useful point of entry into the discussion of the visiting public because it stands metaphorically as well as physically for the structures that define the boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside'. Often the museum is a building

laden with associations, many negative. For example Paul Valéry, no lover of institutions, wrote of going into a museum:

My voice changes and finds a level that is a little louder than in a church but much quieter than it sounds in daily life. Soon I no longer know what I've come to do in this solitude, which has something about it of the temple and the salon, the cemetery and the school.⁷

Nor is this feeling entirely a hangover from the past; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill notes: 'in many cases the message of the building may be enough to deter those who don't know classical culture, who know about the power of the law and who have not found many images of the past that have served them well'. She goes on to describe how most buildings are designed for the objects they 'imprison' rather than for the public that visits them.

The opposite of this negative image is represented by new museums whose architecture is as much an attraction as their contents.⁸ The most celebrated example is the Pompidou Centre in Paris, which, moreover, was conceived from the start as opening the door to those who would otherwise avoid museums as 'not for them'. It is therefore, especially valuable to have Nathalie Heinich's study of the Centre's public, which measures the success of the utopian project against the kinds of users and use the museum has achieved in its ten years of operation.

Usually research on audiences is happy to deal purely in numbers. On this count, the Pompidou Centre has been a startling success, with 7.3 million visitors a year – double that anticipated – and this is how the figures are normally presented. Nathalie Heinich, however, uses the statistics to show that 'popularity' cannot here be equated with visits by members of the 'popular classes', and that the beneficiaries are the educated sections of the middle class. She then looks at the use of the different spaces to see whether the architects' and organizers' plan of mixing publics that would otherwise go to separate places in order to encourage 'cross-overs' and experimentation has worked. The findings are a reminder that the most democratic intentions can have the opposite effects when the power and class relations in the production and consumption of culture are underestimated; 'the outward appearance of freedom . . . is likely to give rise to aimless wandering which itself becomes transformed into anxiety; the capacity to "drift" is not so easy to acquire as one might think'.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's essay surveys the work done on the museum-going public rather than focusing on an individual case. In particular, she refers to the research in Canada and the USA whose achievements are contrasted with the underdevelopment of studies in Britain. The American conception of the visitor as a consumer making a choice in the market-place is shown as positive when compared with the stuffy indifference of many curators on the other side of the Atlantic. None the less, she writes that there is still a shortage of qualitative studies which analyse the visitor's experience using interpretative or ethnomethodological approaches. In the absence of these, museum professionals have no way of judging what messages they are managing to get across to the public, and the tyranny of numbers goes uncontested. The ideal, of course, would involve studying the communicative chain, from the intentions of the exhibition organizers to the exhibition itself and the 'sense' made of it by the public (in turn analysed in terms of its social composition, 'cultural capital', and so on).⁹

Some of the themes running through the chapters, such as the role of the public, have already been remarked on, and the reader will, anyway, discover underlying patterns as well as points of disagreement. However, three broad areas of concern are worth pointing out: the 'commercialization' of museums, the pursuit of 'realism', and the impact of the media.

Commercialization

First, the question of 'commercialization'. It is perhaps symptomatic of the different national traditions that the French authors speak about the role of the state and politics in culture, whereas the British refer largely to the cultural market-place. In France, it has been the *dirigiste* state that has founded prestigious new museums and cultivated the national heritage, while in Britain charitable trusts have led the way. It could be said that in France the museum addresses the 'citizen' and in Britain the 'consumer'. If this is an exaggeration, the growth of market-led initiatives in Britain and the relative decline of the state's role are changing the balance of the museum world.

Bob West's assessment of Ironbridge Gorge museum is particularly critical of the free enterprise spirit. For him, this reconstruction of the Industrial Revolution *in situ* reproduces equivalent forms of exploitation and entrepreneurship by turning a

manufacturing into a service industry, and gearing a whole locality to tourist consumption. Alan Morton writes of the competition in the leisure sector: 'The greater the success of malls and theme parks, the greater the pressure on museums . . . to mount spectacular and expensive displays (to compete with, say, the Disney organization's EPCOT in Florida) or even place a museum "shop" in a prominent site'. It is not just that the market is at the turnstiles, but that its values and methods (marketing, advertising, retailing) are seen to be taking over, so that an educational function is displaced by an entertainment orientation. In consequence, museum staff are increasingly divided between scholars and salesmen, museum professionals and experts brought in from outside, educationalists and marketing people.¹⁰

The majority of contributors (the professionals among whom, it has to be said, work in the national, not private sector, museums) argue in favour of a public service ideal, which, strangely perhaps, is seen as stronger in the USA than in Britain today. Alan Morton, for example, makes the case for maintaining the unique quality of public space which belongs to the citizen, while others note that the museum has to develop forms of accountability and participation if the public is really to feel that the institution belongs to them. Clearly in the British case, public service, whether in broadcasting or welfare, has come under attack from market-based provision.¹¹ Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that it is private initiatives that have forced the pace and attracted visitors. There is, therefore, an acceptance that there are lessons to be learnt and blessings to be found in commercial disguises. Brian Durrans sees a positive side in ethnographic museums being forced to purchase mundane and contemporary objects rather than older, rarer items made too expensive by the art market. The most sympathetic to the consumer-orientation, however, are those who adopt the user's point of view, as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's essay shows.¹² Here, the act of 'consumption', which is not restricted to the aesthetic, has a democratizing potential denied by the enemies of 'commercialization'. If, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, the department store is 'the poor man's art gallery' because it 'presents objects that are familiar . . . but more especially because there, people feel free to judge in the name of the legitimate arbitrariness of tastes and colours', then the introduction of museum shops, display techniques taken from window-dressing, and the juxtaposition of everyday and 'art' objects can make museums more accessible.¹³

'Realism'

A second theme that recurs is 'realism'. The term is notoriously difficult to pin down. It has provoked celebrated debates, and continues to haunt discussions.¹⁴ When Umberto Eco identified the pursuit of the 'real thing' (hyperreality) as an important tendency in contemporary American culture, as exemplified in the museums of the West Coast, he perhaps put his finger on a more general phenomenon.¹⁵ The use of period dress, role-play, working exhibits, real locations, and smells, sounds, and 'experiences' has spread to Europe.¹⁶ Whereas in the nineteenth century Europe exported its concept of the museum to the USA, in the late twentieth century, the balance of trade has been reversed. 'Colonial Williamsburg' – Revd Goodwin's 'reconstruction of an enchanted world where all is as it was two centuries ago' – is the model for our times, even though not in every detail.¹⁷

The open-air museum, however, as Tony Bennett shows, has its roots in a Scandinavian folk revival which was originally a 'progressive phenomenon' – 'a movement of revolt against the centre by the cultural periphery of Europe'. It is not the form itself, therefore, that is at issue, but the way it has been developed. A 'reality effect' has substituted an attempt to reveal historical processes. It is the problem of how to represent the latter that deeply concerns many of the authors of this book. On the one hand, they search to show what is omitted, excluded, or censored – the 'hidden history' of working-class women, the 'violence done to the producers and the environment', the oral culture;¹⁸ on the other, they criticize what is displayed – the trappings and remains of the past that serve to put to sleep, not awaken, a sense of history. Gaby Porter, for example, argues that museums' 'reliance on history and social process to select material' has meant that an object-centred re-presentation of 'reality' has consigned the property-less to oblivion, whereas the march of technological progress has tended to leave women in particular behind; 'much of women's historical experience lies in areas where "change" measured in objects and technology is slow, and where women are seen as secondary, operators and consumers rather than inventors or producers'.

However, Bob West found himself caught out by his own pursuit of 'what it was really like' when faced with candle-making at the Ironbridge Museum:

This was an ill-lighted, pokey and miserable place, the air was heavy with the gagging vapour of quantities of melted wax ...

two people in 'Victorian clothes' were busy making candles. . . . I felt personally confused by this particular aspect of my day out, as, on the one hand, it contradicted my criticism of the lack of authenticity, while drawing into hard relief the potentially unacceptable consequences of really reproducing a hazardous work environment.¹⁹

The paradox here, to paraphrase Eco, is that the only way to attain the real thing is by fabricating the absolute fake.²⁰

It is not 'reality', though, that is the goal. A didactic, positivist 'realism', such as is found in Eastern European museums is as unacceptable as the Disneyland version of the past. Instead, the different essays emphasize how museums construct 'realities', and can do so only with the co-operation of the visitor. Gaby Porter criticizes the attempt to sustain the illusion of the display which claims 'this is how it was', leaving no room for questioning or doubt. The moment when the mask of role-play slips (or when the contemporary world breaks into the reconstructed past) is welcomed by both Tony Bennett and Bob West. Meanwhile, for Brian Durrans, ethnographic museums should be dealing with how societies change and compare, 'especially if contemporary mass culture becomes a legitimate form for collecting and exhibitions'. The tendency to fix 'reality' in a timeless moment makes it impossible to understand processes.

Self-consciousness, reflexivity, and awareness of classification are conditions of existence in the modern world. Kenneth Hudson has observed: 'With every year that passes it strikes me more and more how much of our lives are spent in inverted commas', and has gone on to suggest that museums too, especially those which present other cultures, have to build those inverted commas into their exhibitions.²¹ To put it differently, the museum text needs also to manifest the metatext, so that the very ability to read and make sense, as well as the choices leading to a particular display, are visible to the public.²² At this point, museums could free themselves of the taboos which make them avoid risky and controversial subjects in the name of their 'authority'. For example, as David Lowenthal has proposed, the British Museum could mount an exhibition on the Elgin Marbles which showed the different sides to the argument about restoring them to Greece rather than censoring all mention of the subject.²³ Museums might then become more part of the mainstream of cultural life and less a deep backwater.

The impact of the media

The impact of the media is the third theme which resurfaces in the essays. As a medium, the museum has advantages over printed forms like the encyclopedia, because it has another dimension and brings, in Alan Morton's words, 'the romance of seeing the "real" on display'. Yet, with the advent of television, the museum has often been said to have become redundant: television is better at giving access to faraway people and places; it is more 'realistic' and can record complex and lengthy processes.²⁴ For one eminent museum director, 'television has replaced the museum. It is an armchair culture presented in such a way that the thinking is done for the viewer, for a programme presupposes a commentary and interpretation'. He adds, however, that 'what the museum still does, which is crucial for our society, is to offer an *open*, as against a *closed* experience'.²⁵

Talk of the death of the museum, however, tells us more about the crisis of a humanist tradition than about current developments taken as a whole. The rise of each medium has provoked hostile reaction, but has usually led to the subordination rather than extinction of predecessors; the newspaper, for example, lost its immediacy value to radio and television, and was forced to develop other functions.²⁶ Jeremy Silver's essay is especially helpful here in that he discusses the relationship of oral/aural culture to first writing and then to the technologies of sound recording, storage, and retrieval. If museums have long been silent places with a 'sensory bias' towards the visual, the increasing orality of culture has been affecting displays and entire museum environments. However, as Jeremy Silver insists, the new means of reproduction have a radical impact on conceptions of 'authenticity', 'naturalness', and cultural legitimacy. In fact the relationship between a picture and its reproduction, and between a 'live' performance and a recording, can no longer be understood in terms of 'reflection' or 'origins'. The museum is, therefore, part of a mass-mediated environment, and not simply in competition with television. The very notion of reference to 'the real', so fundamental to the received wisdom of museology, is put in question. According to Jean Baudrillard, 'simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal'.²⁷ This indeed was the theme of a major exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in 1985.²⁸

Far from making the museum obsolete, the media environment has had two main effects: first, to push museums to do what *only* they can do; second, to give rise to a new generation of multi-media museums. The museums that have changed least are the fine art galleries, which are nearest to the model of the open text; the object is accompanied by the minimum of information, and visitors have to discover more for themselves via publications and so on if they so wish; otherwise, the painting or sculpture is meant to communicate in its own terms. Indeed, paradoxically, the very explosion of reproductions (postcards, posters, advertising, television programmes) has reinforced the aura of authenticity surrounding the original, and hence the particular value attached to seeing it in person.²⁹ The traditional museums with world masterpieces are, therefore, among the most visited, while the 'blockbuster' exhibitions are both cause and effect of extraordinary 'media events', in which the queue is an essential component.³⁰

However, other museums, without this advantage, have been under greater pressure to win public interest by offering attractions. The notion of the museum as a collection for scholarly use has been largely replaced by the idea of the museum as a means of communication. In fact, many older ones have become curious hybrids, combining displays with cryptic labels and fairground-style interactive and participatory devices. Often opportunism rather than experimentation, based on a re-evaluation of the museum's cultural role, prevails; 'the conviction that the Museum is fundamentally an alienating institution and that somehow it must be made palatable to a larger, especially younger audience'.³¹

In the case of many open-air museums, the educative function has been almost entirely subordinated to the satisfaction of visitor expectations. The three-dimensional stage-sets, actors, story-lines, and so on can be seen as the result of an attempt to put television realism into museum form, with an extra 'experiential' dimension. So much so, that a leading British exponent of the open-air museum now finds that parts of Ironbridge and the whole of Beamish are trying to achieve what television could do better, and that a return to scholarship and collections of scientific value is needed.³² However, within the museums themselves, the role of the scholar is in decline, whereas that of the marketing manager is growing in status and influence. The pursuit of 'hyperrealism', moreover, is backed by market forces,

the philosophy of consumer sovereignty and trends in popular taste.

The foundation of new museums which are actually about twentieth-century media is a relatively recent but rapidly growing phenomenon. In Britain the opening of the National Museum of Photography, Film, and Television in Bradford and the Museum of the Moving Image (MOMI) in London are early examples of an international trend. The former is, in many ways, an extension of the repertoire of existing museum collecting and exhibiting; it is an outpost of the Science Museum, is housed in a converted theatre rather than purpose-built, concentrates on the technology of the media (photographic studio and television studio reconstructions), and celebrates British achievements (the new television gallery opened to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the first BBC broadcast). MOMI, on the other hand, is designed to mark a break with existing museum practice.

Since MOMI, at the time of writing, has yet to be opened, any comments are necessarily provisional. None the less, it is possible to outline how the projected museum represents some significant contemporary developments.³³ In many respects, MOMI is likely to be more traditional than intended; often the claim to be doing something absolutely new, especially when based on a caricature of the old, results in a failure to examine basic categories, and hence a repetition of existing formulae. At the same time, at least within a British context, the setting up of MOMI and the other new museum south of the river, the Design Museum, mark a shift in the museum scene in Britain.³⁴

These new museums are 'high tech', futuristic, and would rather not be called 'museums' at all in so far as the word is associated with the past. They are largely funded by rich patrons (Sir Terence Conran, Sir Yue-Kong Pao, Paul Getty jun. and others) and by sponsorship, and plan to have admission charges.³⁵ They are designed to provide a service to industry, professionals, and students, and to have a primarily informational and educative function. Indeed, a sense of mission – establishing cultural recognition, developing visual literacy and critical awareness, bringing 'culture' and 'industry' together, making London a leader in the field – comes across in the literature promoting the projects. Anecdotes about the original brainwave, the plan, pride in being 'the first', and fears about others stealing ideas are further indicators of the excitement surrounding the foundation of an institution like MOMI. Founders have 'visions', whereas the directors who come afterwards have to work within a pre-existing structure.³⁶

The fact that MOMI is a museum of film and video also makes a difference, especially given the decision to use 'soft ware' and leave the collection and exhibition of 'hard ware' mainly to others. Instead of being object-centred and concerned about collection, the museum is going to be centred on images and temporary exhibitions. (Of course, the National Film Archive with its miles of film and plans to record millions of hours of television provides the back-up.) Importantly, MOMI stands at the point of intersection where images are endowed with 'aura' (the magic of the 'modern' represented by the laser 'tower' in the sky above Waterloo bridge, and the 'halo' of the old in the recreation of the peep-show), and where they are analysed and contextualized ('demystified' in the interests of education). This places it in an ideal position to address developments within the new media and contemporary culture more widely. If a new museum like MOMI is thereby able to play a critical role and to provoke debates beyond its confines, it could also have positive consequences in a museum world that has scarcely confronted what it means to live in a mass-mediated environment.

It is a curious feature of the present period that rapid change (the formation of the 'information' or 'post-industrial' society) is accompanied by two seemingly contradictory developments. On the one hand, there is the pursuit of 'authenticity' and the revival and recycling of the past; on the other, a fascination with modern technology and the science fictional future.³⁷ The two appear to belong to different worlds and different times. So, in museum terms, we have in Britain the 'great Northern experience' at Beamish, which recreates a 'historic' industrial landscape, and the 'high tech' museums of London, which are products and proponents of new technological developments. There is perhaps even a cruel irony in Labour councils planning to turn old industrial areas, like the Lower Don valley or the Black Country, into theme parks with museums ('for tourists'), while the successful entrepreneurs sponsor design or film and television museums ('for yuppies') in the metropolis.³⁸ However, the developments need to be understood as an interactive whole, not as separate and divergent.

The 'backward-looking' open-air museum is not in itself a relic; far from it. If anything, it has helped pioneer a more commercial approach to museum development, and, hence, to the redevelopment of entire localities. Its replacement of a manufacturing by a service industry and the re-use of sites for tourism anticipates radical changes in the countryside and rural economy. Moreover, the growth of nostalgia (both in the 'everyday life' of individuals and

groups, and in advertising imagery – the two should not be treated as the same) is provoked by the very transformations it laments.³⁹ On the other hand, the museums set up with the purpose of stimulating a culture based on current industrial and cultural innovation cannot escape the historicizing process inherent in the museum form itself.

The different kinds of museums emerging in the late twentieth-century are, therefore, equally faced with the problem of how to function as time-machines, whether they are historical or contemporary in their approach. So much so, that the surrealist idea for a new museum proposed by Eduardo Paolozzi seems more in keeping with the period than museums based on time-honoured classifications; Paolozzi writes:

To counteract and perhaps contradict our tendency to isolate phenomena and impose a separateness of the object I proposed in a series of prints an idea for a new museum: where in an old building preferably an abandoned cathedral . . . a selection from the history of things the choice of material being an art form. The arrangement and juxtaposition of objects and sculptures suggesting another philosophy, fakes combined with distinguished 'reproductions' copies of masterpieces both in painting and engineering – the radial engine and a Leger painting, Bugatti wheels, cinema prints, crocodile skulls – all parts movable – an endless set of combinations, a new culture in which problems give way to possibilities.⁴⁰

Paolozzi's 'Blue print' is an artist's view, and is not, therefore, concerned with many of the basic tasks of the museum curator (to collect, conserve, and so on). However, it suggests something very important, namely that museums can appeal to our sense of wonder and provoke us to thought; they can deal with past and present, and juxtapose European and non-European cultures to raise questions about the systems of classification we use. The museum, then, that feeds and feeds off recycled nostalgia is not just to be criticized for its political and social function, but for impoverishing the culture and, therefore, our sense of human possibilities. If museums are to have a cultural role as distinct from that of the theme park, it lies in helping us orient ourselves and make discoveries in a world in which inherited common-sense conceptions of time and place are increasingly redundant.

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Notes and references

- 1 For the debate on this question, see Wright, P. (1985) *On Living in an Old Country*, London; and Lowenthal, D. (1985) *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge.
- 2 See Johnson, R., McLendon, G., Schwarz, W., and Sutton, D. (eds) (1982). *Making Histories*, London.
- 3 The key themes of the debate between the friends and enemies of museums go back to the French Revolution when aristocratic and religious 'relics' were first saved from political vandalism and then put on public display. For instance, the question of 'context' addressed by André Malraux (1949) in *Museums without Walls*, London, was, and has remained political: 'the museum did away with the significance of Palladium, of Saint or Saviour, ruled out associations of sanctity, qualities of adornment and possession'; see Francis Haskell (1985) 'Museums and their enemies', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, summer: 13–23. Interestingly Pierre Bourdieu, a leading sociologist of culture in France today, argues that museums help to create an aesthetic disposition by removing an object's 'context' of use and function, and thereby reproduce 'aristocracies of taste': see Bourdieu, P. and Darbel, A. (1969) *L'Amour de l'art: les musées de l'art européens et leur publics*, Paris, p. 92.
- 4 Wright, P. (1985) *On Living in an Old Country*, London pp. 251–3; Patrick Wright is also appreciative of Hoyau, and, indeed, this essay was first included at his suggestion.
- 5 In Britain, curators have long wanted to consider themselves part of a profession, in the same way that teachers and doctors might. However, there is no formal entry requirement, and academic courses in museology have only recently been established.
- 6 For Marshall McLuhan on museums, see his (1969) *A Seminar: Museum of the City of New York*, New York.
- 7 Valéry, P. (1979) 'Le problème des musées', in F. Dagognet (ed.) *Le Musée sans fin*, Paris (my translation).
- 8 A lucid account of recent tendencies in museum architecture is Montaner, J. and Oliveras, J. (1986) *The Museums of the Last Generation*, London.
- 9 For a pertinent discussion of the methodological problems in researching audiences, see Morley, D. (1980) *The Nationwide Audience*, London; and Morley, D. (1987) *Family Television*, London. In the museum field, the pioneering text is Bourdieu, P. and Darbel, A. (1969) *L'Amour de l'art: les musées de l'art européens et leur publics*, Paris.

- 10 See, for an British example, Pemberton, M. (1986) 'Talking shop: a guide to retailing in museums', *Museums Journal*, September. He writes:

The enterprise and flair of the High St is diffusing in the world of museums. . . . Packaging means establishing a corporate identity. . . . Shopping is not just making a purchase, it is about the whole experience, including the ambiance of the shop, the style of the staff.

This approach is even more highly developed in the USA; see the special issue on marketing, advertising, and public relations in relation to museums of *Museum News*, August 1986. Contrast this to the thinking of a director of the old school: 'The basic philosophy of window-dressing is deception and seduction . . . the vulgarity which is such a prominent element in cut-throat competition is not only out of place in a museum, but destroys the very things the museum stands for'; Findlay, I. (1977) *Priceless Heritage: The Future of Museums*, London, p. 59.

- 11 For an interesting discussion of the origin and crisis of the idea of public service, Robins, K. and Webster, F. (1986) 'Broadcasting politics - communications and consumption', *Screen*, May-August: 30-46.
- 12 In Britain, Kenneth Hudson has for many years written in the name of the consumer. His (1980) *Good Museums Guide*, London, applies the principle of the *Good Food Guide* to the museum.
- 13 Bourdieu, P. (1980) 'The aristocracy of culture', *Media, Culture and Society* 2: 238, n. 15.
- 14 For example Williams, R. (1977) 'A lecture on realism', *Screen* 1: 61-74.
- 15 Eco, U. (1987) *Travels in Hyperreality*, London.
- 16 This phenomenon can be dismissed as gimmickry. On the other hand, one can ask whether it is symptomatic of a new 'historical poetics', and represents a further stage in realizing the nineteenth-century 'mythic aim of narrowing the gap between history as it happened, and history as it is written'; Bann, S. (1984) *The Clothing of Cleo: A Study of the Representation of History in 19th Century Britain and France*, Cambridge, p. 165.
- 17 See Bazin, G. *The Museum Age*, Brussels, pp. 256-7.
- 18 Criticism of dominant representations of 'reality' and the promotion of alternative 'myths' is a key theme of Horne, D. (1986) *The Public Culture*, London. See especially pp. 218-45 for the impact of ethnic cultural politics on museums. This is the cultural and political environment both parodied and celebrated in George C. Wolfe (1987) *The Colored Museum*, London; directions for staging include:

THE CAST: An ensemble of five, two men and three women, all black, who perform all the characters that inhabit the exhibits.

THE STAGE: White walls and recessed lighting. A starkness befitting a museum where the myths and madness of black/Negro/colored Americans are stored. Built into the walls are a series of small panels,

revolving walls and compartments from which actors can retrieve key props and make quick entrances . . .

The opening lines: 'Welcome aboard Celebrity Slavery, departing the Gold Coast, and making short stops at Bahia, Port Au Prince and Havana, before our final destination of Savannah'.

- 19 West, B. (1985) 'Danger! History at work: a critical consumer's guide to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum', occasional paper, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham, p. 33. An abbreviated and adapted version of the original piece is published in this collection, Chapter 2.
- 20 Eco, U. (1987) *Travels in Hyperreality*, London.
- 21 Hudson, K. (1986) 'Problems in museum presentation of the westernisation of other cultures', a paper presented to the conference 'Making Exhibitions of Ourselves: the Limits of Objectivity in the Representation of Other Cultures', Museum of Mankind, January.
- 22 The catalogue of the exhibition 'Les Immatériaux' at the Pompidou Centre in Paris which reconstructs the planning of the event is symptomatic of this phenomenon as a conscious intellectual strategy; see *Les Immatériaux: album et inventaire* (1985), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. However, it can also be seen as an extension of the idea of taking people 'behind the scenes', or 'into the projecting box', which is increasingly common in museums.
- 23 David Lowenthal speaking at the Annual Study Weekend of the Museum Professionals Group, Exeter, September 1986. Transactions forthcoming.
- 24 See Hudson, K. (1977) *Museums for the 1980s*, London, pp. 78-9.
- 25 Strong, Sir Roy (1985) *Museums: Two Contributions towards the Debate*, London, p. 8. This line of argument assumes a credulous television viewer and a cultured museum visitor. Television, in brief, equals the negation of 'culture'.
- 26 Smith, A. (1980) *Goodbye Gutenberg: The Newspaper Revolution of the 1980's*, London, pp. 3-23.
- 27 Baudrillard, J. (1982) *Simulations*, New York, p. 3.
- 28 *Les Immatériaux: album et inventaire* (1985), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.
- 29 For the classic work on this phenomenon, see Benjamin, W. (1973) 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', *Illuminations*, London, pp. 219-53; for a critical assessment, Heinrich, N. (1983) 'L'Aura de Walter Benjamin: note sur l'oeuvre d'art à l'ère de sa reproductibilité technique', *Actes de la recherche en science sociales* 49, September: 107-11.
- 30 For a recent debate of the 'blockbuster' in the USA, see the special issue of *Art in America*, June 1986; for Britain, Anscombe, I. (1986) 'Exhibition policy: serenity versus comprehension?', *National Art Collections Fund Magazine*, December: 4-9.
- 31 From a paper by David Elliot at the seminar, 'The Museum as Medium', organized by the Design Museum, 21 May 1987, roneo.

- 32 Referring to Beamish, the Black Country Museum, and Blists Hill, Neil Cossons has said: 'These museums are highly consumer-oriented, wildly popular with the public and capable of presenting a nostalgic, warm, and cosy picture of a past which was really bloody awful. . . . It seems we have taken the museum object and used the museum as a medium of communication, stretching it beyond its proper capacity to do the job' (from 'The Museum as Medium', a seminar organized by the Design Museum, 21 May 1987).
- 33 This part on MOMI is based on the museum's own pre-launch literature, press reports, and discussions with Anthony Smith, the director of the British Film Institute, and Philip Simpson, who is responsible for the educational side of the museum's activities. Unfortunately it was not possible to go into details about planned exhibitions, nor to interview the other main organizers of MOMI.
- 34 The Design Museum in London is due to open in May 1989. However, its foundation has been anticipated by the Boilerhouse based at the Victoria and Albert Museum, though independently run and financed by the Conran Foundation. The Boilerhouse, from 1982 to 1986, had the great merit of provoking discussions about contemporary design in a capital city with fewer exciting exhibitions in the area in a decade than held at the Centre de Création Industrielle at the Pompidou Centre in a year; see Bayley, S. (1985) 'Cars for cathedrals', *New Society*, 23 May: 274-7.
- 35 Fund-raising has been described as 'like fishing - you have to know where the fish lie, their feeding habits and so on'. It is easy to overlook the huge campaign that precedes the opening of a new capital-intensive museum, and the role of the big fish. For an analysis of contemporary forms of corporate patronage, see Wallis, B. (1986) 'The art of big business', *Art in America*, June: 28-33.
- 36 New museums are, therefore, often designed to be flexible, responsive to outside influences, and up to date with the latest ideas and information, rather than preoccupied with permanence and 'eternal values'. In this respect the Design Museum's projected tripartite division according to newspaper lay-out is exemplary: 'reference' (small permanent collection); 'features' (temporary thematized exhibitions); 'news and current affairs' ('up to the minute' coverage).
- 37 For a fascinating article on 'postmodernism', which begins with reflections on Disneyland, see Hebdige, D. (1986/7) 'A report from the Western Front: postmodernism and the "politics" of style', *Block*, winter: 4-26.
- 38 The development of 'leisure services' is booming, and it is not surprising if one thinks that the cost of creating one new job in tourism is £4,000 compared to £32,000 in manufacturing and £300,000 in mechanical engineering; for an interesting analysis of the connection between urban redevelopment, museums and appropriations of history, see Lunn, K. and Thomas, R. (1986) 'Portsmouth dockyards - The rerigging of a city's history', *History Workshop Journal* spring: 191-8.
- 39 Nostalgia is a problematic word, but it can be said that memories of 'how

- things used to be' can provide a measure, however inadequate, for judging an unacceptable present.
- 40 Paolozzi, E. (1985) *Lost Magic Kingdoms*, London, pp. 7-8.