Museums and their Paradoxes

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Abstract
This chapter is written from the perspective of a practitioner and explores a range of paradoxes in museums and in the museological literature which may serve as starting points for conversations with philosophers. These include questions of definition and mission, intrinsic versus instrumental value, whether museums actively shape society or serve as a passive reflection, whether their main function is to produce liberating knowledge or express communal identities, whether traditional or progressive museums are the most 'traditional', whether museums are trying to serve idealized or real visitors and, ultimately, whether museums are rational or ritual institutions.

1. Museums and their Paradoxes

> Museums the world over are doing amazingly well.... Museums used to stand for something old, dusty, boring and barely relevant to real life. Those kinds of places still exist, but there are far fewer of them, and the more successful ones have changed out of all recognition. The range they cover has broadened spectacularly and now goes well beyond traditional subjects such as art and artefacts, science and history.... Globally, numbers have burgeoned from around 23,000 two decades ago to at least 55,000 now.[1]

It seems that museums are now ubiquitous – *The Economist's* figures mean that there is somewhere in the region of one museum for every 130,000 people on the planet – a universal institution deployed across cultures, like schools, shops or police. *The Economist* explains this development as being due to

> a wide variety of interest groups: city fathers who see iconic buildings and great collections as a tourist draw; urban planners who regard museums as a magic wand to bring blighted city areas back to life; media that like to hype blockbuster exhibitions; and rich people who want to put their wealth to work in the service of philanthropy ("a way for the rich to launder their souls", as one director put

[1] Fiammetta Rocco, 'Museums: Temples of Delight', *The Economist* (December 2013). http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21591707-museums-world-over-are-doing-amazingly-well-says-fiammetta-rocco-can-they-keep.

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it). For young people they are a source of something authentic and intriguing when their electronic entertainments start to pall.[2]

For the 'more affluent parts of the developing world' museums are being built in large numbers 'by governments that want their countries to be regarded as culturally sophisticated (though wealthy private individuals are also playing a part). They see museums as symbols of confidence, sources of public education and places in which a young country can present a national narrative.'[3] The audiences for all these museums reflect the increasing level of education in all countries leading to more and more people seeking 'guidance' on 'where they fit in the wider world'.[4]

As befits an institution which can achieve goals as diverse as regenerating cities and laundering souls, commentary on its roles and meanings has also burgeoned.[5] Despite, or perhaps because of, their prevalence, museums remain somewhat mysterious, protean institutions whose qualities are never quite captured despite the flood of analysis. The characteristic publication of museums studies, as an emerging field, is the 'reader', compilations of previously published texts, rarely overlapping in content, an indication 'that it has not solidified into an accepted canon of key texts'.[6] Edited volumes of commissioned work are also

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Most of the large Anglophone academic publishers include Museums Studies on their lists, with that of Routledge/Taylor and Francis being the largest and most influential, with Ashgate, Wiley-Blackwell, Altamira, Berg, the Smithsonian Institution, Intellect, Maney, West Coast Press and many university presses also entering the field. The range of disciplines reflecting on or analysing museums is also extensive, including sociology (e.g. Sharon MacDonald and Gordon Fyffe (1996)), economics (e.g. Bruno Frey and Stephen Meier (2006)), anthropology (e.g. James Clifford (1988), Michael Ames (1993), Mary Bouquet (1999), Anthony Shelton (2006)), health (e.g. Helen Chatterjee and Gary Noble (2013)), memory (e.g. Susan Crane (2004), Silke Arnold-de Simine (2013)), property (e.g. Jordanna Bailkin (2004)), cultural policy (e.g. Clive Gray (2007), Oliver Bennett and Elenora Belfiore (2008)), community studies (e.g. Sheila Watson (2007)) and social work (e.g. Lois Silverman (2010)).
[6] Sharon MacDonald (ed), *The Companion to Museum Studies* (London: Blackwell, 2006), 167. For reviews of three of these readers, including the two largest – Bettina Carbonell's, which runs to 655 pages, and Donald Preziosi and Claire Farrago's, which holds the record for length at 779 – see Sharon Macdonald, 'Review Article: reviewing museum studies in the age of the reader', *Museum and Society*, November (2006), 166–172.

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prevalent.[7] No one since Germain Bazin in 1967 and Alma Wittlin in 1970 has attempted a synthetic history of all types of museum, though Andrew McClellan has more recently done so for art museums.[8]

The aim of this chapter is to give an account of museums and the museological literature from the inside, that is, from the point of view of a practitioner working in the UK. For reasons that will become clear, it will not attempt to be comprehensive. Instead it will focus on a few salient points – paradoxes, dichotomies, confusions, debates, disagreements and mysteries – which may reveal aspects of the history, nature and roles of museums, and suggest places where the skills and insights of philosophers may be able fruitfully to enrich the conversation.

2. Definitions and Missions

The accepted international definition of museums is provided by the relevant branch of UNESCO – the International Council of Museums (ICOM):

> A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires,

[7] The most influential are three anthologies arising out of Smithsonian conferences: Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds), *Museums and Communities: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Ivan Karp, Christine Kreamer and Steven D. Lavine (eds), *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); Ivan Karp, Corrine Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Ybarra-Frausto (eds), *Museum Frictions, Public Cultures, Global Transformations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006). Other anthologies have been devoted to everything from ethics (Janet Marstine, (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2011)) to pedagogy (Scott G. Paris (ed), *Perspectives on Object-Centred Learning in Museums* (New Jersey and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002)) and from philosophy to origins (Hugh H. Genoways (ed), *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham and Oxford: Altamira Press, 2006) and Hugh H. Genoways and Mary Anne Andrei (eds), *Museum Origins: Readings in Early Museum History and Philosophy* (California: Left Coast Press, 2008)).

[8] See Germain Bazin, *The Museum Age* (New York: Universe Books, 1967); Alma S. Wittlin, *Museums: In Search of a Usable Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1970); and Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boullee to Bilbao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Since the time of writing John Simmons, *Museums: A History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) has been published.

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> conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.[9]

For the UK, the Museums Association (MA) states that:

> Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artifacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society.[10]

While these do address the basics of why people visit museums, the activities museums carry out and their social purposes, they are so vague as to be mostly tautological: museums are museumy institutions which provide the benefits and pleasures that are typical of museums. To achieve a greater degree of precision, individual museums interpret this generic definition through vision and mission statements. To take just one example of a paradigmatic museum,[11] the core of the Mission Statement of the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) is:

> As the world's leading museum of art and design, the V&A enriches people's lives by promoting the practice of design and increasing knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the designed world.[12]

Even within constraints of the required brevity, the V&A's statement begs as many questions as it answers. How and by whom has its status as the world leader in its field been decided? Would other museums accept this? Which people are to be enriched? What is design and how is it different from art? An analysis of forty mission statements from museums in Britain shows similar issues of definition.[13]

[9] ICOM Statutes, 2007. http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-vision/museum-definition.html. To provide more precision, ICOM also provides definitions of the key words involved it its definition. See http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/Key_Concepts_of_Museology/Museologie_Anglais_BD.pdf.

[10] http://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions.

[11] See Kenneth Hudson, *Museums of Influence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[12] http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/v/v-and-a-mission-and-objectives/.

[13] http://www.collectionslink.org.uk/discover/new-perspectives/1380-what-are-museums-for. For the US see the guidance provided by the

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Professional associations of museums and museum workers similarly refine and elaborate the definition of museums and their purposes. The MA's position is set out in a document called *Museums Change Lives*. By this they mean that museums 'enrich the lives of individuals, contribute to strong and resilient communities and help create a fair and just society. Museums in turn are immensely enriched by the skills and creativity of their public'.[14] Here a similar set of questions arises about how museums might achieve these goals. While both definitions hinge on the capacious word 'enrich' they are remarkably different in their visions of human flourishing. The V&A sees its role in society as limited to its specialist domain; the Museums Association sees museums as benefiting the whole structure of society and is more explicitly political and engaged with issues of inclusion and justice.[15]

3. Intrinsic versus Instrumental Value

Differences such as those between the V&A and the MA reflect a central debate in cultural spheres – and in the museum world in particular – which has, since the 1980s onwards, been expressed as the distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental value of the arts and culture. This dichotomy reflected the breach of the post-war Keynsian consensus in both economics and public funding of the arts and the increasing domination of public discourse and government policy by neoliberal market economics, which required cultural

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American Alliance of Museums to its members at http://www.aam-us.org/docs/continuum/developing-a-mission-statement-final.pdf?sfvrsn=2.

[14] http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-change-lives.

[15] A vigorous strand of museological literature argues that museums have a responsibility to contribute to 'the combating of social as well as cultural inequality'. Richard Sandell (ed), *Museums, Society, Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2002), xvii. See also Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (eds), *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 2012). For practitioners' views, see, for example: Dawn Casey, 'Museums as Agents for Social and Political Change', *Curator* 44/3 (2001), 230–236; David Fleming, 'Positioning the Museum for Social Inclusion', in Richard Sandell (ed), *Museums, Society, Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2002), 203–212; Mark O'Neill, 'Essentialism, Adaptation and Justice: Towards a New Epistemology of Museums', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21 (2006), 95–115; and Robert Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World* (London: Routledge, 2009).

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institutions to justify their existence on the basis of their economic value.[16] In Britain after 1997 New Labour placed less emphasis on economic impacts, instead setting detailed targets for social outputs for government funded museums.[17] While many who had been working for years in democratizing museums found these targets not just acceptable, but useful, 'traditional' museums saw them as simply another set of instrumental objectives.

John Holden, then Head of Culture at the left-leaning think tank Demos, sought to bridge the divide with a model which envisaged three types of value – intrinsic, institutional and instrumental – that would, respectively, be of interest to the public, professionals and politicians/funders.[18] He argued that these different regimes of value were of legitimate interest to the relevant stakeholders, but they all too often failed to recognize or find a language to communicate with each other. In these terms, the professional/instrumental value of museums would be derived from key functions: preserving, collecting, storing, researching, conserving, displaying. The public/intrinsic value would be the whole range of experiences visitors have in museums – intellectual, social, aesthetic, emotional, personal, symbolic, therapeutic, and so on. The political/institutional value includes all the functions listed by *The Economist* above – economic regeneration, national and civic prestige, as well as social justice and similar aims set out by the Museums Association. Holden's intervention has not noticeably reduced the confusion in museum debates, with most institutions drawing in an *ad hoc* way on the three regimes of value without finding any underlying coherence.

There are many thorny issues here: the capacity of experts to distinguish between their professional obligations to the public and their professional self-interest in their advocacy of 'intrinsic value'; the role of experts in a democracy; the meaning of autonomy for cultural

[16] See Anna Upchurch, 'John Maynard Keynes, The Bloomsbury Group and the Origins of the Arts Council Movement', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 10/2 (2004), 203–217; see also Janet Minihan, *The Nationalization of Culture: The Development of State Subsidies to the Arts in Great Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977).

[17] See Helen Rees Leahy, 'New Labour, Old Masters', *Cultural Studies* 21/4–5 (2007), 695–717; see also Celine West and Charlotte H.F. Smith, '"We are not a government poodle": Museums and social inclusion under New Labour', *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 11/3 (2005), 275–288.

[18] See John Holden (ed), *Valuing Culture – Event Speeches* (London: Demos, 2003) and John Holden, *Capturing Cultural Value* (London: Demos, 2004).

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organisations which are state funded – albeit at 'arms' length'; and more widely, the relationship between museums and money. Many have lamented how much the sector has come to rely on sponsorship, income from tourists and influential large donors.[19] Museums are legally recognized as a public good, either through state funding or by being exempt from tax as a charity. They preserve objects which are held in perpetuity outside the market. A key part of their function is to represent non-market values. Despite this their operation is continually transformed by the 'creative destruction' taking place in the economy.[20] The global financial crisis has not resulted in greater clarity or consensus about the relationship of non-market institutions like museums to the market. Given the proliferation of museums recounted by *The Economist* it will be interesting to see if museums can themselves take an active role in helping society redefine this relationship.

4. Agents or Expressions of Change

Art historians Donald Preziosi and Claire Farrago contend that 'the institution of the museum has for some time been essential to the fabrication and sustenance of [the] system of beliefs…that have constituted the core of "modernity"'.[21] Museums are essential, they argue, to creating and maintaining certain 'assumptions about the nature of meaningful relationships between subjects and objects, between individuals or communities and the worlds they weave about themselves'.[22] From the perspective of a literature scholar, Barbara Black argues that museums are the 'master pattern' of the age and that the 'civic museum' was 'the greatest constructive

[19] For example, Victoria Alexander, *Museums and Money: the Impact of Funding on Exhibitions, Scholarship, and Management* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); James Cuno, 'Whose Money? Whose Power? Whose Art History?', in 'Money, Power, and the History of Art' *The Art Bulletin* 79/1 (1997), 6–27, and James Cuno (ed), *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[20] See Mark O'Neill, 'Museums and the Search for Meaning in the "Necessary Context" of the Market', in Eleonora Belfiore and Anna Upchurch (eds), *Humanities in the Twenty First* Century: Beyond Utility and Markets (Basingstonke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

[21] Donald Preziosi and Claire Farrago, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 1.

[22] Ibid., 2.

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project of the nineteenth century'.[23] These are difficult assertions to assess. Did sufficient numbers of even the educated elites in Europe visit museums during the emergence of 'modernity' to have the effect Preziosi and Farrago claim? Scholars in other disciplines could replace the term 'museum' in their argument with their special subject and make a case, from the novel and the law to shopping and the cinema. Black makes no comparisons with other 'constructive' projects of the period (sewage systems, clean water pipes, universal free primary education, imperialism) to support her claim.

The centrality of museums is also questionable because of the lack of an account of their role by major thinkers and writers at the time of their first flourishing, when there was a deluge of commentary on social, economic and cultural changes. There is no equivalent for museums of Newman's *The Idea of the University*, and, though there may be the material for such a volume scattered through the work of Ruskin, between Ruskin and one short essay by Theodor Adorno,[24] the lack of analytical commentary on museums by major thinkers is noteworthy.[25] It might be argued that, because museums are about display, they reflect wider developments in a highly visible non-verbal way appropriate to a society dedicated more than any other in history to the production of objects. Cultural sociologist Tony Bennett, in a very influential Foucauldian analysis, has interpreted the first museums as making public what had once been private, as part of the 'exhibitionary complex'.[26] This included industrial exhibitions, panoramas and fairgrounds and reflected a strategy of inculcating a hegemonic 'civic seeing' by persuasion rather than by force. The Victorians however were not unaware of this new visual culture – reflected for example in the outpouring of responses to the archetypal exhibition, that of Crystal Palace in 1851. The underlying issues here – whether museums are active agents which have an important role in shaping how people live and understand their world, or

[23] Barbara Black, *On Exhibit, Victorians and Their Museums* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 1.

[24] Theodor W. Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 175–185.

[25] For example, there are no references to museums in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Even though Charles Dickens was very aware of museums, championing Sunday opening, David Copperfield is the only one of his characters to visit a museum and none of the – more educated – characters of Anthony Trollope appear to do so.

[26] See Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum, History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995).

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whether they passively reflect more important developments in the wider society – remain central to contemporary debates.

5. Liberating Knowledge or Ritual Demarcation

The Economist describes museums as institutions created when the Enlightenment 'bloomed' and it is certainly true that museums were part of a response to the 'crisis of knowledge' generated when Europeans discovered what were for them new worlds.[27] The flood of objects representing cultures, plants and animals not known to Aristotle and not mentioned in the Bible undermined existing categories of knowledge – why were there were no kangaroos on the Ark? Trying to answer these questions led to new technologies of knowledge like the telescope, the encyclopaedia and the microscope. New institutions had to be invented (usually outside universities, which were slow to change) including royal academies and societies and coffee shops. Museums were both new technologies like the telescope and new institutions like the academy. Deriving from sixteenth and seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities[28] their transition to public institutions was aided by other new technologies, such as the catalogue, reflecting a more democratic, less hierarchical view of knowledge, like the shift from the hierarchical Tree of Knowledge to alphabetical order.[29]

In their formative period, as now, museums used a range of rationales which were not necessarily compatible. They shared the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is in itself liberating,[30] but also promoted uncritical, unitary civic, national or imperial identities. Individual membership of the 'republic of letters' was

[27] Fiammetta Rocco, 'Museums: Temples of Delight', op. cit.

[28] See Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinets of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Cornwall, UK: House of Stratus, 2001).

[29] See Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

[30] Despite its criticism of the Enlightenment, critical theory shares its belief that knowledge is liberating. Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff argue that critical theory's questions, problems and strategies 'have a significance, and an urgency, that go far beyond the museum; they are, we believe, essential to an understanding of our culture that is itself a prerequisite to changing it'. Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff, *Museum Culture, Histories, Discourses, Spectacles* (London: Routledge, 1994), xix.

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tempered by international rivalry.[31] Many also believed that seeing art and nature would be morally uplifting. These beliefs were often bundled together under the rubric of Progress, of which museums were seen as an expression. Since World War II challenges to positivist epistemologies and Enlightenment master-narratives coincided with democratisation and the emergence of feminist and identity politics to pose significant challenges to perceptions of museums and to their self-image. A great deal of evidence has been presented that nineteenth-century museum displays were pervaded by imperialism, 'scientific' racism, and social Darwinist hierarchies of peoples and cultures.[32] Empirical evidence for the ideological function of art museums was provided by a large scale survey of European visitors carried out by Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel.[33] Their analysis was developed by Carol Duncan, in terms of 'civilising rituals'.[34] Duncan argued that, even though art museums belong

> decisively to [the] realm of secular knowledge, not only because of the scientific and humanistic disciplines practiced in them – conservation, art history, archaeology – but also because of their status as preservers of the community's official cultural memory,… [they] have a quasi-religious, ritual function…. We can also appreciate the ideological force of a cultural experience that claims for its truths the status of objective knowledge. To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its higher values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community. Those who are best prepared to perform the ritual…are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms.[35]

[31] See Holger Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World, 1750–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[32] For example, A. E. Coombs, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination* (London Yale University Press, 1997); and Tony Bennett, *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[33] Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and their Public*, translated by Caroline Beattie and Nick Merriman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). First published 1969.

[34] See Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[35] Ibid., 8. For another account of museums as ritual space see Jem Fraser, 'Museums, Drama, Ritual and Power', in Simon Knell, Suzanne

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The logic of Duncan's position is that no amount of access or educational work – the kind of agenda set out by the Museums Association – will enable museums to transcend their ideological function of sustaining the status quo.[36] The result is that generations of museum studies students have come to see the 'evil political side of museums'.[37] There is very little evidence that the literature revealing the inner workings of power in academic literature has been in itself enough to generate change. This may be due in part to its failure 'to account for the material specificity of museums and exhibitions, for their experiential and affective appeal'.[38] The result of the influence of critical and cultural theory in universities is that many disciplines which have been practised in both museums and universities have diverged. Art history and anthropology are now practised so differently in universities and (especially in conservative) museums that scholars are barely able to communicate.[39] Attempts to create a middle ground would, according to Andrea Witcom, only be possible if critical theorists were less 'aggressive'[40] and less apt 'take the moral high ground'[41] and museum practitioners were less 'defensive'[42] and 'paranoid'.[43]

The working out of the implications of these critiques for museums is associated with what has been called the New Museology, usually dated to 1989 and to the publication of a work of that title edited by Peter Vergo.[44] But it had been emerging earlier, through Robert

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MacLeod and Sheila Watson (eds), *Museum Revolutions* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[36] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, op. cit., 4.

[37] Danielle Rice, 'Museums: Theory, Practice, and Illusion', in Andrew McClellan (ed), *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2003), 78.

[38] Michelle Henning, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 2 and see 17–18.

[39] See Charles W. Haxthausen, *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003). See also Anthony Shelton, 'Museum and Anthropologies: Practices and Narratives', in MacDonald (ed), *The Companion to Museum Studies*, op. cit., 64–80.

[40] Andrea Witcom, *Re-imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3 and 90.

[41] Ibid., 168.

[42] Ibid., 3, 168, 169.

[43] Ibid., 12.

[44] See Peter Vergo, *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989).

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Lumley's *The Museum Time Machine* (1988) and Donald Horne's *The Great Museum* (1984). In practice many museums manage these contradictions by a process of splitting. Temporary exhibitions reflect new epistemologies and attempts to reach new publics – they usually have a clear narrative, present an explicit hypothesis, and are often interdisciplinary in nature. In stark contrast, the 'permanent' displays usually reflect single disciplines; they aspire to present objective knowledge and 'remain blissfully insulated from the shifting trends of the postmodern world'.[45]

When museums attempt consciously to deploy both their ritual community-building power and their knowledge creating power, they can generate considerable practical and intellectual confusion. For example, in 2007 the UK National Museums Directors Conference (comprised mostly of 'traditionalist' museums) announced a partnership with the Institute of Public Policy Research to address issues of identity. Amongst other goals, the project aimed to

- Lay out principles for adjudicating between rival claims made on behalf of national identities, minority cultures and individual rights.
- Identify the policies that are most effective in challenging divisive identities and building shared identities, with a particular emphasis on the contribution that heritage and arts policy might play in fostering common identities.

The notes of a related roundtable discussion stated that 'museums and archives are viewed as neutral, non-religious public spaces which people trust and where they feel "safe". They offer expert, non-partisan interpretation of their collections and provide an impartial space for open engagement and debate'. Modern displays in universal museums may be 'neutral' but there is no evidence that they promote tolerance.[46] Further, neutral displays seem an unlikely method of 'challenging divisive identities', while 'adjudicating' rival identity claims would seem in itself to be divisive.

Thus, some museum rationales from earlier periods (e.g. the morally improving effect of art) have not survived, others, even if heavily challenged (e.g. aestheticism) are still drivers of curatorship,

[45] Andrew McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boullee to Bilbao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 192.

[46] Charlotte Higgins, 'Behind the Scenes at the Museum, forget marches and part politics. If you really want to change the world, become a museum director', *The Guardian* 27/11/2003.

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almost as a craft activity, and new ones are invented in response to new pressures. A key motivation for the creation of public museums was however a much wider concern about human flourishing in the new urban, industrial economy. While many pressing practical problems needed to be resolved – clean water, sewage disposal, mass transport – there was concern about what the new way of life was doing to people, as moral individuals and as citizens. There is a large and growing amount of epidemiological evidence that the Victorians' intuitions were right, and that attending museums, along with other cultural activities, like the cinema, has such a beneficial impact on people's health that they live significantly longer.[47]

6. Repatriation

These ideological and epistemological paradoxes underlie one of the most highly publicised issues in contemporary museums – that of repatriation.[48] The way the issue is addressed varies from country to country, with the major disjuncture being between settler countries with significant minorities of indigenous people (like America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand) and imperial countries (like Britain, France and Russia). In the former, indigenous rights movements have resulted in significant returns, while in the latter, resistance is strong – except in relation to goods spoliated from Jews by Nazi Germany, which is accepted as an exception.[49] In 2003, thirteen major museums including the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the Hermitage in St Petersburg issued the 'Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums'.[50]

[47] Mark O'Neill, 'Cultural attendance and public mental health - from research to practice', *Journal of Public Mental Health* 9/4 December (2010), 22–29.

[48] For an overview see Cressida Fforde, Jane Hubert and Paul Turnbull, *The Dead and Their Possessions: Repatriation in Principle, Policy and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002).

[49] See Lynne H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa* (London: Macmillan, 1994). For the UK, see nationalmuseums.org.uk/spoliation.html. For the USA, see www.nepip.org and www.aam-us.org/museumresources/prov/index.cfm.

[50] http://icom.museum/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf/ICOM_News/2004-1/ENG/p4_2004-1.pdf. For a discussion of the concept of the 'Universal Museum' see: Mark O'Neill, 'Enlightenment museums: universal or merely global?', *Museum and Society* 2/3 (2004), 190–202; Neil Curtis, 'Universal museums, museum objects and repatriation: the tangled stories

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The declaration argued that these museums served the whole of mankind, not individual nations or peoples, and to carry out this function it was necessary and therefore right that they showed objects from all over the world. This was seen – and acknowledged – as a means of defending museums against repatriation claims, and in particular of supporting the British Museum against Greek demands for the return of the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles.

These institutions have long claimed to represent universal values, but in the nineteenth century these values were not, as asserted by the Director of the British Museum, to 'show the world as one',[51] but to show that there was a clear hierarchy of civilisations, races and genders. Proponents of the current version of the Universal Museum have found it difficult to acknowledge this history. Philippe de Montebello, the long serving director of the Metropolitan Museum, has been blunt: complainants need to get on 'the same page' and not keep going on about the past.[52] The difficulty here is whether the transformation of museums identified by *The Economist* is of a kind which enables them to make a convincing transition from one set of anti-democratic universalising values to another, more acceptable set – without being forced to deny the past in a way that seems at odds with any definition of what museums are for as truth-seeking institutions.

7. Traditional versus Progressive Museums

The Economist's picture of museums as once being dusty and boring but dedicated to scholarship and now being transformed pervades the literature – but is too simple an account of the history.[53] The story is often recounted as a debate between traditionalists and reformers – as

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of things', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21 (2006), 117–127; and James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[51] See Neil MacGregor, 'The British Museum', *ICOM News* 1/ 7 (2004), and Neil MacGregor, 'The Whole World in our Hands', *The Guardian* 24/7/2004. http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jul/24/heritage.art.

[52] Philippe de Montebello, 'Art Museums, Inspiring Public Trust', in Cuno (ed), *Whose Muse?*, op. cit., 19.

[53] Museums have recently attracted the attention of professional historians, leading to excellent works such as those by Steven Conn (1998), Brandon Taylor (1999), Christopher Whitehead (2005), and David Cannadine (2007).

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it is in the only two published reviews of the literature of museology. The earliest of these, by Deirdre Stam, a US information science academic, is sceptical. Reform, a recurrent phenomenon, is

> a popular intellectual sport among museum players and spectators since the inception of museums…[which]… typically…decries the old as irrelevant to 'today's' world, and calls for adopting 'the new', or for 'change', or 'reform', or even for full-fledged revolution in the name of better service to 'the populace'.[54]

Stam continues:

> This rhetorical form usually includes a few snide remarks about the self-serving, possessive or otherwise neurotic tendencies of curators, and the mendacious and wily natures of administrators and trustees. The call for reform typically ends with the recommendations that power to govern museums be granted henceforth to the disenfranchised constituency most passionately committed to the future of the institution, that is to say, the writers themselves.[55]

Stam argues that the required response to the crisis is the adoption of modern information technology in order to manage the 'information base' (which includes objects) in an integrated way.[56]

The other published literature review of museology is by Randolph Starn, an American public historian. He portrays reform more positively as periodic renewal, but sees conflicts between 'traditionalists' and 'reformists' as having 'by and large become ritual tilts.... Most museum professionals have already either embraced or conceded the case for more "accessible" museums "responsive" to a broader and more diverse public'.[57]

Starn's view that there is really a consensus underlying museum debates may be due to the failure of his review to include writing by, or interviews with, practitioners. He would have found a literature dominated by progressive museum staff, struggling against unseen opposition from 'traditionalists'. A prime example in

[54] Deirdre Stam, 'The informed museum: the implications of "The New Museology" for museum practice', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 12/3 (1993), 54.

[55] Ibid., 54.

[56] Ibid., 58–9.

[57] Randolph Starn, 'A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies', *The American Historical Review* 110/1 (2005), 46. http://www.historycooperative.org.

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America was the1992 report *Excellence and Equity,* a rallying cry for museums to renew their commitment to education, to be more inclusive and welcome diverse audiences. Defenders of 'traditionalist' perspectives generally avoided debate, refusing to give credibility to the case for reform. One of the first conservatives to break cover was James Cuno, now director of the Getty Museum, in his edited book *Whose Muse? - Art Museums and the Public Trust* (2004). Made up of essays by the directors of major American art museums and the National Gallery in London, this is a riposte to these developments. It makes the case for what it describes as the 'traditional' museum, longing for a time before education, marketing, temporary exhibitions, sponsorship and what it calls, with an explicit reference to *Excellence and Equity*, a 'misplaced emphasis on social activism'.

The Economist shares the version of museum history represented in Cuno's volume, but is more welcoming of the changes:

> Less than a century ago Benjamin Ives Gilman, who served as secretary of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts for over 30 years, published a personal manifesto, "Museum Ideals: of Purpose and Method", in which he urged curators to treat museums as having a holy purpose. Collections should be contemplated for their aesthetic qualities alone, he argued, with no need for narrative, context or explanation. The best place to do that was in the rarefied surroundings of a museum. 'A museum of art', he wrote, 'is in essence a temple'.[58]

Far from being 'traditional' and part of their original intent, Gilman's view reflected an aestheticism which developed in the late nineteenth century when 'the museum became the province of professional associations replete with the organizational accoutrements of journals, annual conferences, and accreditation criteria, the "public museum" acquired a kind of Platonic image – an idealized standard against which individual institutions would be measured'.[59] It was only at this later period that conflict between the social and the aesthetic and scholarly roles of museums emerged.

This shift in focus can be seen in how New York's Metropolitan Museum describes the evolution of its mission statement:

> The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded on April 13, 1870, 'to be located in the City of New York, for the purpose

[58] *The Economist*, December 2013.

[59] Jeffrey Abt, 'The Origin of the Public Museum', in MacDonald (ed), *The Companion to Museum Studies*, op. cit., 132.

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> of establishing and maintaining in said city a Museum and library of art, of encouraging and developing the study of the fine arts, and the application of arts to manufacture and practical life, of advancing the general knowledge of kindred subjects, and, to that end, of furnishing popular instruction.'
>
> …The Trustees of The Metropolitan Museum of Art have reaffirmed the statement of purpose and supplemented it with the following statement of mission:
>
> The mission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art is to collect, preserve, study, exhibit, and stimulate appreciation for and advance knowledge of works of art that collectively represent the broadest spectrum of human achievement at the highest level of quality, all in the service of the public and in accordance with the highest professional standards.[60]

The supplementary statement, like the V&A's mission statement, reflects an increased emphasis on status, and a shift of concern from the needs of the public to the concern of the staff. Few public museums founded between 1850 and 1890 would have agreed that there was a contradiction between 'utilitarian' (or 'instrumental') and 'intrinsic' value.[61] Museums would have the desired social and economic impact (whether ennobling, educating or socialising people) because of the intrinsic power of the objects.

It is possible to construct a very different account of museum 'tradition'. The founding director of the V&A, Henry Cole, was clear about the social purpose of the institution:

> If you wish your schools of science and art to be effective, your health, the air and your food to be wholesome, your life to be long, your manufacturers to improve, your trade to increase and your people to be civilized, you must have museums of science and art, to illustrate the principles of life, health, nature, science, art and beauty.[62]

Throughout the first three quarters of the nineteenth century, museum curators and directors were regarded as public servants, accountable to the government which funded them, whether through

[60] September 12, 2000. http://www.metmuseum.org/en/about-the-museum/mission-statement.

[61] See Amy Woodson-Boulton, '"Industry without Art Is Brutality": Aesthetic Ideology and Social Practice in Victorian Art Museums', *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007), 47–71.

[62] Cited in Kylie Message, *Museums and Social Activism: Engaged Protest* (London: Routledge, 2014), 60–61.

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trustees or government departments. Those who objected to wider public access were seen, not as defending a museum tradition or academic standards, but as representing an aristocratic political view on the need to preserve hierarchies.[63] Cole's words were quoted by George Brown Goode, a senior figure in the Smithsonian Institution in the late nineteenth century, whose work inspired later staff, including the influential Dillon Ripley, who was Director from 1964 to 1984.[64] The latter's commitment to 'social justice' led to radical experiments in The National Museum of American History responding to the Civil Rights movement from the 1960s onwards.[65]

8. Ideal versus Real Visitors

Many of the deepest confusions concerning museums arise from the perceptions of visitors among both practitioners and museological scholars. Discussions of the issues involved are often acrimonious, with curators who try to reach wide audiences accused of 'dumbing down', and the visitors who respond described as the 'lowest common denominator'.[66] The responses have been accusations of elitism and attacks on professional preciousness, such as that by curator and museum director Hal Skramstad: 'There is no such thing as the museum profession. And even if there is, nobody cares'.[67]

Attempts to study visitors empirically began in the nineteenth century but grew very slowly until the 1980s, when they began to boom. In a review published in 2006, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill noted the shift from a positivist mode of counting and observing visitors and testing their learning to more interpretive methods of understanding their motivations and meaning-making processes.[68] She criticized the field for the 'functionalist' approach of most studies,

[63] Lisa G. Corrin (ed), *Mining the Museum: An Installation by Fred Wilson* (New York: New Press, 1994), 88.

[64] Message, *Museums and Social Activism*, op. cit., 60–61.

[65] Ibid., 23–24.

[66] See Mark O'Neill, 'The Good Enough Visitor', in Richard Sandell (ed), *Social Inclusion in Museums* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2001).

[67] In a lecture at the Getty Institute in July 1994.

[68] Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors' in MacDonald (ed), *The Companion to Museum Studies*, op. cit., 367. See also L. H. Silverman, 'Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age', *Curator* 38 (1995), 161–170.

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for being theoretically uninformed and lacking in academic sophistication.[69] She concludes that the focus on improving displays, along with restricted resources, limited the development of visitor studies which seek a 'deeper understanding' of visitor experiences.[70] The related literature on visitor learning, access and education has also grown apace, not least because of the focus on and investment in this area of practice by governments and foundations.[71] Visitor studies and learning are related through the influence on both of constructivism, which rejects the idea of knowledge as something existing outside the visitor, to whom it is transferred by the experts in the museum. Instead, visitors are active agents, relating what they experience to prior knowledge.[72] The accusation of under-theorization is due in some part to the different genealogies of museum education and critical theory. The fact that the former is deeply rooted in American pragmatism means that its philosophical underpinnings are practically invisible to thinkers inspired by Continental philosophies.[73]

Works by traditionalist practitioners are often derogatory about museum visitors – not the great masses outside the reach of museums, but the people who actually turn up, who are statistically likely to be much better educated than the population as a whole. In Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Rick Robinson's *The Art of Seeing*[74] and James Cuno's *Whose Muse?*,[75] visitors most frequently appear as tourists crowding the galleries and spoiling the experience for others, walking by masterpieces and failing to appreciate them as the authors do. One of the tropes of Cuno's book is descriptions of acts of appreciation, to give a sense of the kind of experience that makes museums worthwhile. 'The terracottas', says Cuno, 'are not heavy objects. They can be held easily in our hands. The size, scale, immediacy of effect, and familiar material invite our touch: we want to hold them, to press our fingers into their hollows, to

[69] Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors', op. cit., 373.

[70] See ibid. 362 and 374.

[71] Caroline Lang, John Reeve and Vicky Woollard, *The Responsive Museum: Working with Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 5–6.

[72] See George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[73] See Hilde S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 2000).

[74] See Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Rick E. Robinson, *The Art of Seeing: An Interpretation of the Aesthetic Encounter* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1991).

[75] See James Cuno (ed), *Whose Muse?*, op. cit.

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match our fingerprints with those of their maker'.[76] This, and the other examples that Cuno gives, takes place in a museum store and involves activities (handling precious objects) from which not just the public, but most museum staff, are excluded. As museum historian Andrew McClellan dryly remarks: 'It is safe to say that anyone fortunate enough to accompany Cuno on a tour of his collection, seeing as he sees, knowing what he knows, and holding things in their own hands, would become a museum lover for life'.[77]

Visitors are equally remote when they appear in the critical theory literature. Mieke Bal curated an exhibition in response to challenges from curators that her critiques of museums as uncritical institutions did not take their practical constraints into account. Through the exhibition, Bal claims she achieved 'a maximally effective expository politics with extremely limited means', overcoming 'the separation between empirical, historical and analytical studies', and that she was able to 'assess its affects'.[78] She undertook this task, judging by her own account, assuming that no thinking about this carried out in museums was relevant. Visitors are mysterious ciphers:

> Within the framework of the social constraints that induce some people and not others to visit art exhibitions, we can only assume that people go to see things that are there. Some people are interested to learn something about those things – although it is impossible to know what – while others prefer to be left alone, to have an 'aesthetic experience,' or to see things 'as they are'.[79]

Even if she didn't know of the substantial literature on what visitors want, or preferred to work from first principles, failing to study visitor responses to her own exhibition meant that its claim to be an experiment in praxis was void.

9. Museums, Rational, Non-Rational or Irrational?

Does the very multiplicity of purposes for which the institution is deployed, and of explanations for its success, suggest something protean and powerful, or is it merely an evanescent reflection of the many dimensions of consumerist leisure? The ascription of ritual purposes,

[76] Ibid., 56.
[77] McClellan, *The Art Museum from Boullee to Bilbao*, op. cit., 188.
[78] Mieke Bal, 'Exposing the Public' in MacDonald (ed), *The Companion to Museum Studies*, op. cit., 532.
[79] Ibid., 525.

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and the use of words like 'temple' and 'worship', hint at something more profound than the latter. Whether their perceived role is uplifting the soul, or economic regeneration, or promoting ideological hegemony, museums may be instruments of magical thinking. But even if writers like Carol Duncan and Mieke Bal are right about the ideological role of museums, their accounts do not explain why museums are effective. Museums were intended as secular replacements for the superstitious rituals of pre-Enlightenment communities – but perhaps, by investing grace and charisma in art, natural and historical objects, they have become reincarnations rather than replacements for the expression of these deep non-rational impulses.

Underlying all of these accounts may be the role of museums as instruments of immortality, for donors, for cultures, for staff and visitors, a secular response to the decay of traditional sources of transcendence.[80] If museums have something akin to this spiritual function, there is an inherent tension even more profound than that between rational, critical thinking and the appreciative mode which affirms the civic, national or elite identity of the visitor. Instruments of immortality tend towards Manichaeism, and the idea of redemption through museums is threatened by historical approaches which believe, like Walter Benjamin, that 'every object of civilization is also an object of barbarism'. This may also explain the vehemence of some museum debates, especially around repatriation. While one would expect the 'material turn' to be more fruitful for museum studies than the cultural turn has been,[81] this will not be the case if the real purpose of museums is spiritual or gnostic. A fundamental paradox of museums is that they are material expressions of forms of anti-materialist value. This may also explain the paradoxes around visitors, some of whom may appear to be beyond salvation, perhaps because of something akin to invincible ignorance.

[80] See Crispin Paine, *Godly Things: Museums Objects and Religion* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000); Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Lawrence Sullivan and Alison Edwards, *Stewards of the Sacred* (Yale: American Association of Museums and Harvard University Press, 2005); and Mark O'Neill, 'Museums and Mortality', *Material Religion*, 8/1 (2012), 52–75.

[81] See Daniel Miller (ed), *Materialities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). See also Simon Knell (ed), *Museums in the Material World* (London: Routledge, 2007).

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10. Conclusion: Thinking through Museums

The very popularity of museums, and the wide range of hopes and aspirations they reflect seem to embody deep paradoxes which were originally part of Western, Euro-American culture and are now global phenomena – between the material and the spiritual, between the rational and the non-rational, between experts and the lay public, between celebration and analysis, affirmation and critique, between the public space of citizenship and a social obstacle course, between mortality and transcendence. In their attempts to resolve these conflicts museum practitioners and commentators tend to write teleological histories thereby creating unitary 'traditions' that confuse activity and purpose, and in doing so they essentialize museums, their staff and their visitors.

Museums need to find better resolutions of these paradoxes, in order to find ways of advocating for what they represent so as genuinely to reflect the public interest, rather than the vested or personal interests of curators and directors. This means being much clearer about the nature of our mandate, of our institutional legitimacy, as expert institutions providing a public good in a democracy. We also need to be able to think much more clearly about museums' relationship with money. Thirty years of critical theory pointing out how museums are complicit with the market and with power hasn't helped us define how we can preserve non-market values in a market society. We need to be able to draw on much more varied accounts of our own traditions to help us coherently address contemporary issues (such as repatriation or the revival of interest in the religious significance of museum objects). While philosophers will bring new perspectives and questions to their engagement with museums, I hope the issues addressed in this chapter will provide interesting starting points for conversations between them and those in the museum profession.

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