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Museums and the “Death of Experience”: Singularity, Interiority and the Outside.ⁱ

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Introduction: Museums and the Problem of Experience

Many longstanding critiques of the museum place the issue of experience centre stage in what they see as wrong about the role they play in displaying artefacts to visiting audiences. Often premised on the European art museum tradition, beginning with the Louvre, writers like Quatremere de Quincy (see Bann, 1984; Sherman, 1994; Maleuvre, 1999), Valery (see Adorno, 1967), and Blanchot (1997a; 1997b) all typically highlighted either the problem of taking artefacts out of their original displaying context and creating a desacralizing experience of art or of packaging an art experience that is really a museum experience. Others, following more in the tradition of novelist Marcel Proust, have tended to focus on the transformations of cultural memory and history within museums into everyday experience, noting in particular, a fetishistic approach to the history that is represented in museums (see Adorno, 1967; Benjamin, 1999). Far from being of mere historical interest and outdated by more recent approaches to museums that are more attuned to their diversity and engagement with questions of identity and identity politics (see for example Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Bennett, 2004; Karp et. al., 2007) these critiques, notably the latter around issues of history and memory, continue to resonate with contemporary debates around the way that the past continues to have resonance within the present (see Donato, 1980; Huyssen, 1995; 2003; Gordon, 1997; Maleuvre, 1999; Crane, 2000; Smith, 2006).

My aim in this paper is not simply to present those earlier critiques anew and to claim lasting relevance for them. Much of what they have to say – in particular around their selectivity of museum type and approach to issues of aesthetic reception and practice by visiting audiences – might now seem quite dated, even wrong in many of its assumptions. Neither is it my intention to re-present an argument that museums are mere spaces of the commodity fetish/Spectacle in a neo-

or post-Marxist manner. Rather, what I argue in this paper is that embedded within these early critiques of the museum is an unacknowledged recognition of the importance of the spatiality of the museum that allows us to re-theorize what museums do. What I seek to show is that within earlier, critical arguments that have questioned not simply the practices but the very principle of the museum is an unacknowledged recognition of the problem of *topos* that should remain central to any question around understanding museum (or heritage) experience (see Koselleck, 2004).

Topos as a word is generally understood to mean 'place' but this is not just 'place' in the hermeneutic sense of meanings attributed by social actors to particular locations that form a basis for how they come to be represented, understood and remembered. A central tenet for understanding the character of modernity has been to look at what it does to experience. For Koselleck, notably, modern society, since its emergence in the 1500s, has seen the gradual erosion of experience as something enduring, communicable and shared (*Erfahrung*). In a way this is a means of describing tradition. And *topos* is the location and understanding of experience as a part of tradition. That understanding of experience – continuous, unchanging and enduring – has been well charted for a very long time within social science. The major claim has been that it has been eroded by the interventions of an industrial capitalist or modern society (for an overview see Berman, 1982; Kern, 1983; Frisby, 1985; Koselleck, 2004). Experience within this understanding of modern society becomes, it is argued, more fragmented, fractured, detraditionalised and less comprehensible as a shared totality (*Erlebnis*) (see Frisby, 1985; Simmel, 1990; Ziarek, 2001). Within these arguments *topos* is the term used to try and convey a sense of the spatio-temporal aspect of experience – in other words it is a shared experience grounded in a common spatial and temporal order. This, the modernity thesis argues, is eroded and replaced by the disjuncture of a series of fleeting and uncertain events and spaces that characterise experience in modern, urban life.

What remains prescient within the mid-twentieth century critiques of the museum that I will discuss here is that they had a grasp of this changing character of experience within modernity and

its relationship between spatial and temporal order. What they sought to show was how the museum as a modern institution was in many ways a reflection of this change in patterns of experience and moreover, was used as a cultural space in which to try and resolve some of the uncertainties that such a shift produced.

In this paper I offer an overview of a range of critiques of the museum that seek to draw out these questions of time and space and show that they sought to understand the museum as an institution in relation to this idea of topos and its apparent lack within society. I identify two expressions of spatiality, singularity and interiority, around which these critiques are developed. I then seek to add a third from more recent analysis of archival institutions in order to add a dynamic element to how we might see museums as spaces of experience (see Derrida, 1996). In the first two expressions we see the museum being presented as a supplementary topos to make up for the lack of a shared sense of experience grounded in time and space in modern society. Here the museum is a space that is seen as i) singular in its presentation of culture and as ii) an interior in which tropes of cultural and historical certainty and security are re-established. It is around these forms of spatiality, I will suggest, that the museum-as-topos is constructed. What we can also see in these critiques, however, is a recognition that such a topos will always be unstable and open to challenge. I argue that we need to introduce a third spatial descriptor to capture this issue. That descriptor conveys the spatial idea of Otherness and is expressed through a notion of “the outside”. Through interplay around ideas of supplement, mimesis and topos, I argue that we can see the principles of museumness at work while the idea of the outside offers a deconstructive moment through which to suggest a more dynamic understanding of the museum and its future curatorial possibilities.

Singularity and the Museum Experience

A useful way in to these arguments, one which highlights and exemplifies many of these questions about museums, and from which much subsequent critical work take their reference point, is to return to Adorno's well-known essay on the museum, *Valery Proust Museum* (1967). This essay takes as its approach an engagement with earlier work on museums from the early part of the twentieth century by the poet Paul Valery and the novelist Marcel Proust, both of whom were deeply concerned with issues of memory and experience in modern society. While divergent in their conclusions, what typifies both of these authors is that they present the museum as a somewhat tragic space; one where the high intentions of the bourgeoisie to present culture in one place for all to see and to learn from was somehow undermined by that very aim. They are also exemplars of two subsequent divergent approaches to the critique of museums. Valery is very much in a critical tradition concerned with the museum as an artistic context for experience and its problems, while Proust really inaugurates an interest in the museum as an historical supplement to living memory.

Adorno presents Valery as a cultural critic for whom museums are spaces of betrayal. Valery senses betrayal because he sees museums take the great works of art from the past and decontextualize them from their original environment. In doing this, he believes, they devalue the true significance and potential revelatory power of that art for the viewing subject. This is not a unique argument. Paul Valery was not the first person to put forward this proposition and he wasn't to be the last (see Blanchot, 1997a; 1997b). If one looks back to the early nineteenth century one finds the beginnings of such an argument with people like Quatremere de Quincy. He was the Intendent General for public arts in the reactionary Bourbon government that took power and restored the monarchy in France after the revolutionary period of Napoleon Bonaparte. That earlier regime had established the Louvre out of the appropriated royal palaces and through colonial conquest (notably in Egypt). It was around the Louvre that the first principles of the modern museum were established – of bringing together artworks and other artefacts from all times and places as a part of a total, universal survey and of using that collection as a key cultural reference in establishing the national, secular identity of France (see Duncan, 1995). In the Bourbon aftermath to

Napoleon's regime, Quatremere de Quincy argued that he wanted to close the museums down (see Bann, 1984; Duncan, 1995; Maleuvre, 1999), not least because such a secular and rational organisation, he believed, stripped many once sacred artefacts of their holy aura. He also believed that the Louvre had appropriated the representation of history for specific political and nationalist ends and he wanted to challenge that on political grounds. From the outset museums like the Louvre, then, were credited by critics like Quatremere de Quincy and Valery with the decontextualizing of art and of undermining of what they saw as its proper experience because, they believed, museums created a new and distinct environment for that art that was different from the one for which it had been created by artists themselves (see Maleuvre, 1999).

A later author to adopt a similar, though somewhat more sophisticated philosophical position, was Maurice Blanchot writing around 1950 (1997a; 1997b) largely in response to Andre Malraux's famous 1947 evocation of the universal and accessible possibilities for art made apparent in what he called the *musée imaginaire* (1978). For Malraux the idea of the *musée imaginaire* was premised on a notion of the universalising of the museum principle made possible by print technology and the reproduction of images of artworks (in books). For Malraux, photographic reproduction of artworks freed art from its location within the walls of the museum while retaining and universalising the museum principle of the representation of art to the experience of the viewer. In distinct contrast to Malraux, Blanchot believed that art in itself captured something inexpressible and vital to experience that directly challenged the very idea of the museum as a context for its display. Through art, he believed, we experience alterity (Otherness to ourselves) and an openness to the possibility of understanding that exists outside of ourselves as experiencing subjects (on this theme of the outside in Blanchot's work and in general see Foucault, 1998; Hetherington, 2011). Museums, for Blanchot, are not concerned with facilitating this experience of art but only with realising themselves as spaces for the display of art. They are, he believes, self-referential spaces – singular in their self-referencing or what he calls *monads without windows*, parodying Malraux's *museums without walls* idea (1997a: 22). In such a monadic and singular self-referential space the character of

art as a portal onto the outside, a space of Otherness, is, for Blanchot, undermined because he sees that art experienced not in itself but as part of a broader material and representational narrative of art told by the space of the museum. For Blanchot, when a person visits a museum they don't experience art in all its radical Otherness rather they experience museum in all its familiar sameness. In museums, Blanchot believes, art becomes part of a wider museum story – each artefact reduced to an index to that story rather than something through which visitors might contemplate something Other to their experience of themselves as subjects. The latter is important for Blanchot because he sees that as the way in which subjects realise themselves precisely as imaginative subjects in that act of contemplative recognition of what is Other to everyday, common-sense understandings.

The key problem of the museum, as these critics conceive it, is that the museum appropriates this singular character from art – something that comes about because of its sacred or Other character and assumes those qualities for itself as the space where art is experienced. In other words, what they have in common as a basis for their critique is a sense of the loss of a sacred topos for experience in the museum. The singular character of art, within these critiques, becomes the singular character of art in the context of the museum. For these authors art was once the topos for (sacred) experience, now the museum is seen to appropriate this topos for its own ends in representing art.

Returning to Adorno's reading of Valéry as an exemplar of this critical tradition, he was not one to take such arguments about the undermining of experience at face value. In challenging this approach he posits Marcel Proust as a possible alternative source of understanding. Proust, in contrast to Valéry, is presented by Adorno as accepting the decline in the revelatory power of art once it is placed within the museum. However, for Proust, Adorno suggests, this is because it is not the sacred experience of art that is important but, rather, art's influence on personal remembrance that reveals its true significance to modern forms of experience. Adorno suggests that Proust treats a visit to the museum in a similar manner to the way he does a visit to another icon of modernity -

the railway station – both at the time are special experiences, novel and a little out of the ordinary; visits likely to be remembered in individual experience rather than taken for granted as part of the everyday.

For Valery, the work of art can no longer be enjoyed once it has been placed in a museum; its singularity, he believes, is betrayed by the attempt to transpose the conditions of the singular from the work of art onto the museum itself as a distinctive space for art. For Proust this role of the museum matters little because the significance of art escapes the terrain of aesthetic appreciation and enters instead that of memory, reception and consciousness. Both see the museum signalling the death of the work of art but whereas for Valery this is a tragic loss and the basis for an erosion of experience, Proust has a more positive view: the demise of the work of art within the museum is what brings it to life in the creative powers of personal memory and recollection which might lead to an awakening to the past (Adorno, 1967: 182).

For Adorno, the problem with Valery's position is that it is imbued with a fetishism for the work of art while the problem he has with Proust, who gets a somewhat more sympathetic treatment from him, is that he is accused of subjectivism (183). But rather than calling for the end to the museum in principle, however, Adorno suggests our approach should be to go there – not for what today might be called the 'museum experience' (see Huyssen, 1995) - but simply to contemplate one or two important artworks in depth. Despite being presented as a tragic space for the death of aesthetic reception one can still find within its walls and effectively contemplate, Adorno believes, a few expressions of autonomous art. For Adorno this is art autonomous from commodity fetishism, art that resists the museum experience and the commodified culture industry of which it is a part. In such art, Adorno believes, the last vestige of experience as *Erfahrung* – even if only glimpsed as a lack – might be encountered. Different though Adorno's and Blanchot's claims are, premised on quite different understandings of human nature and subjectivity, they share a sense that the museum promotes something fundamentally and irrevocably diminishing to experience. They do so

through a sense of topos as tragically lost to experience and this colours their views of the museum as a social space for the presentation of culture to experience.

The Museum as Tomb Interior

If through the tradition associated with Quatremere de Quincy, Valery and Blanchot we get a critique of the museum as a space of singularity that removes topos from the experience of art and replaces it with the experience of museum, we find something a little different in another key critic of the museum from this time, Walter Benjamin, who can be placed more in the lineage of Proust's understanding of the museum (1973; 1999). Benjamin's attitude to collecting and to an appreciation of fragments from the past was in many ways more sympathetic to the museum idea and notions of multiple reception than his friend Adorno's, albeit critical at the same time around issues of historicity and experience. Such ambivalence is on show in his now famous *Arcades Project* where he treats the museum both as a dream-house in which we experience the past and present through the alienating lens of commodity culture and also a space in which the opportunity for remembrance of what it masks remains a live one with the appropriate work of reception. For Benjamin, the key objective is to find a way of revealing the positive opportunities for a reception not of art but of history found in the museum that challenges what he sees as its fetishistic or phantasmagoric representation of the present through a story of progress unfolding from the past and laid out before the viewer as a representation of historicity. Whereas the other authors surveyed here tend to equate the museum with the art museum or gallery (no doubt because they tend to equate culture with high culture) and have little to say about other types of museums, Benjamin is more sensitive to these other types of museum and to the cultural artefact in general rather than just the painting or sculpture.

In his *Arcades* analysis, Benjamin aligns the museum with a series of spaces that were prominent within nineteenth century consumerism, notably the bourgeois interior or parlour, world fairs and department stores. He also, less obviously but significantly, conflates the museum with the subterranean world of Paris, notably its tombs and sewers (1999; #L: 407ff). The relationship between the museum and the sites of consumption is readily apparent in their mode of display to shoppers/visitors and their relationship to the display of commodities to consumers (shoppers or visitors) and this part of his analysis has been widely explored in recent years (see for example Buck-Morss, 1989; Cohen, 1995; Gilloch, 1995). Benjamin was conscious of the museum's role in the creation of phantasmagoric representations of consumer society and its fetishistic powers. Indeed, his analysis of commodity fetishism in relation to what he called dream-houses of commodity culture has become something of a landmark of analysis for many later studies of the commodity fetish character of culture and cultural institutions within modern, capitalist societies (see for example Buck-Morss, 1989; Maleuvre, 1999; Hetherington, 2007). As one of his so-called dream-house, the museum is, for Benjamin, a cultural site that capitalism uses to create illusions that veil the commodity character of cultural production and art. Our task, he suggests, is to find ways of awakening from this dream of change which he suggests is really a nightmare of the ever-same of capitalist social relations.

Some of Benjamin's critique of the museum, then, as with Adorno, shares an understanding based on describing the alienation of experience within the sphere of culture. However it is the association between the museum and the underground spaces of death that take his analysis beyond this familiar critique and suggest a broader question of the issue of historicity and its relationship to experience that is still worthy of attention. In the convolute of his *Arcades Project* where he discusses the museum and its relationship to these other spaces, that of tombs and sewers, Benjamin begins by outlining the important influence on Bourgeois culture of the discovery and relationship with the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii at the end of the eighteenth century. For Benjamin, these classical ruins became the mis-en-scene of a later bourgeois cultural ennoblement;

the space where bourgeois society gets to make reference to itself and its historical position in relation to the revered classical past as some form of culmination. For Benjamin, nineteenth century bourgeois culture – and its presentation of history - engages with the appropriation of such ruins of the past in ways that present its own ideas about itself as a class with historical significance while at the same time denying the problem of history as a site of struggle and change. For Benjamin, the approach to the past in the museum is one in which ideas of progress and change as measured against the cultural artefacts from the past are tied in with a space of representation in which there is no outside (1999, #L: 406). Museums, he suggests, are constructed like dreams (of the past) in which there is no escape; their interiority, like the state of dreaming, becomes self-containing as the experience of the past. This self contained 'tomb', which he aligns prominently with the 'tomb' of the bourgeois interior and its broader cultural validation of interiority in general, is, for Benjamin, an ironic space for the representation of historicity – bringing history inside the imaginary spaces of the bourgeois topos in order to make it seem safe and self-validating.

For Benjamin, for all its heroic chronological narratives about civilization and Empire, cultural high achievement and above all representation of progress, museums also represents this Bourgeois understanding of history, which is also a capitalist vision of history, as the end of history enclosed in on itself in a state of permanent and enduring insiderness. Museums, Benjamin argues, monumentalise time into something static and enclosed as if there could be no change, no rupture, and no glimpse of an outside to this capitalist dream (see Maleuvre, 1999). Benjamin's methodological task is to construct, through forms of immanent critique (including visual and textual juxtaposition, reading against the grain, and shock images that he calls dialectical images), an understanding in which a shock of recognition might be realised by the receptive subject, revealing that things are not really as they appear. Through that, experience, he believes, might be realised as a form of awakening from a self-enclosed topos of interiority that is a key feature of the phantasmagoria of a capitalist commodity culture.

Again, the point is not whether we agree with these arguments in total or his approach to them. What is significant, and what still resonates for us and how we might understand more clearly what museums are is the distinctly spatial character of this critique around the theme of interiority. What Benjamin is suggesting is that museum constructs a topos of experience through which a shared sense of history and idea of progress is tied to this notion of the interior. His intent is to subject that topos to a form of critique.

Looking at the themes discussed so far we can see that there are a number of common threads that inform these diverse critical traditions and how they have approached the museum. First, they present the museum as representing art/artefacts in ways that undermine the possibility for an experience in which subjects are realised outside of some ideological (or discursive) location. Second, museums are seen as singular, self-defining spaces – through the ways in which they represent and use their collections to offer an experience that is defined by its museum-ness. They do this by appropriating the singularity of art and the enquiring experience it promotes to themselves as a topos for valid experience. In this way both art and history become museum-art and museum-history. Third, museums are presented as utilising historicity – the ability to narrate a sense of the past – in ways that position subjects in relation to the past through the displays in the museum gallery that are somehow contrary to their real interests – principally through an interiorizing of history within a self enclosed total space.

What these varied arguments have in common, despite their philosophical and sometimes different political leanings, is a distinct sense of establishing experience within the museum through these tropes of singularity and interiority. While we might want to question the underpinning critiques of alienation for their essentializing and universalizing of human nature, or question the idea of the art as a privileged portal onto the contemplation of Otherness (Which art? For whom? Who decides?), what we might want to retain and develop from these critiques is this analysis of the museum as a constructed topos that is both singular and interiorizing in its effects on experience.

Above all, they are shown to fuse a sense of history with an experience of social time in keeping with the discourse of progress strongly articulated until well into the twentieth century. They do this, I suggest, principally around the singular and interior through which they construct a topos for experience through ideas of containment in terms of totality, classification and order.

Museum, Archive and the Fabulation of History

While earlier collections and cabinets of curiosities were profoundly open, unbounded to modern eyes, heterodox, fascinated with exotica, freaks and boundary objects, modern museum and modern collecting has largely been all about creating and archiving a totality that can be understood as such and its internal divisions be understood through classificatory schemes and placings (see Richards, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Whitehead, 2009). Archives that function as spaces like the museum, I argue, are premised on the dream of being singular interiors for total collections. From gallery layouts, to cataloguing, to the establishment of disciplinary boundaries around classes of objects (ethnographic, natural history, archaeological, art historical etc), understanding order as something total, singular and interior to the spaces in which they are housed are key principles of the modern archive principle that informs much museum practice over the past two centuries. The archivist can cope with seeming disorder from within this space because they can do scholarly work to reposition, create order and put things in their proper place as knowledge develops. What is problematic is the idea of a disorderly outside that might impinge upon the archive and challenge not its representation of an order but its very principle as an ordering device. It is the outside that is anathema to this topos of singularity and interiority. And what I want to highlight is that it is that outside that this earlier generation of museum critics that I have discussed so far are all searching to understand.

To develop this argument a little further we can say that it is well known that the great cultural fear of leading nineteenth century observers of modern culture from around the high period of museum creation like Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin, amongst others, was disorder and anarchy (see Bauman, 1987). This was not just a fear of the unruly mob in need of proper regulation and governance but also of unruly collections that exceeded classificatory boundaries and of unruly time in which events or understandings from outside the narrative told within the space of display might be challenged (see Bennett, 1995). As Donato suggests, the discovery at the time by scientists of the second law of thermodynamics - that all things tend towards a condition of meaningless stasis (entropy) and ultimately to potential decadence was profoundly troublesome for the Bourgeois mind that sought to imagine the world they were creating as one of dynamic but controllable improvement and progress (Donato, 1979). The museum, Donato suggests, is one way of trying to address those concerns. It rests on an archive principle that provides a sense of order – a museum is assumed to be a total or bounded collection of artefacts, often premised on a desire for completeness, whose statements can be organised in a narrative way that is internally consistent and understandable to its visitors. The reality of local haphazard collections policies and contingent additions and losses would speak of a different reality but the ideals of totality and order are there nonetheless as the history of any of the great museums would attest (see for example the British Museum, Miller, 1974).

The outcome is that museums have always sought to narrate through their collections and displays this sense of coherence and order about whatever it is they are seeking to archive. That is fundamental to their sense of topos. In so doing they typically aim to erase any trace of heterogeneity and uncertainty in what they do (Donato, 1979: 221). The objects in a collection are narrated, in a realist way moreover, that allows them to tell a story through their emplacement of things within an ordered understanding as something that comes to be recognisable from the displays themselves. But such placings, Donato suggests, are premised not on a naturally occurring order that such realism would suppose but rather on the necessity of narrative devices that *fabulate*

that sense of order. The narrative might vary from large stories such as nation, Empire, civilisation, an era in human history, a school of art or smaller things like stylistic changes within the history of a class of objects and so on. But singularity and interiorising – constructing the boundaries around a subject as something knowable – are a key part of the narrative device that lies behind a collection, its display and thereby its sense of topos and how it promotes ideas of how it should be experienced. In so doing narrative devices are used to try and naturalise a sense of order in keeping with stories about the past and the future that such a society wants to tell itself. Take that fabulated sense of order away and not only do the collections become a meaningless arrangement of stuff but their cultural significance and the story that they tell about history runs the risk of collapse too (see Donato, 1979). What we can add to this analysis is that the process of fabulation relies on particular forms of topos formation in which marking out the museum as a singular space capable of telling orderly stories and interiorising that as a totality of knowledge are prominent elements.

Stephen Bann's work on the early nineteenth century museum charts some of this process of fabulation in practice, showing how different discourses of history informed different ways of displaying the past within museums (1984). He simplifies these into two distinct approaches: a "schools" approach (what he calls metonymic museum displays) and a "reconstruction" approach (synecdochical museum displays) (1984: 91). In the former, different schools that succeed one another (for example in the development of art) are organised spatially in the museum galleries to illustrate historical change through the passage of a museum. In the latter approach, all artefacts from a particular time are collected together in the proto- form of the period room to act as an exemplar of a particular period that condenses it so that it can become meaningful as a totality.

Such types of display are still prominent in many museums today. Similarly, recent research by Klouk on gallery interiors and their role in the shaping of experience during the period of the nineteenth century has shown that museums in the nineteenth century sought expressly to educate the experience of visitors who came to them by evoking emotions that cultivated an appreciation of

the artefacts and the stories they told (2009). She shows, too, how prominent ideals from the bourgeois interior were to this process; the parlour in particular, with its sense of familiar security and order in influencing the design of galleries for most of that century.

What we know of the bourgeois interior, that space of enclosure and patriarchal security, I would suggest, can be applied to this idea of interiority within the museum as well. As Logan suggests in the context of the Victorian parlour itself, key to its cultural significance in the way that room was laid out and understood by convention was that it became a space of mimetic realism engaged in the symbolic resolution of social conflicts in the outside world through its narrative of display to the experience of the inhabitant (2001: 53). As a topos of interiority the parlour was a self-enclosed room of all Bourgeois imaginings, hopes and aspirations. The parlour became, in effect, a synecdoche for the values of interiority associated with familial and patriarchal authority. It offered a sense of stability felt to be under threat from social change in the public realm. The museum, I would argue, and this echoes some of Benjamin's observations too (see also Maleuvre, 1999), played a similar role within that public sphere only around the idea of a stable and ordered sense of history rather than family life. It constructed a fabulated topos in which narratives of historicity assumed a *mimetic realism* in which the display of artefacts sought to evoke a sense of the past to visitors in ways they could come to understand not only that past but also their place in the present in relation to it. Often informed by academic studies of history – such as those associated with the works of people like Winckelmann, Ranke and Hegel – this historicity involved not simply the presentation of the past but the construction of a space of historicity that sought to address directly issues of experience within a singular space of a valued interiority. If the modern world is experienced as all bustle and flux and disordered uncertainty then somehow the museum aims to become a still point for contemplation.

In many ways this problem of the relationship between the objects on display and their narrative ordering goes to the heart of the question of history and its relationship to an archive principle on

which the idea of the museum is founded and which Donato and others have sought to problematise (see also Derrida, 1996). The construction of a stable narrative of history that derives from the archive of sources of its own making is, for the bourgeois imagination, a key principle of the institution of the museum as a topos in which social ordering stories are held in place. And yet this is also the place where such an anxiety and its possibility are at their most visible and challengeable. This returns us to the earlier issue of the changing character of experience. We can argue that the museum supplements Erlebnis experience with its own fabulated sense of Erfahrung that rests upon a mimetic realism that produces a believable topos of a temporal order within an imagined narrative of history and a celebration of the present as a culminating part of it. What is most unsettling to such a fabulation is the questioning of the archive from the outside.

The archive, as Derrida has recently pointed out, is both the space where things commence and also where things have command (1996: 1). The first of these principles speaks of 'documents' collected together (material culture or written papers) and the second the authority that is derived from them in that place. In official archives those documents would be the sources from which the law is derived and thereby performed. In the museum it is another kind of authority that is given voice – the authority of the order of things, of the attempt to produce a classification of a natural order that is also an historical and cultural order. There are also second order narratives that follow from such a principle too: empire, nation, social class, race, gender and so on – all naturalised within the authority of the archive and dependent on a seamless and unquestioned relationship between these ideas of commencement and commandment.

In the museum, this relationship works through the principle of mimetic realism that they seek to achieve and through which they establish their representational authority. What Derrida goes on to show, however, through his deconstructive reading of Freudian analysis and its relationship to Judaism as an archive, is that that is never in fact the case in practice. What Derrida shows is that the archive, any archive, and that would go for any museum too as an archiving space, is endlessly

challenged by the possibility of a disordering outside coming within (1996; see also Foucault, 1998). New ideas, new manifestations of culture and artefacts, new interpretations of existing ones not only subtly challenge the narratives told within museum displays but they continually redraw the topos of the museum around what is seen as inside and what outside (on these effects see Hetherington, 1997). This notion of an outside is not to be found simply in the idea of some form of presence – person or thing – rather the outside is a manifestation of Otherness that takes the form more specifically of an absent presence – not a thing or set of visible spaces but a principle of disruption that endlessly erodes the very idea of stability and order on which that topos of the museum, interiorizing and singular, is established. The challenge for the museum as archive has always been a gate-keeping one in relation to this unspecified realm of the outside. And yet its continued presence is really what makes museums interesting – something that makes them become spaces through which to think about society and cultural life even if against the grain of the stories they themselves are trying to tell (see Gregory and Witcombe, 2007;).

It does this, we might add, around questions of the relationship with the past because this absent presence of the outside manifests itself significantly in the slippage between history (narrative) and temporality (event). Put simply: museums exist as points of representational temporal stability (Chronos) in a world in which time is in flux (Kairos). They typically seek to hold the world at bay and make sense of it though various ordering narratives in the construction of an orderly topos for visitor experience.

This manifests itself in gradual changes as much as disruptive shocks. Over time museum narratives lose their validity, new readings are sought or are made apparent through events. For example, what were once seen and displayed as the triumphs of Empire become displays and stories of the shame of slavery. At its most basic, the overriding challenge for any museum over time is that the realism in its narrative ceases to be mimetic; the fabulation it constructs starts to become visible as

such. What this suggests is that events intervene in the story of history. The space of the outside which no-one has control over inevitably encroaches on the topos of the singular and the interior.

Conclusion

In this paper I have sought an understanding of the relationship between the museum and experience that draws directly from the key sources of critiques of the museum. My aim has not been to agree with one set of criticisms or another, nor to defend the museum against its critics, rather I have sought to draw out dominant and somewhat unacknowledged themes of spatiality that can be taken from these critiques and use them to understand the museum and the problems it generates in principle as an archiving institution. The two themes that I have identified – singularity and interiority — are both distinctly spatial in character. These, I have suggested, are dominant ordering principles behind the narrative fabrication of order that museums aim to tell through their collections and through the material ordering ephemera associated with them. There is, however, also a third spatialisation, an excluded third, that is a part of this story – the space of the outside (to the archive principle) that is also the space of the event. More abstract, perhaps, and less easy to grasp than spaces of singularity or interiority, it is important nonetheless for our analysis for it is its significance as a space of an absent present disordering principle that gives the rationale to those other spatial expressions as well as being their main challenge and their main impetus for change.

What should be apparent from this analysis – my main argument - is that questions of topos and its relationship to the category of experience are vital to understanding and critically interrogating what museums are and what they are about. Rather than a secondary issue within museum and heritage studies I would advocate that the spatial questions this raises be placed centre stage to give us a better overview of the museum in both historical and contemporary perspective. I have also tried to show that is this not a completely novel intervention. I have explicitly tried to draw these

themes of space out of earlier and well know approaches to museums to show that it has always been there even if not fully articulated as such. This issue of spatiality is also vital to addressing the question of experience as it is constituted in relation to the museum. Within this geographical analysis I am not, however, operating within a realist or Euclidean understanding of space as a series of locatable sites that act as containers for action, rather I am treating space as a set of cultural imaginaries through which forms of understanding are constituted as the terrain of experience and subjectivity. The three spatial motifs that are apparent, then, are those of singularity, interiority and outside. I am proposing that to get an understanding of what a museum is and what it does to experience (and what experience also does to it) requires that we recognise the importance of these spatial motifs to the museum and develop our analysis around them. The motif of singularity is what provides the sense of a museum as a legitimate geographical site of experience – a container for the experience of art or for history or science or whatever might be the theme of a collection. Interiority is the motif of enclosure and a sense that there can be no possible understanding or valid experience of what is on display except through the museum as an archival totality. Both are legitimisation claims. The motif of the outside, however, is the one that potentially reveals the contrived or fabricated nature of the mimetic realism that museums promote through these other spatial motifs. The main point to recognise, though, is that experience is made across all three of these spaces of representation and not just the first two as museums often assume. It is through that acknowledgement that we can open up the question of museums and experience to further critical scrutiny, reveal it to be less stable and more plural in character. Indeed, it is what gives museums, and their analysis, a continued vitality.

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