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PREPRINT

All that is solid? - Museums and the postmodern

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Abstract

The world today is often described as 'postmodern'. The question is, can postmodern ideas help to explain the many inconsistencies and logical binds in which museums find themselves entangled at the start of the 21st century? Museums are deeply implicated in the Modern, as instruments for cataloguing and characterising first, the natural world, and later, the world of invention, design and technology. But the authoritative voice of the exhibition in inconsistent with the diffuse diversity of the postmodernm. The museum's salvation could, it is argued, lie in its collections. Museums could shrug off their insistance on exhibitions as their major function: their 'modern' face. Instead they could move towards being providers of a service to open up the collections themselves and the knowledge and information about them, rather than guarding them as a private treasure.

In the early 21st century we find ourselves living in a world that is frequently described as 'postmodern' – or, recently, even post postmodern. The question is, can postmodern ideas help to explain the many inconsistencies and logical binds in which museums find themselves entangled at the start of the 21st century? Do postmodern ideas present the possibility of salvation, or re-invention? Or, are museums as institutions doomed, lacking currency in the new age?

The term 'postmodern' has as many definitions as those using it – truly in tune with the concept. I want to explore the situation of museums today as it is depicted in postmodern terms, which are, for the purpose of this discussion:

> … the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is sceptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity (Eagleton, 2003: 13, note1)

Others have characterised postmodernity in many different ways, also telling for the nature of museums. For example,

> Rapid technological change … shifting political concerns, … the rise of social movements especially with a gender, green, ethnic, racial focus … But the question is even bigger: is modernity itself … disintegrating, including the whole grand edifice of Enlightenment world-views? Is a new type of society appearing, perhaps structured around consumers and consumption rather than workers and production? (Lyon, 1999: ix)

My title is taken from Marx & Engels' Communist Manifesto, often discussed in the context of postmodernity, although it was written in 1847:

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his, real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx and Engels, 1848).

The manifesto goes on to proclaim, of course,

> The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.
>
> WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!

These notions chime with the sort of issues that are coming at museums from all sides, causing them a lot of difficulty in seeking new identities and roles in the 21st century. It is quite obvious that these postmodern perspectives call into question some of the deepest foundations, some of the major cornerstones on which as institutions museums have been built.

The postmodern is understood in contrast with the modern project, born in the Enlightenment. In it, superstition and disorder were swept aside by scientific evidence, orderly arrangement and a stable social order. In the west, the rational, scientific mindset became the dominant way of explaining the world. High society wished to know about these concepts. King George III commissioned a wonderful collection of objects for the entertainment and instruction of his family, presently exhibited in an elegant gallery in the Science Museum. Museums are deeply

Fig. 1. The King George III gallery at the Science Museum, London. Photo: S. Keene.

implicated in the Modern project, as instruments for cataloguing and characterising first, the natural world, and later, the world of invention, design and technology (e.g., Hooper-Greenhill, 1992: Ch. 6).

Blade Runner, Ridley Scott's seminal movie about Los Angeles, set in 2019, is often mentioned as a vision of postmodernity. It is set within a semi-ruined cityscape, the rubbish-filled streets illuminated by lurid advertising devices. There is an impression of absence of any sort of social order or communal services. What sort of museum would you expect to find - would you expect to find any museum - in that streaming, crowded, frenetic world (not unlike parts of Soho come to think of it)? 'Decrepitude, disintegration and a chaotic mish-mash of styles (Lyon, 1999: Ch. 1). We will return again to Blade Runner.

Postmodern perspectives are broad and inclusive. I intend to use just four of the major trains of thought to examine the situation of museums. These are the contradictions:

- Agents of the upper classes versus opposing elitism in culture
- Ordered categorizing versus pluralism and heterogeneity
- Objective truth versus personal meanings
- Replicas and simulacra versus the actual

All is set in the context of the rise and centrality of consumerism.

Agents of the upper classes versus opposing elitism in culture

Museums have often been characterised as supporting the values of the upper classes and hence a stable society. From the nineteenth century there are many accounts of crowds of working-class people visiting museums. Bourdieu and Darbel in the 1960s argued from their research that art museums in particular played an important part in supporting, and indeed defining, a social hierarchy. Cathy Pearson in her current PhD research at UCL is finding that museums attracted large numbers of people during WWII. Explicit policies and statements show that in the past museums were indeed implements of modernity, consciously designed to 'socialise' people and uphold a stable social structure (Bennett, 1995: 70-71).

Nick Merriman in the 1980s researched the issue of who did and didn't visit museums, and why. In his well-known book, *Beyond the glass case*, one of his conclusions was that those most in need of social elevation are put off and don't visit them, so by that time, it seems, museums are not a very effective means of social improvement.

Now, museums have indeed been found by the government, their major source of funding, not to be attracting those in need of improvement on a sufficient scale. They must try harder to socialise the socially excluded, as when many were established in

the nineteenth century. This appears to be an affirmation of their earlier 'modern' role.

But in addition, they must be representative of the cultural diversity of their constituencies. This appears to be an aim thoroughly in tune with the postmodern, with the emphasis on the individual, and on plurality.

Many would agree that it is deeply embedded in the psychology of museums that they are 'modern' institutions: institutions almost dedicated to the 'modern' task of bringing order to the world. Hence their early mission to socialise and educate so that people were contentedly incorporated into the social hierarchy (Shenton, 1990). If there is indeed a fall-off in the last, say, 50 years, in numbers of less well-off, less well-educated people visiting, at least in cities where museums can easily be reached, one could postulate that it is a consequence of the postmodern condition. The argument would be that people in need of socialising do not visit museums because they perceive them as 'modern' institutions, purveying a world-view that they no longer see as relevant. Therefore, if museums are to succeed in attracting the excluded in order to improve them, they will have to thoroughly embrace postmodernism. But, the objective is still a 'modern' one: to socialise: so are they then victims of a frame of government mind that is deeply out-of-tune with the times?

David Clark from the National Museums of Scotland has referred to the *hubris* of museums in claiming they can make a serious difference to what is termed social exclusion (Clark, 2005). Museums are a handy source of sound bites for politicians, providing touching stories of individual redemption, but most of the widespread social problems that these cases exemplify stem from poverty and the huge gap between the have's and the have-not's, exacerbated by the constant incitement to consume.

Against this cynical view, it can be argued that it is incumbent on a publicly funded service to make a difference, even if only to a few people for a short while. On the whole, it is true, it is not the majority that are in need of assistance, so therefore helping a few people may have significant effects.

The poor are often blamed as the architects of their own misfortune. The proletariat, you might say, have put on their own chains: the chains of consumerism. Baudrillard, following Galbraith, argues that the aim of the system of production now is as much to produce a system of needs as to produce the goods that satisfy those needs. 'The system of needs is the product of the system of production'; 'Their needs become as essential as their labour power' (Baudrillard, 1970: 44-45). That proposal may have seemed improbable in 1970, but now banners in Selfridges department store proclaim 'Born to shop', computer enthusiasts are content simply to contemplate an iPod purchased and still in its packaging, and even in Romania a shop sign entices the shopper not by proclaiming its goods but by 'Visit the shop … you will enjoy it'.

People don't seem especially satisfied with the anti-elite efforts of museums. From picking through the Museums Journal each month, it is difficult to recall glowing reviews of what might be called anti-elite exhibitions. On the other hand, the British Galleries at the Victoria & Albert Museum have been widely admired. I volunteer the title, the British Aristocracy Galleries, because beside their didactic messages about design they are a celebration of past conspicuous consumption. Nothing wrong with that, in an age where a major Sunday leisure activity is visiting the shopping mall,

and where stores such as Primark have brought high fashion into the reach of almost everyone.

Is it just that anti-elite exhibitions don't get it quite right, or is it that the medium of the exhibition itself is incongruent with the postmodern? Perhaps the response of museums in developing education and out-reach services is correct: it is the exhibition to be visited that lacks the postmodern flavour. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has contrasted the 'modernist' museum with one she terms 'the post-museum'. The essence of the post-museum is to be more a process or experience, not a building to be visited. In it, the role of the exhibition is to be the focus for a plethora of transient activities - dynamic events within and without the museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000: 152-3). But is this future museum postmodern, or is it just politically expedient? These activities leave the collections themselves, still the defining feature of a museum and a huge and costly resource, unexploited. And, they are not accepted as sufficient by the unrepresented. We shall return to this later.

Ordered categorizing versus pluralism and heterogeneity

The concept was developed by Foucault of worldviews that he called epistemes – the Renaissance, the Classical and the Modern, characterised as much by discontinuities as by their nature. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has described the museum as roughly followed that track, too, especially in forming collections and creating meanings from them (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

Ordered categorizing is central to museum psychology. An assemblage of objects becomes a collection by imposing order and classification on it.

But, rigid classification is anathema to postmodern notions. Some argue that it is destructive of meaning (Fehr, 2000: 59). There is some experience in museums that are tackling the challenges of putting assemblages back together after they have been classified into collections that this does in fact create barriers to re-assembly of meaning. For example, Cathy Ross in the Museum of London has described the difficulty of re-assembling the components of a place setting collected from the fashionable London restaurant *The Pharmacy*, with table linen, dishes, cutlery, glass, menus and photographs each classified and stored in different areas of the collection.

Categorizing these days cannot be separated from the effects of the internet. In its early days, much energy was devoted to creating portals and so on. Now, the emphasis has shifted to searching. Some argue that it is impossible to categorize all information – and anyway, each person has a different set of categories. Instead the insistence is on attaching (tagging) information with a number of keywords, and providing the means for anyone else to attach their associations as well. A well-known example is Flickr, an online repository for everyone's photographs, where the uploader can attach tags or contribute their images to groups or clusters, so that the images appear with others tagged as, for instance, postmodern.

Now, there are some museum moves to do the same with collections, either actually or virtually, so as to represent the interests of more diverse groups. The

Revisiting Collections project in London explores the implications of reviewing collections documentation so as to attach further information about the associations of objects. In Birmingham City Museum a similar mapping exercise was undertaken. This is far more productive and sensible than an alternative approach, to invite people such as members of ethnic minorities to contribute yet more objects, especially when items that may be highly significant to their history may already be in the collections. The Museum of London and other associated institutions encourage a similar activity in the *Moving Here* online exhibition.

it is not entirely clear what museums will do once the new associations of objects have been identified. If they are simply new entries in the museum documentation system, what will change? One answer is proposed by the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, which plans to post its archive of 250,000 objects online and invite the public to curate their own collections from them (Arendt, 2006). More challenging would be for museums to allow much more access to and use of their actual collections, a subject to which we shall return.

Is this urge to allow more diverse associations inevitable once collections reach a certain critical size? There are plenty of huge collections which have not been reviewed in this way. Is it indeed a phenomenon arising from the postmodern condition?

Objective truth / personal meanings

Authenticity and authority – that arise from objective truth - are two further defining characteristics of 'modern' museums. For a considerable time, museum collections have been seen as records and portrayals of scientific knowledge. This was the approach adopted by the Royal Institution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the one that is the basis for great natural history collections today (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 145-166). Shelton deeply implicates the museum in the scientific paradigm that dominates Western thought (and indeed economies) (Shelton, 1990).

Conservators have been striving for decades to attain the holy grail of reversibility in treatment – a quest to preserve the object as truth – only to find the ground they stood on disappear. First the concept of 'reversibility' is challenged. Previously the touchstone of the ethical conservator, it is now recognised that there is, in fact, scarcely any conservation action that can truly be reversed. Second, now, there are calls for what is done by way of conservation procedures to depend on what the object is to be 'used' for and who wants it done (Muñoz Viñas, Ch. 9). True up to a point – clean and stabilize or restore? – but that exposes museum objects to the full gale of postmodernity, where 'all that is solid melts into air', and we don't know if the object we see was actually invented yesterday by a conservator. Many people are shocked to discover how radically Stonehenge was reconstructed in the early twentieth century, for instance. Perhaps this always was so – but at least some people tried for a while.

One paradox here is that museum collections themselves help to challenge ideas born in the Enlightenment, about explanation of the world through scientific thinking and experiment rather than through magic and superstition. It turns out that many

scientific experiments are far from reproducible. This is because the very apparatus – the things – that were used in these experiments are subject to the usual ills of material objects, and do not function in the perfect way specified in scientific experiments. Examination of some of those in museum collections (in the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford, for example) shows this: sometimes, it is clearly impossible for the experiment to have had the claimed result. Also, the social relationships between scientists and their tribal research teams and laboratories have a considerable and mostly unacknowledged influence on the acceptance of 'scientific' outcomes.

Questions of authenticity become difficult to contemplate in the case of works of art in digital and other new media. Some of these can be copied an infinite number of times without detriment to the original. On the other hand, it is difficult to recreate the exact circumstances of their delivery according to the artist's intent – in that sense they are more like performances of musical compositions. Some are the product of software programs and are different every time they are viewed.

Therefore, museum collections as touchstone of authenticity and scientific evidence are being seriously challenged.

'Authority' is another characteristic often claimed for museums. Studies have shown that they are among the institutions that people most trust as sources of accurate, impartial information. But they have been attacked from the direction especially of post-colonialsm and imperfect representation. To quote a member of one of the working parties on the Museums Association's *Collections for the future* investigation:

> In my experience (not long as a curator, but long enough as a Black Briton) efforts to embrace cultural diversity within our sector has (sic) been driven by events and public programmes, and until very recently has not been about collections or first rate exhibitions. … 1980s, this model was referred to as the 'Steel Pans and Saris' way of addressing diversity.
>
> Many curators will cry, "But we do not have the collections to represent these groups!" That old excuse is well worn, particularly in Nationals and large Local Authority Museums.
>
> At Birmingham, it was decided that an audit of the collections was required to assess whether or not we had the collections to represent Minority histories. The 'Mapping Project' is ongoing, but in its first phase, we searched the history collections for material relevant to Black (= African-Carribean) and South Asian histories. – *Sarah Blacklock, now NMGM*

Authoritative to whom, one has to ask? It partly depends if these authoritative statements say what you think you ought to hear.

This reflects the postmodern trend: the rise of 'culture' as a quest for individuality, not for collective memory. We may welcome anything that creates a more inclusive climate and helps people move away from the margins of society. But, on the other hand, because of the insistence that everything is contingent on the individual, postmodernism**,** it is claimed, creates a moral vacuum (Eagleton, 2003: Ch. 8). Witchcraft is reported to be promoted in some London churches, and it can be a very harmful practice. Yet this is part of people's culture: can it be criticised? If museums

should represent their constituencies, should they represent these practices, too, when they are important agents in promulgating and marketing ideas?

Cultural inclusion is preferred to be seen as a reparative function that museums ought to serve. However, some see museums' efforts to engage those who would not normally visit them as compromising their integrity. If it is not the museum itself, then it is allied experiences and reconstructions that taint the objective truth of the museum: "History becomes 'heritage', and the musty museum a 'hands on' multimedia experience" (Lyon, 1999: 73). In Ballarat, Australia, the highly successful Sovereign Hill, a re-created gold-mining town is seen as helping to build the Australian national identity, but at the same time it is unashamedly an experiential (and highly enjoyable) attraction where one can 'Wake up in 1896', and pan for gold in a stream, replenished regularly. Is it only shared leisure experiences that can build these collective memories now?

The world of the postmodern then has a lot of trouble with ideas of authority and authenticity: threatening another of the conceptual foundations of 'the museum'.

Replicas and simulacra / the real thing

One of the reasons for *Blade Runner's* identification with the postmodern is its exploration of how far ethical attitudes to humans should apply to a 'replicant' – 'thou shalt not kill'? If a human has been artificially created but is in effect indistinguishable from a human being created by the normal means, do the same ethics and morals apply? We are moving towards replicants with the growing possibility of cloning, a development explored by Kazuo Ishigura in his recent novel, *Never let me go*. And

Fig. 2. A genetically engineered mouse, a so-called 'oncomouse'. Its genes were altered to make it more prone to develop cancers. Photo: S. Keene.

we create special animals as testbeds for research and treatments, such as the oncomice, exhibited in the Science Museum, the first creatures specially bred to be likely to develop cancer. In its treatment of ethics in the febrile world it depicts, *Blade Runner* sounds another postmodern chord.

Baudrillard, one of the major thinkers in postmodernism, is well known for his ideas about the supplanting of the real by the virtual. He saw a series of relationships of 'simulacra', images, to the real, identifying three major 'orders' (Smart, 1993: 51-53).

The first order, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution, saw the emergence of representation, 'dissolution of an unquestioned hierarchical ordering of 'natural' … by the production of the copy as equivalent to the original … representing or embodying nature' (ibid.). Paintings in particular are examples of such representations – we may think of Holbein's double portrait, *The Ambassadors,* in the National Gallery, London.

The second order of simulacra begins with the invention of mechanical reproduction. Instead of representation, we have the potential for infinite reproduction: many copies of the same object. The Science Museum exhibits many examples, including for instance the Portsmouth block-making machinery from the end of the eighteenth century, made in order to manufacture the thousands of blocks needed for the Navy's sailing fleet. This was the first instance of mass production machinery. According to Baudrillard, 'an 'industrial law of value' reigns – technology itself and mechanical reproduction come to constitute a new reality' (Smart, 1993: 52). Indeed, museums of technology and industry struggle when trying to apply the concept of authenticity to machines made of interchangeable and replaceable parts.

We live in the third order of simulacra. We have progressed via 'the counterfeit of an original' through 'a pure series of exact replicas or mass production objects' to:

'Our contemporary condition, truly the age of ambivalence, where the real world is constituted in and through models and where a structural law of values obtains.' Now, 'one is not the simulacrum and the other the reality: there are only simulacra' (Baudriallard, quoted in Smart, 1993: 52). Simulacra are synonymous with models, codes and the digital. Everthing consists of the media and the masses. The Science Museum, again, offers vivid illustrations of this progression. The visitor passes

Fig. 3, a, b, c Three showcases from the gallery, Making the modern world, in the Science Museum, London: Measurement, 1750-1820; Manufacture by machine, 1800-1860; The age of ambivalence, 1980-2000. Photos: S. Keene.

through the gallery *Making the Modern World,* with a succession of showcases from *The age of enlightenment, Manufacture by machine* to *The age of ambivalence.*

This meticulously ordered gallery leads to the Wellcome Wing, its strapline when first opened: *A breathtaking theatre of contemporary science.* The glittering, often digital, exhibits dazzle against its dark background: it seems the very museum manifestation of the world of *Blade Runner.*

Baudrillard has extended these ideas far in many directions. He is notorious, and taken less seriously because of, his proposal that the Gulf War was just a virtual combat, since we only knew it existed via television screens. But this claim should not overshadow his analysis of the role of images, modern communications, and the consumer society. Marshall McLuhan too, saw that that 'the medium is the message'. Returning again to the Science Museum, the recently installed Energy gallery conveys through its flashing screens, bleeping and screeching exhibits and blaze of light *that it's okay to consume as much energy as you want in order to deliver your message – even if your message is, to use less energy.* It was a condition of the sponsor that no museum objects should be exhibited.

The diagnosis of the importance of the virtual, of images, seems to have a great deal of validity. At the present time, 100,000 people have signed up in the online computer experience, *Second Life*. There they, through their avatars, set up shops where people buy virtual goods that have been made – for instance, costumes. The online trade in virtual weapons, knowledge and so on used in online gaming now constitutes a significant economy.

Sadly, as in the actual world, this huge and growing industry is served to a large extent by people in South Eastern Asia, many of whom earn a scant living by fashioning virtual stuff for our entertainment. Like those making our trainers and fashion garments, but with less visibility to the Western consumer, they undertake the tedious, repetitive and painstaking tasks of creating those incredibly realistic scenes and objects.

The growing importance of the virtual creates another conundrum for museums. If it is so important, can they ignore the the hyperworld, either in collecting or in exhibiting? Yet it is so evanescent. The virtual can't be realised without the software: the software has exacting requirements for an operating system: the operating system can only run on the appropriate hardware (Keene, 2002). At best the stuff has to be continually copied, adjusted and run on up-to-date technology – and that brings us back to the issue of authenticity[i]. What about collections being for the future? Is this possible? Will these objects still be 'the real thing'?

This is not just a philosophical question. What does it mean to collect works of art in digital media – now commonplace and commercially valuable in the art market? What does it mean to collect the 'intangible heritage'? Museums have made a start with oral history collecting and recording: how are they coping with this material?

Are museums becoming schizoid? On the one hand they have the collections, still thought of as being the very heart of the museum: the real things. They have solid buildings, places in which to mount physical displays and exhibitions, that are physically visited by actual people. Yet, there is a growing emphasis on the non-physical museum - as forum and meeting place, on live events within the galleries, and on outreach activities reaching outside their physical walls.

Are museums virtualising in this way, becoming in Hooper-Greenhill's term, post-museums? Is this the only way ahead, if they are to exist as institutions with validity in postmodern life?

Rise and centrality of consumerism

The postmodern world has another major characteristic, in fact some social scientists argue that it is its overwhelming characteristic. This is the rise in consumerism. This also deeply affects museums, although in a number of subtle and diverse ways.

Fig. 4. The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, with the commercial blocks of Canary Wharf to the north of the River Thames. Photo: S. Keene.

Consumerism affects many of the operations and functions of museums, including:

Exhibitions: What museum audiences expect

Higher disposable incomes lead to higher production values in leisure provision and activities and thence to higher expectations of museums. The availability of sponsorship also drives high-cost displays. If museums are short of funding they will grasp at what is cost free in order to serve expectations and thus deliver audience figures. Gradually, sponsors gain greater control over what is exhibited, as museums compete for their favours.

The collections: Russell Belk in *Collecting in a consumer society* claims:

> the largest failing of institutional collections is their uncritical celebration of stuff. … if consumer goods are increasingly the focus of museums and if there is no critical analysis of what these goods mean to our lives, then we are left with the impression that the goods enshrined in our museum temples are worthy of worship. Rather than participate so fully in consumer culture, museums can still cause us to notice this culture in which we are enmeshed and to reflect on its pleasures and problems (pp. 136-46).

This reflects Baudrillard, writing in *The system of objects* and in *Consumer society* about 'the possibility that consumption has become the chief basis of the social order and of its internal classifications. … advertising codes products through symbols that differentiate them from other products, thereby fitting the object into a series.' Baudrillard writes of 'objects as a network of floating signifiers that are inexhaustible in their ability to incite desire' (discussed and quoted in Poster, 2001: 2-3). Thus, in museums we see advertising material that is contemporary with objects as a rich reflection of the meanings society placed on the objects. In fact at the time, as now, it was the other way round: it was the advertising that defined the meaning of the object and imposed it on society. It is interesting that some advertising is appropriating another of the characteristics of museums: permanence. For instance, a current advertisement reads: 'You never really own a Patek Phillipe watch - you merely look after it for the next generation'.

Baudrillard explicitly distinguishes between the object as real and the object as sign: 'in order to become object of consumption, the object must become sign' – so therefore the real objects in collections are converted into signs when people encounter them, in order to 'consume' them in the museum experience. This is not a new thought for museums. The difficulty comes because objects are mostly only shown to people on museum terms – in exhibitions – where someone else's meaning has already been imposed on them. Sometimes the meaning is wrong. A Japanese student reviewing an exhibt in the British Museum wrote that such objects would never be exhibited in that way in Japan, because of the meanings conveyed (inadvertently?) to Japanese viewers by the design. It is also argued that the classification systems that museums impose on objects pre-empt other meanings, discussed above.

Conclusions

The question posed was, can postmodern ideas help to explain the inconsistencies and logical binds that museums find themselves entangled in at the start of the 21st century? Are museums doomed as institutions? Or, do postmodern ideas present the possibility of salvation and re-invention?

Some of the perspectives of postmodernist writers have been employed to suggest that four of the psychological characteristics of museums, their deep conceptual foundations, are brought into question in the postmodern world – if indeed we are postmodern, something that some writers question. So where does this examination through the lens of the postmodern take us? We saw a progression (beautifully illustrated in the Science Museum) from the Enlightenment through mass production of identical objects through to the age of ambivalence, perhaps culminating in the double helix of DNA, the ultimate signifier of life itself.

- The postmodern opposes elitism in culture, and this threatens the museum function of education for the masses and support for the social order.

- Pluralism and heterogeneity is the essence of the postmodern, and this moves to invalidate the museum's ordered classification of knowledge.

- In the postmodern, the concept of objective truth is rejected – only personal meanings are accepted.

- The postmodern world consists of simulacra, signs and images – threatening authenticity and authority which seen as touchstones of museums, and invalidating ‘the real things’ that are traditionally seen at the museum’s heart.

All is set in the context of the rise and centrality of consumerism, which leaves museums floundering in trying to see what they should now collect.

So what sort of museum would be consonant with the postmodern world we live in? What is the museum that might be found in the postmodern world of *Blade runner*?

Is it the celebrated, and deeply conventional, Los Angeles Museum of Art, with its strictly categorised collections? Even then, the museum has responded to the postmodern gales, or hurricanes, with a current virtual exhibition of artworks that consist of software which creates a new exhibit for every viewing.

Is it the bizarre Museum of Jurassic Technology, also in Los Angeles? My introduction to this institution was in a temporary exhibit in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. The exhibit dealt with ‘scientific’ concepts relating to pyramid design, and was viewed down a microscope. An online commentator describes a typical exhibit, ‘A box from which emanates the sound of barking. When you look through a peephole on the side of the box, you see a tiny desertscape with a coyote's head mounted on the right wall, and black and white film footage of a man tied to a straight backed chair, barking, projected against the "sky" on your left.’ He goes on: ‘For the past eleven months, the Museum of Jurassic Technology has been my personal yardstick for the peculiar; but what is it? A con? A grand delusion? Performance art effortlessly, ineffably strange?’ (Websites: MJT; The Cobra’s Nose). Maybe all of these, but it is seriously discussed by art historians and cultural critics (e.g., Roth, 2002).

Fig. 5. Sovereign Hill, Ballarat, Australia. Visitors panning for flakes of gold in the regularly replenished stream in the visitor attraction. Photo: Flickr: Cam Pegg. Used under Creative Commons license 2.0.

Is the idea of the museum, like the ideas of the Enlightenment itself, being usurped by institutions like the *Ark of the World Museum*, where 'Adam walked with dinosaurs'? 'The centrepiece of the museum is a series of huge model dinosaurs, built by the former head of design at Universal Studios, which are portrayed as existing alongside man, contrary to received scientific opinion that they lived millions of years apart.' At a cost of $25m, the *Ark of the World Museum* is devoted to converting more people to the ideas of creationism, perhaps the most influential anti-Enlightenment movement in the world today (Langton, 2005).

Fig. 6. Rosia Montana gold mine museum, Romania. a: the derelict museum; b: abandoned mining machinery imported from Erith, Kent; c: the entrance to the Roman mine galleries of Alburnus Maior. Photos: S. Keene.

Are these the futures for the museum: the fantasy world of Sovereign Hill or the elegiac fate of Rosia Montana goldmine museum in Romania – currently destined to be swept away, rusting British mining machinery, Roman goldmining galleries and all, by the Gold Fields Zambian mining corporation, in a huge opencast mining development? Or are we to participate in Hooper-Greenhill's jolly 'post-museum', which I have argued responds to the political context, not to the postmodern? Charles Delingpole wrote in his prize winning essay for The Times, *What are museums for?*:

> Thus have the shrill cries of a few vocal minority groups successfully stalled the march of progress. For, as Tiffany Jenkins so brilliantly argues in her Institute Of Ideas paper, Human Remains - Objects To Study or Ancestors To Bury?, this is more than just a cynical, bien-pensant sop to the grievance industry. It represents, in fact, a wholesale disavowal of those very Enlightenment values for which museums were first established. The pure search for knowledge and scientific truth has given way to relativism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, superstition, and the politics of victimhood.

Tiffany Jenkins is a member of the Institute of Ideas, a group well known for its critical stance towards current museum trends. She takes issue with the implications of the DCMS Working Group on Human Remains report, which has comprehensive recommendations on repatriating human remains currently in museum collections:

> … another factor is the message that this policy sends out - it effectively suggests to all and sundry that scientific research is not a priority, and that science should be put second to mystical kinds of belief. …

> Where is the demand for the return of remains coming from? While there are strong claims from campaign groups, especially in America, Australia and New Zealand, the loudest voices arguing for the return, reburial and further restrictions on research are from the cultural left, including many within the museum profession. In fact, the emphasis on gaining 'consent' for remains is actually a reflection of the museum profession's loss of faith in its own mission as the collectors, carers and studiers of artefacts. (Jenkins, 2003).

So, should we agree with Delingpole and the Institute of Ideas? Is the only alternative to the bleak futures sketched above, to go back?

Museums are found in many societies and countries to be useful institutions. Organisations or arrangements to look after valued objects, actual things, are almost universal. Surely we can find a role for them in this postmodern age? Damian Tissier and Samir Singh Nathoo in their 2004 report on black and minority ethnic engagement with London's museums, for the London Museum Agency, said: 'Museums are, at the one and the same time, agents of social consolidation and agents of social change.' Some social consolidation would surely be welcome even in this postmodern world.

Hooper-Greenhill's 'post-museum' seems still to be part of the 'them-to-us' mindset that is a large part of the reason for museums' current awkwardness. It seems to deny the collections: a huge and little used resource that museums have really not got to grips with. It is the collections that are seen as critically important by the groups with whom she wishes the museum to engage.

The museum's postmodern salvation could, surely, lie in its collections. Museums could shrug off their instance on seeing exhibitions as their major function (with a little outreach to satisfy those who don't visit) and be much more positive about using the collections themselves as a resource for the future (Keene, 2005).

They could move from being guardians of collections, to being facilitators of engagement with them.

They could move from storing static collections, to managing collections as a service to individuals and other organisations (but without prejudicing their value for the future, too).

They could move from their perception that they are so different and separate from other institutions that they can have no realistic interface with them, to performing as players in networks – in which others take the lead.

I agree with Mark Dion, the installation artist: 'the museum needs to be turned inside out – the back rooms put on exhibition and the displays put into storage'.

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[i] These issues are being researched by Pip Laurenson for her PhD thesis at UCL.