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Eileen Hooper-Greenhill: *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture*. (Museum Meanings Series). Routledge, 2000. 195pp., 18 illustr. ISBN 0-415-08633-7 (pbk).

Eileen Hooper-Greenhill is a, perhaps the, leading practitioner in conferring academic respectability on museums and the concepts concerning them. Her first book, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992), crystallised understanding of how these organisations evolved in Europe. This latest book has, she says, two strands, the professional, a preoccupation with the academic analysis of the relationship of people and museums, and the personal, an intense interest in objects. “The two vital questions the book addresses are how are objects and collections used by museums to construct knowledge, and how can the relationships of audiences to this knowledge be understood?”

The four chapters mainly devoted to collections and objects are full of interesting descriptions and perceptions. The National Portrait Gallery’s democratization of who is important has been quite startling. The history of Hinemihi, the Maori meeting house transported to the unlikely setting of Clandon (Surrey, UK), an opulent British country house, illustrates vividly the very different values people place on the same object. “In Western terms, a work of art [has] to be cared for, it doesn’t care for us”, but Hinemihi is there for Maori people to visit when they are feeling homesick, ““We will leave her here for this purpose””. Not that there was much choice, since the current owner, the National Trust, has refused a request for her return. The different motives for forming other Maori collections are well contrasted. We readily agree to disagree with David Wilson’s statement that ““objects communicate perfectly through being what they are””. Far from it: Hooper-Greenhill well succeeds in contributing to the case made earlier by Thompson in his wonderful book, *Rubbish Theory* (1979), that the meaning of an object lies in the eye of the beholder.

The other three chapters deal with the relevance and application of anthropological and social science concepts to museums, with reference to the case study objects and others as well. Areas of academic discourse that are described include culture, meaning, and the emerging understanding of visual culture; processes of interpretation, drawing on hermeneutics, learning theory and media studies; pedagogy in museums utilising communication and educational theory; interpretative processes, and the evolving nature of museums into what Hooper-Greenhill terms

'post-museums'. Hooper-Greenhill usefully defines the meanings of many of the terms used in this milieu. 'Culture', for instance, a term fundamental to museums, is much misused or even avoided because of its supposed elitist connotations. Of course, 'culture' has multiple meanings depending on the context (academic or everyday life) and who is using it (anthropologist, social scientist), one of the dichotomies being between product (things) or process (shared ways of life and practices).

Hooper-Greenhill states a commitment to forcing academic discourse to confront the real world, but there often seems to be a gap between real life experience in museums and the ideal and generalised view she takes in her analysis.

Unfortunately, many collections are not "the result of purposeful activities informed by ideas about what is significant". Are all visitors to museums looking for "meaning"? Is learning really so overwhelmingly dominant? What happened to enjoyment, a nice trip out, somewhere to take the children at a weekend, a welcome destination for the significant proportion of visitors in the marketing segment "visiting friends and family"? How much importance do people really attach to museum messages? A number of studies have given the answer: disconcertingly little. Weil, for example, cites visitors to an exhibition about the American flag who had come away thinking that the exhibit was nothing to do with that, but instead primarily about themselves (2002). The real world seems to be more complex than Hooper-Greenhill allows.

On the other hand, Hooper-Greenhill's review of the current evolutionary state of museums in terms of modern and post-modern is a useful reminder that, as ever, museums are part of a general cultural shift. The essence of the 'modern' museum – the classifier, authoritative holder, producer of knowledge, source of 'the right' interpretation and dominant narrative through place-based exhibitions – is a building. The post-museum (her term) is more a process or an experience – moving out into the spaces of the communities that they serve. Hooper-Greenhill does not discuss what might be lost through this transformation. Museums offer the sort of place as churches and cathedrals, where the everyday intersects with ideas and concepts that are otherwise too difficult to comprehend. The post-museum, if it is a place at all, is not this sort of place. But then, many people find that modern liturgies have turned churches into post-churches.

Will the essence of the post-museum still be its collections? Hooper-Greenhill concludes by describing the well-known episode of the Ghost Dance shirt, returned

after protracted negotiations by Glasgow Museums to the Lakota Souix Indians. She uses this to illustrate her argument that “visual culture within the museum is a technology of power”. Indeed it may be, paradoxically, that it is objects rather than exhibits that arouse most strong emotions and feelings in people. Possibly, then, even in the post-museum, with its focus on people rather than buildings or collections, objects may still hold centre stage.

I found this book a slightly uneasy combination, with its two foci remaining separate rather than integrated. The theoretical chapters had the feel of being written out of a sense of duty, as though they were needed in order to confer some sort of intellectual validity on the object-centred case studies. Yet the object-centred chapters were full of insight and interest. I felt that somewhere there was a whole that would be greater the sum of the parts. A small niggle is the publishers’ horribly inconvenient referencing system. However, the book is in general very accessible and I am sure that many museum professionals, and general readers, would find much enjoyment and enlightenment in it.

References

- Hooper-Greenhill, E., 1992. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Thompson, M., 1979. *Rubbish theory : the creation and destruction of value*. Oxford: OUP.
- Weil, S., 2002. *Making Museums Matter*. London & Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. p. 68.