



Critical Heritages (CoHERE): performing and representing identities in Europe

Work Package 1 Work in Progress

Critical Analysis Tool (CAT): why analyze museum display?

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CoHERE explores the ways in which identities in Europe are constructed through heritage *representations* and *performances* that connect to ideas of place, history, tradition and belonging. The research identifies existing heritage practices and discourses in Europe. It also identifies means to sustain and transmit European heritages that are likely to contribute to the evolution of inclusive, communitarian identities and counteract disaffection with, and division within, the EU. A number of modes of representation and performance are explored in the project, from cultural policy, museum display, heritage interpretation, school curricula and political discourse to music and dance performances, food and cuisine, rituals and protest.

Work Package 1, **Productions and Omissions of European heritage**, provides a critical foundation for CoHERE as a whole, interrogating different meanings of heritage, historical constructions and representations of Europe, formative histories for European identities that are neglected or hidden because of political circumstances, and non-official heritage.

This essay relates to a key objective of the research to ‘investigate how Europe is represented in museums, heritage and commemorative practices’ by analyzing the representation of Europe as a historical and geopolitical entity within key museums, heritage sites and in commemorative practices. The purpose of this is to examine the cultural, historical and political construction of Europe, to understand identity positions, areas of common ground and shared *lieux de mémoire*, origin stories, constitution moments and ‘European’ attitudes, values, ethics and ways of being that are invoked in the displays. In addition to this, the research also examines representations in museums that do not take Europe as their primary frame, but link European history and questions to the geopolitical unit that they represent, as in the case of national history museums and city museums.

Christopher Whitehead

Why Analyze Museum Display?

Introduction

This essay is one of a series of linked Work-in-Progress papers relating to different approaches and frameworks that aim to understand and analyze museum display as a form of representation. Museum displays come in many forms and individually they tend to include a variety of different communication technologies and techniques to construct visitor experiences. Although sometimes displays can be haphazard, in their organization, the majority are sophisticated forms of representation and communication that aim to present particular narratives or organizations of knowledge, or to create sensory environments and affective spaces that invite or impel visitors to respond in a certain way. Technical factors such as lighting, the spacing of objects or the colour of the walls can subtly but powerfully produce meanings, and there is a tradition of analysis – to be reviewed in the essays that follow this one – that seeks to pick apart how signification works through display.

This essay establishes the premises for explorations of methodology and presentations of exemplary case study research. I discuss motivations for analyzing display as a cultural production of knowledge that has a particularly critical role in the context of the socio-political interests of the CoHERE project. This links to future papers that review different approaches and frameworks that aim to understand and analyze museum display as a form of representation, before developing and exemplifying a cartographical approach and a connected methodological apparatus. While outlining the particular theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches to be taken as part of the CoHERE project, these essays also provide a general resource for scholars, practitioners and visitors interested in understanding the meanings of museum display.

Why analyze display?

Why should we, or anyone, analyze museum displays? Why might it be necessary and what purpose does it serve beyond the immediate fun of figuring out the signification of a representation? I'll answer this with some reflections on knowledge, truth and history that draw on a number of interrelated intellectual traditions. These reflections proceed from social constructionist premises (in other words they relate to the social construction of knowledge, including ideas of truth and history), but they also engage with the realist perspectives that museums often take, more or less openly.

We must analyze museum display firstly because it is, among other things, a *political, public production of propositional knowledge intended to influence audiences and to create durable social effects*. Moreover, however empirical in cast, from a constructionist perspective that knowledge isn't absolute. There will be alternative propositions and accounts of things and each one could be open to question. The purpose of analyzing displays and understanding them as knowledge productions isn't to topple 'false' accounts and identify the 'true' ones. Rather, it is to expose the techniques and contingencies of that knowledge production and then to seek to understand the epistemological choices made and positions taken, whether consciously or not, *as political ones*.

As this essay will explore, this entails attention to the relationships between museum representations and truth – truth-telling, our need for truth, our anxieties about it, the status of

truth as absolute, relative or provisional, and our constructions of it. Longstanding debates on representation, reality and truth in literatures from the theory of history, philosophy and cultural theory have affected studies of museum displays, but not very thoroughly. The museum is one of the most authoritative public institutions for the management and proposal of truths, and I'll show that it has special capacities here. Many museum acts are representational, from collecting and conserving to the provision and organization of cafés. But display warrants special attention as a core function and as one of the most openly representational museum acts.

Some authors, myself included, have treated display as a kind of epistemological technology, and individual displays as embodied or concretized theories, each one operating as statement of position on something. Of course it could be said that lots of representational forms embody theory and constitute statements of position (e.g. TV documentaries, history books, Wikipedia entries, etc.), but this brings the need to study the particular representational technologies and techniques that give them their specificity, coupled with the cultural factors that give (or deny) them their authority. What is it that a museum display does that is specific and different from some other form of representation? And what do its validity and cultural authority rest on?

Lastly, when we combine display analysis with other studies – particularly those of curatorial accounts of display production and of the reception by audiences of displays – we can seek to understand what might be called the *cultural nexus of museum knowledge production* in greater complexity. We can approach the matter of how meaning is made, not just by the communicating 'text' of a display (if such it can be called) but also by the visitors who make sense of it. To go back to the idea introduced above that display is 'intended to influence audiences and to create durable social effects', we can see whether, how, where, when and why it does. We can see, in other words, what kinds of effects and affects display has upon individuals and groups, whether these were intended or unanticipated, and what relations they have with persisting and coeval social and cultural forces.

Museums and the production of truth

There is by now a longstanding orthodoxy in academic museology that the meanings made in museums are selective and partial, capable of presenting views of the world and versions of truth that occlude others. Museums, in this view, can be utilized by producers – with varying possibilities of intentionality, as we will discuss – to naturalize contentions and positions as singular truths, leading us to fear that displays may include bias, distortion, exaggeration of particular accounts, and propaganda. If we assume, as I have implied above, that museum representations have some kind of effect on the hearts and minds of visitors who tend to trust in their singular truth and authority, then the ability to decode, deconstruct and denaturalize museum communication becomes paramount. This analytical imperative suggests that museums' truth claims function *at worst* as mendacious covers for some kind of social control, or as blithe knowledge propositions that model and reinforce existing orders, possibly against the interests of the many, or those of already subjugated groups.

This is an extreme view of the museum's position as cultural institution and communicative form in society. But historically some museums have occupied it squarely, and have used the accreted authority of the word and the form 'museum' to entrench their truths, especially those in regimes tending to totalitarianism or those produced by groups interested in popularizing unusual beliefs. The majority of museum professionals would obviously decry

this and distance their practice from it, pointing either to benign social missions, to ethical responsibilities, or to the presumed objectivity and neutrality of museum representations, that can only be achieved through the disciplined method and technical competence of expert staff. Although the social effects of these approaches may be (or may seem) less heinous, neither one can possibly depoliticize museum work.

A frequent category error is the ubiquitous metaphorical notion of the *museum as mirror*, as though the museum were *reflecting* some out-there thing (the social history of a region, the development of eighteenth-century art, or whatever). In this view, the job of display is to reflect its topic as well as possible, and it is curators' rigorous commitment to displaying (reflecting) the truth that enables this. An alternative view is of the museum as a constructive agent, whose practice produces rather than reveals truth and selects one account of things from many possibilities.

This is a divide that it has been hard to bridge for a number of reasons. Firstly, museums' traditional default position has understandably been to depend implicitly on the validity, knowableness and representability of the real and its singular truths for their existence and power. To destabilize truths in museums is hard, albeit compelling work, and can risk destabilizing museums' very cultural grounds of authority, and the professional competencies and funding that support it. Secondly, museums (usually) contain *things* that are 'true' in the sense that they are generally accepted to be what we say they are: proofs of truth or connectors with reality. Consider: a 'real' deep sea fish from the epipelagic zone; a real piece of masonry from a prehistoric settlement; an arrowhead discovered in a field, once a battleground; a 'real' Rembrandt painting; a fossil of an extinct creature; and Archduke Franz Ferdinand's bloodstained shirt. Simply because such objects exist we might affirm that such fish definitely exist or existed; that that settlement was, and it was thus; that that battle took place right there, and archers fought; that Rembrandt himself stood in front of this canvas and painted it (such that it can be called 'a Rembrandt' as if it were an essential trace of him), and here is a real material trace from the very moment in which the First World War was sparked.

To deny such affirmations might seem perverse. Indeed there are significant social, political, moral and occasionally legal dangers associated with *some* denials – for example of the Holocaust, of climate change – that there is a mainstream, but by no means total, will to avoid. Seeing such things as anything other than infallible foundational truths can profoundly destabilize social orders of knowledge, with extreme ramifications for the groups with an investment in them or interests in overturning them. A paradigmatic example here is the treatment in different museums of what has come to be known (for some only) as the 'Armenian Genocide'. In the Armenian Genocide Museum in Yerevan – in Armenia – the proposition is unequivocally made that the Ottoman Turks, and later the Kemalist government of Turkey perpetrated genocide against Armenians between 1915 and 1923. In the Harbiye Military Museum in Istanbul – in Turkey – an antithetical proposition is made – that Armenian dissidents victimized innocent Turks, justifying a measured, and certainly non-genocidal, response. Two museums then, with opposing stories, each one proposed as foundational truth, not least through the assembly of material evidence.

Clearly, there is a history of fabulous concoctions in museums – mermaids and monsters and fakes that are curious only after their fictionality is exposed as part of the show, and we take an interest in the fantasy, worldview or artifice they represent. Before this they bear more serious epistemological or economic value, and the possibility for drastic shift in status is one

reason for the centrality of authentication methods in museum science. Simply put, it's important to prove that things are real. At the same time, things presented as real that don't fit with our beliefs about the world can be disquieting, as proofs and beliefs need to support one another.

Consider this blog excerpt from a visitor to the National Museum of Denmark, after coming across the 'Haraldskær Mermaid' skeleton. The label for this, 'presented in the same style as other cases, provided vague references to the finding of this specimen and to possible existence of "Sea Peoples"':

Perplexed visitors hovered around the case wondering, like me, why the museum curator would include obviously bogus information alongside all of the wonderfully presented legitimate artifacts... Copenhagen's National Museum, a world-renowned museum chronicling the history of Denmark, is apparently interjecting myth into history.

Throughout other exhibit halls in the museum, other works with a more conspicuously artistic purpose had been displayed at the edge of the historical exhibits. In these cases, though it was perplexing to have historic artifacts displayed as art next to objective exhibits and commentary on history, the difference between the two was at least obvious. In the case of the Haraldskær Mermaid, the only clue that the exhibit was fictional was the observer's own common sense. Everything about the display blended seamlessly into the context of the other historical exhibits in the room.

Connecting the diverse and multitudinous factions of Scandinavian history and prehistory is already a puzzle taxing the best effort my brain can generate. The Haraldskær Mermaid exhibit pretty near shut me down. I'm rebooting my brain, hoping to wake up tomorrow "normal" again (Friesendm Travepod blog entry June 20, 2012¹).

While perhaps we should not take Friesendm's sense of shock too seriously (although it did warrant a blog entry!), the story is telling: this is what happened to someone when a highly authoritative museum played with the truth, messing up categories like myth and reality, wrong-footing its visitors who came expecting certainties and the reinforcement of accepted truths. Note the oppositional categories posed by the blogger: legitimate/bogus, history/myth and so on. These can only be sorted by 'common sense', whose origins may be found, at least in part, in people's enculturation and acquired familiarity with the very same knowledge produced by authoritative cultural institutions like museums.

The mermaid skeleton is a fabulous object. But in a constructionist argument, and in a number of approaches in museology (such as object biography), it isn't just fabulous things like mermaid skeletons that might be questioned. Even our 'really real' things (fish, masonry, arrowhead, painting by Rembrandt, fossil, shirt) that form part of the normality to which the blogger hopes to return, are also forms of concoction. They are concocted both in themselves as conserved, treated and manipulated physical objects and in their selection for and assemblage within specific, contingent knowledge relations. They can figure within stories and reify them, and *realize* them. They can be used to make truth.

¹ <http://www.travepod.com/travel-blog-entries/friesendm/15/1340369078/tpod.html>, accessed September 2016.

To take an example from the real things that I question above, I don't mean that Archduke Ferdinand wasn't shot and killed in 1914, or that he didn't wear the shirt sometimes on display in the Austrian Military Museum in Vienna. Rather, I mean that the choice to display his shirt at all, and indeed to make of it a kind of showpiece with attendant prominence, is part of a conventional belief system that structures the past into narrative abstractions like events, causal schemes, transitions and change. These abstractions are concretized in the museum, by configurations of material proofs set up in displays to renew conditions of *witnessing*, allowing for the reproduction of singular truth. Within such museum narratives are assumptions about the literal importance of events as pivotal within causal schemes, and, then, the importance of *this* event within *this* causal scheme. This scheme proceeds to the *central* event that we identify as such and name the First World War, and which we perceive (and commemorate) as having a beginning and ending. Even if the set of contingencies that 'led to' the War can be complicated endlessly, the event of the assassination powers a striking narrative about how one death (or two, if we consider the lesser-told story of how Sophie Duchess of Hohenberg was also killed) can lead to millions of others.

The preservation and display of truth-supporting materials is part of a cultural imperative to bear witness as best we can and to preserve relics and traces of those events that we identify as crucial. It's an appeal to grasp in ourselves the physical horror of being shot, and perhaps to reflect on the mass violence of the War, yet to come in the story. The shirt is a thing of wonder, a material trace of a moment that 'changed everything'. Of course, it has never been washed since the Archduke died in it. The blood is significant, and part of the object; we should not confuse this with any other shirt. The blood is as real as our own. It is assembled as an event in causal relations with others and as an index of the brink of historic transition from one phase, 'age' or 'era' to another. It may be assembled not just as the signifier of an event but also with other materials: the uniform and car in which Ferdinand was shot, the couch upon which he died, the portraits of him and Sophie Duchess of Hohenberg in life. Relationally, these take the combined status of physical proofs and icons. The shirt is also part of other kinds of knowledge relations. It was put on display only exceptionally (because of its delicate state of conservation) in 2013, in the run-up to the centenary of the assassination, inviting audiences to engage in particular forms of remembering, and in a military museum that places it exclusively in a history of warfare and military conflict.

Other stories could be told, other temporal schemes could be identified and much more complex causal schemes could be sketched, or causality itself could be demoted. Other moments could be identified and other relations made, with or without the shirt. In a literal sense, *things* could be otherwise. The bloodied shirt stands as truth because of a set or naturalized perspectives, assumptions and stories. It's not 'untrue' (in itself this may seem a meaningless adjective for an object), but could be said to be part of or a support for only one of many 'truths', all producible from a past that is both potentially infinite and not directly knowable. Physical objects such as those collected and displayed become surrogate props for eye-witnessing what can't be witnessed by us, because we weren't there. We invest them with a powerful affective charge to bring the past into the present for us to experience directly 'as if' we could. This surrogate witnessing salves anxieties about truth and reality (what 'actually happened') and shores up accounts of the past that help us to situate our own lives and positions in history both in temporal and moral dimensions. Witnessing is a cultural mode of perception associated with proof; it feels like it affords us the ability to cut through the ambiguities and uncertainties of representation to actual truths. It can be mobilised in

court (so long as the witness is ‘reliable’) to prove things. It can be mobilised by individuals to assert the existence of ghosts or elves or gods. It is fraught with problems attaching to suggestion and false memory, but nevertheless the assemblage of materials (even the monstrous concoctions mentioned earlier) for surrogate witnessing has been a longstanding rhetorical practice museum appeals to truth.

The idea of truth that I am delineating here isn’t the Enlightenment ‘object of discovery’, that requires evidence and the consensus of recognized experts about the validity of that evidence to establish that things cannot be otherwise. Rather, a truth is one account of many, with greater or lesser purchase on people. In this sense it’s a relative truth, an idea that incurs the dangers of relativism. Can anything be true? Are some things only true for some people? In the Creationist Museum in Kentucky there is a label that dates all fossils to the ‘year of the Flood’ based on biblical evidence. And of course, what the label says could well be ‘true for you’! You and anyone else can disagree with everything I’ve written so far (which is indeed based on philosophical and intellectual positions that are contested), and hold onto your sense of a knowable past and the certainty of its phenomena and their order. But then we find ourselves automatically in a world of divergent and sometimes oppositional views. For example, opposing accounts and interpretations of the ‘fossil record’ are available in numerous natural history museums around the world, whose displays take the position that the fossil deposits span billions of years. This is where we have to admit that museum representations are political, even if only in their choice of belief system. If there are known alternatives to any given truth represented in display, then we encounter politics.

With political representations come ethical and moral imperatives too. This is at its most pronounced in museums that engage with difficult histories that we are told we ought not to ‘forget’, to recognize and remember the suffering of the dead, or to ‘learn from history’ so that we can somehow ensure that it doesn’t repeat itself, as in the case of genocides. A key position that emerges in reception studies and in memory studies (albeit in different ways) is that the past is always accessed from the present, and present conditions determine our perceptions of that past. This leads to an always-mobile intertextual dynamic between the two that guarantees the emergence of new interpretations, aesthetic and intellectual engagements (e.g. with historic literature and art) and, possibly, moral inflections about what we should learn from the past for the sake of human society. This adds interest, contemporary relevance and vibrancy to our encounters with the past, but certainly doesn’t help in the search for a fixed past.

How might the museum respond to the dilemmas that these reflections illuminate? One of the questions that the museum has faced for some time is where it sits between two different epistemic positions. One is that associated with rationalist Enlightenment thought gearing the museum to interests in the existence and objective capture of singular truths and lone stories. Another sees the museum, with its old-fashioned predispositions, under pressure to adapt to the insistent problematization of everything that has been one of the apparent goals of postmodernism thought. This leaves the Enlightenment museum hopelessly in thrall to a fearfully alien, dystopian and nihilistic position: that nothing is truer than anything else, nothing matters, nothing is valid, and that there are no really tenable grounds for producing or acting on knowledge other than yet more critique.

There are different responses to this quandary. One is to ignore it and to proceed as normal with the affirmation of singular truths, with the usual appeals to incontrovertible evidence,

objectivity, neutrality, expertise and methodical rigour. This is still the ‘museum-as-mirror’ approach, although it’s sometimes pursued defensively. Despite the protestations of its adherents (often made in good faith), it is never apolitical, usually tends towards epistemological conservatism, and at its worst is a cover for partisan stories about all sorts of things: the age of the earth, the transcendental heroism of any number of ‘great men’ (Winston Churchill, Chiang Kai-shek, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk etc.), the antiquity and identity of a nation, and so on.

Another response is to go against the historical conventions of museum representation and recognize a multiplicity of truths, stories and viewpoints. But practically this can get messy: special techniques need to be found to manage competing accounts of things, and visitors in search of simplicity can end up confused, not least about which truths, stories and viewpoints, if any, the museum privileges and what they should believe. Community co-production models are often employed in these situations, helping to valorize non-professional and previously low-status cultural competences possessed by certain groups, such as forms of ‘local’ or ‘insider’ knowledge. Here museum professionals try to move away from being knowledge bearers to become instead cultural intermediaries between the museum and its new ‘experts’. But the results of such projects tend to accompany and qualify core stories and competencies rather than supplanting them. They are also frequently cordoned off, physically or otherwise, and the ‘community’ audience participation is foregrounded, creating, perhaps unintentionally, a kind of knowledge disclaimer. We also hit the problem of how, if at all, museums can represent contemporary positions held by groups or individuals that are more generally untenable, because they cause offence to many, infringe laws or jeopardize public order, and indeed whether museums should. This is a matter of considerable interest in establishing the social relevance of museums today in places and situations where animosity and antagonisms between groups are critical.

A third way is found in museums whose staff recognize the political nature of their viewpoints and representations and seek explicitly to persuade audiences of their greater worth in moral terms, more or less openly. For example, in the permanent display ‘London, Sugar and Slavery’ at the Docklands Museum (a branch of the Museum of London) an expressly positive position is taken on the multicultural composition of London, as one ‘legacy’ of the slave trade. In a label accompanying a pastel drawing at the end of the exhibition:

Vegetable stall, Brixton market, 1988, by David Williams

The colour, flavours and music of the former British empire have come to London with its people. Our capital city is a richer place because of it.
Museum of London

Having interviewed MoL staff I know that when such displays were being produced (the Galleries of Modern London at the main branch of the MoL have a similar viewpoint) it was with full awareness that this is a partisan position that can be contested. But it was proposed as truth not so much evidentially or empirically as morally. Indeed, the MoL position *was* contested, by Far-Right activists who surreptitiously dropped leaflets presenting opposite

positions on multicultural society,² and by some visitors who left extremely critical comments calling out the leftism of the curators. To be clear, the display's statement of position about multiculturalism as a good (at least in London) is unequivocal and presented as truth. The language used doesn't admit alternatives: 'Our capital city *is* a richer place because of it' (my emphasis) – not '*may be* a richer place; not 'we think that it's a richer place' or 'some people think' so; or 'do you think that it's a richer place?' This may seem dictatorial, and it is. The one concession to the existence of other positions is a book of transcribed visitor comments that is available for perusal in the display area, representing multiple viewpoints and responses, and as noted this includes some indignant rebuttals of the ideological premises of the exhibition.

The difference between the MoL position on multiculturalism as social good and the 'museum-as-mirror' approach isn't easy to gauge: does it lie in the reflexive awareness of the curators that they are operating politically, and actively privileging specific convictions? Does it lie in the fact that we (obviously 'we' can mean only some of us) might agree more with this statement of position than with others and are therefore less likely to want to problematize it? This isn't naïve like the 'museum-as-mirror' approach, although its surface and rhetorical technique is practically the same. But neither is it a nihilistic 'nothing-matters' approach (or its positive inversion, 'everything matters equally'), as it is motivated by politico-moral convictions about the public good and what the museum can do benignly, as a social mission. This is still a statement of truth, but it seems to me that the claim to neutrality has been dropped.

Summary and ramifications for practice

So far I have tried to explain the museum's special discursive power to configure (a sense of) the real. This works in particular through its construction of assemblages – of things, themes, stories, ideas – that are at the same time vistas for witnessing and first-hand connection with an apparently 'extra-discursive' truth, and thus overcoming the unknowability of the world. My argument, as I have hinted, is that although we are 'only' speaking of representational acts, this museum function has the power to alleviate all sorts of anxieties by providing fixed points for orientation, for siting ourselves in time and place and calibrating our moral and aesthetic compasses. For better or for worse. In my view, it is this capacity to objectify and realize truth that gives the museum form its reason for being and its longstanding social warrant and power.

For practitioners, there is no easy way out of the quandaries on the status of museum knowledges that these reflections evoke. It might be argued that there is moral and civil value in the attempt to reach for but not to attain truth (against any nihilistic or quietist abnegation of responsibilities); to secure, as best as one can, provisional truths, but also to reflect on their provisionality; to reflect on the political nature of any statements of position that are taken; to take such positions openly, but also to admit and explain their epistemological and moral groundings; to explore what bearings our current conditions bring to our engagements with the past; and to recognize antagonistic positions and explain them historically. To do all of this requires new reflection on museum representations and, perhaps a new technical repertoire. Future publications will work towards an articulation of this, particularly in the

² Ross, C. (2015) 'From Migration to Diversity and Beyond: The Museum of London Approach', in Whitehead, C., Lloyd, K., Eckersley, S and Mason, R. (eds) *Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe: peoples, places and identities*, Farnham: Ashgate

context of complex social, identity and party politics within Europe, in which antagonisms, multiple knowledges and histories and crises of truth are important features.

For now, this discussion has presented a view on *why* we should analyze museum display as a *political, public production of propositional knowledge intended to influence audiences and to create durable social effects*, which has a particular social warrant and purchase because of the truth work that is possible because of the representational capacities specific to museum display. Our next question is *how* we might analyze display, adding methods to the motivation established so far in a review of approaches. This will be the focus of the next essays in this series connecting to the study of museum representations.