

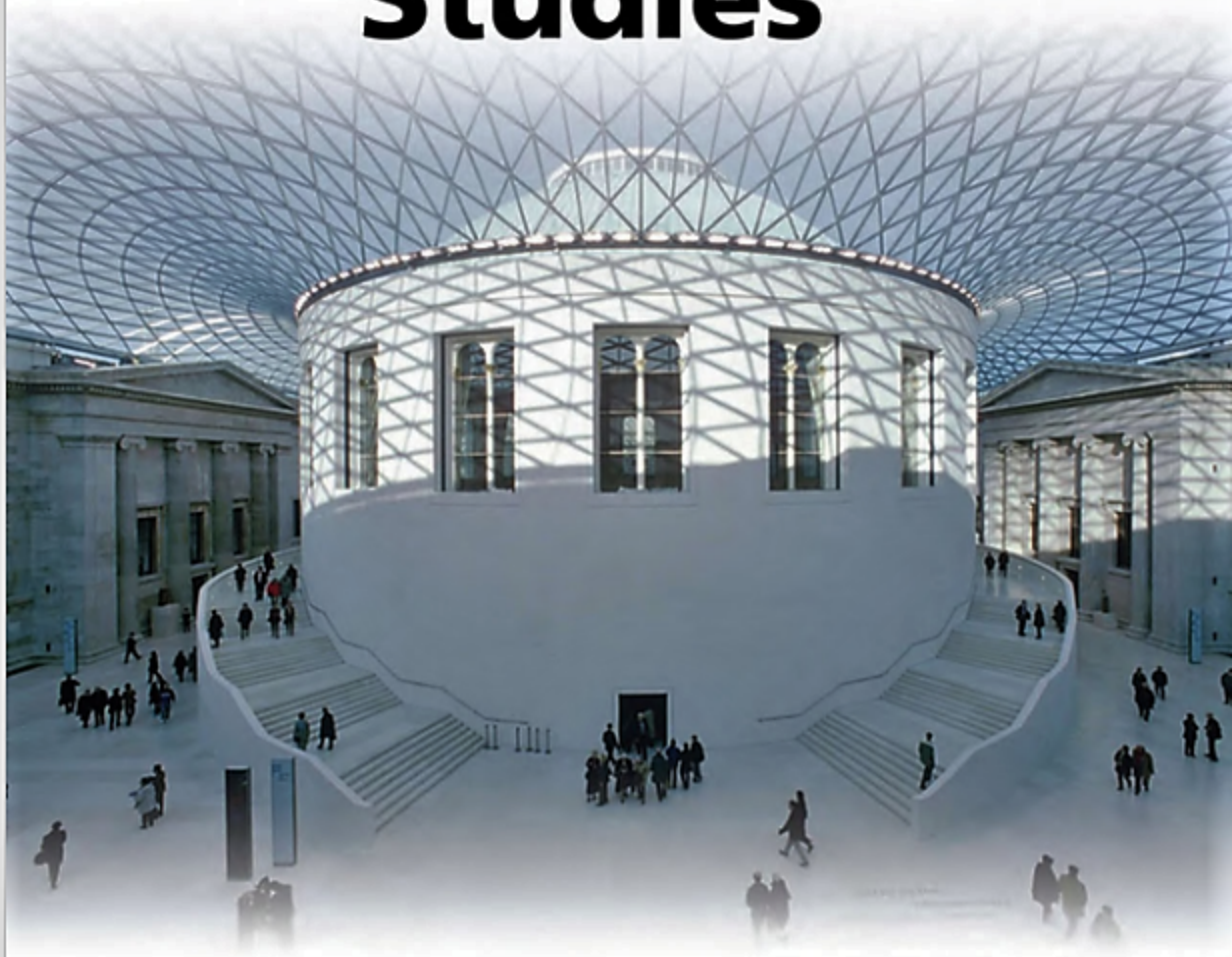
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Cultural Theory and Museum Studies

Rhiannon Mason

Like many recent developments in the academy, cultural theory is characterized by its interdisciplinary nature and its disregard for traditional academic boundaries. Ideas linked to the term “cultural theory” are as likely to be found in geography or music seminars as in those of history, philosophy, literature, film, art, gallery, and museum studies. There is no one single definition of cultural theory and its application varies according to intellectual context. There are, however, a number of key concepts and issues which fall under its name. This chapter examines these to see how they have informed and contributed to the field of museum studies, looking, in particular, at the increasingly explicit use of cultural theory within museum studies. In turn, it also explores how ideas in cultural theory are themselves being adapted and refashioned by museological research and practice.

What is “Cultural Theory?”

Milner and Browitt (2002) date the ascendance of cultural theory within the academy to the 1970s and 1980s, although they trace the genesis of many of its central debates to the work of nineteenth-century thinkers such as Matthew Arnold. Put simply, contemporary cultural theory involves the analysis of culture in its broadest sense: from culture as a way of life to culture as the result of aesthetic practices (i.e. paintings or music). It takes as its central premise the idea that culture is a signifying practice which is bound up with value judgments (Hall 1997). This last way of conceptualizing culture is central to contemporary cultural theory, but is only the latest development in the usage of that term (Jordan and Weedon 1995).

Contemporary cultural theory is all-encompassing in its choice of subject matter: from literature, art, and cinema to soap operas, comics, and hairstyles. In this respect, cultural theory, like much of contemporary art and cinema, has moved beyond the hierarchical distinction between high and low culture which characterized earlier literary and artistic modernism. This same rejection of the traditional division between elite and popular culture is also apparent in many contemporary museums, particularly in social history and contemporary collecting projects. The Twentieth-century Gallery in the Museum of Scotland, for example, displays the popular Scottish fizzy

drink "Irn Bru" alongside a ballot box from the 1997 referendum on political devolution for Scotland and treats both as equally significant to the story of Scottish culture at the end of the twentieth century (Watban 2000: 57).

Influenced by the politics of difference and postmodern relativism, contemporary cultural theory tends to approach culture from a pluralist perspective. This means that cultural theorists talk of cultures rather than Culture and cultural analyses often focus on cultural differences. It should come as little surprise, then, that the museum – an institution that actively seeks to display multiple cultures and to mark out cultural differences – should have become a site of prime interest for those interested in cultural theory.

Contemporary cultural theory argues that we inhabit culture in the sense that we share a certain amount of knowledge and understanding about our environment with others. We share "cultural maps," as Stuart Hall puts it, although membership of groups and communities is in itself a complex issue (Hall 1997: 18). The existence of shared cultural maps involves making judgments about cultural practices or products and their value, status, and legitimacy. By implication, this confers or denies value and status to their producers, owners, and consumers. Again, this process can be seen at work within museums and galleries where the act of display is always simultaneously one of definition and attribution of value; it says "this is art" or "this is culture." The controversies that sometimes arise over such acts of value-definition are discussed in this volume by Steven C. Dubin (chapter 29) and Steven Conn (chapter 30) among others. As their examples demonstrate, museums are public spaces in which definitions of cultures and their values may be actively contested and debated. Museums materialize values and throw the processes of meaning-making into sharp relief, and it is for this reason that they are of such interest to cultural theoreticians and museum studies researchers alike.

Theorizing Meaning: Semiotics and Structuralism

British cultural studies and cultural theory mostly take as their starting-point semiotics, post-Saussurean linguistic theory and, in particular, poststructuralism. Semiotics is the term now given to the study of signs pioneered by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of the twentieth century (Saussure 1974). Saussure set out to theorize how people communicate and proposed that we employ a signifying system based on signs which comprise of signifiers (phonic, written, or visual indicators) and signifieds (the concept or meaning). He argued that signification relies on comparison and differentiation between signifiers and that we learn to differentiate as we acquire language. In this respect, meaning depends on a shared understanding of a given signifying system which is socially constructed.

For Saussure, the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is arbitrary. This is to say that those who share the same signifying system agree upon a given signifier to indicate a signified, but there is no inherent reason why one signifier should be attached to one signified as opposed to another. Moreover, signifieds themselves are constructs. Language is thus not simply an objective description of an external reality, but a social construction which we learn, which is negotiated, and which con-

ditions the way in which we view reality. Saussure also considered the use of language at the levels of the social and the individual and made a distinction between *langage*, “the universal human phenomenon of language,” *langue* “a particular language system, for example, English,” and *parole*, “language in use, specific speech acts” (Lodge 1988: 1).

Saussure's and other related theories of language and meaning – for example, those developed by the Russian Formalists – were extremely influential throughout the twentieth century, particularly with the emergence of structuralism in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Milner and Browitt 2002: 96). Structuralism, like semiotics, sought to identify underlying structures in the organization of societies and proposed that these differences were often marked through binary oppositions, for example, hot/cold, woman/man, nature/culture. French intellectual, Roland Barthes, for example, pursued the ideas of semiotics and structuralism in his study of popular culture, advertising, and myth, *Mythologies* (1957), while structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, developed schematic analyses of cultural practices such as kinship and marriage (see, for example, Lévi-Strauss 1963).

Structuralism and semiotics have made their presence felt in museum studies and material culture studies. In *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (1992), for example, Susan Pearce uses Saussure's and Barthes' discussions of *langue* and *parole*, and the structuralist interest in binary oppositions, to carry out schematic analyses of museum collections, although she also recognizes some of the limitations of this kind of museum analysis (1992: 166–91). The term “semiotic” is often used more loosely and has been applied to a whole range of museum critics (for example, Haraway 1989; Bal 1992; Duncan 1995), who take a less tightly structured approach to their exploration of how museums function as systems of signification and can be read as texts (see below.)

Rethinking Saussure: Poststructuralism

While many of Saussure's ideas continue to inform theoretical thinking, certain aspects and, in particular, their structuralist derivation, have themselves been challenged and revised within the field of cultural theory. These revisions have come to be known as *poststructuralist* or *post-Saussurean* theory, although “poststructuralism” serves as an umbrella term for many different theorists rather than indicating a single, definitive theory (Weedon 1987: 19).

Poststructuralism continues from Saussure's central premise that “language, far from reflecting an already given social reality, constitutes social reality for us” (Weedon 1987: 22). However, it departs from Saussure in its emphasis on the plurality and change of meanings over time and the nature of the relationship between the signified and the signifier. To take the first point, Saussure and later structuralists focused on language and culture synchronically rather than diachronically. Poststructuralists argue that this approach does not pay sufficient attention to change in meanings over time and within different contexts. Conversely, poststructuralist theory emphasizes change over time. This is particularly true of those branches interested in the cultural politics of difference and identity – for example, those

working on feminism, queer theory, race, and class – because it enables them to draw attention to the power struggles involved in the attribution of meanings and the value systems attached to those meanings.

Museums are especially valuable in this respect because they materialize cultural and historical differences. An example can be found in Henrietta Lidchi's (1997) discussion of Elizabeth Lawrence's (1991) case of the stuffed horse, Comanche, which was involved in the famous American battle, Custer's last stand at Little Bighorn. The horse was an exhibit at the University of Kansas from 1893 to the 1970s when it became the subject of considerable controversy due to the perceived bias in the interpretation attached to it: it was initially labeled as the "sole survivor" of Custer's last stand. This labeling was rejected in the 1970s by American Indian university students as being historically misleading and written from a white settler perspective. In response, the curator worked with Native Americans to rewrite the labels in a way that took account of the different perspectives on this historical event.

Lawrence's example illustrates the polysemic quality of museum objects. This one exhibit simultaneously held opposing meanings for Native Americans, white American students, and for museum curators. It also makes apparent how meanings considered appropriate at one point can be read another way in a later context. In this case, as is often the way, the cultural artifact became emblematic of a much wider political debate about whose version of history is recorded as the official one and whose is marginalized (Hutcheon 1994; Riegel 1996; Luke 2002; see also chapters 7 and 12 of this volume).

Lidchi (1997) also provides a useful definition of two other key museum studies terms: "poetics" and "politics" (Silverstone 1989; Karp and Lavine 1991). "Poetics" refers to "the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition" (Lidchi 1997: 168). It includes how museums employ certain representational strategies to claim authenticity and mimic reality. The linked term "politics" refers to "the role of exhibitions/museums in the production of social knowledge" (1997: 185).

The distinction between poetics and politics is valuable because it offers a way of subdividing museum analysis into manageable components while stressing their interconnectedness. This is crucial because the more practically oriented literature on museum and exhibition design often treats display as though it is an ideologically neutral and unproblematic act. By contrast, the extent to which the poetics of display is always already political is made abundantly clear in accounts which demonstrate how different cultures make different judgments about appropriate methods of display and interpretation (Clifford 1997; Appadurai and Breckenridge 1999; Thomas 2001; Witcomb 2003; chapter 28 of this volume).

The politics of display is demonstrated by Helen Coxall's (1996) work on the assumptions contained within the language and grammatical constructions used in museum labeling. In one example, she examines labels presented at the National Railway Museum, England, on the subject of the employment of women during World War II. She argues that the language used implicitly constructs women as passive, while men are discussed in the active tense. The result is that women's work is cast as a necessary expediency rather than in terms of empowerment and progress

toward women's equality. Coxall's work highlights the possibility of multiple readings and the existence of alternative meanings present in museum displays. It also demonstrates how the acts of display, documentation, and labeling in museums make apparent poststructuralist arguments about the ways in which societies construct meanings. This issue of multiple meanings returns us to the second point on which poststructuralism parts company from structuralism and Saussure: the relationship between the signifier and the signified and the ensuing nature of the sign.

Deconstructing Saussure: Derrida

Saussure argued that the linguistic sign comprised a signifier and a signified and that their relationship was arbitrary. However, he claimed that the combination of signifier and signified produced a single, fixed sign: "Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact" (Saussure 1974: 120). Poststructuralists, in particular the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, have revisited this point and rejected this idea of fixity in favor of what Derrida calls "deferral" and "*différance*." Weedon (1987: 25) explains:

For Derrida there can be no fixed signifieds (concepts), and signifiers (sound or written images), which have identity only in their difference from one another, are subject to an endless process of deferral. The effect of representation, in which meaning is apparently fixed, is but a temporary retrospective fixing. Signifiers are always located in a discursive context and the temporary fixing of meaning in a specific reading depends on this discursive context.

The idea that any act of signification will always involve competing meanings, and that the interpretation and recognition of those meanings is dependent on the context, has proved valuable for museum studies. It has provided a way of theorizing, first, how meanings of particular objects arise out of their relationships to other objects within a given display or collection; secondly, how those meanings change either when their place is revised or through the passage of time; and, thirdly, how visitors themselves will understand those objects in different ways. Charles Saumarez Smith demonstrates this by showing how a wooden doorway held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Mark Lane Archway, has moved from being an exhibit within the Furniture and Woodwork Study Collection through marketing icon to useful decoration within the shop (Saumarez Smith 1989: 14). Its resignification occurred because of reorganization of the collections and also as part of the rebranding of the V&A during the 1980s in line with a more consumerist ethic. This example reiterates the point that every arrangement is an interpretive and representational decision that will produce different effects. However, some arrangements will be considered more timely and appropriate than others at a given moment.

It is important to note that taken to its logical conclusion, poststructuralist theory does not automatically imply that the material world ceases to exist, although this is sometimes how it is understood. Pearce (1992), for example, condemns

poststructuralism as damagingly relativistic with negative connotations for museums and curators. However, Pearce conflates a host of different theorists (Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Baudrillard, and Barthes) and omits the related theoretical debates within cultural and media studies which do have something constructive to offer museum studies (see below). A more positive understanding of poststructuralism is to accept that the real world exists but to acknowledge that it will always be mediated by the signifying systems we inhabit.

Similarly, for poststructuralist-inspired museologists to argue that the meanings of objects are inseparable from the context of their display and interpretation is not the same as saying that they are meaningless. Nor does this theoretical direction necessarily lead to a rejection of history. On the contrary, it emphasizes the importance of historical context while drawing attention to the constructed and plural nature of "histories." Museums contribute to our understanding of these theoretical points by enabling us to see the processes in practice. Indeed, museums are ideal places in which to explore the issues raised within cultural theory *precisely* because they are in the business of identification, differentiation, and classification. An example of how classificatory systems may shape our understanding of objects and cultures can be found in Annie Coombes's (1994) discussion of the Benin Bronzes (and see chapter 10 of this volume). Gaby Porter's (1990) work on the gender bias inherent in the categories used for social history documentation and classification provides another excellent way of understanding how cultural theory might be applied to the functions of museums.

Cultural Politics of Difference and Identity

Many of the examples mentioned so far raise questions of identity and difference, both key to contemporary museums and cultural theory alike. The theory of difference is central to Derridean and poststructuralist theory, but it is equally central to cultural theory as a whole because it coincides with the theoretical and political concerns of various social movements which have marked the second half of the twentieth century: feminism, multiculturalism, lesbian and gay rights, disability issues, and civil rights (Milner and Browitt 2002: 128). Academic interest in cultural theory stems partly from the fact that its emphasis on the constructedness of norms and values resonates with the political and ethical concerns of these social movements. At the same time, these theories also articulate many of the practical issues and concerns currently facing museums around the world, a situation which is a legacy of the historical context – that of colonialism and modernity – within which the concept of the public Western museum was developed.

The politicization of museums and the reorientation of their function, as the title of Stephen Weil's (1999) article puts it, "From Being *about* Something to Being *for* Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum," form arguably the key paradigm shift of recent years. In the literature of museum studies this shift is often discussed in terms of "new museology," and this term is usually attributed in Anglophone circles to British art historian Peter Vergo's (1989) *The New Museology*. For Vergo, new museology meant a "state of widespread dissatisfaction with

the 'old' museology, both within and outside the museum profession . . . what is wrong with the 'old' museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums . . ." (1989: 3; and see the Introduction to this volume).

As with all such theoretical movements, "new museology" has itself been interpreted differently. Dutch scholar Peter Van Mensch argues that there have been three different applications of the term: in the US (1950s), the UK (late 1980s), and France (1980) (cited in Davis 1999: 54). Peter Davis also points to the links between "new museology," ecomuseology, and community museology, and stresses the international aspect of the movement developed within the International Council of Museums (ICOM) during the late 1970s and early 1980s (1999: 56). Irrespective of these differing time-scales, Davis suggests that: "[n]ew museology could be seen as shorthand for the radical reassessment of the roles of museums in society . . ." (1999: 55). I would suggest that "new museology" can be understood as a name for the branch of museum studies concerned with those ideas central to cultural theory.

The embracing of the issues and ideas developed within cultural theory/new museology and the ensuing acknowledgment of the political nature of museums have led to increased attention to questions about the relationship between government, museums, and cultural policy. Such attention has been particularly influenced by the work of French philosopher and historian, Michel Foucault.

The "Foucault Effect" in Museum Studies

Foucault's ideas have been particularly influential in museum studies since the end of the 1980s. His work is extensive and defies easy classification. Among other things, his studies encompass a rethinking of the relationship between power and knowledge, the status of truth, the politics of sexuality and subjectivity, and the way that histories are written (1973, 1974, 1990, 1991). He argues against a traditional notion of linear, progressive, and teleological history and in favor of what he calls "effective history," which draws attention to discontinuities, breaks, ruptures, and non-linearity (1974: 4). His concepts of *epistemes* and *discursive formations* explain how certain meanings and ways of thinking gain credence at particular times. Discourses – another key Foucauldian term – are "systematic conceptual frameworks that define their own truth criteria, according to which particular knowledge problems are to be resolved, and that are embedded in and imply particular institutional arrangements" (Milner and Browitt 2002: 110).

An explicit example of the use of Foucault's ideas in museum studies is Eileen Hooper-Greenhill's *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (1992), which maps Foucault's concepts of the Renaissance, the Classical, and the Modern *epistemes* onto specific shifts in conceptions of knowledge and the changes these shifts engendered within museum collecting. For example, Hooper-Greenhill argues that sixteenth-century collections – so-called "cabinets of curiosity" – were structured around the principles of rarity and novelty, whereas the seventeenth century witnessed moves toward organizing collections along more taxonomic lines. Her third epistemic shift relates to the emergence of the disciplinary museum during the late eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries and the ways in which states began to deploy public museums as a means of “civilizing” their populations (1992: 168).

The concept of the disciplinary museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 1989, 1992) is developed in Tony Bennett’s “The Exhibitionary Complex” (1988) and *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (1995), the latter title echoing Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Bennett applies Foucault’s ideas about disciplinary power, panopticism, and governmentality to the development of the public museum in the nineteenth century. He argues that at this time the museum should be understood as an institution that was designed not only to “improve” the populace as a whole but to encourage citizens to regulate and police themselves (1995: 59–88). This is understood as part of a broader shift toward “governmentality,” defined by Stuart Hall as “how the state indirectly and at a distance induces and solicits appropriate attitudes and forms of conduct from its citizens” (1999: 14).

In “The Exhibitionary Complex,” Bennett draws on Foucault’s discussion of the panopticon – a model for a self-regulating prison – developed by the English Enlightenment philosopher, Jeremy Bentham. Self-regulation would be achieved because inmates would always be visible to the guards but would be unable to tell whether they were being observed at a particular moment. Bennett suggests that visitors to nineteenth-century public museums would be similarly encouraged to accept and internalize such visual “lessons in civics” because the arrangement of space in such institutions created public spaces in which the public itself was put on display and held in perpetual tension between observing and being observed (Bennett 1995: 67–9; chapter 16 this volume).

Bennett’s account is significant for its pairing of Foucault’s discussions of knowledge, power, and spatial relations with Italian revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci’s interest in the “ethical and educative function of the modern state” (Bennett 1995: 63). Bennett introduces a similar bifocal perspective on the question of museums and hegemony. He argues that a synthesis between Foucault and Gramsci is necessary because a purely Gramscian approach to museums is inattentive to its institutional specifics. Bennett argues that a Gramscian focus on the museum as purely an “instrument of ruling-class hegemony” leads to the idealistic notion that the museum could be simply turned on its head as a counter-hegemonic tool (1995: 91). In other words, that the museum could be purged of its elitist function and turned toward empowerment of the hitherto excluded, an argument often made for community museums or community participation within museums. Bennett questions this, as Pierre Bourdieu has in relation to art galleries and the politics of taste, by pointing out that the situation is complicated by the ways in which culture has long been used to differentiate people into social groupings and to accord status to those various strata (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991; Bourdieu 1993, 1994; Bennett 1995: 105).

Museum Studies Speaks Back to Cultural Theory

The introduction of Foucault, and to a lesser extent Gramsci, to museum studies has brought museums to the attention of a much wider cultural studies audience. At the same time, there have been a number of rejoinders to the kind of Foucauldian

analyses practiced by Bennett. Clive Barnett (1999), for example, points to the fact that Bennett's approach has a specific institutional and cultural context originating out of a body of work developed within the Institute for Cultural Policy Studies at Griffith University, Australia. For Barnett, the reading of Foucault's concept of disciplinary power within such cultural-policy literature neglects Foucault's own emphasis on the ways in which subjects of government continue to have agency and to be active participants within the operations of power (Barnett 1999: 374). It also "fails to attend in detail to the contradictions that beset practices of government" (1999: 374). Colin Trodd (2003) similarly questions the Foucauldian-inspired position as insufficiently attentive to the conflicting forces existing within individual museum contexts; in his case, the art museum. Trodd is also critical of what he perceives to be an oversimplification of the various relationships between state and museum: "the state becomes a thing rather than an antagonistic complex of differentiated forces, powers, and interests" (2003: 19).

An alternative model of how museums function within society can be found in James Clifford's idea of the museum as "contact zone" (1997: 188–219). Clifford borrows the term from Mary Louise Pratt (1992) to emphasize the interactive nature of the relationships between various communities, stakeholders, and museums. As "contact zone," the museum functions more as a permeable space of transcultural encounter than as a tightly bounded institution disseminating knowledge to its visitors. Clifford recasts the museum as a space where different cultures and communities intersect, interact, and are mutually influenced by the encounter. Moreover, as Andrea Witcomb notes, Clifford recognizes that the museum itself is a community with its own conventions and cultural values (Witcomb 2003: 79–101). The real advantage of Clifford's conception of the museum is that it accounts for the diversity of museums by stressing how they are changing continually in response to their own changing contexts – colonial, postcolonial, modern, postmodern, public, commercial, and so on. He writes: "[a] contact perspective views all culture-collecting strategies as responses to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization" (1997: 213). Viewed in this light, the term "museum" is understood as a much more flexible and expansive way of describing a whole range of relations and activities which surround the valuation, collection, and display of cultures and histories.

Clifford's foregrounding of the extent to which the world outside the museum – in the form of various communities or audiences – exerts its own forces upon the museum raises the other major criticism leveled at the governmental model of the museum: namely, that it places too much emphasis on the production side of museums at the expense of the consumption side of the process. As a result, visitors are often overlooked or their responses oversimplified. Yet, as is increasingly acknowledged (see chapter 22 of this volume), visitors do not come to museums wholly passive or as blank slates.

To be fair, Bennett himself explicitly anticipates and answers many of these criticisms, but while he is more circumspect about the limitations of his approach than his critics perhaps allow (1998: 61, 12–13; chapter 16 of this volume), cultural theory has sometimes been guilty of underestimating the subjects of its analysis. The tendency of cultural theory-inspired museum critiques to ignore audiences or,

alternatively, to imagine them as uncritical consumers reproduces some of the attitudes toward audiences of mass culture found in the early work of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School, or the Institute of Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, was founded in 1923 and included many of the twentieth century's most pre-eminent cultural critics such as Theodor Adorno (1903–69), Max Horkheimer (1892–1940), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979). It was members of the Frankfurt School who coined the term “critical theory” to “distinguish their own kind of ‘critical sociology’ from what they saw as the ‘traditional theory’ of mainstream social science” (Milner and Browitt 2002: 57).

This idea of the cultural consumer as passive and uncritical dupe continued late into the twentieth century, particularly in analyses of television, film, and the heritage industry. However, in the same way that television and film studies have now revised and refined their conceptualization of audiences, consumption, and the nature of cultural texts, so museum studies too is increasingly recognizing and researching the complexity of people's responses to these multi-faceted cultural phenomena (see chapter 22).

Reading Museums as Texts: Cultural Theory and Textuality

In addition to the Foucauldian/power model of museums, the other, most influential, cultural studies/museum studies approach of recent years is the *textual approach*. This involves reading the object of analysis like a text for its narrative structures and strategies. In museums, the textual approach can involve analysis of the spatial narratives set up by the relationship of one gallery or object to another, or it might consider the narrative strategies and voices implicit in labeling, lighting, or sound. Mieke Bal (1992), for example, has written about the museum-as-text using concepts of narratology and the “voice” adopted by exhibitions. She also posits an extremely useful distinction between textual and spatial narratives and the ways in which they might conflict, thus producing dislocation within the overall text of the exhibition or museum.

Roger Silverstone has similarly applied the idea of narrative to museums: “The study of the narrativity of the museum or the heritage display involves a study of an exhibition's capacity to define a route (material, pedagogic, aesthetic) for the visitor, and to define thereby a particular logic of representation, a particular legitimate and plausible coherence for itself” (1989: 143–4). Like Lidchi (1997), Silverstone invokes the concept of poetics but uses it specifically to refer to “the particularities of the museum as medium: with its role as story-teller, as myth maker, as imitator of reality” (1989: 143). He proposes that a study of poetics should have to consider the “conflicting pressures on museum curators of the mythic and mimetic” and the strategies that museums deploy to construct a sense of reality in their displays (1989: 143). Silverstone also briefly introduces the idea of genre, which has been extremely influential in media and film studies but has not yet been explored to its full potential in museum studies.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1997, 1998) adds another dimension to the textual approach by drawing attention to the degree of performance involved in the narration of spatialized stories within museums. For her, it is the immersive quality of the museum visit that differentiates it as a cultural practice. It is "the movement of spectators through space that distinguishes museums (and many tourist attractions) from theatre" (1997: 8). This emphasis on the specific nature and range of media at work in museums is another way that museum studies researchers are customizing concepts developed elsewhere within the literary theory or media studies branches of cultural theory.

The advantage of understanding museums in terms of texts and narratives is that it moves away from privileging or compartmentalizing a particular aspect of the museum; for example, its building, collections, individual staff, or organizational status. All these components remain crucial, but a textual approach argues that they must be viewed in concert to understand the possible meanings of the museum. Another useful aspect of the idea of textuality is that it raises the question of unintentional meanings, omissions, or contradictions present within displays. A common analytical strategy within cultural and literary studies has been the practice of reading texts "against the grain" for their internal inconsistencies (Turner 2003: 71–108). Reading texts for their contradictions or subversive potential draws on the idea within poststructuralism and deconstruction that meaning is a messy, complex, and multidirectional process and that all texts will contain a plurality of possible meanings. On a practical level, this point is borne out by any account of the complexity and multifaceted nature of the process of exhibition creation (Macdonald 2002).

Another benefit of the textual analogy is that it can shift emphasis away from the curator-as-author and his/her intentions toward the visitor-as-reader and his/her responses. The visitor is therefore understood to be a crucial participant in the process of meaning-making. These ideas correlate with the introduction of constructivist communication theory within museum studies (Hooper-Greenhill 1999), visitor and non-visitor studies (EVR SIG 2004), cultural diversity (Hooper-Greenhill 1997; Desai and Thomas 1998), work on the role of cultural capital in shaping visitor responses (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991), and research into the visitor experience (Falk and Dierking 1992).

Irrespective of the distinctions between these audience-oriented approaches, they all problematize the concept of authorship and question the museum professional's ability to control meanings. Instead, they promote the idea that visitors will construct multiple and differentiated readings perhaps in conflict with those intended by museum professionals. Again, cultural theory and poststructuralism have contributed to this debate. Barthes and Foucault both examined authorship respectively in "Death of the Author" (Barthes 1968) and "What is an Author?" (Foucault 1969), and both rejected the idea that the author controls the meanings of texts, moving instead toward a notion of the text as product and producer of its own social, cultural, and historical discourses. Barthes famously concluded his polemic with: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Lodge 1988: 166). Recent sociological work on how visitors construct their own narratives in response to museum displays has added considerably to our understanding of this

process, as has visitor studies literature which investigates the physical use of museum spaces by visitors (see chapters 3 and 22).

The “death of the author/curator” and the “birth of the reader/visitor” strand of cultural theory has not necessarily been welcomed in all circles. As Ghislaine Lawrence notes, if taken too literally the concept can appear disempowering and threatening for curators who have been traditionally trained to think in terms of educating and “delivering” messages to visitors: “[i]n the face of the death of the author, how relevant is it to speak of the effectiveness of museum communication?” (1991: 25).

Although unsettling to curators, these theoretical concerns do again link very closely to the practical issues with which museums are concerned in terms of improving communication with visitors and overcoming barriers to access. Indeed, it could be argued that critical and cultural theory has helped to foreground the complexity of possible responses to museums because of its emphasis on the multiple and negotiated nature of meanings and texts.

The museum-as-text approach is not without its weaknesses. Sharon Macdonald, for example, has cautioned that in some applications:

The model does not allow for the investigation of whether indeed there is such a neat fit between production, text and consumption. It supposes both too clear-cut a conscious manipulation by those involved in creating exhibitions and too passive and unitary a public; and it ignores the often competing agendas involved in exhibition-making, the “messiness” of the process itself, and interpretative agency of visitors. (1996: 5)

As Macdonald rightly points out, an analysis that is directed purely at the *finished text* does not necessarily exhaust all possible accounts of production. For example, shortcomings within displays may be linked to lack of funding and time, or to practical constraints regarding access, health and safety, and conservation. It is worth remembering that the process of developing a new gallery from conception to completion can be very protracted, during which time ideas, demands, policies, resources, and possibilities will often shift repeatedly so that the end result will be a palimpsest of the whole process. At the same time, discussions with staff can be revealing as museum professionals are themselves immersed in their own professional and subject-based discourses and will be operating with certain assumptions. To recognize this is not to negate the value of textual critiques, but to omit these other considerations is to tell only part of the story of how museum representations come to fruition.

What is needed is a way of combining the textual approach with other elements and methods of cultural analysis in order to capture the multifaceted nature of museums and to be fully “textual” in the broadest sense. Silverstone (1989) makes a similar point when he advocates the textual approach but proposes that it be combined with what he terms an “ethnographic” approach which takes proper account of the social and historical context within which museums are embedded. Bal goes one step further by arguing that museums would do well to foreground their own histories and contexts within the space of their displays. This “metamuseal func-

tion," she argues, would help to situate the knowledge that museums present and to alert their audiences to the reasons for the anachronistic vagaries of museum collections (Bal 1992: 579; and see chapter 32 of this volume).

From a cultural studies perspective, to advocate this kind of holistic approach is not new. In 1997, du Gay et al. proposed the "circuit of culture" as a model of cultural analysis to look at five interconnected stages of "representation," "identity," "production," "regulation," and "consumption." Du Gay et al. applied the circuit to the Sony Walkman as cultural artifact, but the same principle can be extended to museums as Fiona McLean has suggested (1998). The reason why this kind of approach is not as widely practiced as it might be speaks to a wider problem within museum studies: namely, the gap between museums and universities, and practitioners and critics. This is partly a practical issue about conducting research. Academics are rarely able to be immersed within museums and, as such, often find it difficult to access the kind of behind-the-scenes information necessary to reflect on the processes of production and regulation. Conversely, practitioners are often enmeshed in the day-to-day practical issues and may not be inclined to take the longer, historical view preferred by academics. The problem may relate equally to the nature of museums as institutions with their own reputations and public profiles to protect. As with any such organization, there will be political sensitivities and personal investments in museum work which may make it difficult to open the museum up to critical investigation.

Developing a "Theoretical Museology"

Despite these practical restrictions, an approach is needed that can combine the useful analytical approaches of cultural theory but is simultaneously sensitive to the unique differences of museums as objects of cultural enquiry. There are those who are already doing such work. Clifford (1997), Dicks (2000a, b), Cooke and McLean (2002), Macdonald (2002), and Witcomb (2003), for example, have all carried out studies which combine an analysis of textual representation, institutional conditions of production, and a discussion of audiences and consumption. This kind of research, which seeks to locate itself at the *intersection* of theory and practice, as opposed to a mode of critique which stands outside looking inward, is, in my view, best suited to capture the complexity of museums as cultural phenomena. This returns me to the proposition with which this chapter began: namely, that museum studies is exerting, and should continue to exert, a reciprocal influence on cultural theory by adapting and refashioning it into a form appropriate to museological research and practice.

Postscript

In a chapter of this length and scope it has been necessary to select certain aspects of cultural theory while omitting others. (Some are also covered elsewhere in this

volume.) The decision about what to include and exclude has been made according to my primary aim to examine the interrelationship between cultural theory and museum studies and the problematics which their encounter has generated. To this end, I have focused on semiotics, poststructuralism, Foucault, ideology, meaning, textuality, and power because these seem to me to be the main trends in the cultural theory-influenced literature of museum studies to date. The reason why these particular aspects of cultural theory have been selected as opposed to possible others is, I believe, because they best articulate the practical, legal, and ethical debates occurring in Western museums as a result of the multicultural and postcolonial nature of the societies they now find themselves within. If my analysis is correct, then theory and practice are shown to be anything but separate spheres. On the contrary, they are mutually informing and intimately connected. Recognition of the importance of research to practice and vice versa will only enrich both academics' and practitioners' understanding of museums.

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