MUSEUMS, CONTACT ZONES AND THE INTERNET

CHARLIE GERE, BIRKBECK COLLEGE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, UK

ABSTRACT

In a paper recently delivered at the Open University in the UK in 1996, Professor James Clifford proposed the idea of 'museums as contact zones'. The term 'contact zone' comes from the writing of Mary Lousie Pratt, and refers to the space of colonial encounters. Professor Clifford uses this term to rethink the museum's role in relation to other cultures. His intention is to challenge and rework that relationship, which is normally perceived as that of one-sided imperialist appropriation. He proposes instead that the museum can become a space which benefits both it and the cultures whose artifacts it shows. In Clifford's model these cultures can exploit the museum as much as the museum exploits them.

In my paper I suggest that, whether consciously or not on Professor Clifford's part, this idea owes much to the model of communicativity offered by the Internet and the Worldwide Web. The Net and the Web offer powerful new paradigms of communication and media distribution. Instead of the unidirectional model of, for example, television, the Web in particular offers the possibility of interactive engagement with the media. Clifford's model of the museum, like the Web, is a space of exchange, negotiation and communication. I argue that this is far more problematic than it might appear, and raises issues of mediation, access and control. By juxtaposing Professor Clifford's ideas with issues around new media, critical questions can be asked about both the contemporary role of museums in an age of information, and about the use of new media in the representation of material culture.

In his book *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* Victor Hugo has Dom Claude Frollo remark, pointing from a printed book to the Cathedral of Notre Dame, that 'this will destroy that' (Hugo, 1993, p 135). Hugo ascribes an unlikely prescience to his fifteenth-century character in foreseeing the effect that printing would have in subsequent centuries. It was, Hugo was suggesting through Frollo, one of the means by which mediaeval theocracy was eventually replaced by scientific modernity. That such a thing would come to pass would not, I suspect, be obvious to a mediaeval cleric, however gifted with foresight. It is more likely that he would have seen the printed book simply as a more efficient means of disseminating the word of the Church. This is similar, I imagine, to how most people in museums think about the computer. It enables unprecedently efficient archiving and retrieval of data. It is useful for talking to remote colleagues and the public through email, and for publicizing what museums are up to through the World Wide Web. Multimedia kiosk systems are excellent ways of communicating information onsite, and attractive electronic art books and catalogues can now be produced on CD-ROM. None of these would seem to threaten the museum's fundamental purpose or way of doing things. Yet, I would argue, like the printed book in the Middle Ages, the computer is likely to have far reaching epistemological and practical consequences, not least on the museum. As a way of structuring, distributing and thinking about knowledge it offers a powerful alternative to that represented by the museum. One can imagine, perhaps, a curator gesturing from the personal computer on her desk to the museum in which she works and saying, like Frollo, 'this will destroy that', or perhaps, less apocalyptically, 'this will fundamentally alter that'.

In saying this I do not wish to make a simplistic analogy between the Renaissance and now, as times of similar epistemological rupture. Nor do I wish to subscribe to subscribe to a kind of vulgar technological determinism, in which developments in communications technology are the simple cause of social change. The relationship between technology and culture is subtle and complex. It is also hard, if not impossible, to grasp the effects technology has at the time they are taking place. Indeed to try to do so is, arguably, hubristic. Nevertheless my aim in this paper is to try and look at the some of the possible effects, at least in the short term, of one aspect of digital technology, the Internet, on the museum. The Internet is a radical development in information storage and communication. It has already had

immense social and cultural consequences, and seems likely to go on doing so. It is also the locus of a great deal of discussion, rhetoric and hype. It seems to be a phenomenon invested with in people's minds with both hope and fear. I suggest that it is possible to see already ways that museums are being re-thought in the light of the Internet's existence, and how consequently the museum, as an institution, is changing. My interest is not in the practical use of the Internet in museums, but rather how it acts a kind of paradigm for developments in museum practice.

To begin with I wish to look at some aspects of the historical relationship between the museum and technologies of communication and representation. There have been institutions devoted specifically to the collection and display of objects since the Renaissance, some of which were called museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1982, Impey and McGregor, 1977). But the modern museum, as a place where objects and work of art are displayed for the benefit of the public, has existed properly only since the mid to late eighteenth century (Bazin, 1968). The great era of the museum is, arguably, the nineteenth century. Museums were the ideal vehicle for the particular Victorian combination of spectacular display, totaling categorization and public education. The nineteenth century is also the period of the rise of the mass media, and of the development of spectacular technologies and other forms of display. Thus one might place the museum in the same company as newspapers, photography and other technologies of illusion, the great exhibitions and even department stores. It is in the context of such phenomena that the art historian T. J. Clark suggests that the second half of the nineteenth century sees the beginnings of the 'society of the spectacle' (Clark, 1985, pp 9-10). This is the term coined by the Situationist Guy Debord (Debord, 1977), to describe how social relations in capitalist societies are mediated through images, which alienate the subject from real life.

The idea of the 'Society of the Spectacle' is disputed by some. Michel Foucault in particular took issue with it and suggested that modernity is a society not of spectacle but of surveillance, embedded in what he called the panoptic machine (Foucault, 1979, p 217). The last term is derived from the 'panopticon', the ideal prison designed by Jeremy Bentham, in which all the prisoners can, at all times, be seen from a central observation point. Since they are never certain whether they are being watched or not, prisoners regulate their own behavior. Foucault used this as a model of how citizens voluntarily regulate their own behavior, without apparent coercion (Foucault, 1979). Tony Bennett has written a subtle analysis of nineteenth-century museums and exhibitions, or what he calls the exhibitionary complex, in which he steers a path between spectacular and panoptic analyses of its operation. He defines the exhibitionary complex as 'a set of cultural technologies concerned to organize a voluntarily self-regulating citizenry' (Bennett, 1995). Like Foucault's panopticon it was a response to 'the problem of order, but one which worked differently in seeking to transform the problem into one of culture' (Bennett, 1995, p 63). It worked:

> "... through the provision of object lessons in power—the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display ...to allow the people, and en masse rather than individually, to know rather be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge. Yet, ideally, they sought also to allow the people to know and thence to regulate themselves; to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the subjects and objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as (ideally) known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and, hence, self-regulation." (Bennett, 1995, p 64).

What is noticeable in this analysis is that the visitor to the museum is an observer, whose role is to look at the display of power, as well as observing themselves as power might observe them. According to Jonathan Crary the nineteenth century produced a particular kind of observer, one appropriate to the emerging mass culture (Crary, 1992, pp 6-7). Crary sees this observer as one aspect of the emerging subject of the nineteenth century described by Foucault. This was the free-floating subject of the industrial revolution, torn away from the agrarian communities and family arrangements of pre-industrial society, and who needed to be regulated and controlled (Crary, 1992, p 15). Crary is interested in

particular in the many technologies of vision, such as photography and stereoscopy, that were developed in the early nineteenth century, which 'codified and normalized the observer within rigidly defined systems of visual consumption' (Crary, 1992, p 18).

Through Bennett's analysis it is possible to see the museum also as a technology of vision, operating in a similar manner as such technologies. It is a place of visual consumption that presumes and addresses a particular kind of observer. It is therefore precisely a medium, a system of display through which messages are communicated, and which mediates those messages[1]. The historian of early cinema Mark B. Sandberg has studied the relation between folk museums in Scandinavia in the end of the last century and cinema spectatorship (Sandberg, in Charney and Schwartz, 1995). He points out how the way that such museums were experienced was through 'composite viewing habits from a variety of late-nineteenth-century attractions, habits usually identified with modernity (a taste for distraction, mobile subjectivity, panoptic perspectives, and voyeuristic viewing)' (Sandberg, in Charney and Schwartz, 1995, p 321). He suggests that the late nineteenth century, through the development of optical and recording technologies, the circulation of mass-produced images, and new institutionalized forms of viewing created the conditions for a 'roving patronage of the visual arts', which encompassed the museum as well as the early cinema (Sandberg, in Charney and Schwartz, 1995, p 322).

As in the cinema the museum message goes only one way. It goes out from the museum to the people, but they cannot communicate back. Thus, if understood in terms of media, the museum is a one-to-many, unidirectional medium. In this it is similar to the twentieth century mass media technologies, film, the radio, and television which were developed out of nineteenth century technological advances, and, more to the point, manifest nineteenth century ideologies of the spectator.

This uneven reciprocity of communication in the media has been a cause of concern for commentators, particularly from the left, from the Frankfurt School onwards. Adorno and Horkheimer wrote of a monolithic entity they called the 'culture industry', in which radio, for example, turns 'all partici-

pants into listeners and authoritatively subjects them to broadcast programs which are all exactly the same. No machinery of rejoinder has been devised, and private broadcasters are denied any freedom.' (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, p 122)[2].

Pessimistic analyses such as those of Adorno and Horkheimer have been criticized for their reductive simplification of a set of complicated phenomena. There are, arguably, different kinds of relations within the apparently monolithic media industries, and possibilities for reciprocation. Their analyses also depended on a characterization of the receiving subject as entirely passive. They failed to engage with the ways that messages may be received and used in ways other than those intended by their senders. Yet they are right in seeing most media in terms of being concerned only with distribution, rather than communication, the messages going only one way, from a single transmitter, to many receivers. Perhaps more controversially they suggest that the technologies themselves are deliberately developed to exclude, as far as possible, the possibilities of reciprocal communication. Following them Hans Magnus Enzensberger suggests that this is merely a technological problem:

> "Electronic techniques recognize no contradiction in principle between transmitter and receiver. Every transistor radio is, by the nature of its construction, at the same time a potential transmitter; it can interact with other receivers by circuit reversal... The development from a mere distribution medium to a communication medium is technically not a problem. It is consciously prevented for understandable political reasons." (Enzensberger in Hanhardt, 1986, p 98).

Enzensburger suggested that it is merely a matter of political will to enable reciprocal communication in mass media. He also saw it as a duty of the radical left to effect such reciprocity. (Enzensberger in Hanhardt, 1986, p 98-99).[3]

In Enzensberger's analysis there is one medium which has, from the beginning, maintained the capacity for two-way communication, the telephone. But the telephone differed from other media by being a one-to-one medium, or at best one-to-a-few.

Though developments such as party lines, faxes and so on may have increased its potential for sending a message to more than one receiver, it was not a useful way of disseminating messages widely. Thus it might be argued that its capacity for far-reaching reciprocal communication was tolerable to the powers that be because of its ineffectiveness as a mass medium. Even so Enzensburger, among others, saw that telephone networks represented a model of media that contained, immanently, the potential for free and liberatory forms of mass communication.

Enzensburger was writing when the Internet barely existed. Nevertheless his essay anticipates, such a network, without being able fully to imagine what it might be like, and how it might work. While he was imagining the possibilities of among other things, two way radio networks and 'electro-libraries', the American Defense Department had already set up a network of computers in government departments, universities and businesses, linked in such a way that if any part was disabled by a nuclear strike, the rest could continue to communicate. This network, known as ARPAnet was, ironically given its origin in the military-industrial complex, the beginnings of the Internet, the communications system which has come closest to realizing Enzensburger's and other's ideas.

To begin with the Internet was limited mainly to enabling messages, email, to be sent from one user to another. In this it was little more than a textual variation of the telephone. But soon interested parties began to develop ways of using the technology to broadcast messages through bulletin boards. In the late eighties scientists at the European nuclear research laboratory, CERN, were looking for a way to disseminate their findings and papers to colleagues more quickly than conventional paper methods. They developed a way of publishing material of various sorts on the Internet. Later developments enabled the inclusion of pictures, sound and video as well as text. Anyone with the right equipment and software could view this material. With a little more equipment people could publish their own material. Though at first limited to a few users this subsystem has recently achieved wide dissemination and popularity, and has became known as the Web

The Internet seems to be precisely the emancipatory reciprocal mass medium dreamt of by Hans Magnus Enzensburger. As well as the practical opportunities made possible by its existence it also offers a powerful model of communication and knowledge dissemination. One place, I suggest, it has started to resonate is in discussions of the museum. As a network of decentralized communication it counters the centralized and hierarchical model of knowledge dissemination the museum represents. But it also presents an opportunity for the museum to be rethought in ways that may be more appropriate to this postmodern, post-colonial age.

The anthropologist James Clifford has looked at some of the ways museums are communicating with people from other cultures. He has coopted the term 'contact zone', from the work of Mary Louise Pratt, to denote 'the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations.' Clifford uses this term to rethink how we understand museums. The traditional model of the museum sees it as occupying the center of a process of collecting, with the places from which objects are collected occupying the periphery. Such a model allows no space for any communication or reciprocity between the collectors and those whose objects are collected. The latter are presumed to be passive subjects of imperialist appropriation, engaged in a power relationship of fundamental inequality.[4]

Without in any way denying the asymmetry of the power relationship between collectors and collected Professor Clifford uses the idea of the contact zone to suggest that something more subtle is taking place. Using a number of anecdotal examples from anthropological encounters in museums and elsewhere, he shows how a degree of 'mutual exploitation' takes place in such situations. Whether this is between Tlingit elders and curators of the Rasmussen Collection in Portland, or between sculptors from New Guinea making a sculpture garden at Stanford and visitors from the University, both parties gain something from the encounter. Nor is the simplistic demarcation between encounterer and encountered possible to sustain. Both parties encounter each other.

Clifford extends his analysis to include museums other than the ethnographic and anthropological Despite his careful caveats about the unequal power relations inherent in those encounters it is hard not to be seduced by Professor Clifford's message. The

museum, that problematic institution of imperialism, is not quite the source of unease we thought it was. It need not be thought of just as a storehouse of colonial plunder, nor a one-way medium, but as a place of interactive communication. Indeed in order to delineate his ideas Professor Clifford uses words and terms connected more with communication, than with the collecting of objects. He talks of 'reciprocal communication with... communities', of 'interactive process' and of 'interaction and performative improvisation'. He also invokes powerful metaphors of networks. Indeed the idea of the contact zone itself is suggestive of a de-centered space of networks, as opposed to the center/periphery model more traditionally associated with museums.

Clifford's emphasis is on connections between the collectors and collected. Much work is also now being done on looking at the relation between the museum and the visitor. The 'new museology' for example is concerned with promoting the 'active museum'—museums that are concerned with involving people in all aspects of their work. Mike Wallace talks about:

> "efforts to demystify and democratize museums by sharing authority with communities, involving them in planning, collecting and evaluating, and helping non-professionals to mount displays..." (Wallace in Hooper Greenhill,1995, pp 107-123)

The cultural anthropologist Constance Perin has examined the modes of communication between museum professionals and the public. She talks of the need to close the 'communicative circle' in these relationships. She suggests that

"Audiences "hear" the messages exhibitions convey, but what audiences say during their own turns can only be assumed. Talking only to and among themselves find that their turns in the museums communicative circle rarely, if ever come up." (Perin in Karp, Ivan and Kreamer, Christine Muller and Lavine, Steven D, 1992, pp 182-220)

A number of museums and other exhibitionary complexes are trying to put these ideas into practice. Since the nineteen sixties, first in France, and then elsewhere in Europe and in North and South America, numbers of 'ecomuseums', small local museums, intended to act as a focus for community history and self-understanding. Examples include Gallery 33 in Birmingham, which aims to show Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery's ethnographic collection in a fashion appropriate to the city's multicultural audience. One of its main intentions is to 'develop a dialogue among the visitors' (Jones in Karp, Ivan and Kreamer, Christine Muller and Lavene, Steven D, 1992, p 229). This idea is echoed by those responsible for New York's Chinatown History Museum, which is being developed as a 'dialogue-driven exhibition and museum', or 'dialogic museum' (Wei Tchen in Karp, Ivan and Kreamer, Christine Muller and Lavene, Steven D, 1992, pp 285-386). This new sort of museum is described as 'a cultural free space for open discussion'. In Adelaide, Australia the Migration Museum has a community access gallery which is available to community organizations living in the area. A large number of these organisations have taken advantage of this facility to stage exhibitions, reflecting their particular experiences of migration.

Here also the term contact zone seems appropriate. Rather than denoting the contact between collectors and collected, in this context it can denote the contact between people, culture and communities. No longer at the center, broadcasting knowledge outwards, the museum can be seen as a node in a network of interactive relations, where culture, communities and people can meet and exchange ideas.

The idea of the dialogic museum, or the museum as a contact zone resonate with developments in communications technology. George F. MacDonald of the Canadian Museum of Civilization suggests that:

> "... the shift in values, attitudes and perceptions that accompany the technological transition from industrial to information society can make it possible for museums to achieve their full potential as places for learning in and about a world in which the globetrotting mass media, international tourism, migration, and instant satellite links between cultures are sculpting a new global awareness and helping give shape to what Marshall MacLuhan characterized as the global village." (MacDonald in Karp, Ivan and Kreamer,

Christine Muller and Lavine, Steven D, 1992, p 161)

What these developments suggest is the extent to which the concept of the museum is fluid. From the princely collections of the Renaissance to the pedagogical public museum of the nineteenth century how the museum is understood has changed along with the culture in which it is embedded. In each case it has a specific role within culture, often related to the distribution of power. In a world of transnational media and global communications networks new models of the museum are necessary, that are appropriate for an age of networks, of decentered and diffused distribution of knowledge, and of access and reciprocal communication. Dialogic museums, ecomuseums, contact zones would seem to be, I suggest, attempts to rethink the museum in the light of global electronic communication.

The idea of the museum as a place of contact and reciprocal communication is clearly attractive, especially to those for whom the 'museum experience is no longer a transparent and untroubled phenomenon' (Karp and Lavine, 1991, p 45). Much recent work both in museums themselves, and in writings about museums, which has been concerned with understanding and addressing their relation to power and knowledge. The traditional museum is part of a hierarchical, centered structure in which knowledge is disseminated outwards to the passive receiving subject. The dialogic museum or contact zone might present a model of the museum which is, at the very least, more sensitive and reflexive about issues of power relations, and, at best, offers the possibility of an equal, symmetrical relationship between the museum and its audience. Rather than being subject to the imposition of knowledge from above, communities are, at least in theory, enabled to generate and structure knowledge themselves.

Similar ideas coalesce around the Internet. According to Wired Magazine's 'Manifesto for the Digital Society' what they describe as a digital revolution is 'sweeping the world', offering 'the priceless intangibles of friendship, community and understanding', as well as 'a new democracy dominated neither by the vested interests of political parties nor the mob's baying howl' which can 'narrow the gap that separates capital from labor' and 'deepen the bonds between the people and the planet.' (Wired UK, 2.10, October 1996). With such rhetoric the

Internet makes a seductive model for other institutions, such as the museum. Yet asymmetrical power relations are inherent in this model as in the traditional museum, albeit more insidiously. It is instructive to look at the Internet itself to understand what its use as a model might really mean for the museum.

One of the problems lies with the supposed universality of the Internet. As Jonathan Crary puts it:

> "Many evocations of an emerging "online" world assume as a matter of course, or else never question, that a more or less uniform and available information and communication culture is now being installed globally." (Artforum, February, 1994, p 58)

With networks it is necessary to be connected to have access. This seemingly banal fact is actually of crucial political importance. The potential benefits of the coming 'wired world' are limited to those either can afford, or have access, to the expensive and sophisticated equipment. In a world in which only twenty percent of the population even have a phone this is clearly a limited number of people.

Furthermore the Internet, however free or even anarchistic it might appear, is controlled in a number of ways. It is not evidently regulated. There is little censorship; the right to broadcast on the Net is free, rather than being granted by the Government. Yet there are other more insidious controls. Access to the Net is mediated through a number of conduits, the software for browsing or communicating, which mediate the messages, the service providers, Compuserve or America On-Line, the telephone lines along which messages are passed. All these determine the shape or form of what can be said on the Internet. Instead of explicit control by governments use of the Internet is controlled implicitly by its own structure.

Perhaps more insidiously whatever information is transmitted via the Internet has at first to be rendered into computer code. What may be in the first instance a photograph, a sound recording, a piece of video or film, or whatever are all subject to an extreme form of homogenization and turned into a series of ones and zeroes that comprise the binary

language of computers. However much the Net may seem to be able to communicate through a rich mixture of different media, its message is, in fact, a homogenous stream of data bits.

It is not perhaps surprising that the exponential growth of the Internet coincides with a period when the operations of capitalism are driven by market-centered philosophies. The Internet is itself the paradigm of market-oriented capitalism. It is effectively deregulated from any governmental controls and relies on the 'invisible hand of the market' to determine how it works and what succeeds. It offers an illusion of choice and engagement that is strictly limited by its own structure. This choice is open only to those rich enough or connected enough to have access. Even the digitization of material necessary for it to be put on the Net resembles the homogenization of commodities as objects of exchange value. Rather than offering radical possibilities for what the museum might be, the Internet paradigm might instead simply be a way in which market forces control museums in place of the State. Museums have themselves already been affected by monetarist notions of market forces. Those going to museums are now thought of as 'consumers' or 'clients', rather than simply as visitors. In Britain at least a long and important tradition of free museum access has given way to a situation in which increasing numbers of museums charge entry fees.

I have suggested it is possible to make an analogy between developments in museums and in global digital communication. The latter acts as a paradigm for the former. If this is so then it is worth examining all aspects of this paradigm, not just those celebrated by current hyperbolic rhetoric. As a model for developments in the museum the Internet brings with it issues in relation to power as complex as those found in the traditional model of the museum. For all the talk of global access and networks of communicativity access to the Internet remains limited. Similarly if one characterizes the museum as a medium of communication then it is still one to which access is limited, culturally if not literally. The museum remains in the hands of and largely the preserve of the, for want of a better phrase, bourgeois intelligentsia. This is not to suggest that the Internet paradigm is not valid as a progressive model for the museum, but rather to point out the dangers in using such a paradigm.

Conclusion

This paper is not intended to be a kind of luddite polemic. The possibilities of new technology, however compromised and overhyped, are immense and, mostly, positive, not least for the museum. But it is intended to be a warning. The use of technology, whether practical or conceptual, involves a kind of Faustian bargain. In the beginning of this paper I quoted a character from Victor Hugo's 'Hunchback of Notre Dame' describing the effect of the printed book on the Church. The medieval Church embraced printing without any idea of the complex and far reaching consequences that such technology would have. Similarly perhaps the Museum exploits digital technology without being able to foresee the effects it might have. I cannot claim Dom Frollo's foresight, but I am certain that such technology has profound implications for the museum as an institution. I argue that these implications are already showing themselves, and that they are not limited to the practical. In particular the model presented by global digital communication is an attractive one for a post-colonial age, and a new museology concerned with mitigating the effects of power in museums. I am also concerned to show that such a model is less straightforward than it might appear. Beneath the utopian rhetoric inspired by the Internet is a more complex set of phenomena. It is, I suggest, necessary that we become and remain aware of this complexity as we embrace such new technology.

Notes

[1] The notion that museums and exhibitions can be understood as media is currently in vogue. The third international conference on Museum Studies at Leicester University in 1993 was devoted entirely to this idea. Critics such as Bruce Ferguson and Mieke Bal have examined the rhetorics of museum and exhibition display as forms of communication.

[2] Walter Benjamin earlier had been more optimistic. In his famous essay on the 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', he saw film as potentially emancipatory because of its reproducibility, portability and use of montage (Benjamin, 1977, pp 219 - 253). His optimism was criticized by Adorno, justifiably in the light of the near-monopolistic success of the Hollywood dream machine.

[3]   Views such as these were later criticized by Jean Baudrillard, who suggested that the repressiveness of a medium was an innate part of its structure. In this he invoked the work of Marshall McLuhan whose most famous dictum was 'the medium is the message'. Baudrillard took MacLuhan's notion and stripped of its euphoric positivism (Baudrillard in Hanhardt, 1986, p 98 - 99, pp 124 - 143). MacLuhan represents a more conservative, determinist approach to the media. For him social transformations are determined by technological developments. MacLuhan's ideas still have currency among those who perceive digital technology as a transformative phenomenon.

[4]   All references to Professor Clifford's paper are taken from my notes taken at a lecture given at the Open University in 1996 by Professor Clifford.

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