

Emotional Strategies in Museum Exhibitions

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Editorial

Emotional strategies within museums are a nascent field of study. That this is the case is, in part, due to the traditional conception of the museum as primarily an educational and objective, rather than emotional, place. Tony Bennett captured this categorisation of the museum in his description of the Victorian-era institutions that, in establishing themselves according to their 'ability to organize and coordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order' set the formula for the 'modern museum' (Bennett 1995, p.67). However, since the influence of the New Museology of the 1980s both practitioners and scholars have begun to pay greater attention to the emotional aspects of museums. Gaynor Kavanagh's formulation of the museum as 'dream space' (2000, p.3) captured this new understanding of the institution's nature and function. In understanding the character and value of museums, she argued, 'we have to accept more fully the imagination, emotions, senses and memories as vital components of the experience' (Ibid, p.3). This drive for the recognition of the emotional elements of museums and the visitor experience in them was shared by contributors to the edited volume *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions*, whose essays captured, according to the book's introduction, 'a shared ambition for museums to somehow touch the spiritual and emotional side of audiences and a recognition of the complex relations between narratives, built forms and identity, as central to this endeavour' (Hourston Hanks, Hale and MacLeod, 2012, location 763).

An area where the subject of emotions is particularly pertinent, and which the majority of the papers here address, is museum representations of recent conflict and human suffering. The emotional strategies used in such representations have been developing considerably over the last decade. Paul Williams identified a genre of institution which placed visitor emotion at the heart of their practice and he termed these 'memorial museums' (2007). Such museums, he argued, were unlike more traditional war and military museums in their willingness to employ explicitly emotional strategies and they had been growing in numbers over the past quarter of a century (Williams, 2007).

This development emerged from the growing academic and public interest in memory from the late 1980s onwards and the roughly simultaneous emergence of trauma studies, prompted by the increasing prominence of the Holocaust as a subject of discussion (see particularly, Arnold de-Simone 2013). As a result, museum representations of Nazi atrocities and the strategies used to represent them, figure prominently in the literature on this theme, as they do within the present volume.

However, as emotional strategies have emerged as an area of interest for practitioners and scholars alike so too have they become a subject for debate. The techniques for which 'memorial museums' have been internationally acclaimed have also been met with much criticism. Those in support of the emotional strategies of such museums include Alison Landsberg, whose work on what she termed 'prosthetic memory' included a sympathetic analysis of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington DC (2004). The display methods employed by the museum, many of which aim to prompt an emotional reaction from the visitor, are valuable, she argued, as they serve to create 'an experiential site' in which, at 'this moment of contact, an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history'. As a result, 'the person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which

he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person's subjectivity and politics' (Ibid, p.2). However, for those who object to such methods their attempts to encourage an empathic reaction from the visitor are a cause for concern. Timothy Luke's analysis of both the USHMM and the Tolerancenter in Los Angeles draws a comparison between them and theme parks (2002). Within such museums, he argues, what 'visitors have known only as a photographic/televsual/cinematic product is repackaged in the museum's people-handling system, narrative voice, and informational representations as an experiential theme ride, carrying the visitor through a simulation of the Holocaust death machine as if he or she were amidst the masses of its victims' (Ibid, p.54). The danger, Luke warns, is that such emotional 'payoffs can easily seal off the moral outrage needed to rededicate mass publics to realizing the ultimate lesson of the Holocaust: "Never Again"' (Ibid, p.55). The increasing ubiquity of strikingly similar emotional strategies has also drawn some criticism. Art historian Arnold Bartetzky, for example, has lamented 'the fashionable pathos of dismay as found in contemporary memorial museums à la Daniel Libeskind' (2013, p.30).

The papers included in this issue shed light on the interrelation and interaction of education, spatial experience, cognitive input and the emotional reactions of museum visitors. They mostly deal with the time of the Second World War, but also look beyond, particularly Chloe Paver in her paper on exhibiting post-war East German history. They cover both exhibitions set within authentic sites and those situated in more distanced museum settings. Geographically, they address exhibitions in Germany and Russia. The concentration on these two countries is due to their multi-faceted intertwined war and post-war history. The various specializations of the contributors (history, literary studies, museum studies, cultural studies, exhibition practice) provide a genuinely interdisciplinary approach.

The papers contribute to the growing body of literature by addressing some of the key questions that emerge from it for academics and museum practitioners. The most fundamental of these is whether museums should attempt to represent and evoke emotions and, if so, how they can use narrative and object display to do so. Bound up in this question is uncertainty over how visitor emotions can be related to critical thinking within museums and whether they need to be. The ethics of emotional strategies within museums are also considered by a number of the papers presented here. Central to this issue is the question of what is the appropriate relationship between individual visitors and those who experienced the histories depicted; a subject of particular concern for those working in and studying museums of twentieth-century conflict. Should museums attempt to represent the emotions of those who lived through the histories they represent? Should empathic identification with victims and with historic suffering be promoted? Nostalgia and museum treatment of it is also a contested area in the field of emotional museum strategies. Several papers consider whether museums can or should work with or challenge nostalgic responses to their displays. Uniting all these subjects is the overarching question of whether museums can use emotional strategies whilst remaining accountable, or whether their use of such strategies is inevitably made suspect by an association with ideology and propaganda, even if well-intentioned or unintentional. Drawing on both academic study and practical experience, the contributors to this edition critically assess these questions as they have been manifested in a diverse range of museums, exhibitions and displays.

The papers are connected by the relevance they concede to certain key topics. These are the conceptions of affect, empathy, experience and identification. Individual and collective acts of identification and commemoration are set in relation to the disciplines of History, Memory Studies and Psychology. Accountability, victimisation and suffering play an important role and are seen against the background of ideology, mentality, public history and, in extreme cases, propaganda.

By bringing together a number of different disciplines, a range of case studies and both museum scholars and practitioners the papers in this volume represent an important contribution to an area of study that is becoming increasingly significant. As museum attempts to enact emotional strategies proliferate and as those working in and on museums remain divided over the benefits, dangers and ethics of such strategies, there is a need for analysis of how museums can work with emotions and what the consequences of doing so may be, for both the visitor and the institution. The contributors here take different approaches to the subject.

In her paper "Fascism and its Afterlife in Architecture: Towards a Reevaluation of

Affect", Elke Heckner examines the spectrum of emotional strategies that exhibition narratives deploy at military history museums (such as the Militärhistorisches Museum in Dresden) or that sites of WWII military history wield (such as the Bunker Valentin). The paper shows that the musealization of WWII history at the Militärhistorisches Museum (MHM) has the effect of 'unlearning' or undoing the affect of shame which for so long has been associated with Nazi perpetrator history. In drawing attention to the effects of museum architecture, Elke Heckner argues that the MHM Dresden does not address the implementations of Libeskind's design in the exhibition concept and the museum's activities. On the other hand, the paper shows how the current exhibition design of the Bunker as a "Gedenkort" (site of memory) and a "Denkort" (site of thinking) sheds a critical perspective on Nazi Germany's megalomaniac attempt to turn the war around by attempting to launch a secret submarine weapon. But the exhibition design leaves visitors alone with their feelings of awe caused by the spatial or dwarfing effects of the Bunker's dimensions.

The topic of prisoners of war links the paper to the account of an exhibition's creation by Petra Redert and Kerstin True-Biletski. The authors took part in the development and organization of the temporary exhibition "*Russenlager" and forced labour. Soviet prisoners of war in Bremen* that was shown in Bremen in 2014 as local contribution to the touring exhibition "*Russenlager" and forced labour. Pictures and memories of Soviet prisoners of war*. Their paper shows the different stages of how the issue of Soviet prisoners of war was addressed in Germany. Redert and True-Biletski reflect on their personal motivation to participate in creating the exhibition, which was prompted by the spatial closeness of their homes to former POW camps. They discuss the conception of home in the concept of the conflicting feelings of shock and endearment and show how they incorporated the intention to reach out emotionally to visitors by using a biographical approach, comprising both the actual POWs and their descendants.

Chloe Paver's article "Exhibiting Negative Feelings: Writing a History of Emotions in German History Museums" complements recent work that investigates how museums about National Socialism and the Holocaust engage the visitor's emotions, particularly through an encouragement to empathize with individuals. It pursues a new question: can the emerging fields of history of emotions and history of mentalities make the transition from the written investigations of academic history to the material displays of public history? Chloe Paver answers with a tentative 'Yes'. Understanding emotions as socio-linguistic constructs, she draws special attention to museums and exhibitions on post-war and especially late and post-socialist East-German history. She argues that the House of History and the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum in Leipzig do admit the importance of material culture for GDR life, but struggle with addressing negative emotions easterners experienced during and after the collapse of the GDR. The Erinnerungsstätte Notaufnahmelager Marienfelde, on the other hand, allows room for emotions like fear and resentment mostly in the accompanying catalogues.

Finally, Yvonne Pörzgen discusses the emotions that are evoked by referring to the idea of heroism in its different forms. Her paper "Siege Memory – Besieged Memory? Heroism and Suffering in St Petersburg Museums dedicated to the Siege of Leningrad" shows that today, the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany is the strongest connection of Soviet and modern Russian patriotism and thus serves to legitimize a national Russian concept of heroism by borrowing from a state that has ceased to exist. The paper argues that the memory of the Siege of Leningrad (1941-1944) as treated in museums in St Petersburg today is largely a continuation of the Soviet narrative as perpetuated by Russian nationalist propaganda. An alternative narrative can be found in published Siege diaries and memoirs that display a whole range of mostly negative emotions that are suppressed in public commemoration.

The diversity of approaches and conclusions reflects the complexity of a subject whose implications could be far-reaching for both the museum sector and the way in which recent conflict and suffering are represented within the public sphere. It is hoped that this volume will act as a prompt for further considerations of this subject; both in terms of case studies on the emotional strategies being used within museums and in the form of a more developed theorisation of the nature of the relationship between museums, emotions and historic suffering and of the responsibilities of those creating institutions, exhibitions and displays when negotiating the volatile intersection between them.

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