

## Displaying lives: the narrative of objects in biographical exhibitions

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### Abstract

Biographical exhibitions are a museum practice that asks for critical consideration. Grounding the argument in critical theory, social studies and museum theory, the article explores the narrative function of objects in biographical exhibitions by addressing the social significance of objects in relation to biography and their relevance when presented into an exhibition display. Central is the concept of objects as 'biographical relics' that are culturally fetishized in biographical narratives. This raises questions about biographical reliability and the cultural role that such objects play in exhibition narratives as bearers of reality and as metonymical icons of the biographical subject. The article considers examples of biographical exhibitions of diverse figures such as Gregor Mendel, Madame de Pompadour and Roland Barthes, and the role that personal items, but also portraits and photographs, play in them.

**Key words:** Biography; biographical exhibitions; curating; biographical objects; narrative

The immobility of the antiques has something of self-conscious about it. No matter how fine it is, an antique is always eccentric; no matter how authentic it is, there is always something false about it. And indeed it is false in so far as it puts itself forward as authentic within a system whose basic principle is by no means authenticity, but, rather, the calculation of relationships and the abstractness of signs. (Baudrillard 1996: 74)

### Introduction

Biography is a literary genre that is not immediately associated with exhibitions: yet, biography and exhibitions bear similarities as cultural constructs. Museum practice includes intermediate forms which overlap the two genres and are recognizable in displays commemorating illustrious figures, house museums, artists' monographic exhibitions and biographical exhibitions. Just as historical displays may function as 'visions of the past' (Bann 1990), so too the reconstruction of the living space of famous figures creates a vision of the person who inhabited that space. In such displays, objects are invested, not unlike religious relics, with extra cultural beliefs and values rendering them vestiges of illustrious person and past ways of life (Pearce 1992: 201). Artists' monographic exhibitions also bear similarities with life writing in the chronologically organic arrangement of the material and in the biographical identification of the artist and his/her work. These exhibitions may succumb, as with monographs, to 'the infatuations with mystified creativity as the artist's persona participate in the production of meanings about the artist and about art' (Codell 2003: 3). Owing something to both historical reconstructions and monographic shows, biographical exhibitions attempt to create a vision of their biographical subjects through the presentation of images, personal items, diaries and other kind of material documentation. Literary theory, social studies, historiography, and museum studies offer useful tools to analyze biographical exhibitions and their use of objects to construct biographical narratives. This is relevant to a broader understanding of objects, their links to identity and their cultural significance in museum displays.

This article focuses on biographical exhibitions and on the narrative function ascribed to objects, examining whether they act as factual evidence and how they acquire a narrative function. I first consider the biographical relevance of objects and their insertion in narrative structures, such as collections. I then question the evidential force of personal items and their significance in exhibition narratives, suggesting that it is necessary to consider the fetishization of such objects as cultural icons. In developing the argument I have drawn on my own curatorial experience as a co-curator of an exhibition on Gregor Mendel, namely *The Genius of Genetics: A Celebration of Gregor Mendel through Art and Science* (Mendel Museum, Brno, Czech Republic 2002-03). In particular, the sparse material traceable to Mendel enabled me to raise questions about the nature of biographical evidence and interpretation. The article also examines the biographical authenticity of portraits in relation to other forms of record and their use in biographical exhibitions, by considering two additional exhibitions for which images and objects were paramount in the creation of their subjects or persona. One, which was dedicated to Madame de Pompadour, was mounted at London's National Gallery from October 2003 to January 2004. The other, on the subject of Jean Cocteau, ran from September 2003 to January 2004. Both exhibitions raise questions about the nature of biographical records and their cultural perception. The final section of the article focuses on the narrative structures of biographical exhibitions and draws on the example of a show dedicated to Roland Barthes (R/B Roland Barthes, November 2002-March 2003, Centre Pompidou, Paris). Taken together these shows both illustrate and challenge the biographical endeavour in exhibitions. They also illustrate the key issues which confront curators and provide a means of grounding the discussion in showcases of biographical practice.

### Life narrative and biographical objects

Biography and exhibitions had parallel developments in nineteenth-century Europe and, as specific cultural strategies, contributed to the definition of social and national identities (Pearce 1995: 111-31, Duncan 2004). A common ideology of commemoration informed the ways in which biography – whether through written texts or images – aimed to celebrate its most illustrious citizens. In Britain, the founding in 1859 of the National Portrait Gallery in London, which collected portraits of the most notable British men and women throughout history was followed in 1885 by the publication of the first volume of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The authors of these endeavours considered portraits and life stories as means of shaping the moral and social conscience of the nation by grounding it in historical examples of its most distinguished citizens. Similarly, the notion of the pantheon as a place of burial and celebration (i.e. as conceived in Rome and Paris) was broadened to forge a metaphorical space of national identification. This vision is apparent in the creation in 1842 of the Walhalla, the Temple of the Gods, commissioned by King Ludwig of Bavaria to celebrate the German genius through the busts of the most outstanding national figures. The mutuality of written and visual accounts in substantiating the reputations of illustrious figures is still evident and, as Alison Booth suggests,

Victorian prosographies, like those of today, may take varied forms, ranging from printed books to monuments, plaques, pageants and calendars, as means of registering the interrelated names, narratives and visual representations of personae (Booth 2006: 55).

This article explores such interrelations by examining the associations that are culturally established between identity and objects in the creation of biographical narratives through exhibition displays. In this section, I consider the cultural and biographical significance of objects. Relevant to the discussion is the shift of personal items to cultural icons when inscribed within a biographical narrative.

Objects pervade our life and are imbued with biographical significance to the extent of becoming inseparable from us, since 'the capacity of a person to act as a social subject is defined through his or her relation to the material world, and particularly to certain objects that represent him or her' (Hoskins 1998: 193). The sociologist, Violette Morin specifically talks about biographical objects as those objects that are invested with the relationship that exists between the subject and the object, bearing traces of use and/or belonging. According to Morin,

biographical objects mark the life of a person and help to create a tangible landscape that provides the self with a cultural configuration anchoring its fluid and fragmentary nature within a concrete framework of experience (Hoskins 1998: 7-9).<sup>1</sup> Biographical objects, like souvenirs and memorabilia, are both tangible parts of our past as well as of our present because of the feelings and images with which they are invested or that they are able to evoke. They act as proof of the narratives through which we fashion the self and our past:

Origin stories are told of a past which is not repeatable but is reportable, in narratives which spiral backwards and inwards into the interior of a life. Gradually, the souvenir itself becomes the point of the story, and where once it was a product of life, now life is used to explain it (Pearce 1995: 244).

The assimilation of the self with a landscape of objects is crucial when we are confronted with biographical narratives, since it allows a subjectification of personal objects and the generation of narratives from and around them, rendering the objects themselves the silent signs and bearers of these narratives.

In making his case for a cultural biography of objects, Igor Kopytoff suggests that we can ask of objects questions similar to those that underpin the biography of a person, looking for significant moments in a life-span, for its singularity and for its broader social or political impact. The biographical narratives sustained by objects are the story of the objects themselves and that of the relationships with people when their stories interweave (Kopytoff 1986). Kopytoff challenges straightforward distinctions between subject and object, and focuses on the process of commoditization as the cultural shaping of biography. Samuel Alberti extends this argument to include a notion of a biography of museum objects (both in terms of the provenance of objects and their modes of collection, and of their inclusion and live within a museum collection). The status, value and significance of objects change over time in relation to other objects and the interaction with collectors, curators, and the audience. To consider objects biographically is to reveal something not only about the objects themselves but also about those who acted upon them. When included in a collection, objects signify in two ways: they connote the world from which they have come and they are inscribed within taxonomies of similar objects. That is, we can say that the emblematic status of museum object is only one of its attributed meanings (Alberti 2005). Authenticity and representational value are also important qualities that concur to culturally shape objects biographically. In examining the narrative of collecting, Mieke Bal asks, whether objects can tell stories, and act as subjectivized elements in a narrative. Bal's analysis points to the reading of objects as representational within a system of signs (i.e. collections) (Bal 2004: 97). For other similar systems, such as museum displays and exhibitions, this subjectification is not only semiotic, but also socio-cultural and can be traced in the cultural role ascribed to objects.

Like factual events, objects are culturally invested with a halo of authenticity. Yet, the 'truth' they stand for is fluid and culturally determined. According to Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago,

There is today a general consensus that the status of the objects, both natural and artifactual, changed dramatically during the course of the Scientific Revolution. Rather than representing a preexisting intelligible order through visual signs syntagmatically and hierarchically linked in multiple associations, the embodied 'truth' of the artifact came to serve as *primary evidence* for the writing of natural and cultural history (Preziosi and Farago 2004:107).

The recognition of an object as the embodiment of an intrinsic truth that substantiates the writing of natural and cultural history suggests the cultural significance of objects as tangible links between the past and the present, between reality and its articulation as narrative systems, whether social, economic, or cultural-historical. Extending the notions of authenticity identified for artworks - nominal authenticity as the correct identification of the origins, authorship and provenance of an object, and expressive authenticity as the 'value possessed by works of art' or an object - we can argue that the evidential force of an artefact constitutes part of its expressive authenticity, that renders it culturally, historically and, for our purposes, biographically

'true' (Dutton 2003: 259). *Medicine Man* (Wellcome Trust/British Museum 2003) an exhibition organized by the Wellcome Trust to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Sir Henry Wellcome's birth, helps us to explore the convergence of the biography and authentication of objects and to consider how this is realized for biographical objects.

The exhibition celebrated its subject through the display of some of the most significant objects in Wellcome's museum for the history of mankind. It conveyed well the collection's richness, heterogeneity and its founder's underlying ambition to foster knowledge through the study of artefacts. Wellcome did not collect for the aesthetic value or singularity of the objects but rather for their significance in the scientific development of mankind. His vision of a history of material culture provides the narrative drive and *raison d'être* for the collection (Arnold and Olsen 2003: 29-47). The authentication of the objects is relative to their expressive value, attesting to his vision by testifying to a story of scientific progress. Whilst other interpretations are implicit in this act of collecting – socially, culturally and politically – from a narrative perspective, the exhibits in *Medicine Man* had a synecdochic function, since they exemplified the many other kinds of things in the collection, the act of collecting, and the collection itself. Yet, their biographical link with Henry Wellcome is casual and though relevant to the individual story of each object, it does not validate or represent Henry Wellcome beyond his collecting enterprise. What differentiates objects endowed with biographical significance from others is the fact of their links to the identity of the biographical subject; their act on a personal level to authenticate the subject.

If biographical objects function primarily on a personal level, the turning of personal possessions into modern relics has broader social and cultural significance. Their metamorphosis suggests the evocative power of objects, whether imaginative or emotive, that enlists them as bearers of both the form and content of life narratives. The very familiarity of objects which move from the sphere of real personal possessions into that of relics, also facilitates an individual's identification with the narratives (national, cultural, etc...) that objects embody, since they create an empathetic space between the object as biographical relic and the viewer. Though this approach is fraught with dangers of misinterpretation, it is nonetheless important to consider such evocative power along with the range of collective and individual associations (either emotional and/or intellectual). Some objects are more charged than others: the display in the Freud Museum (the house in Mansfield Road where Freud lived in London) of the couch used by Freud's patients during their analytic sessions is exemplary in this sense. The couch travelled with Freud when he moved to London from Vienna: it is the 'real' couch where his patients reclined. More significantly, it functions as an iconic embodiment of Freud's psychoanalytic method and of his theory. Both emblematic and representational, Freud's couch exists simultaneously in the past and in the present, in a metonymical and metaphorical relationship with the absent subject. Its 'authenticity' – which following Dutton we can consider not only to be normative, but also and most significantly as expressive – depends on the symbolic value attributed to it, and thus on the cultural myth that the couch both embodies and endorses (Dutton 2003: 266-70). This raises questions about the interweaving of these two forms of narrative in biographical exhibitions and whether objects and images constitute the factual evidence that provides the exhibition narrative with authenticity, reality and information. To explore these issues, I shall now consider the exhibition on Gregor Mendel, *The Genius of Genetics*, and explore the conversion of biographical objects into cultural fetishes. The exhibition acts as a case-study to question the cultural function of biographical objects.

### **Mendel's glasses: biographical objects and the myth of authenticity**

*The Genius of Genetics* was conceived for display at a gallery in the Augustinian Abbey of St Thomas in Brno where Gregor Mendel (1822 – 1884) lived and worked from 1843, and of which he became the Abbot in 1867. Founded in 1350 and rebuilt in 1750, in the early nineteenth century, the Abbey of St Thomas was an important religious and cultural centre, though quite at the periphery of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of which Brno (at the time Brunn) as the capital of Moravia, was a part. When Mendel entered the Augustinian order, the Abbey enjoyed a lively intellectual life, especially in the fields of natural philosophy and mathematics, as testified by the extensive and still extant library. Most of the objects in the exhibition belonged to the Abbey,

with the exception of some external loans. A problem emerged. There was little evidence that would allow my co-curator and I to establish a direct connection between Mendel and some of the exhibits. There were items, such as scientific instruments which had belonged to the Abbey during Mendel's time, and which he might, therefore, have used, though there was no proof. The approach of the exhibition, which aimed to convey the intellectual and scientific context for Mendel's seminal experiments on crossbreeding, was not immediately biographical. However, we were confronted with the myth that surrounds Mendel's life: that of the isolated friar who made a crucial scientific discovery leading to the development fifty years later of classical genetics, but whose contribution was recognized only after his death. Despite recent refutation by scholars who describe the rich and vibrant intellectual life of the Abbey of St Thomas, the myth of the secluded friar is still widely endorsed and it was felt that the exhibition had to engage with the myth, if only to disprove it (Orel 1996).

The material selected for the exhibition included a relatively small variety of objects including personal items, such as Mendel's glasses and walking stick, a portrait of Mendel as Abbot of St Thomas, various certificates and other documents. In order to convey the intellectual context in which Mendel lived and worked, as well as to create a dialogue with the setting in which the exhibition was placed, we included material that was broadly linked to the Abbey and that illustrated its rich intellectual life. Hence, in the first section of the exhibition, a library catalogue dated 1755 figured alongside a biblical commentary with its pages opened to display a sacred genealogy, a group photograph of the friars including Mendel, and Mendel's certificate of ecclesiastical studies. Similarly a microscope and box of slides which were part of the teaching material in the Abbey were shown alongside plates from a herbarium, a floral book, pruning tools and a list of seeds ordered by Mendel for the Abbey. Although none of these items had an immediate relevance in illustrating Mendel's scientific achievements and his research method, they nonetheless helped to create a biographical setting and to introduce the rest of the exhibition. They also hinted at Mendel as a friar and a teacher.



*Fig. Glasses in leather case belonging to Gregor Mendel.  
Copyright and courtesy of Stepan Bartos, Mendel Museum*

In the few extant photographs, and in a portrait of him as Abbot, Mendel wore round glasses with metal frames as was typical of his time. Though a characteristic feature, almost a trademark of Mendel's somewhat limited iconography, we agreed to exclude the glasses (**see fig. 3**) and other personal items from this section. The grounds for this decision were that there

was no evidence that they had actually belonged to Mendel and that even if they did, their inclusion did not add to our understanding of his scientific endeavour or his personality. However, Mendel's glasses do now feature in the permanent display which came out of the exhibition after its closure, as they do in a re-edition of the exhibition at the Field Museum in Chicago, together with other originally excluded items such as Mendel's birth certificate. The matter of the spectacles raises important and wider issues. Curatorial choices concerning the construction of an exhibition narrative, the narrative functions ascribed to objects and their biographical relevance are at stake. Does the inclusion of supposedly personal items speak of our desire for objects to be the tangible embodiment of stories? Are objects, such as Mendel's glasses, a token of fetishist curiosity? Do exhibitions, and especially biographical exhibitions, collapse a straightforward distinction between subject and object?

As Jean Baudrillard suggests in the case of antiques, the 'authenticity of biographical relics is relative neither to the objects themselves, nor to their function but to the system that frames them: that is to their *relationship* with the subject. Accordingly, biographical relics symbolize a myth of authenticity, which 'is reflected in an obsession with certainty – specifically, certainty as to the origin, date, author and signature of a work', and of belonging (Baudrillard 1996: 76). Biographical objects are authentic for what they evoke rather than for what they are. Following Baudrillard, we may argue that biographical relics are 'mythological objects' in so far as they occupy an anachronistic position, as an 'authentic presence' that conjures up a past, and the ghostly presence of the biographical subject. For Baudrillard, mythological objects are located in the narrative time of the present perfect: 'it is that which occurs in the present as having occurred in a former time, hence that which is founded upon itself, that which is "authentic"' (Baudrillard 1996: 75). Mythological objects fully realized as a myth of origins. Within this cultural myth of authenticity, biographical objects become relics. They act as cultural fetishes, as the tangible surrogate of the absent subject, thus acquiring subjective attributes. They move from the indifference of being an object to the subjectivity of having 'a name, a personality, a past'. As in the case of Mendel's glasses, otherwise anonymous spectacles are identified as belonging to Mendel and acquire a metonymical significance when included in an exhibition display. Furthermore, drawing on the parallel with Baudrillard's reading of antiques,

These fetishized objects are therefore by no means mere accessories, nor are they merely cultural signs among others: they symbolize an inward transcendence, that phantasy of a centre-point in reality which nourishes all mythological consciousness, all individual consciousness – that phantasy whereby a projected detail comes to stand for the ego, and the rest of the world is then organized around it. The phantasy of authenticity is sublime, and is always located somewhere short of reality (*sub limina*). Like the holy relic, whose function it secularizes, the antique object reorganizes the world in a dispersive fashion which is quite antithetical to the extensive nature of functional organisation – such organisation being the very thing, in fact, from which it seeks to protect the profound and no doubt vital lack of realism of the inner self (Baudrillard 1996: 79).

In a similar fashion, the original functionality of biographical relics is displaced in favour of their biographical significance. They act as discontinuous traces and active memories of the biographical subject that are used to produce a tangible archive that testifies to the individual and can be used to construct biographical narratives, since they endorse a myth of authenticity and an illusionary creation of reality. Clothes and other personal items are conventionally fetishized, because of their close association with a person. Garments and clothes fathom the presence of their owner and bear the signs of use in the wrinkles, which tellingly nineteenth-century cloth makers and repairers called 'memories' (Stallybrass 1998: 196). Clothes, in fact, literalize the notion of embodiment by showing the traces left by the body. They tell us, through their physicality – shape, condition, texture, colour, and smell – about another absent physicality, that of the person who wore them. This tension between presence and absence allows clothes to occupy the subliminal mythological place described by Baudrillard for antiques, of being both real and a phantom of reality. Such traces, memories of use and belonging, are what arguably authenticate biographical relics, rendering them 'true' to the biographical subject, or rather to

the cultural relationship that is recognized between the subject and the object.

In the case of *The Genius of Genetics*, there were several other instances in which objects were chosen for their special traces-of-use and their contextual significance for Mendel's experiments, for example some books that presumably belonged to Gregor Mendel, such as a German translation of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1863) and Franz Gärtner's *Versuche und Beobachtungen über die Bastarderzeugung im Pflanzenreiche* (1849). In the case of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, pencil marks in the margins suggested how Mendel read the book and indicate his knowledge of Darwin's studies. Franz Gärtner's *Versuche und Beobachtungen über die Bastarderzeugung im Pflanzenreiche*, an influential book on crossbreeding of plants, was a key reference for Mendel's research on the crossbreeding of *Pisum sativum*, and on the back cover he annotated the morphological characteristics of the pea varieties that he would use in his experiments. These annotations are relevant for Mendel's experiments and show rare glimpses of his work in progress. In so far as we consider Mendel's scientific endeavour, both books played an important role, and in this sense they are biographically relevant. The annotated pages may also evoke for us an image of the scientist carefully studying them. Yet, though they provide biographical evidence, the significance of Mendel's books is only partial: the reality that they illustrate for us is dependent on the work of the curators or biographers who, by placing them within the broader context of Mendel's research, interpret them, thus conferring meaning upon them. Their functions are both metonymic and metaphoric since they illustrate the idea of Mendel's work in progress and allude to his world of ideas, as well as to the lost body of his notes, and books. A tension exists between the personal meaning the books had for Mendel, what he thought about them or how he used them, and the value that we ascribe to them, as biographical relics.

In the case of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, we can only *a posteriori* infer its significance - a significance that partially depends on the influence of Darwin's theories to Western science and thought. However, we cannot assess what Darwin's book meant for Mendel as a scientist, as a friar, and as an individual. The lack of evidence gives way to speculations that feed into the myth about the possible relationship between the two scientists, including the story that Mendel sent a copy of his seminal article on crossbreeding to Darwin who left it unread. This claim is officially denied by the Darwin's archive – yet, what if it was true? The biographical fascination with such suppositions allows us endless interpretations that endorse an encompassing vision of scientific progress and of communality of minds. Although biography aims to create a core sense of the biographical subject, a coherent, though multilayered, image, from a psychological and cultural point of view the idea of biographical truth is illusionary. Moreover, biography is faced with the irony of discontinuity, contradiction, and fragmentation, bringing into question the relationship between factuality and interpretation, and the kind of representation offered by biography.

As literary criticism informs us, the reliability of sources, including diaries, letters and memoirs, is difficult to assess. Bound by the standards of their genre, biographical records are marked by degrees of uncertainty and interpretation. Biographers variously interrogate and interpret this material. Yet, the structures underpinning the relationship between life and record are not straightforward and require a consideration of the biases that inform the latter (St Clair 2002: 234-5). We may investigate the public and private nature of the records, the reasons beyond the matter of why certain records have survived rather than others, and their reliability. Thus, the illusion of biographical truth is reflected in issues of interpretation of records and in how biography is constructed through them as a coherent representation of the subject, whether as a written text or an exhibition. Biographers and curators are faced, not unlike historians, by the fragmentary and discontinuous nature of evidence. As Hayden White observes, 'facts do not speak for themselves, but the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is – in its re-presentation – a purely discursive one' (White 1978: 125). This invites a consideration of the apparent cohesion achieved by biographical exhibitions and of the narrative strategies that unfold in the presentation of the biographical material. To examine further these issues, we consider an emblematic category of objects, those that mimetically represent the subject, such as portraits, photographs, busts, medals, prints, and miniatures, questioning their biographical authenticity and functions as records of the subject in exhibition narratives.

### Biographical fetishes and iconic visions

In his *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch characteristically defines the subject of his writing, lives, by comparing his intention to that of portrait painters who through the rendering of facial features capture the character of the sitter, creating a meaningful representation. Like a painter, the biographer fashions the otherwise scattered details of someone's life into a meaningful portrait of a personage, a life-story (Holmes 2002: 9). The recurrent comparison of portraiture and biographical writing to describe the aims of biography suggests an unresolved tension between factuality and art, reality and representation (Marcus 2002). The illusion of reality that biography sustains by dealing with actual people and specific historical periods is the result of narrative strategies that validate a vision or representation of a personage. Biographers 'make sense of life by establishing 'significant' facts, and by telling 'revealing' stories with them' (Holmes 2002: 17, Edel 1973, Marcus 1994). Images as well as words concur in drawing a portrait of the biographical subject and in developing a coherent narrative that meets socio-cultural expectations about representations of the self.

According to Richard Brilliant, 'The oscillation between art object and human subject represented so personally is what gives portraits such extraordinary grasp on our imagination', thus establishing a subtle complicity between the painter, the sitter and the viewer (Brilliant 1991: 17). This complicity is not dissimilar to that which a biographer establishes with the reader, drawing him/her into the unfolding of the life events by 'satisfying curiosity and telling good stories', and by responding to a desire of authenticity and recognition (France and St Clair 2002: 3). Both biographers and curators use portraits to create an image of the personage they are dealing with, to confer a sense of the 'real' person, both physically and psychologically, almost metonymically embodying him/her. The likeness of portraits, however, is elusive and their biographical 'truth' far from straightforward. As Brilliant suggests, portraits are synthetic images, in which likeness and the recognition of a resemblance between the sitter and the image is the implicit propositional statement of the painting itself. Brilliant questions the underpinning mimetic qualities of portraits and observes that 'whatever the mimetic quality of a portrait, the work remains a representation of the subject whose value as an approximation is less determined by its descriptive character than by the coincidence of the perceptions shared by the portrait artist and the viewer' (Brilliant 1991: 26).

Portraits create an illusion of reality, through the referential use of the name of the biographical subject, by internal thematic allusions to the profession, character, or an emblematic event in the subject's life, and by the use of visual strategies aimed at producing recognition. Like other biographical sources, such as memoirs or diaries, portraits also construct a complex relationship between private and public presentations of the self, in an attempt to capture the inner self as much as providing a denotative image of the biographical subject. They firm up identity and being into the fixity of the image producing a tension between verisimilitude and self-fashioning, reality and representation, being and being seen, self and representation, subject and object. As a representation of the subject, painted and photographic portraits are intrinsically subjective biographical objects, yet as artefacts they are bound to the conventions of the genre and to changing taste and fashions.

The elusiveness of portraits is further complicated when we consider images, as photographs or videos that, like diary and letters, seem personal and reliable documentation of the subject. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes draws an analogy between biographical traits and photographs, and refers to these traits as 'biographemes'. Both are elusive, fragmentary, discontinuous, and exist in a complex relation with reality, of which they supposedly act as traces. Yet, the authenticity of the trace exceeds reality, and merges with the imaginary creating an encompassing image from details, by capturing the transience of a moment in time. As soon as the photograph is taken, what was photographed no longer exists; the subject is objectified, almost turned into 'a museum object' (Barthes 2000: 13). The meaning of photos is also precarious. The images may have existed as mementos for the biographical subject. However, they lose the narrative force of memory for other viewers and remain only as a testimony of the past. As Barthes writes,

The photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph). The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what I see has indeed existed (Barthes 2000: 82).

For Barthes, photographs possess an 'evidential force' that

bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological point of view, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation (Barthes 2000: 88-9).

We may however question what are we authenticating and for whom. The certification of presence of photographs is questionable and, as in the case of museum objects, we are faced with the decoding and reading of the image (Perloff 1997). This suggests degrees of evidential and narrative value for both photographs and portraits that may variously substantiate the overall narrative of an exhibition. As biographical relics, photographs and portraits act as metonymical traces of the biographical subject, yet what kind of presence do these images conjure? What do they authenticate?

For biographical exhibitions, images are obviously crucial both as artefacts and as representations of the subject. As such, portraits and photographs literalize their function as cultural fetishes by standing in the place of the absent subject, by creating an illusion of likeness, and by bringing the viewer into a direct, intimate relationship with the subject. Hence the narrative function of portraits is to convey through their power the image of the subject that the exhibition endorses. In order to examine the precariousness of this act of authentication and of its related narratives I turn to a recent exhibition on the subject of Madame de Pompadour (National Gallery and Wallace Collection, London). The show told the story of the famous royal mistress through a series of portraits, which depict her at various periods of her life. The portraits attested to the beauty and refinement for which she was renowned and suggested the progress of her life story, thus achieving a sense of continuity across the exhibition and a coherent representation of the biographical subject with which the visitor could engage.

Portraits were crucial in the making of Jeanne Antoinette Poisson (as she was born) into Madame de Pompadour:

Her success involved the endless making and re-making of her own image, a process in which her early assets – seductive charm, pristine beauty – were always to the fore. When time eventually and inevitably took its toll on her attractiveness, her image was manipulated so as to hide the fact (Jones 2002: 16).

The manipulation of the portraits went beyond the mere alteration of the likeness, fashioning through the representation the very perception of her persona. The portraits endorsed specific biographical readings of Madame de Pompadour, through a precise use of objects, and garments. Hence the rendering of Madame de Pompadour as a *femme savant* becomes a *leitmotiv* in the representations throughout the 1750s, when no longer the mistress of the King, Jeanne Antoinette Poisson still played an important role as a royal adviser and as a promoter of the arts and champion of the Enlightenment. A lover of luxury, Madame de Pompadour collected and surrounded herself with refined objects, from silverware, porcelain, tapestries, glass, fabric, furniture, jewellery and paintings. The inclusion of a broad range of these objects in the exhibition created a referential context between the images and the objects, indirectly charging every item in the exhibition with iconic and biographical value, and inviting the audience to partake of the beauty and seductive power of the images. Madame de Pompadour the seductress and the lover of the arts became alive for the visitor through the allure of the objects on display, which was 'played out on the tensions of presence (of the actual objects and of the metaphor or myth they are associated with it) and absence (the past which the pieces come from and reality which this once was) (...)' (Pearce 1995: 247). The objects embodied ideas of refinement and seductiveness that ultimately validated the image Madame de Pompadour promoted for herself through her many portraits.

The exhibition, as a whole, was persuasive in creating for the audience an image of beauty, refinement and seductiveness. However, it left unchallenged the role of the portraits themselves in fashioning the persona and myth of Madame de Pompadour. Unanswered was the question of just how revealing the portraits are of Jeanne Antoinette Poisson versus Madame de Pompadour. We may argue that the very manipulation of the image suggests Madame de Pompadour's intent and the relationship between the image and the subject.

Despite the consistency of the image that Madame de Pompadour created for herself, the authoritative value and legitimacy of each representation in relation to the others seem nonetheless to be at stake (Brilliant 1991: 82, 132). Similar issues of unresolved tension between the tendentiousness of records and the interpretative framing of biographical narratives are recognizable in the case of an exhibition about Jean Cocteau, *Jean Cocteau, sur le fil du siècle*. The show was organized by the Centre Pompidou, forty years after the death of this eclectic and controversial figure, to reassess his reputation.

For the show, the curators drew on the broad range of material that made up Cocteau's corpus of biographical records. These ranged from diaries, letters, drawings, private photographs and the numerous portraits and self-portraits, notebooks, poems, plays, choreography for ballets, drawings, paintings, and films with a constant overlapping between private and public records. This overlapping was partly due to the nature of the material presented; it reflected the fact that Cocteau had constantly refashioned his own image, reinventing himself, almost creating a parallel life as a mirror image of reality, a projection that he revisited and rewrote throughout his life through images and texts. The records thus become metaphor of a personage that remains ungraspable and, as a result, we are confronted with biographical icons of an unstable and fragmentary signifier (Berge *et al.* 2003: 11, 339-40). Though an attempt to unravel the figure of Jean Cocteau, *Jean Cocteau, sur le fil du siècle* remained entangled into this process of refashioning. The exhibits, organized in seven sections, included famous portraits of the artist, such as Philippe Halsman's photograph, 'Jack of all-trades' (1948), that shows Cocteau with six arms and hands, holding a pair of scissors in one hand, a pen in another, a book in a third, and a cigarette in a fourth one; a cubist self-portrait (1910-13) in which the face is concealed by a blank surface, thus defeating the realism of the image through the absence of its most defining feature; and a photograph by Man Ray (1922) where Cocteau is shown holding a frame, turning the image of the photographed subject into a projection or mirror image of itself. Whilst the aesthetic debts to modernism and surrealism are evident, such iconic images presented within the broad range of other biographical material, are no less charged with self-referentiality. Equally, private images and records of the artists, such as holiday photographs with Jean Marais, and diary extracts are fraught with self-consciousness, almost deliberately overlapping with Cocteau's public persona.

Cocteau's consistent manipulation of the records to achieve desired effects makes it difficult to assess their reliability – a difficulty that was reflected in the exhibition itself. As in the case of Madame de Pompadour, the representation of the biographical subject was entangled with a reshaping of the records. Both exhibitions confirmed the cultural representations already circulating, thus endorsing and reproducing a myth of the subject - whether of Jean Cocteau or Madame de Pompadour. In so doing, both exhibitions were faced with the problems highlighted by St Clair for biographical records in general, pointing to tension between the factuality of the exhibits presented and their representational power. This tension, is faced to different degrees by biographical exhibitions in general, is inherent in the narrative strategies adopted in relation to the curatorial aims and the audience's reception of biographical exhibitions. The last section of the article summarizes the issues discussed in relation to the narrative structure of biographical exhibitions and concludes with some consideration of an exhibition on Roland Barthes.

### **Conclusion: telling things and biographical illusions**

Jean François Lyotard, compares the experience of visiting an exhibition to that of a hero in a novel who moves in and through the exhibition space, as defined by the exhibition subject (Lyotard 1996: 167).<sup>2</sup> Lyotard draws attention to the self-contained narrative of exhibitions, in which the visitor moves into an artificial, hence illusionary, temporal and spatial dimension as the exhibition subject unfolds. As three-dimensional narratives, biographical exhibitions create a palpable impression of biographical subject by rendering the exhibition a figurative space in which the selected items portray a cohesive if not consistent picture through their mutuality. Curators draw on the cultural significance of objects, on the visual impact and rhetorical strength. From a bird's-eye perspective, biographical exhibitions are striking because of the diversity of the material presented: portraits, photographs, personal items, notebooks, letters,

pages of diaries, books, various kinds of objects and artefacts that illustrate the subject's activities and achievements, oral records, such as interviews of the subjects or of other renowned personages who knew him/her, and videos. Divested of their original functions these records of a life exist in mutual visual and contextual relationships: yet the extent to which these relationships mirror those that existed between the subject and the records is arguable.

With exhibitions as with biographies, the presentation of the subject has a figurative dimension, and is shaped through the rhetorical relationships established among the exhibits. These relationships are abstract and may vary since, as I have observed, biographical relics function as evidence only in relation to the biographical subject and within a system in which they are required to authenticate the subject. Through the process of inclusion, biographical objects become part of the rhetorical framework of the exhibition functioning as rhetorical tropes (metaphorically, metonymically or synecdochically standing for, substituting and alluding to the biographical subject). By acting as traces of the biographical subject, biographical relics also imbue the exhibition display with emotional and imaginative power within the exhibition context. This figurative dimension pertains not only to the making but also to the reception of biographical exhibitions, since it shapes the presentation of the biographical subject and the use of biographical objects within the exhibition context. Yet, as in the case of life writing, the presentation of the facts is imaginative and achieved through narrative strategies is central to the biographer, readers tend to 'misinterpret the artistic ideal of coherence with the historical ideal of objectivity' (Nadel 1984: 156). A frisson is apparent between the reader's acceptance of facts and their figurative presentation, between the narrative coherence of biography as a literary form and its historical objectivity. Hence, 'the power of objectivism as a social and moral force in society has determined the way biography has been understood and written as a literal account of the subject' (Nadel 1984: 157). Such a frisson is also present in biographical exhibitions, since it is inherent in the cultural assumptions that, through their materiality, objects act as evidence of 'truth'. For biographical objects, the notion of belonging and authenticity overshadows the many other cultural facets that intervene when such objects are invested with meaning as biographical relics. The tension recognizable between the figurative role of objects and factuality is translated in the overall exhibition display into a tension between biographical truth and representation. Yet, what happens when the biographical subject challenges the very illusion of biography and the cultural mythologization of objects as cultural fetishes? What if the exhibition subject is Roland Barthes and some of the items are the very objects that he criticized as cultural icons?

*R/B Roland Barthes* (2002), an exhibition organized by the Centre Pompidou, which encompassed the life and intellectual legacy of Roland Barthes interestingly opened with some of the everyday objects that Barthes analyzed in *Mythologies*, such as the Citroen 19 (1957). Within the exhibition context, the car has an iconic status recognizable for any visitor familiar with Barthes's writing, as are the plastic tupper-ware boxes. The car, however, is not only completely divested of its original function but is also culturally determined as an icon. Positioned in mutual relation with a broad range of records, including notebooks, photographs, paper cuttings, books, manuscripts and artworks, as well as films, interviews with contemporaries, installations and an interactive computer game aimed to illustrate the fashion sign system, the Citroën 19 acquires a mythological status in relation to Barthes and his intellectual legacy. The very object whose 'mythology' Barthes unravelled is turned into the metaphoric and metonymic sign of Barthes's now iconic text. A paradoxical relationship is established between the object, the subject and text that the exhibition both encompasses and displays. This irony characterized the whole exhibition, variously informing most of the exhibits.

Audio and video recordings of interviews brought to life Barthes and his contemporaries, tangibly making the past present. The man and the intellectual became alive as his voice and the clatter of his typewriter resounded throughout the gallery. The exhibition culminated in an installation showing hundreds of annotated index cards. About this exhibit, Stuart Jeffries commented in his review of the exhibition:

One resists the temptation to genuflect and pray. It is a monument to the might of the intellectual, as is the reconstruction of his study with its books, manuscripts and files – every last scrap might be significant, and every cough and spit might mutate into a holy relic (Jeffries 2003).<sup>3</sup>

Imagining Barthes's own reaction to the exhibition, Jeffries writes, 'Barthes, were he alive today, might not like it, or might experience the not entirely unpleasant frisson of adoring fans canonising him inside a temple of modern art' (Jeffries 2003). Ironically, through an array of fragments and traces - those very traces and objects that he painstakingly analyzed - Roland Barthes is mythologized and turned into a modern icon. He emerges from a spectrum of representations and images, as a coherent figure, his life as a coherent and meaningful continuum. Yet, the exhibition also mirrors the irony of biographical process and, as its title implies, we are left with the unresolved dichotomy of the sign and the person, the fragment and the whole: R/B Roland Barthes.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Violette Morin is quoted in Janet Hoskins, *Biographical Objects: How Things Tell the Stories of People's Lives* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998, 7-9). Gifts are also indicative as biographical objects and as objects that act subjectively in a narrative structure, that of the gift exchange, quoting Marcel Mauss, 'things as gifts are not indifferent things, they have a name, a personality, a past' (Mauss 1967: 55).
- <sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the structure of exhibitions and the creation of internal coherence see in the same volume Jean-Marc Poinot, "Large Exhibitions: A sketch of a typology", 39-66.
- <sup>3</sup> Stuart Jeffries, *The Guardian*, 22 February 2003

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