

The Most Powerful Material in Westeros: Fiction Exhibitions and the Authenticity of Fiction Objects

Märit Simonsson

Abstract

This article examines authenticity in relation to exhibitions about films and television series and the objects they contain, defined here as *fiction exhibitions* and *fiction objects*. The study is based on an analysis of *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition*. Material and constructed authenticity are examined and used in the analysis. It is concluded that the exhibition relates to both categories of authenticity, as it contains authentic material from the production of the series and constructs authenticity by emphasizing the fiction objects' value. The value of objects is also discussed in relation to the representation of different fictional cultures in the exhibition. Comparing exhibitions and objects of fiction with exhibitions and objects of cultural history, the paper concludes that their authentic qualities are similar, confirming that fiction exhibitions and objects are no less authentic than exhibitions and objects in established museums.

Key words: Exhibitions, objects, fiction, authenticity, fiction exhibitions, *Game of Thrones*

Introduction

Fictional stories and popular culture have become common themes in touring exhibitions and museum exhibitions around the world. They challenge established concepts of authenticity because of their contemporary and often fictional themes and contents. Museums have long had an established position in Western society as sources of knowledge with collections of objects functioning as evidence of historical accuracy. As museums are evolving in many different directions, the role of museum objects has also changed over the last decades, as focus has shifted in museums towards more experience-inducing activities (Hein 2000; Chhabra 2008; Conn 2010; Wood and Latham 2014; Hede *et al.* 2014). Today, museum objects tend to represent the stories connected to them rather than representing themselves (cf. Kavanagh 1989; Hein 2000; Gurian 2006). Yet, even though the status and meaning of museum objects have been negotiated in museums according to changes in practice, the authority of the 'real thing' remains an integral part of the identity of museums (cf. Kavanagh 1989; Pearce 1992; Hein 2000; cf. Jones 2010). This shift in focus from objects to stories and experiences, but still with emphasis on the authority of original objects, raises questions regarding the concept that museums have traditionally depended upon; that historical accuracy is best represented by authentic objects (Kavanagh 1989; Pearce 1992; Prentice 2001; Deetz 2004; Gurian 2006; Dudley 2010; McIsaac and Mueller 2015; Varutti 2018). Despite these developments regarding the role of objects, debates about what constitutes authenticity in relation to objects today have somewhat stagnated, both in museums and in museology research.

It is becoming evident that fiction and contemporary popular culture have the potential to contribute to new conceptions of what is culturally significant and authentic in the contexts of museums and cultural heritage (cf. Prentice 2001). For example, popular fiction has been the direct cause of tourist increases in New Zealand following the success of *The Lord of the Rings* movie franchise (Roesch 2010; Buchmann *et al.* 2010) and in Dubrovnik, where parts of the HBO series *Game of Thrones* were filmed (Tkalec *et al.* 2017). Moreover, exhibitions

about films, television series, literature and comics are currently touring the world and the largest and most frequently touring exhibitions of this kind are based on films and television series within the genres of fantasy, science fiction and comic books. Defined here as *fiction exhibitions*,¹ this relatively new type of exhibition contains *fiction objects* such as props, artwork and costumes used in the filmed productions, i.e. films and television series, that the exhibitions are based on.² Examples of fiction exhibitions are *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition*, *Star Wars Identities: The Exhibition*, *The Hunger Games: The Exhibition*, *Harry Potter: The Exhibition* and *Marvel Studios: Ten Years of Heroes*.

For this article, I have analyzed the exhibition *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition*, henceforth the GoT exhibition.³ It was produced by GES Events and HBO Licensing & Retail and started touring in October 2017. The exhibition was shown in several exhibition venues and one museum in Europe. The exhibition was based on the *Game of Thrones* series that aired on HBO between 2011 and 2019 and contained objects from the series, such as props and costumes, that were presented in exhibition settings traditionally associated with museums of cultural history and natural history.⁴ Fiction exhibitions like the GoT exhibition have mainly emerged during the past twenty years and they can therefore appropriately be regarded as part of the experience-centered turn and of the so-called Disneyfication of museums (cf. Kratz and Karp 1993; Chhabra 2008). Yet, despite the increase in fiction exhibitions during the last two decades, there is a lack of research concerning the meaning and purpose of fiction exhibitions from a visitor perspective, and what place fiction exhibitions have in a wider museum context in regard to authenticity. Fiction exhibitions are commercial events for producers to capitalize from and it can be concluded that the GoT exhibition was produced in order for HBO to turn an extra profit from *Game of Thrones*. Still, visitors are prepared to travel far and pay the often costly ticket fee to experience their favourite fiction materialized and on display.

The heading of this article, 'The Most Powerful Material in Westeros', is based on a quote from the *Game of Thrones* series. The series takes place in a fictional world during a civil war and Westeros is the land that characters and noble houses are fighting over. The words 'The most powerful man in Westeros' are uttered in a conversation between two characters (season 3, episode 10). The exchange indicates that the most powerful person is not necessarily the one wearing the crown. In the article heading, the word 'man' is replaced by 'material' as a play on words to highlight the subject matter of this article. The key contribution of the article is twofold: first, it shows that even though the GoT exhibition was based on a work of fiction, it contained materially authentic objects that had the potential to evoke meaningful authentic experiences for visitors. Authenticity was also constructed and emphasized in the GoT exhibition through the use of specific exhibition techniques that established a connection between the objects and the series, as well as by using conventional museum exhibition design to convey the value of the objects. Second, I identified two different perspectives in the GoT exhibition that I define as *inside* and *outside* the fiction, which refer to how the exhibition offered two different experiences depending on whether an audio guide was used or not; one from within the fictional world and the other relating to the series as a contemporary production. I also show here how, in the exhibition, the representation of gender and of the cultures of Essos, which is a land to the east of Westeros in *Game of Thrones*, related to representation in the series (*inside*) and in the contemporary world (*outside*) and how the exhibition ignored relevant discussions about representation.

When the exhibition analysis for this study was performed, the GoT exhibition was exhibited in a customized pavilion at Centro Promenade in Oberhausen, Germany. The analysis was made during two visits on 23 and 24 February 2019, preceded by a short visit for introductory observation. The first analysis was performed without an audio guide and the second with an audio guide. The exhibition analysis model used for the study is partially based on museologist Peter van Mensch's directions for exhibition analysis and partially developed by myself. Van Mensch's model was employed to characterize the exhibition based on the categories and sub-categories *Structure: subjective, systematic, narrative, ecological*, *Style: aesthetic, evocative, didactic* and *Technique: static, dynamic, interactive* (van Mensch 2003). These categories were then used primarily to compare fiction exhibitions to traditional museum exhibitions.

The exhibition analysis model that I developed is directed towards *Content*, specifically the categories *setting*, *objects* and *wording*. This model was used to analyze the components of the fiction exhibition and what they communicated. The first category, *setting*, referred to scenography and arrangement and included all components that have been produced for the exhibition specifically, not for the series. The second category, *objects*, focused on how objects were presented in the exhibition and included all material components that had been produced for the series specifically, not for the exhibition. The third category, *wording*, referred to communication through written and spoken words and included various exhibition texts and the exhibition audio guide, and how they related to the exhibition contents in general. The collected results of the exhibition analysis are presented here in no particular order and are discussed continuously throughout the article.

Authenticity is used in this article as a perspective through which the GoT exhibition was analyzed. The concept of authenticity is closely linked to museums and is often associated with original objects in a museum context (Trilling 1972; Komarac *et al.* 2020). Yet, while the research field of museology has not been too concerned with authenticity related to popular fiction in museums, the field of film tourism studies has. Although visiting a film location is different from visiting a fiction exhibition in terms of setting and situation, there are substantial similarities regarding aspects of fiction and authenticity and, therefore, film tourism studies are employed and referenced here.

Authenticity tends to be regarded as dichotomous, where something is either authentic or *inauthentic*, but such a division is problematic and limiting, since authenticity is complex and relational and can have a variety of meanings and functions (Wang 1999; Prentice 2001; Steiner and Reisinger 2005; Jones 2010; Rickly-Boyd 2012; Joyce 2013; Brida *et al.* 2014). Also, from a Western perspective authenticity often relates to the original materials of an object or building, whereas in parts of Asia, the concept of authenticity can include aspects such as tradition, feeling and spirit (Lawless and Silva 2017; Wijesuriya and Sweet 2018), as well as intention and creativity (Lee 2018). In a Korean context, copying an original painting 'has been a well-established genre of genuine painting as a creative work' (Lee 2018: 58) as it follows processes that relate to 'intangible values' (Lee 2018: 59), rather than the material aspects of the painting. The diversity and complexity of authenticity as a concept allows for the possibility to explore various aspects of authenticity beyond the dichotomy of authentic or *inauthentic*. In this article, two categories of authenticity are mainly discussed: *material* and *constructed* authenticity. *Material authenticity* constitutes the authenticity of an object that was present in a specific situation at a specific time, i.e. it was *there when it happened*. Archeologist Sian Jones (2010: 189) argues that this kind of authenticity of objects depends on 'the networks of people and places they have been associated with during their unique cultural biographies'. Favouring Jones' approach, it is maintained here that the materiality of objects is essential not because of the objects' 'origins, material, form or provenance in a materialist sense, but rather because the materiality of objects embodies the past experiences and relationships that they have been part of' (Jones 2010: 189-90). Since all objects have a biography of some kind, all objects, including copies, are potentially materially authentic depending on the situation and context (cf. Pearce 1992: 24). *Constructed authenticity*, on the other hand, is based on the conception of authenticity as a social construct. It is formed through processes where an object's authenticity is negotiated based on symbolic value, as opposed to being inherent in the object (Peterson 2005; MacNeil and Mak 2007), as with material authenticity. Since constructed authenticity is projected onto objects, it affects the manner in which we experience them.

I argue that an object is never *inauthentic* in and of itself, only with regard to something. Therefore, the fiction objects on display in fiction exhibitions are materially authentic even if they were created for a filmed production.⁵ Moreover, both material and constructed authenticity were active in the GoT exhibition and it is evident in the analysis that authenticity was present in the display, as well as constructed to establish value in the exhibition. The two categories of authenticity presented above are not solitary entities, where only one of them can be active at one time. Instead, these categories overlap and were active simultaneously in the GoT exhibition and, often, in a single object.

Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition

The emphasis on aesthetics and craft was prominent in the GoT exhibition and related to the process of creating the filmed version of the fiction, as performed on screen and as shaped behind the scenes. These aspects were presented from the two different perspectives in the exhibition that I define as *inside* and *outside* the fiction. While the *inside* perspective focused on placing the visitors within the fictional world of the series, the *outside* perspective provided information about the making of the series through the audio guide. The visitors could choose whether they wanted to experience the exhibition as if *inside* the fictional world or with an audio guide that provides information about the creation of the series and thereby places the visitor *outside* the fictional world. This will be discussed more extensively below.

Analyzing the GoT exhibition based on the *Contents* model, starting with the categories *setting* and *objects*, the layout consisted of a pathway leading through different areas with settings containing compressed versions of sceneries and environments representing different locations and noble houses in *Game of Thrones*. The settings included diorama-like staging, podiums, photographic backdrops, sound and, in most areas, screens showing video clips. Objects from the series, such as costumes, jewellery, weapons and props were displayed in glass cases or on headless and handleless mannequins that represented different characters. Some weapons were displayed fastened on panels beside the character mannequins that are associated with those weapons in the series. The objects and costumed character mannequins were assembled within the exhibition areas that represented their main locations and in relation to other mannequins according to the characters' relationships in the series. There were also larger props, such as a dragon skull, a carrying litter and the Iron Throne. Visitors could not touch the objects on display but they were allowed to handle duplicated versions of a few stationary objects, such as the swords Needle, Ice and Longclaw. These objects were incorporated in settings throughout the exhibition and were used for photo opportunities by visitors. Allowing for visitors to touch replicas and take photographs is not a new practice; museums have offered hands-on experiences to visitors for many years, long before this exhibition, and allowing photography and selfies in exhibition settings is becoming increasingly common. Still, in this particular exhibition, these kinds of components added some activity and motion to the otherwise fairly static setting. To enhance the atmosphere, the exhibition also contained banners and shields depicting the symbols of the different houses as well as lamps and torches of the same design as in the series. The soundtrack to the series was on a constant loop and mixed with the audio from the screens and with sounds such as crackling fire, wood creaking and noises from creatures that appear in the series. By framing the costumes, jewellery and weapons with supplementary colours, sounds and sceneries, the exhibition placed the visitors *inside* a fairly convincing representation of the *Game of Thrones* world.

The *inside* perspective was evident in the *wording* in the GoT exhibition. The contents of the texts, which were kept short and to the point, were heavily derived from the series and almost exclusively contained information that would already be known to most *Game of Thrones* followers. Even though there was a short introductory film shown at the beginning of the exhibition, visitors had to have watched at least some of the *Game of Thrones* series to fully understand the exhibition content. Expecting some prior knowledge from the visitors, the exhibition had thereby already placed the visitors *inside* the fiction from the start, at least to some extent. Even if actors' names were mentioned and seasons of the series were specified in some of the texts, which are both examples of an *outside* perspective where the production of the series is highlighted rather than the fictional world, this kind of information was not extensive or emphasized. This way, visitors could navigate the exhibition in relation to the plot of the series without having to drastically interrupt their *inside* perspective.

The screens showing video clips from the series in the different areas of the exhibition had a similar function as the texts in the sense that they kept visitors *inside* the fiction. However, the video clips also provided the visitors with a direct visual connection between the series and the objects. For example, in the area representing Kingsroad, where the character Arya Stark's sword Needle was displayed, some of the clips showed Arya using Needle. The clips worked as a reminder of scenes where Needle is used in the series but they also connected

Needle as an exhibition object to the content of the series. This created a form of constructed authenticity, where the exhibition accentuated the authenticity of the object as an original object from *Game of Thrones*. In the case of Needle, the constructed aspect lay in the manner in which the *inside* perspective established the authenticity of an exhibited object by referring to its meaning and value within the fiction. In other words, the *inside* approach was closely linked to constructed authenticity.

Visiting the GoT exhibition with and without the audio guide were two very different experiences. The audio guide contained commentaries by the executive producer of *Game of Thrones* as well as some of the principal crew members responsible for the creative process of designing and producing the sets and objects for the series.⁶ Their comments provided visitors with information about the making of the series that was otherwise completely absent in the exhibition. Restricting this kind of information to the audio guide gave visitors the opportunity to choose between taking part in it or not, and thereby choosing whether to experience the exhibition from *inside* or *outside* the fiction. While a visit without the audio guide allowed the visitors to experience the constructed authenticity of the fiction objects from *inside* the fiction, the audio guide centered on an *outside* perspective that emphasized the material authenticity of the fiction objects.

The objects on display in the GoT exhibition were created in order to be part of a filmed production and were thereby *there when it happened*; they were *there* when the series was filmed. This was emphasized by the audio guide and the comments by the producer and some of the crew members who were part of creating the objects. In the audio guide, they described aspects of designing the objects, ideas behind the designs, circumstances during filming and interactions with actors. Costume designer Michele Clapton, for instance, commented in detail on how the various costume designs for Daenerys Targaryen, played by Emilia Clarke, were inspired by the character's development and the different locations she travels to on her journey throughout the series.⁷ Clapton also mentioned making a last minute adjustment to Oberyn Martell's red leather armour before filming a combat scene so that the actor, Pedro Pascal, would feel more mobile during filming.⁸ Furthermore, Clapton explained how the characteristics and background of the enigmatic character Varys, played by Conleth Hill, inspired the robe-like costume that would be wrapped around his body as if he were hiding his secrets behind it.⁹ The label text by the costume of Varys described how, 'The oversized cuffs conceal his hands and suggest a sense of mystery and secrecy'.¹⁰ This particular example shows how the wording remained focused on the character and his costume from an *inside* perspective, while Clapton's descriptions of the three different costumes reveal that she designed and created the costumes for the series, which adds an *outside* perspective.

By approaching the fiction from *outside*, the audio guide disrupted the *inside* perspective in the exhibition and simultaneously established that the objects that the crew members referred to had been produced specifically for the series by 'real' people in the 'real' world. This means that the objects were materially authentic. Consequently, as will be developed further below, the *inside* perspective constructed authenticity by creating a visual connection between the objects and the series' contents and story through screens, while the *outside* perspective provided through the audio guide revealed the material authenticity of the objects and connected the objects with the making of the series.

Authentic by association

As the *inside* perspective shows, the GoT exhibition constructed meaning and value by making the series the source of authenticity. However, the constructed authenticity of fiction objects was not created only within the context of the exhibition but also through other factors. In the case of *Game of Thrones*, the series itself makes objects meaningful within its own world. One of the more prominent examples of this is that swords are given names and biographies in the series, like Arya's sword Needle. Thus, the objects become significant both *inside* the fiction and to the audience (cf. Wetmore Jr. 2007; cf. Roesch 2010). Also, 'making-of' documentaries about the production have the same function as the audio guide in the GoT exhibition. It seems as if the series wanted to show the audience that the fiction objects are not only meaningful within the story; they are also valuable because of the work and craft

put into their creation. The audience may then invest in the production of the series and the objects become meaningful *outside* the context of the fiction as well. These are examples of constructed authenticity, but regarding the 'behind-the-scenes' perspective, the constructed and material authenticities overlap. While the objects in the GoT exhibition *were* materially authentic, promoting their material authenticity to the audience also means constructing authenticity because it charges them with value that may not have been perceived otherwise. With constructed and material authenticity already established through the series and making-of documentaries, the meaning that had been invested in the objects of *Game of Thrones* before they became exhibition objects played a part in the experience of authenticity in the GoT exhibition.

Another factor that contributed to the constructed authentication of the GoT exhibition was its resemblance to museum exhibitions. This brings a certain status (cf. Kratz and Karp 1993). When an object, virtually of any kind, is placed within a museum space, the context contributes to changing the perception of the object's value and meaning (Ehn 1986: 21-3; cf. Pearce 1992: 33-5; cf. Duncan 1995: 15-6; cf. Smeds 2007: 66-7; Mangione 2016: 36). Moreover, the credibility of museums as institutions contribute substantially to the construction of authenticity. As Hede *et al.* (2014: 1397) stress, 'perceived authenticity relies on a museum's authenticity and visitors' expectations of the museum to create experiences that consumers will perceive to be authentic'.

The GoT exhibition used a similar form for displaying fiction objects that museums of cultural history often use for displaying historical artefacts. There were also settings similar to the kind of dioramas that are often seen in natural history museums. The results of the categorization of the GoT exhibition, according to van Mensch's model, suggests that the exhibition corresponded with the form and style of more established museum exhibitions. The categorization shows that the *Structure* of the exhibition is *ecological* (van Mensch 2003: 3-4, 8); visitors were placed directly within an existing story, which was presented thematically rather than linearly in the exhibition. Concerning *Style*, there was a clear focus on the *aesthetic* (van Mensch 2003: 4-5); the objects and settings were both thoroughly aesthetically designed and the setting enhanced that aspect.¹¹ Regarding *Technique*, the exhibition was both *dynamic* and *interactive* (van Mensch 2003: 5); it contained several non-static technical elements, such as film, music and other sounds on loop. There was one exhibition-altering interactive element and a few visitor activities and photo opportunities. It is relevant to the analysis of the GoT exhibition to show that the exhibition fits into a categorization model for museum exhibitions, because the designs and components associated with museum exhibitions become what Anne Eriksen defines as 'genre markers' ['sjangermarkører'], which refers to museum visitors' understanding of what a museum is and the expectations that come with a museum visit (Eriksen 2009: 15). All the recognizable qualities of the museum, including notions of credibility and authority (cf. Kratz and Karp 1993: 41), then transmit to the fiction exhibition in the eyes of the visitors. When fiction objects are displayed like museum objects, in glass cases and behind ropes, which both can be described as genre markers, they also appear to be as valuable and meaningful as museum objects. Aside from being authenticated through elements in the fiction exhibition and in relation to the fiction, the fiction objects also gain some of their constructed authenticity through association.

Representation inside and outside the fiction

Continuing the examination of how value was created in the GoT exhibition, and subsequently how the *inside-outside* perspectives tied into value and representation, there were cases where the construction of value goes amiss in the GoT exhibition. In the House Targaryen room, some objects were presented as having either less or a different value than other objects and this related to how different cultures were represented in the exhibition and the series, as well as in the contemporary world. In his article about depictions of warriors in *Game of Thrones*, Mat Hardy describes how the world of *Game of Thrones* is distinctively divided into Westeros and Essos, which reflects the conception of West and East. 'The screenplay and casting reinforce this', Hardy argues, 'with Essos encompassing peoples of color ranging from the Pacific Islands, South Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean while Westerosi characters are predominately white and European (with the exception of the

Moorish/Iberian culture of Dorne)' (Hardy 2019: 194). This separation was also evident in the House Targaryen room in the GoT exhibition. The main setting of the room was designed to resemble the Essos location Meereen where Daenerys Targaryen rules for some time in the series. Daenerys is a white Westerosi character who was brought to Essos as a child and later rises to power. The Daenerys mannequin in the exhibition was placed on an elevated platform in the Meereen setting. It was clear that this exhibition room was devoted to Daenerys herself rather than to the inhabitants of Essos, with the exception of the two Essosi characters Missandei, Daenerys's advisor, and Daario Naharis, a sellsword and Daenerys' ally, who were represented by mannequins with costumes. Before Daenerys besieges Meereen, she is married to the leader of the Dothraki, a people that 'exhibit the savagery of a hypermasculine warrior culture' (Hardy 2019: 200). In the House Targaryen room in the GoT exhibition, the Dothraki were represented by a few weapons displayed in an insufficiently lit corner, behind glass on a wall that faces away from the rest of the room. The placement of the weapons and the poor lighting (as well as the noticeably unclean glass at the time of my visit) gave the impression that the objects belonging to the Dothraki were not as valuable or important as the other objects in the exhibition. In the same room, the Unsullied were represented by three sets of upper body armour including a spear and shield, placed on each side of Daenerys' platform. In the series, the Unsullied are an army of slaves who are purchased by Daenerys and, according to Hardy, are, 'not a race or ethnicity in their own right but rather a caste and, moreover, most definitely a product of an Eastern society' (Hardy 2019: 200). As opposed to the Dothraki, the Unsullied, who were castrated when children, are 'to be feared precisely because of their nonmasculinity' (Hardy 2019: 200). While the other mannequins in the GoT exhibition had legs that are clothed, the Unsullied armour was displayed on standing hangers made of wood and instead of the trousers that they would wear in the series, there was a wooden pole. Displaying the Unsullied armour on hangers without lower bodies, when none of the other armours or costumes in the exhibition were displayed in the same way, emphasized the castration as a reflection of the 'Western emasculation constructions of Eastern men' (Hardy 2019: 200). Furthermore, it accentuated the 'otherness' (Naguib 2004; Hardy 2019) of the Unsullied in relation to the Westerosi cultures in the exhibition.

While genre markers like glass cases and ropes accentuated value in the exhibition in general, the genre markers used in the Dothraki and the Unsullied displays lost their value-inducing effect. In the case of the Dothraki weapons, the glass as genre marker signals that the objects were too valuable to be touched but since their placement made them rather inaccessible, the construction of the value that comes with a glass case in an exhibition context became counterproductive. The Unsullied armour had a central position in the House Targaryen room and stood behind ropes, which made them seem important and valuable (cf. Simonsson 2014) but the placement also left the wooden pole, the factor that differentiated them from other costume displays in the GoT exhibition, fully visible to visitors.

The representation of these two Essosi cultures in the GoT exhibition mostly reproduced how they are represented in *Game of Thrones* (Hardy 2019) and in that sense the exhibition succeeded in reflecting the series and its fictional world. While the focus on Daenerys in the House Targaryen room is appropriate considering she is one of the main characters in the series, it was unnecessarily at the expense of the Essosi cultures. By not commenting on this, the exhibition reinforced stereotypical depictions from the series, which in turn emphasized stereotypical notions of West and East (Hardy 2019: 194). The patriarchal system of *Game of Thrones* (Clapton and Shepherd 2016: 13) was also avoided in the exhibition, which makes the problematic representations of gender in the series (Ferreday 2015; Clapton and Shepherd 2016; Hardy 2019) seem like a non-issue. This also applied to depictions of violence, rape and incest. In her article on *Game of Thrones'* feminist fandom and rape culture, Debra Ferreday argues that scenes of rape and incest in the series cannot be detached from the current extensive discussions about sexual violence (Ferreday 2015: 34). She states that rape and incest are 'coded in a way that speaks back to heroic and romanticised narratives of consensual incest' in the series, which would make it irrelevant to contemporary discussions about abuse, but since it is a contemporary work of fiction many fans consider it part of 'present-day feminist debates about the media depiction of rape' (Ferreday 2015: 34). Although the GoT exhibition did not address the debates that Ferreday mentions, her description of how

the series and its fans deal with these depictions in the story resembles the *inside-outside* perspective. The exhibition presented *Game of Thrones* from the *inside* and visitors decided for themselves if they wanted to experience the exhibition as a fantasy or as a production, i.e. with or without audio guide. Experiencing the exhibition from *inside* the fiction, issues of unequal representation would be seen as part of the fictional world of *Game of Thrones* and would not necessarily be considered relevant for discussing in the contemporary world. In the GoT exhibition, it was ultimately up to the visitors individually to choose how they wanted to engage in it. However, there is no reason why the Dothraki weapons could not have been displayed more accessibly or why the Unsullied armour could not have been displayed on mannequins. Whether it was deliberate or not, the GoT exhibition reproduced what was depicted as valuable and not valuable *inside* the series and presented it as such, thereby also reinforcing stereotypes *outside* the fiction. By not challenging stereotypes and the patriarchal system that exist in the series it is once again evident that the GoT exhibition placed its visitors *inside* the fiction. It could be argued that from an *inside* perspective, these matters are customary in that specific fictional world and there would be no reason to address them. *Outside*, however, the *Game of Thrones* series have caused controversy from start to finish. If the GoT exhibition had questioned the controversial content of *Game of Thrones* (which would have been unlikely considering the exhibition was produced by HBO), it might have meant pushing the visitors to think about the 'real world' and placing them *outside* the fiction, thereby breaking the 'flow' of the *inside* perspective. From an authenticity perspective the GoT exhibition missed the mark slightly when it came to trying to be true to the source material. Addressing and acknowledging the more controversial customs *inside* the fictional world (and it can be assumed that most *Game of Thrones* followers and GoT exhibition visitors are already familiar with them) could establish an *inside-outside* perspective even further. By challenging existing stereotypes and addressing gender inequality and discrimination, the exhibition could have initiated interesting discussions about fantasy versus reality among the visitors. It could also have strengthened the constructed authenticity between the fiction objects on display and the world presented in the series, rather than concealing aspects and customs of the fictional world as if they did not exist, neither *inside* nor *outside* the fiction.

The old objects and the new

According to Umberto Eco, what makes a work of fiction a 'cult object', besides being treasured by a wide audience, is that the fiction 'must provide a completely furnished world, so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world' (Eco 1986: 198). For works of fiction that completely or partially take place in an invented world, such as works of fantasy and science fiction, this aspect is crucial because it makes that world not only come to life on screen as part of a story, but also to appear as convincing and credible. If the world represented in a fiction doesn't come across as believable, it is more difficult to relate to the story and the characters (Lyons and Morris 2007: 196; cf. Roesch 2010: 200). This is also the case with fiction objects. The design and function of the fiction objects in filmed productions within the genres of fantasy and science fiction need to seamlessly reflect the world they represent on screen in order to be perceived as genuine. For example, the swords Needle or Longclaw are recognizable as swords from the world of *Game of Thrones* because of their specific designs and functions. In that sense, the objects are representatives of their world just like an historical object can become representative of an historical era or location.

Museologist Susan M. Pearce describes how an historical artefact can carry meaning through time because 'unlike we ourselves who must die, it bears an "eternal" relationship to the receding past, and it is this that we experience as the power of "the actual object"' (Pearce 1992: 28). Jones also discusses the meaning of the power of historical objects, arguing that, 'We need a means to understand the powerful, almost primordial, discourses that are invoked by the authenticity or 'aura' of old things' (Jones 2010: 183). Jones describes the authenticity of historical objects as 'experienced and negotiated as a numinous or magical quality that ... is linked to the networks of inalienable relationships they have been involved in throughout their social lives' (Jones 2010: 199). Although Pearce and Jones associate

the power of authentic objects with historical objects specifically, biographies, networks and relationships are also mentioned as relevant factors in what constitutes this power. As has been maintained here, in accordance with Jones (2010), the material authenticity of an object is based on its biography. Since an object's biography can be related to living persons or current events (Prentice 2001),¹² I argue that the power of objects that Jones and Pearce describe relates to material authenticity and that it is not exclusive to historical objects but also applies to contemporary objects and, subsequently, fiction objects.

In film tourism consultant Stefan Roesch's study (2010) about film tourists visiting *The Lord of the Rings* locations in New Zealand, the tourists were invited by a guide to handle replicas of weapons and the cloak worn by actor Sean Astin when playing Samwise Gamgee in the films. Roesch describes how the cloak 'possessed more meaning for the tour participants' than the replicas and was even defined as 'authentic' by the tourists (Roesch 2010: 171). Roesch concludes that the significance of the cloak was related to the emotions connected to it in the films and to its amount of screen time, rather than the character associated with it (Roesch 2010: 173). According to Roesch, the tourists felt that handling the authentic object brought them 'even closer to the imaginary' (Roesch 2010: 171). The fact that the tourists established a closer relationship with the cloak than with the replicas confirms what has previously been discussed here; that the manner in which fiction objects are presented and treated on screen affects how the audience values those objects. Moreover, handling an object that was used when filming *The Lord of the Rings* was more meaningful to the participating tourists in Roesch's study than handling replicas because of what the object had been a part of (Roesch 2010: 171-3). The authentic power of fiction objects is thus constituted by their biographical connection to the filmed production and to what constitutes that connection in terms of the material and constructed aspects. This is part of the fiction object's material authenticity and biography and the relationships it forms with the visitor experiencing them.

Fiction objects have biographies that are both *inside* and *outside* the fiction. In the GoT exhibition, an object such as Jon Snow's costume was created both to represent the character, his qualities and the fictional world, and to physically fit the actor Kit Harington. In that sense, the costume was designed for Jon Snow but worn by Harington. Here, the *inside* and *outside* perspectives intersect, and this intersection connects the objects to authenticity in multiple ways. In their study of tourists visiting *The Lord of the Rings* film locations in New Zealand, Buchmann *et al.* describe a similar phenomenon, stating that for the film tourists, 'The sensation of the touched grass is an empirical encounter with both New Zealand and Middle-Earth' (Buchmann *et al.* 2010: 245). A GoT exhibition visitor experiencing Jon Snow's costume is, in a sense, in the presence of both Jon Snow the character and Harington the actor, who are both part of contemporary culture but who represent two different sides of the same popular phenomenon. Being in the presence of the materially authentic objects in the GoT exhibition, such as the Jon Snow costume, is an 'empirical encounter' (Buchmann *et al.* 2010) with the characters as well as the actors who play them.

Even if a physical encounter with fiction elements tends to be an 'emotional and intrinsic experience' (Roesch 2010: 232), devoted fans still know the difference between fiction and non-fiction (cf. Rosenbaum 2006: 201; cf. Buchmann *et al.* 2010: 237). Yet, encountering a fiction object can evoke authentic experiences in a similar manner to encountering historical objects. Both fiction and history feel more real to us when they are tangible because a physical object seems reliable and true to us, like a piece of material evidence confirming the occurrence of a certain event or the existence of a specific person. The material authenticity of fiction objects displayed in fiction exhibitions can help visitors establish a connection with a fictional character or place.¹³

I argue that people visited the GoT exhibition and other fiction exhibitions precisely because the materially and constructively authentic fiction objects on display are connected to both the *inside* and *outside* of the fiction; they overlap the gap between *inside* and *outside*, which allows visitors to have materially authentic experiences of a fictional world. When fiction is materialized through objects, it does not mean that the materially authentic objects prove that the *fiction* actually happened. Rather, they prove that the *filmed production* actually happened.¹⁴ Thus, it would be correct to claim that fiction objects do not bring the visitors closer to the fictional world itself, only to the filmed version of the fiction. The participants in Roesch's

study were therefore close to Sean Astin, not to Sam Gamgee, and the GoT exhibition visitors were close to Kit Harington, not to Jon Snow. However, the assumption that fiction objects of filmed productions only represent the production and not the fiction would mean ignoring their constructed authenticity and the objects' potential to evoke authentic experiences. As has been shown in this study, authenticity of fiction objects is more complex than that. Fiction objects are the original objects, in a museological sense, of their fictional world *and* of the filmed production. The fiction objects that were on display in the GoT exhibition are materially authentic by measures of the non-fictional world, *outside* the fiction. They were *there when it happened* and they have the potential to bridge the gap between the fictional world and the non-fictional world through material and constructed authenticity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed the fiction exhibition *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition* and how authenticity is displayed, constructed and experienced in the exhibition with regards to the fiction objects on display and the exhibition design. There are two key contributions, which partially intersect. First, I have shown that, despite the GoT exhibition being based on a fictional story, authenticity was a significant factor in the exhibition. Material authenticity was embedded in the biographies of the fiction objects that were on display, while constructed authenticity was established through combinations of exhibition components in the settings. Constructed authenticity also emphasizes the objects' value, which was further accentuated through the recognizable museum exhibition design utilized in the exhibition that reinforces the fiction objects' meaning by association. Second, I have identified and used the *inside-outside* perspectives as a point of departure for discussing the dual experience of the fiction as a fantasy world, on the one hand, and the series as a contemporary filmed production, on the other hand. From a visitor perspective the *inside-outside* approach in the GoT exhibition depended on the visitors' choice whether to use an audio guide or not. However, the approach is also relevant in a wider discussion about how different cultures are represented in the exhibition and how that relates to the fantasy world *inside* the fiction and the contemporary world *outside* the fiction. As a tool for analysis, the *inside-outside* perspectives may be useful for analyzing other fiction exhibitions in particular but can be equally suitable for analyses of cultural history exhibitions.

In addition to the two key points above, I have discussed aspects that add to the examination of fiction exhibitions and fiction objects as authentic and as relating to two different worlds. I have argued that fiction objects are similar to historical objects and museum objects regarding how their material authenticity has the potential to evoke meaningful authentic experiences in visitors. However, although fiction objects are products of the creation of a filmed production in the contemporary world, they are also representatives of the fictional world and, in that sense, they can bridge the gap that separates the two worlds in the eyes of the visitors.

This article introduces a research subject that has previously been essentially unexplored, especially in museological research, and therefore there are many aspects of fiction exhibitions and museums that have not yet been addressed. Further research needs to be conducted concerning fiction exhibitions and an extensive visitor study would provide data for an analysis specifically of visitors' motivation for visiting fiction exhibitions and their experiences of fiction objects. Some of the issues that need examining further include what the emergence of fiction exhibitions says about contemporary correlations between popular culture, capitalism, representation, society and museums; what it means for museum practices and for the inclusion of visitors and visitor consumption; and if fiction exhibitions, as a phenomenon of contemporary culture, affect museums' economy and marketing strategies. Considering how rapidly museums and society are changing, museological research is efficiently keeping up with the latest developments but fiction exhibitions should not go unnoticed in the process. Hopefully, this article can draw attention to fiction exhibitions and inspire further research on the subject.

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Notes

- ¹ cf. Märil Simonsson, 'Autenticitet i fiktionsutställningar', Humanistportalen, 2015. <https://www.humanistportalen.se/artiklar/museologi/autenticitet-i-fiktionsutstallningar/>, accessed 16 September 2022.
- ² The term 'fiction' is used here to describe fictional stories regardless of media and is not referring specifically to literature.
- ³ *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition* is regarded here as separate from *Game of Thrones: The Exhibition*, which was also produced by HBO and toured in 2013-2015, and from *Game of Thrones Studio Tour*, which opened in Banbridge in the spring of 2022.
- ⁴ The *Game of Thrones* series is based on books written by American novelist George R. R. Martin. Since the books are not referred to in the GoT exhibition, they will not be discussed in this article.
- ⁵ Simonsson, 'Autenticitet i fiktionsutställningar'.
- ⁶ Commentaries are provided by executive producer Bernadette Caulfield, production designer Deborah Riley, set decorator Rob Cameron, property master Gordon Fitzgerald, costume designer Michele Clapton and weapons master Tommy Dunne.
- ⁷ Michele Clapton, audio guide recording, *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition*.
- ⁸ Michele Clapton, audio guide recording, *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition*.
- ⁹ Michele Clapton, audio guide recording, *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition*.
- ¹⁰ Exhibition label text, 'Varys', *Game of Thrones: The Touring Exhibition*.
- ¹¹ The exhibition could be defined as partially *didactic* (van Mensch 2003: 5) considering the information provided by the audio guide. However, it did not have a specified educational approach or a model for learning and is therefore interpreted here as being mainly *aesthetic*.
- ¹² cf. Simonsson, 'Autenticitet i fiktionsutställningar'.
- ¹³ cf. Simonsson, 'Autenticitet i fiktionsutställningar'.
- ¹⁴ cf. Simonsson, 'Autenticitet i fiktionsutställningar'.

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Author

Märit Simonsson
marit.simonsson@umu.se

ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9906-0390>
URL: <https://www.umu.se/en/staff/marit-simonsson/>

Dept of Culture and Media Studies
Umeå University
Sweden