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Original Citation

Evans, Adrian (2016) The museum as a deep map : the need for narrative, wonder, mystery and discovery. In: Heritage Theory and Practice Conference, 5th November 2016, Leeds City Museum. (Unpublished)

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The Museum as a Deep Map.

The need for narrative, wonder, mystery and discovery.

Heritage Theory and Practice Conference, Leeds City Museum 5th November 2016.

Here we are in Leeds City Museum. Today I want to talk about Museums and Landscapes – or an aspect of them which perhaps we overlook. Museums can be seen, perhaps, to be a receptacle for our heritage; a place where artefacts of scientific or cultural significance are held and displayed, with an implicit objectivity; a place for us to visit, and ‘improve’ – to learn.

But...

in the gloom of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, in an old fashioned glass case, framed in wood, there is a tiny exhibit; two whitish scraps of something, bound in some dark, tarry, fibrous material. Rather than a large, clear, printed board of interpretation, telling us exactly what we should know about this item, there is, as is common in the Pitt Rivers a tiny, hand written label attached. In a few words, the label tells us that the white scraps are the front feet of a mole; when cut off and placed in a pocket, *and the mole, still alive, is allowed to crawl away*, your toothache will be cured. The combination of a small amount of otherwise unidentifiable material, and the plain, minimal identification of the exhibit has the power to conjure a narrative in our heads so powerful that it fills us with incredulity and horror, so much so that the experience of disbelief and horror overwhelms the experience of learning.

The case which it shares with many other objects is titled ‘complimentary medicine.’ It is actually an exhibition of magic. A small, beautiful twist of a glass bottle, silvered on the inside, the cork tied in and sealed with wax, contains a witch. The straight faced, straight forward presentation of items through the blunt labels, without interpretation, and allows our minds to work; In the Complimentary Medicine display of the Pitt Rivers, it plunges us into a world of dark brutality and belief, which existed all around us just a few years ago, *and perhaps persists still?*

Our propensity to experience wonder, horror, awe at an artefact, perhaps with the simplest of information about it, is, I believe, very under-recognised. A curation which, by its *minimal* factual interpretation permits us to think, to connect, to disbelieve, to suspend our disbelief, to linger in that no man’s land, that uncanny valley on the brink of fact, gives back mystery to our lives. By contrast, a didactic and themed interpretation, which takes a group of artefacts as data, providing a proof, simply allows us to learn. If we can experience wonder, horror, awe, mystery, we are engaging in a narrative.

The process of analysis and objectification of an artefact tends to remove its narrative. If we over concentrate on the artefact as data, or fact, to demonstrate a theory, or to illustrate something to be learnt, we lose its narrative.

And, as a narrative makes us work to discover meaning, the process of discovery itself becomes important.

It is easy for the curation of artefacts, of heritage, in the desire for analysis, for demonstration, illustration, proof, to provide us with learning and deny us the moment of discovery.

In our world of soundbites, google, instant gratification and instant information we are hungry for *discovery* as a process; for narrative and for mystery.

There are many instances of this.

In 'Notes from a Small Island' published some 20 years ago now, Bill Bryson bemoans this loss of narrative when he says:

'and of course put the Natural History Museum back the way it was before they started dicking around with it. (In particular they must restore the display case of insects infesting household products of the 1950s)'

I remember as a child, pulling open drawer after wooden drawer, full of stuffed birds and preserved insects at the Natural History Museum, hunting for the smallest humming bird, or the largest beetle. So much more engaging than simply being shown the smallest and the largest.

More recently, pulling out a large drawer in the base of a display in a West Yorkshire Museum to discover a papier mache model of a rock pool.

Seeing a light shining out of the skirting in the same museum, and bending down to find yourself peering into Wallace and Gromit's sitting room.

In the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, while browsing through the display cases of beetles, we may stumble upon a toy vw beetle.

<http://www.thisiscolossal.com/2016/01/museum-beetle-cleveland/>

On line, there is a vast catalogue of amateur museums, museums to the bizarre and the grotesque, the comedic and the mundane. For many of them, the most interesting thing about them is their existence.

'Roadside America'

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/>

The trappings, the objective, scientific framing of 'Museum' rather than 'Gallery', both allow us to suspend disbelief, and become part of the narrative contained in the artefact. The vw beetle in a case of beetles or Wallace and Gromit's sitting room would be nowhere near as engaging if they were simply 'works of art' in a gallery. In a Museum, they are subversive; they are *naughty*. Surely you're not allowed to be naughty in a museum.

Even more interesting, and challenging is when we slide about at the periphery of the Museum framing; we can use the trappings of science and objectivity to suspend our disbelief in something we are not quite sure is not fact....

... Somewhere in the liminal twilight at the edge of 'Museum', thriving on the ambiguity growing in this uncanny valley where facts and truth fail to co-incide, lurk...

The London Institute of Pataphysics,

<https://www.atlaspress.co.uk/theLIP/>

with its various departments:

Bureau for the Investigation of Subliminal Images

Committee for Hirsutism and Pogonotrophy

Department of Dogma and Theory

Department of Potassons

Department of Reconstructive Archaeology

The Office of Patentry

The Pataphysical Museum and Archive

(Pataphysics is a branch of philosophy or perhaps science that examines phenomena that exist in a world beyond metaphysics; it is the science of imaginary solutions.)

The Merrylin Cryptid Museum:

<https://merrylinmuseum.squarespace.com/index/>

My research investigates the relationship between contemporary modernist architecture on the West Coast of Scotland, and its landscape. Specifically, it recognises that modernism, even with a Critical Regionalist sensibility, separates itself from the landscape. This separation from the Genius Loci, the 'Spirit of the Place' can be traced back to the development of perspective, and Cartesian mapping, and leaves us dislocated from

the places we used to inhabit, the narratives we used to travel, from our Landscape Heritage. When we can measure, triangulate and accurately map, we no longer need to 'journey' by the narrative of directions. We can buy and sell land remotely, identified 'off plan' without ever visiting. It allows us to treat the landscape as a resource. On the West Coast of Scotland, this resourcification is manifest in treating the landscape as a site to scrape level to found our building and park our car on; perhaps cultivate an icon of Arcadia in the form of a lawn; safely frame 'wilderness' through a 'picture' window for viewing from the comfort and convenience of our domestic environment. We create extensions of the domestic environment into the 'outside' in the form of decks or patios; but these remain part of the house. They are attached, contained, and may be swept clean of dirt;- the landscape may be kept out of them.

The loss of narrative inherent in this objectification and resourcification of the landscape is illustrated with agonising irony by companies seeking to extract minerals in Northern Australia referring to aboriginal dreamtime story maps as richer, better sources of information than GIS data.

By generating a body of creative artefacts which explore and reflect on the extraordinary rich and layered landscape on Scotland's West Coast, I intend to build a portfolio of works as a speculative **Deep Map**. The key speculation is that this expression of place, a deep mapping through the creation of many, disparate artefacts, may offer a way for contemporary modern architecture to re-forge a lost connection with the *heritage* and *narrative* of the place it inhabits.

Deep Mapping is an emergent methodology at the meeting of geography and creative arts. Originating from William Least-Heat Moon's book, *Prairie Earth*, it is, essentially, **an extensive, rich, big, open ended, multimedia and possibly multi author exploration and illumination of a place**. The many different works, components, layers of this exploration build into a kind of palimpsest. The reader may stitch together these works into a narrative; a narrative, which, like all good narratives, engages the reader.

This is rather congruent with the rich, open ended collection of artefacts grouped together to explore a theme in a museum. Can we see a museum as a kind of Deep Map? Can we use the quasi-scientific framing of 'the Museum' (as opposed to 'the Gallery') to journey through the stories carried by our artefacts? Rather than positioning 'Heritage' as primarily didactic, dry, objective, can the museum first harbour a sense of Wonder, Horror and Awe? Instead of being a repository of facts, can it be a receptacle of truths? of myths? Of Narratives...

A journey in the landscape is a series of events and experiences which connect us to that landscape. When we journey the landscape, we become part of it. We may record the story of the journey in a journal. We may tell the story of the journey as a narrative. We may travel many journeys in, through, by the same place; we may record those journeys perhaps as words, but also perhaps as artefacts; Maybe collecting things we

find in the place, along the way. Maybe as things we make – drawings, poems, songs, sculptures, films, dances... This attempt to explore and reveal something of the place, something hidden, is a deep map.

By recording these journeys of place, we may come to more closely know a place. This multi – stranded response to a place may reveal our place heritage in new ways. But perhaps to never know it completely.

Is this not a rather strong echo of how we may attempt to reveal our heritage in a museum?

We collect together artefacts to explore a theme, a subject, an idea. We order our displays and exhibitions around themes.

But we don't need to explain, to reveal to lay bare entirely: – let us revel in the hidden, the partial, and hold the mystery. By holding the mystery, we may retain the wonder and the horror in a narrative.

Let us not explain; let us puzzle, and allow others the joy of puzzlement. Let us retain the incomplete.

Consider, for a moment, the Mysterious Package Company.

<https://www.mysteriouspackage.com/learn-more>

A company which will send you a gradually unfolding a mystery, told artefact by artefact, over weeks, or months, through the post.

And such is the market for their service that the fee, depending on the elaborateness of the mystery, may be several hundred pounds.

And consider Null Island. It has its own website:

<http://www.nullisland.com/>

Which details the history, geography and economy of the island, and invites you to visit, explains the arrangements for tourism, and allows you to buy real artefacts, souvenirs of this special place.

Perhaps we engage so much with the narrative of Null Island, that we may wish to find out more; it is located at the crossing of the Equator and the Greenwich Meridian; strangely though, it doesn't seem to show on any maps, or Google Earth; What are its Cartesian co-ordinates? Latitude 0, Longitude 0. And eventually we discover that all there is at Latitude 0, Longitude 0 is a weather buoy. Where the Cartesian co-ordinates are 0,0, where they disappear, there is nothing but a narrative so rich and real that you can buy its artefacts.

I'd like to finish with two short readings.

The first, from Alan Garner's wonderful *The Stone Book* (1976 pp. 45-46) is Father, a stone mason, directing his small daughter underground, along a passage too small for him to follow. His narrative directions are the story of the rock itself:

' "You still want a book for Sundays?" said Father. "Even if you can't read?"

"Yes," said Mary.

"Then this is what we're doing," said Father. "So you listen. You're to keep the lucifers dry, and use only one candle. It should be plenty. Let the silk out, but don't pull on it else it'll snap. Its to fetch you back if you've no light, and that's all it's for. Now then. You'll find you go down a bit of steep, and then the rock divides. Follow the malachite. Always follow the malachite. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Father."

"After the malachite there's some old foxbench, then a band of white dimension, and a lot of wet when you come to the Tough Tom. Can you remember it all?"

"Malachite, foxbench, dimension, Tough Tom." Said Mary.

"Always follow the malachite.,," said Father.'

And now, from Finn Family Moomintroll, by Tove Jansson (1948, pp 26-27), where the Hemulin discovers the tragedy of completion, and the loss of the search:

' "Have you lost a rare stamp again?"

"On the contrary," answered the Hemulin, gloomily. "I have them all: every single one. My stamp collection is complete. There is nothing missing."

"Well isn't that nice?" said the Snork Maiden, encouragingly.

"I said you'd never understand me, didn't I?" moaned the Hemulin.'

Moomintroll looked anxiously at the Snork Maiden and they drew back their clouds a little out of consideration for the Hemulin's sorrow. He wandered on and they waited respectfully for him to unburden his soul.

At last he burst out:

"How hopeless it all is!" And after another pause he added: "What's the use? You can have my stamp collection for the next paperchase."

“But Hemulin!” said the Snork Maiden, horrified, “that would be awful! Your stamp collection is the finest in the world!”

“That’s just it,” said the Hemulin in despair. “Its finished. There isn’t one stamp, or an error that I haven’t collected. Not one. What shall I do now?”

“I think I’m beginning to understand,” said Moomintroll slowly. “You aren’t a collector any more, you’re only an owner, and that isn’t nearly so much fun. ”

“No,” said the heartbroken Hemulen, “not nearly.” ‘

Adrian Evans November 5th 2016