Archive Time: Museum Decadence and the Poetics of History

Kevin Hetherington

The Open University

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

I On the Museum's Demise?

Despite the intentions of the founders of many of the great museums of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and successive generations of directors and curators thereafter, the museum has long been treated with a high degree of suspicion by its critics on both the left and right who have come to see it as a space of cultural and artistic death, decadence or the betrayal of the very ideals it seeks to conserve for its viewing public into the future. It might be easiest single out Theodore Adorno for this state of affairs (1967). The epitome of the serious-minded, critically-engaged, mid-twentieth century cultural pessimist, he certainly had little regard for museums though he wasn't an outright advocate for their closure. His friend and contemporary Walter Benjamin, in his typically more ambivalent and complex understanding of the culture of the past, also equated the museum in his great, unfinished *Arcades Project* with the mausoleum and tomb (1999). For him the question was as much one of the presentation of history as artistic reception – though the two could not be disentangled. We need to ask ourselves why an imagery of death might hang over such a space (see also Sherman, 1994; Maleuvre, 1999).

In this paper I am interested in the modern Western institution of the museum, many of which had their beginnings in the nineteenth century, and continue to today as well as influencing the subsequent development of museums across the world beyond their European and North American heartlands. The is no single problematic that defines the museum, just as we have to recognise that they are varied in kind, in scale and in the scope of their ambition. All the same, all are in some ways entangled in time-space issues of archiving – of collecting and given coherence to ranges of artefacts that can be catalogued, stored, studied and displayed to a visiting public in ways that aim to protect the integrity of those artefacts; removing them from the corrosive conditions of everyday life and the uncertainties of the market and conserving them for future generations. A question that all museums engage with, therefore, is one of temporal chronology – of things from the past, their uses and reception in the present and their existence for the future. All museums are embedded,

therefore in philosophical questions of history and not just those for whom history is an explicit part of the narrative that they wish to tell.

Their engagement with the past, as much as with the future, transforms the museum present – as it moves through time – into a contested space of struggle for recognition, access and opportunity. Noble, philanthropic and civic though many of the original goals of the founders of museums might have been, that has not stopped them from being located within relations of power and raising questions as much about the erasure of cultural memories as their preservation. In the last few years it has become the norm that they are now called into question as a mainstream concern rather than simply by those on the radical fringes of academic debate. The space of the contemporary museum is, therefore, a highly contested one; one situated at the centre of questions of the politics of difference and diversity, of post-colonial reception, remembrance of traumatic historical events as well as to catering for an ever more diverse set of audiences, citizen-consumers with mobile phones more than sketch-books in hand these days, who enter their doors wanting to be entertained as much as educated.

Adorno would have hated it. Even before the museum experience we know now became so explicitly a part of the culture industry he was deeply suspicious of this bourgeois institution. As an example of this distrust Adorno's essay, *Valery Proust Museum* (1967) takes its lead from two different approaches to museums by leading literary commentators in France in the early part of the twentieth century - the poet Paul Valery and novelist Marcel Proust – both of whom saw it as a tragic space in which the ennobling intentions of high art had been lost. Adorno presents Valery as a typical conservative cultural critic for whom museums are spaces of decadence and betrayal because they take the great works of art and decontextualizing them from their original context – sacred or secular - thereby undermining, he believes, the true significance and potential revelatory power of that art. Valery was not the first nor the last to adopt this position. One can go back to people like Quatreme de Quincy in the early years of the nineteenth century –The Intendent General for public

arts in the Bourbon government after the revolutionary period of Napoleon Bonaparte whose regime had established the Louvre and really the first principles of the modern museum- he wanted to close the museums down and showed outright hostility to the Louvre and its position within French culture (see Bann, 1984; Duncan, 1995; Maleuvre, 1999)

From its very beginnings museums like the Louvre, then, were not only celebrated within society but also credited by critics with the decontextualising of art and undermining of its experience (see Maleuvre, 1999). The radical political version of this argument is that - the separation of art from experience, which underpins its critique of the museum, expresses the belief that in the museum we see the triumph of everyday experience (Erlebnis) over more serious understanding (Erfahrung) and through that process the aestheticisation of subjectivity; something prone to fetishistic understanding within a consumer society(see Blanchot, 1997; Sherman, 1994; Maleuvre, 1999).

Adorno was never a conservative. One might, therefore, expect him to be more sympathetic with Proust's position than Valery's. Proust, in contrast to Valery, is presented by Adorno as accepting this state of affairs that museums remove art from its significant aesthetic context. However, for Proust, Adorno suggests, it is the individual remembrance of art found in museums that provides its significance thereafter and not the qualities of the art itself. Adorno suggests that Proust sees a visit to the museum in the same way as he does a visit to the railway station – a visit to both is out of the ordinary, likely to be remembered, and also both signal directly issues of mortality in his writing (end of the journey, the afterlife of the artefact (1967: 178)). For Valery the work of art can no longer be enjoyed once it has been placed in a museum; its individuality or singularity betrayed. Whereas for Proust, Adorno suggests, this role of the museum matters little because the significance of art escapes the terrain of aesthetic appreciation and enters instead that of memory, reception and consciousness instead. Both see the museum signalling the death of the work of art but whereas for Valery this is just a total loss, Proust has a more positive view: the demise of the work of art within

the museum is what brings it to life in creative powers of memory and recollection (Adorno, 1967: 182).

Adorno goes on to ask the question which of these is the preferred position and ends up rejecting both, and in his typical uncompromising style, also any middle position between the two as well. For Adorno, Valery simply fetishises the work of art in itself while Proust is accused of subjectivism (183). While one detects in Adorno a trace of sympathy with Proust's position in that both see the museum as an acknowledged space of tragedy that somehow relates to the character of experience within modernity, Adorno cannot raise himself to such an optimistic stance (and certainly not to one that might have any taint of a fetishistic position). Though rather than calling for the end to the museum principle, it is too late for that he believes, he suggests our approach should be to go there – not for the museum experience (see Huyssen, 1995) - but simply to contemplate, in an upmost serious manner, one or two important artworks. Despite being a tragic space for the death of aesthetic reception one can still find within its walls and effectively contemplate, he believes, a few expressions of autonomous art – namely art autonomous from commodity fetishism that resists the museum experience and the culture industry.

Benjamin, in contrast, himself a life-long collector, was more ambiguous in his stance on the museum. Closer to Proust, whom he translated and whose ideas on memory influenced his thought significantly, his archival approach to collecting and presenting fragments of the past was in many ways curatorial in form. Indeed he presents the collector as the contemporary kin of the allegorist who is able to decipher the phantasmagoric messages that capitalist society communicates through its material culture of commodities (1985a; 1999).This ambivalence is on show in his *Arcades Project* where he treats the museum both as a dream-house in which we encounter a relationship between past and present filtered through the lens of commodity culture and also a space in which the possibility of recognising that and the remembrance of what it masks remains a possibility. As he suggests, in the fifteenth century this role of the place of spectacle was assumed by the cathedral,

the seventeenth century had the royal palace and the museum is the nineteenth century equivalent as a space of phantasmagoric wonderment (1999, #L: 406). For Benjamin, the key task is to find a way of disentangling the positive opportunities for reception on history found in the museum from its fetishistic and phantasmagoric mode or representing the past (see also Asendorf, 1993; Maleuvre, 1999).

In his analysis Benjamin elides the museum with a number of other spaces of nineteenth century consumerism including the bourgeois interior or parlour, the world fairs and department stores. He also, significantly, compares it to the subterranean spaces of Paris, notably its tombs and sewers (1999; #L: 407ff). The first set are readily apparent and have figured prominently in the reception of Benjamin's work on cities and commodity culture in recent decades (see Frisby, 1985; Gilloch, 1995). Museums are full of both great works of art as well as artefacts that members of the bourgeoisie might buy and fill their homes with, also a mode of exhibiting found in commoditised sites like world Fairs and department stores also influenced display and forms of spectacle within museums (see Bennett, 1995). Likewise many of the museums of the late nineteenth-century housed galleries that were deliberately laid out with reference to the parlours of grand bourgeois houses (see Klonck, 2009). As well as producing familiar domestic settings that expressed ideas of familiarity, comfort and a recognition for bourgeois achievements by that class, museums at this time, as Charlotte Klonck has recently shown, were concerned principally with cultivating, through the reception of art, the subjective interior of the visitor through an individualised experience and of promoting ideas of bourgeois individual perception in the process (see also Lowe, 1982; Susman, 2003). Museums became the public space of the private interior - historical consciousness understood through a reception of the great works of the past increasingly being replaced by an interest in the arrangements of valued artefacts (though some would say knick-knacks) as an expression of personal good taste and status position (Klonck, 2009: 59; see also Saisselin, 1985).

Benjamin was well aware of the museum's role in the promotion of such phantasmagoric representations and their illusory powers – and he suggests kitsch as the epitome of the Bourgeois taste (1999; see also Olalquiaga, 1999). Indeed, his analysis of commodity fetishism in relation to these dream-houses of commodity culture has become the benchmark for most later studies of the fetish character of culture and cultural institutions (see Saisselin 1985; Asendorf, 1993; Maleuvre, 1999). As a so-called dream-house the museum is, for Benjamin, a space that capitalism uses to create illusions that veil the commodity character of cultural production and art. The museum, unlike the department store, he sees as one of the more genteel version (1999, #L: 403) in which the bourgeois interior becomes the plush, total, a-historical dream world of the commodity fetish. His task, our task, he suggests, is to find ways of awakening from this dream. All of this is now familiar from much recent Benjamin scholarship and I don't intend to dwell directly on it here (see Buck-Morss, 1989; Cohen, 1995; for my analysis on these issues see Hetherington, 2007). The more specific question I'm interested in is why compare the museum to underground spaces like tombs and to the sewer and cemetery.

In the convolute of his *Arcades Project* here he discusses the museum and its relationship to other spaces, Benjamin begins by reference to the effects on Bourgeois culture in its discovery and relationship to the descent into the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii at the end of the eighteenth century. For Benjamin, these heroic, classical ruins are the mis-en-scene of bourgeois cultural enoblement and also its point of weakness on questions of historical consciousness that might be challenged – detonated is the metaphor he proposes elsewhere - through the shock effects of photographically imagined dialectical images that reveals the truth hidden within phantasmagoric illusions of history (see Benjamin, 1973a; 1985b; 1999; Wolin, 1982; Buck-Morss, 1989; Cadava, 1997).

For Benjamin nineteenth century bourgeois culture – and its presentation of history through what Stephen Bann has described as its historical poetics (1984) - engages with the ruins of the past in

ways that present its own ideas about itself as a class with historical significance while at the same time denying the problem of history as a site of struggle and change. This vision was ambivalent about the character of that ruined past as Benjamin suggest in this convolute. Herculaneum and Pompeii were not just remainders of the classical past though which the Bourgeoisie sought to ennoble themselves but were also, in their reception at the end of the eighteenth century, caught up in a repertoire of images and events that provided the min-en-scene too for the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath. We are, of course, reminded here of Marx's famous reference to how this class relates to the past and a construction of its own place in history in his famous quote at the beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past" (Marx, 1978: 9). The part of this passage that is most famous and is taken to illustrate most clearly Marx's disdain for the Bourgeoisie's approach to culture and history and its appreciation of the conservatism of tradition is the next sentence: "The tradition of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." (1978: 9) But it is what he goes on to say that is just as important and, significantly, seems to underpin Benjamin's whole analysis: "and just when they seem involved in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never before existed, it is precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis that they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow names, battle cries and costumes from them in order to act out the new scene of world history in this time honoured disguise and this borrowed history" (1978: 910). This reference to uses of classical imagery and costume – forms of illusion and disguise, but also a part of an historical poetics, could be a description of the nineteenth century museum's understanding of history with its emphasis on classical European artefacts, history painting, sculptures of the great and the good, its classically conceived architecture as well as its modes of historiography and emphasis on heroes, battles and world changing events in which it as a social class is imagined as the culmination and figure for the end of history sitting in its comfy parlour.

What we can say is that the nineteenth century museum as the repository for theses cultural ideals on the past was constructed through a chronotope in which that past came to be realised through distinctive (though changing and at times contradictory) historical poetics (see Bakhtin, 1981; Bann, 1984). The two principle characteristics of this chronotope in the nineteenth century museum and cognate spaces are a temporal narrative organised around the language of chronology and a spatial narrative organised through the language of class – not just social class but classification as a mode of ordering a finite, bounded historical totality.

Chronology meant progress. This was not apparent right from the start in the museum story as many collections were founded on the idea that the finest achievements in art had taken place in Greece and Rome. The question at first was how to measure up to them; to present oneself in heroic guise as inheritors of the great, ordered past. Only as time passed and the bourgeoisie became more confident in its own industrial and artistic achievements did this idea that the modern was better really take hold. The Great Exhibition of 1851 was perhaps the turning point. That event too exemplified questions of class as well.

The forerunner to the modern museum in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the cabinet of curiosities – would be to our modern eyes an heterogeneous collection of stuff with no coherence to its ordering. Filled with shells, historical mementos, mythical beasts, coins and other curiosities, what gave it coherence was an interest in the infinite nature of the natural world and the desire to collect specimens that reflected that diversity (see Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Exotic items that challenged the boundaries of knowledge – some mythical creatures as much as real ones – anything that promoted ideas of knowledge as infinite found their way into such collections as prized objects (Hetherington, 1999). The modern museum, in contrast, abhors the idea of such heterogeneity and the idea that the world is boundless and infinite. Through its representational order it seeks to impose instead the idea of totality on this universe of knowledge and to then divide that totality up into classes that can be represented and known. The problem for such an approach is always the

boundary object. For example, the committee that was tasked with ordering and classifying artefacts within the Great Exhibition in 1851 began by imagining that four classes for objects would suffice as an organising principle for their display (Miller, 1995). However after one member produced his umbrella and asked which class that object should be placed a debate ensued the outcome of which was to increase the number of classes to 29. This `Balkanization of the commodity' as Thomas Richards has called it (1991: 32) is a key element of the problem of the classificatory order of a totality – with no possibility for anything outside, new class positions have to be invented within. The boundary object is inherently problematic to any schema of class. And this did not just affect the classification of artefacts on display but, within museums, also the boundaries between areas of knowledge too. As Chris Whitehead has shown museums, more so than Universities at the time, were prominent in the nineteenth century in the contested and highly political shaping and classification of academic disciplines. Debates, including Royal Commissions, addressing which classes of artefacts should go in which museums and galleries helped to establish and also distinguish the disciplines of natural history, art history, archaeology and anthropology from one another (see Whitehead, 2009).

In such a process of ordering, Stephen Bann has suggested that museum displays, apart from those few which were self-referentially critical and ironic in their approach, typically took one of two forms at this time in how they presented history: i) metonymic displays which placed an emphasis on the classification of art into different schools that succeeded one another chronologically or ii) synechdochical displays where the classification of things as belonging temporally together were organised within a period space – such as a period room (1984: 91ff). In both cases, however, the outcome was to construct an historical setting in which the past came be understood as leading up to the culmination of bourgeois' achievements and ideals which is able to master and control through the historical poetics that it sought to deploy.

What Benjamin was seeking to achieve with his reference to Pompeii as well as to the Parisian spaces of tombs, cemetaries and sewers was to reveal the social anxiety over the idea of history as progress that developed within this bourgeois vision - thereby directly challenge the phantasmagoria of memorialisation and the triumphant end of history that such museum poetics sought to achieve through their representational orders (see also Maleuvre, 1999). Juxtaposing the heroism of the museum with the decadence of these spaces of death he constructs what Sigrid Weigel has called an image-space (Bildraum) (1996; see also Lindroos, 1998) in which thinking through images that are seemingly incongruous in character can open up a new vision, a non-fetishised vision, on what is made apparent. Familiar with all of the techniques of avant-garde photography as well as his reading of the practices of Surrealist art, Benjamin was seeking a new methodology for the understanding of history and its ideologically informed poetics so that they could be subject to detonating critique. These are all spaces of death, corruption, decay and of fossilised remains. Sites of disposal and burial of history. The relationship between the ruin and the museum is his central motif within the construction of this image-space (see Hetherington, 2010).

II The Museum and the Latrine

> We are not dancing on a volcano, but on the floorboards of a latrine that seems to me quite rotten. Pretty soon society will go drown itself in nineteen centuries of excrement and they'll scream themselves hoarse.
>
> Gustav Flaubert, *Letter to Louis Bouilhet*[i]

Benjamin was not the first author to critique the museum as a space of death and ruin. A number of critical nineteenth century writers were equally scathing of what they saw in museums and the principles that they represented. One of the most notable, according to Eugenio Donato, was the novelist Gustav Flaubert (1980). Through a detailed analysis of Flaubert's approach to history in his

novels, notably *Salammbo*, *The Temptation of St Anthony* and *Bouvard and Pechuchet* as well as though some of his private correspondence, Donato suggests that Flaubert typifies a nineteenth century ambivalence to institutions like the library and the museum. We know that there were others, such as Baudelaire and Manet, who had in their sights on the Salon for art as an object of scorn at the same time. What these novels address, Donato suggests, is the theme of the impossibility of an ordered understanding of the world – in effect of totality - and the continual threat of fragmentation into heterogeneous confusion and uncertainty – conditions that Donato identifies as associated with a decadent view of culture and history (1993). The museum, Donato suggests, rests on an archive principle – the idea of a total or bounded collection of artefacts whose statements can be organised in a narrative way. Museums try and tell stories through their collections and their displays – and in the nineteenth century their aim, often as universal survey museums (see Duncan and Wallach, 1980), was to be encyclopaedic in form. In so doing they sought to erase any trace of heterogeneity and uncertainty in their composition (Donato, 1980: 221). The objects in a collection are presented as if, in a realist way, they tell their own story through being placed together. But such a placing is itself premised on the necessity of narrative devices that construct a fabulation through which those artefacts come to have meaning in that arrangement. Take that away and not only do the collections become a meaningless arrangement of stuff, at worst bric-a-brac, but their cultural significance and the story that they tell about history collapses too. In other words, one cannot recover the meaning of history from an artefact itself as museum displays imply but only through is position within a narrative construct – a construct in which it comes to make sense. Donato derives this critique of the museum from his reading of Flaubert. All we have of nature, of culture and of history, Flaubert suggests in this reading of him, are a series of meaningless fragments and to openly acknowledge this is to challenge directly, in a manner not dissimilar to Benjamin, the chronotope of the museum and its positioning of the bourgeoisie within its history.

In many ways this problem of the relationship between the objects on display and their narrative ordering goes to the heart of the question of history and its relationship to an archive principle on which the idea of the museum is founded. The archive, as Derrida has recently pointed out, is both the space where things commence and also where things have command (1996: 1). The first of these principles speaks of `documents' collected together (it could be any form of material culture and not just written texts) and the second the authority that is derived from them in that place. In official archives those documents would be the sources from which the law is derived. In the museum it is another kind of authority that is given voice – the authority of the order of things, of the classification of a natural order that is also an historical order. There are also second order narratives that follow from such a principle: empire, nation, social class, race, gender and so on – all naturalised within the authority of the archive and dependent on a seamless and unquestioned relationship between the ideas of commencement and commandment. What Derrida goes on to show, through his deconstructive reading of Freudian analysis and it relationship to Judaism as an archive, is that that is never in fact the case. In practices these principles come to challenge one another and to problematise the idea of origin on which the principle of such authority is founded.

The archive is already a haunted space, threatened by an unruly spectre that threatens to undo its narrative authority. The spectre that haunted the nineteenth century bourgeois imagination was not communism as Marx and Engels believed Though much has been made of the role of museums in disciplining working class visitors and their riotous culture of fairs and festivals (see Altick, 1978; Bennett, 1995), the bourgeois imagination had the potential to be more troubled by the potential malaise from within – by its own decadence – than by oppositional forces from without. if Donato is to be believed (1980), the spectre that haunts the museum in the nineteenth century is that of the second law of thermodynamics – the spectre of entropy as the antithesis of progress. The communist is, in effect, just a figure of entropy in the bourgeois imagination (see Derrida, 1994). The construction of a stable narrative of history that derives from the archive of sources of its own making is, for the bourgeois imagination, a key principle of the institution of the museum as a space

in which history is held in place. And yet this is also the place where such an anxiety and its possibility is at its most visible and challengeable.

III The Archive and the Two Spaces of Death

This might give some weight to Flaubert's and Benjamin's positions in revealing the museum as a decadent space of ruin. But I am not so sure that we can be fully confident of all elements of their critique. If the anthropologists Robert Hertz is to be believed, and there is no empirical reason yet to doubt him, death has always had two spaces (1960). The disposal of the dead – and here we are also talking about the figure of the past as much as real bodies - across many culture is typically a two stage process that involves the ritual removal, or first burial, of the dead thing temporarily in a state of abeyance for an allotted period of time before its final removal in a second burial in which the remains are discarded once and for all beyond reach as the spirit is received into whatever culturally imagined afterlife exists for it. Clearly it is not the intention of institutions like museums and libraries to utterly dispose of things in their care – quite the opposite, though fire, theft and decay can take their toll in long historical time. The museum is not a space of second burial. Most of the critiques of the museum that we have surveyed, however, assume it to be so and do not fully acknowledge this dual process and the space between – the space, in some cultures, in which the remains are put on display, honoured and any debt to their spirit accounted for, before their final destruction at some time in the future. If we are to retain the metaphor of death in considering the museum and its relationship to history, then it is neither as a site of first or second burial but as the space and time between them that is where it should be placed.

The removal of artefacts from circulation, and from the market for commodities in particular, constitutes the act of first burial on which many museums are premised. Despite the problematic and political problem of de-accessioning which involves either the return of things from museums

back into the market, increasingly so as museums run out of storage space or run out of money to adequately conserve everything they possess, or increasingly through the repatriation of artefacts to indigenous communities who argue that their original acquisition in colonial times amounted to an act of theft, the logic of the museum has always been that once things have been removed from their social context they will not return. Certainly that was the nineteenth century premise on which many museums were founded. Artefacts enter a space of singularity in which their elevated status as important – not only intrinsically but also as part of the narrative into which they are being located – is made apparent (see Kopitoff, 1986). Derrida notes, too, that the archive is always a space of singularity (1996: 3). The singular is important because it is the crossing point between the archive as a space of commencement and commandment – in the singular artefact the recognition of the right to be there and to have a defined purpose in so being is what provides the archive with its ability to command through the narrative of authority that such singular artefacts help to establish. It is through this process, for example, that the museum can have authority as a de-commodified space and yet be used to justify the capitalist principle of exchange value at the same time. The museum is par excellence the space of the commodity in a capitalist society even though its artefacts are not available for sale – as unportable property the singular item in the museum being used to help establish the value of similar things within the market place (see Hetherington, 2007; see also Thompson, 1979).

However it is not this issue of the commodity status of the artefact in the museum that is my principle concern here it is rather the operation of the museum as a space between first and second burial and its relationship to history that I wish to discuss further. While many of the critics of the museum have been right to point to the deployment of time in a chronological manner within the chronotope of the displays and through its historical poetics, as an archive the museum does not always behave in a chronological manner moving from past through present to future. Again, as Derrida suggests, the archive is not really about the past but about the future. It is all about how those times are folded together. Its authority resides not so much in what it contains but in its future

use as an archive of knowledge. Rather than seeing the archive as a space of consigned memory, in material, pictorial and documentary form, Derrida suggests we see it as a space that is about the calling into question of the future (33ff). The archive's principle concern is to present an understanding of what it contains to the future as a problem of response (36). This is different to imagining the museum in the nineteenth century assuming a finite point, a space of death that figures the end of history in the anxious triumph of the bourgeoise as it seeks to deal with disposing with the problem of history. But neither can this museum idea be seen as open to the possibility of multiple futures, including those of its own demise and what it represents. Instead, this institution of betweeness, forecloses on the possibility of such openness by imagining a differentiated set of future responses under the singular possibility of a response from posterity as a unified subject position.

In the nineteenth century museum - and traces of it clearly remain and are made visible by current museum politics associated with the traumas of holocaust, slavery and colonialism in the past as well as the demands for subaltern visibility, repatriation of artefacts and a more open and inclusive approaches to diverse communities of visitors – the opportunity for multiple views of the future are still often foreclosed by the singular, unmarked and universal figure of posterity as the inheritor of the archive. The defence that many museums give for holding on to things in their collection or not altering politically sensitive displays is that they are there for perpetuity – a time without history - conserving those things for posterity. This is a figure for a universal and harmonious subjectivity that will have overcome all antagonisms of difference, will be in a position of detailed knowledge and absolute critical judgment untainted by interests or mired in local politics or conflict. Furthermore, the museum can be read as an imagined foundational archive for the future establishment of such a future subject. It is that vision that it seeks to portray that gives authority to the archival purpose of the museum and its overcoming of history. It can justify what it does in the name of this future of humanity – as the point of commencement the Bourgeois museum assumes for itself the authority of commandment to imagine how the future should unfold for this imagined inheritor of knowledge.

IV Jupiter and the Lightning Rod

> Because duration can be measured by the two standards of absolute age and systematic age, historic time seems to be composed of many envelopes, in addition to being mere flow from future to past through the present.
>
> George Kubler, (2008 [1962]: 91)

The issue left to be considered is where this leaves the critique of the museum. If the idea of the museum as a space of ruin and death, imploding under the weight of its own decadence is to be treated at the very least with a degree of wariness, then one needs to offer an alternative perspective. Otherwise, one is likely to be left either accepting the museum as an institution or alternatively with only the prospect of the gloomy company of Adorno for all perpetuity. While one can find significant traces of an alternative reading in Benjamin, notably in his work on mechanical reproduction and photography and its relationship to history through the image-space (see Benjamin, 1973b; 1985b; Cadava, 1997), I wish to consider here the less convoluted company of two others who might offer us the basis of examining the character of this museum space of betweeness that I have proposed – one of them was a direct contemporary of Benjamin: the cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer (1995) and the other was the art historian George Kubler (2008). In the first we find an intriguing suggestion on the issue of the reception of history, in the latter ideas about the topological character of time that challenges how we might think about the museum chronotope.

In his posthumously published last work, *History - The last things before the Last*, Kracauer makes a tantalizing suggestion – that since the nineteenth century our mode of historical reception has changed. It has, he suggests, become less reliant on story-telling and is increasing photographic in nature (1995: 104ff). It is not simply that we have the possibility of using photographs in the depiction of history but that we now have the ability to see history photographically. In so doing our vision of the past does not simply have to rely on poetic descriptions of events but instead, while

grounded in a fragmented view of reality, has the potential for a more subtle, sophisticated and complex understanding of that past. An approach to history that is filmic or photographic affords the possibility of working with rather than against complexity, uncertainty, contradiction, montage, incompleteness and making them features of the reception of the past rather than trying to produce smooth narrative that adhere to simple chronological principles. He speaks not of linear flows but of history being made up of cataracts of time (1995: 199) and of processes of interference, pockets and provisionality in understanding its dynamics (for a detailed discussion see Barnouw, 1994).

In suggesting this perspective Kracauer was mainly thinking about a photographic mode of reception of the past by professional historians but we might want to broaden that out. One of the influences on Kracauer's thinking on the questions of this uncertain and provisional temporality that lies within this approach to history was the art historian who published an influential book in the early 1960s and offered a novel approach to art history (2008). In effect, George Kubler's book, *The Shape of Time*, does the same for art history that Thomas Kuhn, publishing in the same year, did for the history of science (****) – opens up a new perspective on how changes in knowledge and practice occur within a particular field. The history of art, Kubler suggests, should not to be approach through a linear chronological set of schools succeeding and bettering one another in their vision and technique, but rather in a folded, topological manner of different ways of dealing with a set of familiar problems. He treats art not as the product of a creative genius but as a form of material culture like any other that is socially produced and which engages over time with lasting, but changing relevance.

Any historical sequence, he suggests, is punctuated by the creation of prime objects – new expressions in art, sometimes mutations of older forms, that have the effect of an event – the rest of art is simply skilful replication until a new prime object emerges. Time, he suggests operates with two speeds (2008: 87) – slow cumulative drift expressed through the routine nature of replication and swift forest fires created by new prime objects. With similarities, though not identical, to Kuhn's

schema of normal and revolutionary science, Kubler goes on to suggest that innovation can, however, only occur when it is receptive to its own time – in effect he offers us a theory of history in which chronological sequence is punctuated by events, which if they occur at the right time, have a kairos effect – moments of opportunity where novelty can flourish and things can move off in a different direction. Time, Kubler suggests, is about ongoing patterns of recurrence, history, though, is about moments of change within that pattern (2008: 62). History does not follow a chronology but has the ability to rupture the flow of time.

Kracauer was not the first to suggest that the technology for reproducing images influences how we see the world. One can, of course, find strong elements of this in Benjamin's radical methodology of revealing truth hidden within illusion (1973b; 1999). However, the person to first make this explicit was the curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, William Ivins in his book, *Prints and Visual Communication* (1953). Through a detailed reading of the changing techniques of printmaking, image reproduction and their reception over several centuries, Ivins suggested, it is only with the photograph in the nineteenth century that we begin to see the world first hand for the first time. Before then people had relied on artists for their depiction of the world and they relied on prints of various kinds to translate that world for them. Those prints were always two removes from the original both in production and in their mode of reception but with the photograph first had experience of a recognisable reality is afforded to the viewer. This realism opens up a mode of recognition that is no longer reliant on the techniques of illusion and imaginary devices. It is taken as proof of the world as it is. In effect, the photograph is an example of a prime object that ruptures the flow of time and sends not the history of art, but the history of reception, off in a new direction. The time of the photograph's history maps neatly, also, onto the time of the history of the museum (on the postmodern museum and photography see Crimp, 1993).

Of course, as an art form photography is as open to artistic manipulation as any other art-form but the point Ivins was making was that once this way of seeing had become possible it could never be

put back in the box. It is not just that from the nineteenth century onwards that people begin to see photographically as Ivins suggests, but, we might suggest, following Krakauer, that they begin to see history photographically and that that has the opportunity of changing the relationship between the event and the archive. The relationship between changing modes of reception and the ability to seize moments of opportunity is something that can be extended beyond the world of artistic practices to social practice and its engagement with how it sees the past. If narrative was the glue that held together the Bourgeois vision of history as the end of history and for perpetuity, then under such photographic mode of reception history becomes just a series of `envelopes' in Kracauer's terms provisionally sellotaped together and each envelope contains a an image of the past that can be looked at and understood out of chronological time sequence.

To see history in a topological rather than a chronological manner requires a mode of reception that can apprehend a sequence as a single image – a condensation of the past as a snapshot of time. That was Benjamin's dream too. In the past that was not possible because of the dominance of narrative understandings of sequence, except, perhaps, to a small minority of artists and philosophers. Since the advent of photography however, and especially with its popular uptake during the last century, that mode of reception of the past is open to all who are schooled in reading photographic images and that is a large number of people. Under such conditions the reception of the past, the role of the archive and what happens in the space of the museum will change – though not automatically always for the better. It does, though, open up the past not as something gone but as something that continues to be folded into the present in ways that directly challenge the authority of the unmarked authority figure of posterity. It is not so much the photograph itself that is important here, nor the question of individual perception, but rather the techne of seeing photographically and the influence of that on cultures of reception – notably reception and the recovery of cultural memories of the past as a series of at best provisionally connected images.

Perhaps Marx was right all along, although in a deeply ironic way, not when he was speaking about the dead-weight of Roman helmets that crowned the bourgeoisie in its attempt to locate itself within the historical narrative but in one of those note-book moments that reveals an envelope of time when he spoke about the much lighter apparel of Greek Epic poetry and its enduring significance as a cultural resource:

> Is the view of nature and of social relations on which the Greek imagination and hence Greek [mythology] is based possible with self-acting mule spindles and railways and locomotives and electrical telegraphs? What chance has Vulcan against Roberts & Co., Jupiter against the lightning-rod and Hermes against the Credit Mobilier? All mythology overcomes and dominates and shapes forces of nature in the imagination and by imagination; it therefore vanishes with the advent of real mastery over them […] From another side: is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the Iliad with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish? But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. *The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model* (Marx 1973: 110-111 emphasis added).

The sublated will always have its revenge on those who think they have disposed of it. As a figure of the past, it continues to stalk the archive as an opportunity, a resource for the making of prime objects with continuing relevance and appeal, and as the possibility of recovery and as the realisation of the event. The event, then has a relationship to the archive and this is one that can be expressed through a mode of reception that see the world through images rather than structured and ordered narratives. In archive spaces such as the museum the issue is as much about visitors and subject positions as it is about images. The issues becomes one of opportunity rather than expectation. It is about the recovery of what we see and its realisation within the context of our own social lives. If one could removes some of the subjectivism and the individualizing of this reception and also his disdain for the photograph one might say that Proust was right all along about the museum though it is though through the camera rather than the involuntary memory in the mind's eye that affords such a position of reception.

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[i] Quoted in Donato (1980: 236).