The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude

Global Art, Memory and Post-Fordism

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Museum Chronotopics: On the Representation of the Past in Museums

'If something is important, then importance must be "ascribed" or "attached" to it; in other words, it is important because the historian is interested in it.'
Georg Simmel[1]

It is an irony of history that Georg Simmel's words apply to himself because twentieth-century sociology textbooks tended to marginalize him in relation to other so-called founding fathers of the discipline, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Only in the last two decades has Simmel's work come to prominence. In the late-modern period where fragmentation, polyphony and hybridity have become prevailing metaphors for social phenomena, Simmel's micro-observations have begun to be appreciated. At the turn of the last century, this idiosyncratic sociologist was already speaking about social networks and their unconditional hybrid nature. Today, this idea has been happily embraced by network-thinkers such as Manuel Castells, Bruno Latour, Rudi Fuchs and the actor-network school. According to these sociologists, an event only acquires meaning when it is connected to a network, and only within the boundaries of that configuration. This tautological account also applies to history, or rather to historical consciousness. Indeed something or someone only acquires historical importance when this importance is ascribed retroactively. However, not everyone has such intermediating power. Where historical 'facts' are concerned, the historian, for example, plays a crucial intermediate role between the present and the past. Simmel describes this in no uncertain terms in his book *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (*The Problems of the Philosophy of History* [1892/1905] 1977). Whilst the originality of Simmel's argument has already disappeared into the folds of history, he remains a discerning thinker on modern history. Despite his cosmological framework, the principles of his theory have a contemporary relevance; he was one of the first to unsettle historical doxa by establishing their relativity. Nowadays such a pronouncement may seem all too evident or clichéd. But we should not forget that Simmel formulated this idea in the early 1890s.

However, the concern of this essay is not to elaborate Simmel's theoretical framework but to show how his ideas may be developed in relation to museums in a globalized society. The importance of his stress on mediating between present and past will be emphasized because, for Simmel, it is not what is said, but how something is said

that determines the possibility of a connection between a historical event and the present (Simmel, [1892/1905] 1977). Moreover, causality, consistency and resemblances can only be experienced, not objectively observed. Though the possibility of grasping particular facts and historical events does exist, their mutual coherence is the result of interpretation. In other words, a causal relation and consistency cannot be deductively inferred from empirical facts (Simmel, [1892/1905] 1977). These are, to use Simmel's own expression, retroactively 'woven', and it is the nature of that fabric which determines if the events of the past permeate into the present. Thus the weaver, so to speak, is an important mediating link between different periods of time, and constitutes an indispensable translation centre between present and past. Simmel appreciated the increasing importance of the historian in all of this for his own time. Thus, whilst an existing 'practising memory' was a component of ritual traditions, historical science had gained importance as an intermediary. Within the truth paradigm of modernity, professional historians and their science were becoming an obligatory passage to the days gone by. However, as the twentieth century drew to a close it was becoming apparent that historians were in increasing competition with other 'memory workers' such as the many heritage brokers. It may be that in a secularized world it is the latter who are the heirs to the ritual traditions and to the traditional experience of history. As we have seen, they professionally organize an economy of experience of the past.

Visitor Studies: Towards a Relational View

In arguing that the presentation of history is a matter of mediation, I do not, of course, mean that this is only done by professional historians and heritage brokers. The museum visitor is also an active interpreter of history. To characterize the visitor as active is to make a distinction between reception and perception. Whereas the former notion refers to a passive taking in of phenomena, the latter indicates an active experience: a museum visitor observes by means of a viewing grid or schema that he has acquired through education or socialization. The same may also be said for the so-called

1 Georg Simmel (1858–1918), who for much of the twentieth century was best known for his influential essay on the metropolis and mental life, also wrote widely on aesthetics and history, as well as sociology. Sociology's much vaunted interest in culture as well as in consumption, sensibility and the body has re-established the importance of his work for the discipline.

'passionate viewer', who is 'blindly' carried away, overwhelmed by the presentation of an art exhibition or a historical event. The relation between subject and object, between the viewer, reader, listener and the museum display, consists of a double synchronous movement of active passion and passive action. The French sociologist Antoine Hennion describes this movement with regard to music (Hennion 1993; Gomart and Hennion, 1999) but it can also be seen at work in a museum. The museum visitor has to develop all kinds of active skills before he can enjoy the museum passively. The point is that the way something is presented can itself stimulate the development of the appropriate skills. Thus, intercourse with museum presentations may be described as a subtle 'interweaving' between manipulation and being manipulated. The visitor may develop skills, practices and a vocabulary, only to be overpowered finally by that which is on display. The quintessential museum experience is, therefore, the result of a reflexive acting and, at the same time, an unreflective undergoing of the visit. Research in *Het huis van Alijn* (Alijn's House), a museum of urban folk culture in Ghent (Belgium) has made it clear that this double movement between 'active' and 'passive' can be established by observing people in the course of their museum visit.[2] Filmed recordings of museum visits show how participants slow down or stand still when they recognize certain artefacts, or when a historical context is offered, possibly by the attendants. However, the appreciation of this double movement is especially sharpened by a particular room in which museum visitors are themselves invited to identify the original uses of objects. This room, the Identification Room, forms part of the standard museum visit, so that every visitor normally passes through it. In the room stands a table with objects from the collection placed upon it. The origins and former uses of some objects are known by the museum staff, but in other cases the original use or meaning is a riddle, both for visitors and for the staff. So visitors are invited to write down on a piece of paper what they think they are about. As an extension of this public space, staff members also take suitcases full of artefacts to homes for elderly people so that residents may talk about the objects and their experiences of using them in the past. As another extension of the Identification Room, objects were publicized in newspapers so that readers could send in their own stories about the artefacts. These stories were, in turn, collected and displayed at the museum, so that new visitors could read about the different interpretations. The research suggested that this alternation between passive viewing and active interpreting serves to intensify the usage of the

whole museum. Thus, for example, the objects in a display cabinet (these are less accessible in *Het huis van Alijn*) were scrutinized further as visitors passed through the Identification Room. In other words, there are museum presentations which transform the viewer into an active participant who starts co-constructing the meanings of things. Or in the words of Gomart and Hennion: '... a sculpture exhibit does not bring together already existing objects, subjects and social groupings — rather, this is a conjunctural event in which the relevant objects, subjects, and social groupings are co-produced' (Gomart and Hennion, 1999).

Thus, without an active gaze, hardly anything is experienced or observed. Gomart and Hennion's sociological insight derives from Actor-Network theory (ANT), which differs from other sociological approaches such as phenomenology and from more structural approaches such as that which is associated with the well known work of Pierre Bourdieu (1979). ANT sees individuals as particular and dynamic actors who can, up to a point, overcome their social background, and are certainly not fixed or imprisoned in their own historical frame. On the contrary, every experience can be a part of an active learning process in which the singular actor develops and even re-articulates their personal mode of attending to the world. In this case, this also means that the relationship between museum and society is a dynamic one in which museum displays can always reach out to endow the visitor with new skills which will help him in redefining his perceptual grid. But on the other hand, the museum will also learn from developments in the wider society to construct other presentation formats. The development of viewing and listening skills generates an observation grid for the visitor by means of which the environment is interpreted. Museum presentations may

2 The general research question was about the presentation and perception of cultural heritage: how is cultural heritage presented in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and how does the public perceive it? The research started in 2002 at the Centre for Sociology of Culture of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) and continued into 2005. Its main aim was to develop ideal types of presentation models, considering the targets of museum personnel and heritage brokers on the one hand, and the social background of participants on the other hand. The research was mainly based on qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews with museum personnel, heritage brokers and visitors, and the filming of displays and their viewers.
This was done by one post-doctoral researcher with the help of his supervisor and students. Ten cases were selected following selection criteria of the time period, target groups of the museum, 'high' versus 'low' culture, the display format (e.g. use of ICT, extraordinary formats), religious versus secular heritage, etc.

go along with that grid or they may even attempt to change it. In the absence of an 'optimistic' or non-deterministic and dynamic perspective on the social actor, such as that of ANT, the mutability of visitors' frames of reference will always seem to be relatively limited. For it is evident to the sociologist that the spectacles through which reality is viewed remain largely constructed and fixed by everything which Pierre Bourdieu (1979) refers to as primary (upbringing at home) and secondary (education at school) socialization. Sociologists Gordon Fyfe and Max Ross started from these premises in their research on museum visitors (1996). By means of in-depth interviews with families of different social backgrounds they found out that the interpretive reference frame of people visiting a local cultural historical museum differs significantly from that of people visiting a museum of fine arts. The researchers established that the people in the first group are chiefly looking to locate their own existence within a spatio-temporal framework. Exhibitions in cultural history museums serve as a reading grid to confirm the local embeddedness of the visitor. The visitors to a regional cultural historical museum, therefore, are mainly focused on the local histories and events of their local community. It is exactly this local 'interwovenness' that grants the artefacts on display a significant meaning so that the boundaries of a visitor's own territory are thereby seldom exceeded. In contrast, Fyfe and Ross identify the so-called 'trans-local visitor': the man or woman who looks beyond the local *Gemeinschaft*. The boundary-exceeding approach of a museum for fine arts better fits this segment of the public, because their familiar spatio-temporal viewing grid is reconfirmed by the 'trans-local' context of the artistic institution. The museum serves as a source of inspiration in the quest for new ideas that push back the horizon of the professional fine arts visitor. This visitor, who views the world more easily through 'trans-local' spectacles acquired by virtue of his education, training and profession, is characterized by a relatively high degree of detachedness from the local (Fyfe and Ross, 1996). Thus, to a certain extent, what a museum presents can confirm the habitus of the visitor and can play a role in social reproduction and the constructions of identity within specific social strata.

The majority of visitor studies start from the above mentioned premises, namely that there is a causal relation between social background variables and cultural participation. Fyfe and Ross refine that insight by looking at the nature of the local interwovenness: they ask, for example, whether the participant has always lived in the same place, or whether he is an outsider (Fyfe and Ross, 1996).

Social background characteristics and the individual's geographical trajectory both strongly mark the observation grid of the museum visitor. In themselves, these kinds of studies are beyond reproach, for they provide important insights into visitor participation patterns. However, despite their virtues, these studies rarely take into account the distinction which is made here between modes of participation and modes of presentation. For this reason, this kind of research has sometimes been overtaken by new developments in the field. For example, some museums now stage the past by means of all kinds of cross-over techniques for combining so-called high and low culture, and international and local frames of reference. Social anthropologist Sharon Macdonald, for one, demonstrates how the Transcultural Galleries at Cartwright Hall in Bradford, England, present a layered image of a local community by means of presentation methods that transcend the distinction between fine arts and crafts. On the other hand, contemporary artists are engaged to intervene at exhibitions (Macdonald, 2003). In Belgium this is again illustrated by *Het huis van Alijn*, where contemporary visual artists, cartoonists, poets, writers and others are called upon to tell the folk history of a town. Such aesthetic presentations certainly presuppose a different public. The visitor is approached differently, at least, and is addressed by means of another grid of possibilities.

Towards a Chronotopy of the Museum

As already argued, history and heritage do not simply appear in the consciousness of museum visitors. What is perceived as relevant history or heritage is offered to the visitor as an artefact or as an event of some historical importance. The mediator decides what is worth inheriting, so to speak. The occupations of historical mediators, subsidized or not, and perhaps also those of memory workers, official or not, locate what is valuable from the past, and what has historical or eventual relevance on a scale. In fact we often encounter the latter as an argument in exhibition catalogues, discursive presentations of museum collections, or introductions to historical documentaries. What is important about the past is determined by the agenda of the present. Meanwhile, historical events and objects are staged with the dramaturgical means of today. Time and space are said to be the two central ordering principles serving this purpose. Given that, for Western modernity, both dimensions constitute the most important coordinates of human experience, this should come as no surprise (Benjamin,

1996). The perception of the past as well as that of everyday events are given meaning within a spatio-temporal grid. In order further to qualify the relationship between museum displays and the visitor as inhabitant of a global world, this frame has to be refined. This can be done using the notion of chronotopy used by Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin in his posthumously published study of the novel to disentangle the different connections between time and space in that literary genre (1981). Chronotopy means that both dimensions are treated as symmetrical and absolutely interdependent. The experiences of time and space are unconditionally connected and, at least from a theoretical point of view, need to be treated as equivalent analytical concepts. They constitute the observation grid by means of which cultural products, which in the case of Bakhtin were mainly literary, relate to the cultural context within which they are produced as well as perceived. In the case of display theories, visual culture, historical theory, visitor studies, at least three general ways of connecting time and space which are of relevance for studying the museum world can be identified. They are local time, global time and glocal time.

Local Time

A conception of time which is especially relevant to the museum world, and which in the West has constituted a dominant chronotopy, is linear time. History, conceived in this way, is presented as a chronological succession of events that can be clearly placed along a time-line. Formal history still makes use of this time dimension; it may suffice to recall, for example, the time-line from prehistory until the present day that is represented on the walls of elementary school classrooms. However, not only schools, but also quite a lot of museums make use of linear time as a practical guide. The first room of a museum route invariably starts with period x and we end up many years or decades later with artefacts from period x+1. The past is almost mathematically surveyable and subdivided into little compartments. Such a mode of presentation makes us experience the past in a certain manner. The past is first and foremost a pluperfect time, meaning a closed period for which the story is fixed. The history of how things actually were is known and no longer permeates the present, whilst no one could imagine that a present would still be able to intervene in the past. Chronological narration thus claims an absolute past which in fact is monochronous. Such presentation barely tolerates a personal point of view or a particular vision. One cannot

touch the past, which is impersonal and sacrosanct. Historical events or heroes receive their importance or grandeur from the very fact that they belong to history. The tautology decrees that the past itself is the source of their 'authentic' reality or value. This form of historical narration functions according to the mechanism of the memorial: the history that is narrated is at the same time memorable or consecrated. The American sociologist of performance art, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, refers to such presentations as in-context displays. Objects are shepherded in a discursive regime, whereby it is not their own performative strength, aesthetic value or eloquence that most matters. Rather, artefacts are only (re)animated by the story in which they are introduced or the historical knowledge that is released about them. In other words, what is displayed is only an illustration of the discourse that is set up (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). In an absolute historical presentation, whatever is to be known about the artefacts has to be taken as the only 'true' interpretation. The model is based on the classical communication scheme in which a message passes noiselessly from sender to receiver. Such a model presupposes a passive participant who barely interprets, and who neither transmutes the things nor moulds them to his own will. It implies a museum visitor who, for certain, does not inhabit the history or geographical setting in which the event occurs. Such a presentation offers the special advantage of telling a lucid story which provides the viewer with a solid grip. Moreover, it may provide objects with a meaningful frame, for as suggested, performative strength lies outside the artefacts which are only given life within their discursive setting. In addition, they derive their historical weight from the place where they are displayed (the museum) and the authorities and experts surrounding them. To explain the success of the chronological narrative line would require research in itself, but one thing may be said without much doubt: from a tender age we are socialized within the idea of causality and chronological succession — witness the classroom timeline. Monochronous narration certainly has an important pedagogical and educational value.

The careful unwinding of time over a linear path often goes hand in hand with an equally meticulous spatial delineation. Historical adventures are unwound within sharply delineated places which are locally traceable. The story of that alliance between chronology and geography has been widely described (see for example Gathercole and Lowenthal, 1990). In the romance of the nation state not only historical scientific analysis, but also ethnology has been readily

used as an instrument within a geopolitical setting. Soil and people merge together in an inextricable choreography of the *Gemeinschaft*. Historical figures or characters are not coincidental residents of an estate. Rather, they are its inhabitants in the sense that they live in and through their environment. Moreover, the geographical setting lives through the medium of community, for the soil counts as the most important bearer of the tradition and the histories of its inhabitants. Roads, paths, trees and buildings constitute the heritage of the ancestors and the links that connect successive generations with each other. Consequently, moving a road, felling a tree or demolishing a building constitutes an attack on the past and also on the continuity of the community. Though this chronotopy is no longer taken seriously by the majority of historians and museum personnel, it is hard to deny that it still acts on the sentiments of some museum visitors. Though it may no longer have much to do with a (geo)political perspective, time and locality are often unconditionally connected. This is reflected for example by the heated discussions regarding a central depot for heritage associations from different parts of a region or the sometimes tedious negotiations by a municipal museum for the loan of works from local museums. The members of heritage associations and people concerned with local (ethnological) museums are often quite attached to their local connections, and sometimes rightly so, as many artefacts become meaningless when they are plucked out of the environment that impregnates them with meaning. Meanwhile the alliance between time and locality, hence 'Local Time' generates a chronotopy that matters for museum visitors, and perhaps chiefly so for 'heritage activists'. Likewise, the spatio-temporal grid remains intact for many 'history-loving souls', when histories are staged on a larger scale in a town or country. It is, of course, widely known that in the latter two cases chronotopy is quite often exploited for commercial reasons such as city marketing, or for political purposes by the nation state.

Global Time

The opposite pole of Local Time is of course Global Time. Whether we like it or not, in the last decade the concept of globalization has been popularized as the master key to social analysis. The frequent use of the notion in various contexts and with diverse meanings has rendered the concept into a rather colourless and perhaps negative definition of social change. Thus, globalization often conveys an understanding of social change as the loss of the local. Roots, in the sense

of people's local roots, become roads, while authentic landscapes, village views, and city squares make way for non-places such as airports, parking lots, uniform shopping malls and the inevitable McDonald's. And in the case of the museum world, we have an institution such as the Guggenheim. In fact globalization often seems to go hand in hand with that other polyvalent concept from the seventies, Americanization. Here we come to a second, crucial chronotopy, as the experiences of time and space interact with each other in quite a different way within a global setting. The markers of time do not claim authenticity which is tied to the soil, but rather they claim universality through identical key points which spread worldwide and thereby install instantaneous time. The latter concept of time is borrowed from the English sociologist John Urry. In *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000) he describes the experience of time, amongst other things, as the effect of rapid information and communication means that see to it that similar kinds of information spread almost simultaneously over the entire planet. Moreover, within this space of flows, technological developments and hyper-smooth modes of transportation generate a cluttered procession of artefacts between highly divergent cultures. The availability of cultural goods eases them away from their place of origin. So we no longer need to travel in order to eat Pakistani food, buy Chinese clothes or look at African masks. Moreover, the spatio-temporal interpretation grid is made uniform by means of the ever-increasing 'modularization' of education, training, labour and leisure time (Urry, 2000).

The customary 'heritage' presentations associated with this chronotopy are widely known: Disneyland in the United States and Paris, or Mini-Europe and the entirely simulated historical scenery around the Brussels Atomium in Belgium. The rationality of the historical chronology makes room here for an emotionally experienced 'pastness'. Because everything revolves around the direct experience of the past or a touch of the past, correct data, right locations and historical context do not really matter. Time no longer serves as an educative organizer of the heritage experience, but as an animator in which one may lose oneself for a while. The event or sensation gives the participant a flush of past-ness. Far from the aforementioned monochrony, such presentations simulate a history that comes within reach. So it is no coincidence that these Post-Fordian heritage presentations often make use of techniques of mediation which appeal to all of the senses. The remote scientific gaze is exchanged for, or at least compensated by, scents, sounds, and especially a variety of

tactile stimulants. The participant is literally besieged on all sides by a simulacrum of the past.

Historical tourism and other forms of commercial exploitation are often denounced as the causes of such heritage presentations. Hence, Disney becomes an easy target for those of its critics who judge the theme park to be a 'perversion' of the past. Yet history and economy do not necessarily conspire to generate this chronotopy, for the predecessors of simulated heritage cannot be traced to commercial motives alone: dioramas, style rooms and other mimetic recreations of historical settings are well known examples of museum presentations that also appeal to a total experience. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett takes note of that genesis of historical presentations in *Destination Culture* (1998), where she contrasts the in-context displays mentioned above with in-situ displays which favour experience at the expense of historical knowledge. Long before computers existed, these presentations were already simulating a virtual world. The heritage effect is based on the ambience of a travel experience and the pleasure of entering a different way of life. The participant feels that he is a nineteenth-century explorer, and is able for a moment to step into the life of another. The core of the illusion in this chronotopy is the feeling of being able to travel through time without a time machine. The possibility of movement through space is confused with time travel.

Notwithstanding the simulacrum however, it is hard to deny that many museum visitors are seduced by this call of the past and that heritage brokers are aware of that. Some of them, therefore, play with the possibilities of a total experience in order to lure a larger public. For example, museums will make use of anything from scents and soundscapes to virtual simulation machines. An examination of a sample of about two hundred public presentations by museums and other heritage projects revealed that the most of them did not mention the historical period with which they were concerned in promotional materials such as programmes and leaflets. Likewise, a large proportion of museums and heritage mediators seem to prefer to tempt visitors with an enigmatic sense of 'pastness' rather than a lucid past.

Glocal Time

Whereas the past is out of reach in the monochronous narrative, a Global Time simulates the notion that we can step without a hitch into a time machine. However, notwithstanding the great difference in historical experience both presentations follow the same strategy,

for they both deny their own role in mediating between present and past. Within the first chronotopy the expert, usually a historian, effaces his own labour of construction by creating the illusion that historical facts 'speak for themselves'. In the second spatio-temporal frame, the mimetic illusion denies that the past is staged. The Simmelian account of mediation introduced at the beginning of this essay is not reflected by either of these two heritage presentations. Herein lies the very essence of our last chronotopy, which is called Glocal Time. The realization that there exist different localities also generates the consciousness of multiform times. In other words, every locality has its own time. Nevertheless, those same localities can have an international character when they are connected worldwide with other localities. However, it should be noted that only the connection determines a synchronous time experience. For example, the opening hours of the only cafe in a small village may determine the rhythm of a local community. However, that same time goes by differently for employees at the stock exchange in London, New York and Tokyo, who exist within the same chronotopy in spite of their geographical distance. However, this can be quite a different thing to a virtual community chatting away with each other amiably next door to the stock exchange buildings in the respective cities. So it is important to understand that our conception of both time and space comes into being through connections. Our conception of space, like our experience of time, depends on the network or configuration in which we find ourselves. If, after their day's work is finished, our London, New York and Tokyo stockbrokers visit a local pub, they are also entering into different time and space coordinates.

The very consciousness of the diversity of people's own times generates a new, polyphonous, view of days gone by, and different heritage presentations may continuously come up with ever different time loops. In contrast to Global Time, which departs from an absolute relativism, reducing history to an enigmatic 'pastness', a Glocal Time generates the consciousness of diversity. This also constitutes an entirely different conception from the first chronotopy, which organizes history according to one absolute principle, namely monochrony. Apart from the realism of chronological narration, and the absolute relativism of mimetic staging, Glocal Time installs what might be called a relative relativism (Latour, 1993). This is brought about by showing that there exist many experienced pasts, and that access to a specific past depends on the instruments of disclosure that are used to enable it. Hence, the museum personnel may draw their

conclusions from the Simmelian account and exhibit their own role: their staging of the past is put forward as one of the possible stagings. It shows a picture of itself and is thereby reflexive. In other words, the gap between a historical event and the way it is currently presented is dramatized.

The above mentioned complex narration of heritage is what is referred to as the 'novelization' of the past, a notion which, again, is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). In his literary research, Bakhtin contrasts the novel with the epic genre. In the case of the latter genre, the adventure unrolls monochronously within an absolutely unreachable past. The great epic or story of the untouchable hero stands central. The novel, on the other hand, is polyphonous: not only are temporal coordinates shuffled but, and this is crucial for our argument, maximal contact with the present is staged by means of an open ending. The narrated event is connected with the present by means of which a vital contact with an incomplete, yet evolving, contemporary reality comes into being. The open ending of the past provides for a connection with the present by means of which the literary genre accentuates the sense that history has not yet ended. In other words, the 'novelization' infects the past with a spirit of endless incompleteness. Bygone days are placed in the extension of a daily flow of events. Through the connection with that contingent 'everydayness' the past is also injected with it. There is no first word any more because the last one has not yet been spoken. This principle of the novel is what we see at work in some heritage presentations. For example, *Het huis van Alijn* deliberately carries the subtitle 'the museum of things that (never) pass'. It is precisely that 'never' between brackets which symbolizes the ambivalent and reflexive attitude of an institution which oscillates hesitantly between present and past. When, by contrast, we are dealing with a museum of things that do pass, we fall back into the old chronology of a distant past. A museum of things that never pass, on the other hand, appeals much more to a sense of 'pastness'.

Chronological narration is broken open through the novelization of the past. The distance between the present and bygone times disappears, not because one can travel without problem through time, but because the present day is located as the extension of history, or rather a multitude of histories. The strategies that museums use for such presentations of the past also display similarities with the style characteristic of a novel. On the one hand, curators use the aestheticization of the past, which is enabled through rendering exhibition formats relative. For example, artefacts are no longer only displayed

along a time line; the aesthetic requirements for combining objects are also taken into account. In *Het huis van Alijn*, the arrangement of objects takes place in permanent consultation with a visual artist. An aesthetic bias obviously makes far more configurations possible than a mere monochronous narration. And artefacts are freed from their historical corset by means of a formal play of presentations which also increases the number of interpretative possibilities for the participant. On the other hand, laughter breaches the distance from the past. This second strategy of irony, parody and travesty knocks the heroes, gods and demigods from the absolute past off their pedestals. Such an approach can be discovered in the Belgium Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, where young artists were asked to make so-called 'interventions' in works of the permanent collection. Guests may select works from the collection which they deem 'relevant' and place them in the exhibition space. However, they can also push a collection aside and use it as background for their own artistic project. This often brings about a sort of visual and playful comment on museum pieces. Consecrated artists from the past are thrown off their historical pedestals, but at the same time their very identification constitutes a sort of tribute. In fact, their interventions function like a joke, as Paolo Virno (2008) describes this in relation to innovation. But this will be explored in the following essay. What is important is that laughter, irony, parody and travesty enable a space of open questioning that brings historically consecrated artists and artefacts into an unusually familiar proximity with contemporary artists. This leads them to a 'fearless' zone of observation and investigation. It generates a general feeling that 'it is okay to experiment with the past'. It is exactly this Socratic irony and dialogue that make free research possible, according to Bakhtin: 'Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization.' (Bakhtin, 1981)

The monologue about the past in the aforementioned playfulness is bent to a dialogic imagination. This notion, according to Bakhtin (1981), makes it clear that every meaning can only be seen in relation to other meanings, and that there is permanent interaction between those meanings, so that they also transmute throughout time. In the dialogue a word, a discourse, a culture or a history is made relative, 'less privileged' and at the same time more unstable. It should be noted however, that making something relative does not mean 'minimizing' it. On the contrary, it concerns how we

'constitute a dialogue with' or literally 'relate to' that something. Thus consciousness of a continuous struggle for definition about the same things comes into being. With respect to the historical facts, the 'novelized' museum presentation enters into a dialogue with the past, thus presenting the visitor with an especially complex chronotopy. Not only is he given a historical interpretation, but that very interpretation is also on display in the presentation. The historical staging is literally presented as dependent on time and place. From this grows the realization that the past is time and again given meaning by an ever-moving present.

A Display Example: In Flanders Fields

All of the above may sound a little abstract, but the example of In Flanders Fields Museum, may make things more concrete. In Flanders Fields, tells the story of the First World War (1914–1918), which is a time, in the Belgian town of Ieper (Ypres), which is a place.[3] Both of these ingredients, those of date and place, constitute the central time-space coordinates of the presentation. We can define this chronotopic as an example of local time. Indeed, we are provided with basic information about our place in linear time and about the concrete location. Nevertheless, other chronotopics are presented apart from these. For example, at the entrance of the museum, the visitor receives a card with the name of someone who played some kind of role in Ieper during World War I. By subsequently inserting the card in different computers, chronologically installed along the museum trajectory, the visitor receives biographical information about 'his' character. This chronotopy follows different time and space coordinates to those of the aforementioned grid. The life that is told usually begins before the tragic events of the Western Front and continues thereafter, unless the person in question is killed in the battle. Moreover, the character may come from a different place and only reside temporarily in Ieper, later on to emerge in yet another location. In other words, the biographical story follows a different chronotopy than that of the factual historical parameters: 1914–1918 at Ieper. In fact we are dealing here with a possible presentation of glocal time because the experience of a grand history (the First World War) is particularized. The visitor gets an idea about how the human disaster was experienced in different ways by different people whose different biographical paths simultaneously evoke other time loops.

In addition to all this, In Flanders Fields Museum regularly

calls on contemporary artists to (re)interpret the events of the beginning of the twentieth century. This often leads to artistic presentations that bring certain universal themes, such as 'war is of all times' or 'the human tragedy' to the fore. This is the very message we receive as we enter the final section of In Flanders Fields: the first modern war, we are told, was not the end, but the beginning of many new wars. Moreover, the tragic events of the past can teach us lessons for the present. With this latter suggestion, the war museum sets itself up as an advocate of peace. The coordinates of time and space, depending on which is the last story to be told, are no longer linked to time and space, for war is now seen as common to all times and a universally deplorable event. This brings us to the above mentioned global time. At times this universalism takes the upper hand at the museum and the visitor who is interested in an economic and political introduction to the First World War may have a hard time finding what he is looking for. The political situations in, for instance, Germany, as well as the economical situation in Europe, are submerged under the universalistic peace message of the museum. In other words, it gives little sense of the wider development of local time (economical and political facts) or glocal time (different interpretations made at that time by, for example, Belgians and Germans about the economical and political situation). This lack of context gives world war the aura of some natural disaster hanging unconditionally above our heads.

In the Museum's different stagings of one historical event we can detect three different general chronotopics. However, whereas some stagings are more developed in their presentation, others are submerged in the dramaturgy. The crucial thing is that the visitor finds points of contact with one or more of them, or perhaps with none of them. Thus, he may let the visit pass by without meaning, due to the lack of a spatio-temporal presentation grid. Social background characteristics as well as the staging of displays see to it that the visitor is attracted by one or other chronotopy. The well-educated world traveller is, for example, more sensitive to glocal time, because he

3 Ieper (Ypres), a small Flemish market town close to the French border, was the scene of some of the worst fighting during a series of three major battles on the Western front during the First World War. Whilst the combined casualty figures for the German and Allied armies are a matter of dispute, the consensus is that at least 550,000 soldiers and thousands of non-combatants were killed. The town was virtually destroyed. Flanders Fields Museum is an award-winning interactive museum which was re-opened following a major refurbishment of the old World War museum in 1998, and which interprets the Great War at Ieper.

understands that different places can have different time experiences. By contrast people who hardly leave their small town, and whose access to the wider world is primarily by means of their televisions, are more sensitive to global time. Of course not all visitors conform to this black-and-white distinction. A lot of visitors can be attracted by several chronotopics and the intelligent exhibition-maker is able to play with those divergent spatio-temporal frames: he can let them merge into each other or accompany each other temporarily, after which they may again go their separate ways. It is then up to the visitor to pursue or not pursue certain coordinates, or to eventually return and combine time and space presentations. However, it should be noted that the notion that the museum visitor has a single and monolithic identity does not conform to reality. A historian, for example, will visit In Flanders Fields with a different expectation pattern than, say, the son or daughter of a war veteran who was actually there in 1917, knee-deep in the mud. And to make the analysis more complex: there are also historians whose fathers were shooting or whose mothers were nursing in 1914 at Ieper. It is precisely this subtle or 'layered' vision of the participant that deserves our attention. The particular ways in which museum visitors appropriate what is presented, and may go on to tinker with and nuance their own identity, is emerging as both an interesting and important question.

'Multi-Chronotopic' Museums and 'Multi-Chronotopic' Visitor Studies

This essay began with Simmel's notion of historical mediation and concluded from this insight that 'classical' visitor studies often lack a relational point of view. They relate the social background of participants only to what is presented and not to how history is told by museums. That is why many visitor studies are overtaken by developments in the field. Today, some historical institutions try to attract different layers of society by developing a polyphonic display strategy. This essay tried to capture this by developing a relational perspective on museum professionals, their displays and the visitor. Bakhtin's notion of chronotopy has proven to be particularly useful in conceptualizing the relation between historical presentations, museums and visitors. A theoretical exploration and analyses of displays reveal that we can discriminate between at least three general chronotopics, namely local, global and glocal times. The example of the displays at the First World War museum, In Flanders Fields, shows how different chronotopics can be presented in a display of the same historical

events. It provides the visitor with several ways into the story. The concept of chronotopy has the potential to help museums to be more reflexive about their own praxis. Which chronotopics, for example, are presented, and which are absent or are less developed? For visitor studies, the idea of chronotopy can be helpful to gain a deeper understanding of visitors themselves. Which chronotopics flourish amongst the public and in society more generally, and how can they be expressed in museum displays? The museum of the future will be a 'multi-chronotopic' museum. This will be a museum which aims not so much to attract as many visitors as possible, but rather one which seeks to enlist a differentiated multitude. In order to develop the museum reflexively in this direction, 'multi-chronotopic' visitor studies are necessary, and can help us to understand the important mediating factors between museum and society.

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