

The Nineteenth-Century Museum's Role in Imploring Social Codes.

When discussing Museums, it is important to gain an understanding of what the term itself actually signifies. The word itself is of Greek origin, meaning, 'a philosophical institution and a place of contemplation.' The English Oxford Dictionary defines it as, 'A building in which objects of historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest are stored and exhibited.'¹

I shall argue that the museum was not only established as a cultural institution, but also one which is grounded in education as well as social order, especially prevalent within the nineteenth-century Century Museum. The intention of the museum is to rationally order not only the physical, but the physiological order of those who visit. As Tony Bennett states in his book 'The Birth of the Museum', 'Overcoming mind/body dualities in treating their visitors as essentially, 'minds on legs.'² It is also important to discuss, particularly with regards to the museum and the formation of social ideals; Michel Foucault's understanding of the museum and its orders, which will also be discussed within my essay. It is important understand the establishment of the museum and its role in educating the masses through three prominent figures, those being, Donald Preziosi , Tony Bennett, and finally Paul Valery. I intend to unpack what they understand by the museum and its implication of social order in the nineteenth Century. One cannot deny that the History of Art is very much connected and grounded to and within a social spirit.

The Museum was an institution, unlike many others of the time that was available and accessible to all members of the public. A phenomena which was quite novel in the nineteenth-century. The intention was to educate the masses and implore some sort of social order within society, and the best way to do this, was through an institution such as the museum. However, this did not come without

¹ Oxford Online Dictionary, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/museum?searchDict-Code=all> Date Accessed: 04/01/15 Time Accessed: 12:38

² Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of the Museum: History Theory, Politics*, (New York: Routledge,1995) pg. 12

its problems, as Bennett states, ‘ In thus being conceived³ as instruments capable of ‘lifting’ the cultural level of population, nineteenth-century museums were faced with a new problem: how to regulate the conduct of their visitors. Similar difficulties were faced by other nineteenth Century institutions whose function required that they freely admit an undifferentiated mass public.’⁴ The establishment of these institutions, such as the museum or department store or even the amusement park, to an extent was already breaking with social norms of the time, it was the role of the museum to establish and introduce a new set of social norms as well as educating a previously uninterested or unaware group of society and re-educating those who remained in a state of pre-enlightenment thinking.

It is important to mention that as a result of the enlightenment period, many people were fascinated with the idea of artefacts, science and to an extent gaining an education, through displayed works within these institutions. Foucault's reading of the enlightenment through Kant highlights this. He identifies enlightenment thinking as a shift from the human state of immaturity to a state of maturity. Humanity's reason will now dominate. The greatest tool in aiding this is an institution such as the Museum. By displaying artworks, artefacts and pivotal scientific developments, the people are now exposed to what was previously shrouded. Museums were real spaces designed into society which are now available for all to access. The Museum is now re-educating the masses as well as imploring a new set of social norms, by opening the doors of a previously elitist institution, to the masses.

³ The Museum

⁴Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of the Museum: History Theory, Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 1995) pg. 12

One cannot deny that the opening of these public spaces, such as museums, created great anticipation and excitement. Many people visited within the first days and weeks, yet as time developed, the excitement seemed to simmer. Statistics of the number of visitors became available as early as the 1830s. However, the data which was made public was only that of the gross number of visitors correlated with the days of the week or the times of the year.⁵

There is no doubt that the early statistics of visitors to the museum were manipulated and used as political tools to illustrate the benefit of the museum in ‘improving the force of culture’⁶ particularly for those of the working class. This was to an extent, to be expected, as at the time, even the very gallery spaces within the museum, were manipulated by the government. The Louvre in Paris is an example of this. After the Revolution in the late eighteenth-century, the government advised the trustees of the museum to display works which were evidently anti-revolution. This would therefore impact the views of, some may argue, the naive public. Rhiannon Mason, highlights the argument that Bennett states in regards to the intention of the nineteenth-century Museum, ‘He argues that at this time the museum should be understood as an institution that was designed not only to improve the populace as a whole but to encourage citizens to police and regulate themselves.’⁷

Donald Preziosi makes an interesting statement at the beginning of his text on collecting/museums. He states, ‘Since its invention in late eighteenth-century Europe as one of the premier epistemological technologies of the enlightenment, the museum has been central to the social, ethical and political

⁵*ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ Mason, Rhiannon, ‘Cultural Theory and Museum Studies’, in *Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald: (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, Pg.24

cal formation of the citizenry of modernising nation-states.’⁸ Here we are made immediately clear on what Preziosi’s stance is regarding the museum and its role in shaping social conduct. One cannot deny the importance of the museum in founding and shaping a social order and conduct in the eighteenth-century, and one which, to an extent is still evident when visiting an institution such as the British Museum today. Our Behaviour immediately alters and the deafening silence cannot help but be noticed. Preziosi argues that the museum uses its collections and artefacts to implore awe and wonder within the visitor which in turn inspires a need to obtain a possible superior moral understanding, as well as a superior model of life, which is made evident within the works. As we see when he states, ‘ What the museum subject “sees” in this extraordinary institutional and disciplinary space is a series of possible ways in which it can construct or compose its life as one or another kind of centred unity or consistency which draws together in a decorous and telling order all its diverse, fragmentary, and contradictory experiences, its sundry device and desires.’⁹ This is quite a Foucaulian understanding. The viewer themselves is both the object and the subject, as is evident when Preziosi states, ‘Museums put us in the picture by teaching us how to be picture perfect.’¹⁰ The Museum to an extent manipulates what the viewer should aspire to particularly prevalent within the nineteenth-century museum, as a result of the need for social forms and the use of institutions such as the museum to implore this. The viewer aspires to what has been decided by the curators, or in some cases with governmental aid, is the ideal social, moral and behavioural conduct, to be not only followed within the space of the museum, but also to be carried outside of its walls and appropriated into everyday life; perhaps, some may argue, bringing the museum outside of its walls,

⁸ Preziosi, Donald, “Collecting/Museums,” in Nelson, Robert S. and Richard Shiff, (eds.) *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003 Second Edition) pg. 407

⁹ *ibid*, pp.411

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp.411

bringing it to life. The viewer is not only expected to digest the artwork or artefact but also to an extent, recognise himself within it, or what he himself could become, as Preziosi states, ‘At the same time, the work and its maker are transformed into into a new disciplinary unity: the man (or the people) - and/as-its-work.’¹¹ Preziosi sees the museum as the premiere mechanism for modernity. Mason, highlights the similarity in Bennett’s thought when she argues, ‘Bennett suggests that visitors to the nineteenth-century public museums would be similarly encouraged to accept and internalise such visual “lessons in civics” because the arrangement of space in such institutions created public spaces in which the public itself was put on display and held in perpetual tension between observing and being observed.’¹²

Many prevalent figures within the art world including artists and curators alike, have examined Michel Foucault’s examinations of Prisons and asylums as versions of the museum. He identifies the common thread between these institutions with the idea of being constantly surveyed and watched. Foucault argues that the set of rules which are in place within the asylum or hospital can be transferred to the museum. Perhaps a most telling statement would be, ‘In the ceremonies of the public execution, the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance.’¹³ This is a statement which can be easily transferred to the realm of the museum. For the Museum to be able to successfully function, it is very much dependent on the presence of the public and its response to what the institution has established as pivotal and exemplary works which all should learn from. This is also emphasised when Foucault goes on to state,

¹¹ *ibid*, pp.411

¹² Mason, Rhiannon, ‘Cultural Theory and Museum Studies’, in *Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald: (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, Pg.24

¹³ Foucault, Michel, ‘The Spectacle of the Scaffold’ in *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) trans.Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1977), pg.58

‘Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be made to be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it.’¹⁴ Once again, as is evident in the nineteenth-century museum, the public must learn from what is presented to them, embody these ideals and transfer this to daily life. For example, the display of the artwork by Jacques Louis David, *The death of Marat, 1793*, within the Louvre, was intended to install a sense of national pride as well as the representation of the new French ideal after the revolution. This is no incident that it is displayed within, what is considered the national gallery of France. As stated above, the museum may have confined walls, but the intention was to transfer these ideals set out to the public to the daily lives of the public, as Bennett states, ‘Museums may have enclosed objects within walls, but the nineteenth century saw their doors opened to the general public - witnesses whose presence was just as essential to a display of power as had been that of the people before the spectacle of punishment in the eighteenth century.’¹⁵

‘The Exhibitionary Complex’ by Tony Bennett addresses the relationship between Foucault’s understanding of the Panopticon and the museum as imploring similar sentiments. The Panopticon was a plan of an institutional building, a prison, designed by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th Century. The plan saw a circular building, with cells surrounding the 360 degree space. The design for the building featured a watchtower in the centre of the building, which would allow guards to look out, yet simultaneously, the inmates ability to see inside the watchtower, obscured. This therefore would instil a sense of fear and paranoia within the inmate as it was always ambiguous as to

¹⁴ *ibid* pg.58

¹⁵ Bennett, Tony, *The Exhibitionary Complex*, *New Formations*, Number 4, Spring 1988
http://moodle.citylit.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/140986/mod_resource/content/2/The%20Exhibitionary%20Complex.pdf Pg.73
Date Accessed: 04/01/15

whether they were being watched or not. To relate this to the museum may seem peculiar, but is important to reflect in the novel notion, as a result of the enlightenment, of watching yet simultaneously being watched; whether that be by fellow visitors, the state, or the institution itself. The Panopticon also highlighted the notion of self-policing, one which Preziosi mentioned as discussed above. This was the intention of the the museum, to inform the public, through a space such as the museum, on how to police themselves, through the navigation of the museum. Bennett describes this theory, ‘The exhibitionary complex, by contrast, perfected a self-monitoring system of looks in which the subject and object positions can be exchanged, in which the crowd comes to commune with and regulate itself through interiorising the ideal and ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power - a site of sight accessible to all.’¹⁶ Here Bennett emphasises this notion of self-policing as well as an element of paranoia, present within the museum hence the title exhibitionary ‘complex’.

It is often argued that the very movement around a museum space is very ritualistic and to an extent almost as though the visitor is partaking in some sort of religious ritual. Valery describes the museum as a ‘temple of the loftiest pleasures.’¹⁷ As Visitors we are unknowingly directed around a space in which is constructed to implore certain sentiments and feelings within us. A modern day equivalent would be the varying curatorial choices of many exhibitions, are constructed in a way to echo the works or the psychology of the artist, a recent example of this would be the Ricard Hamilton retrospective in the Tate Modern, where the discontinuous spaces, to an extent, followed the fragmented mindset of the artist. Paul Valery likens the experience of participating within galleries of

¹⁶ *ibid* Pg.80

¹⁷ Valery, Paul, ‘The Problem With Museums’ (1934), in *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, transl. David Paul (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan, 1972)

the nineteenth-Century museum, to a ‘drunk man walking between counters’¹⁸ For Valery, the museum is ‘admirable, none are delightful.’¹⁹ he begins his text by highlighting the set of rules that one is first confronted with upon entering the space, ‘At the first step that I take toward things of beauty, a hand relieves me of my stick, and a notice forbids me to smoke. Chilled at once by this act of authority and by the sense of constraint, I make my way into a room of sculpture where a cold confusion reigns.’²⁰ It may be argued that this is not dissimilar to the reaction of many visitors to museums such as The Louvre, The British Museum or The Metropolitan Museum of Art, today. We are also, perhaps as a result of the establishment of social codes from the nineteenth-century, conditioned to behave in such a manner. When asked, many people find the museum an intimidating space, due to its silence and undertone of superiority. Nick Riggie argues that when in a museum space, ‘When you are finally face-to-face with an artwork, you should be in a certain mood. Subtle awe mixed with tinges of curiosity and overflowing with reverence. This mood will often be sustained by the tall, flush white walls, simple flooring, and boxy rooms with plenty of light. Hushed speech echoes faintly throughout. A meditative calm soothes a soul raised to such heights. The museum sets the mood; its architectural monuments to universality drain you in preparation for the heavenly ceremony. You’re ready to receive what you’re promised.’²¹ It is this expectation and set of codes that are not overtly displayed, but instead an unspoken understanding, that are present not only in the museum of the nineteenth-century, but also in a museum today. It is the same set of un-

¹⁸Bennett, Tony, The Exhibitionary Complex, *New Formations, Number 4, Spring 1988*
http://moodle.citylit.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/140986/mod_resource/content/2/The%20Exhibitionary%20Complex.pdf Pg.73

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¹⁹ Valery, Paul, ‘The Problem With Museums’ (1934), in *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, transl. David Paul (London: Routledge and Paul Kegan, 1972)

²⁰*ibid*

²¹Riggie, Nick, *Art Beyond the Museum*, Last Modified, February 9th 2010,
<http://hyperallergic.com/1837/post-museum-art/>

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spoken requirements that we are confronted with upon entering a religious space, therefore it is no surprise that some have argued that partaking in the museum path, is ritualistic, as mentioned above.

Therefore one could argue that the social codes established in the nineteenth-century, are ones which remain cemented in our being. The ways in which works are displayed and created has evidently altered, however the expectations, in terms of behaviour, of the visitor are fundamentally unchanged. One cannot deny that the artwork itself and the attitude of the artists has changed in terms of creating works specifically for the museum space rather than a religious site or civic building. Some artists try and disrupt this notion of distance between the viewer and the work by creating installations which allow the viewer to partake with the artwork, such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres' piece entitled 'Candy', which encourages viewers to take a piece of candy, immediately altering the artwork. However the 'behavioural code' is still in place as we hesitate to do this, and one will find visitors double checking the intention to ensure that its appropriate to do so. The sense of Ritualistic movement around a museum may have altered, however the very architecture of great Museums such as The Louvre and MoMA and Tate Britain, still implore, to an extent, institutional importance. We may have moved away from the nineteenth-Century museum institutional ideals, however, one can argue, and an opinion which i align myself with, are grounded in this unspoken set of social codes.

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