

///// tematická studie / thematic article //////////////////////////////////

**THE MUSEUM ON THE EDGE
OF FOREVER**

Abstract: *This article argues that understanding any space or site relies on a knowledge of its fourth dimension – the timescape. It will explore this by situating the investigation in the museum – a place of heightened contrivance which could easily be shallowly interpreted as “mere style”. It will defend a new method of investigating museum temporality which combines both phenomenology and literary theory, and will replace the idea of geo-epistemology with geochronic epistemology: an understanding of context and situation which takes on time as well as spatial location. In so doing, it moves on from notions of the museum as a place out of time, situating it in the networks of meaning, power and politics in which we have lived and are living. Thus, “the whole space of the exhibition” as Lyotard said, “becomes the remains of all time”: the Museum on the Edge of Forever.*

Keywords: *museum; time; literary phenomenology; geochronic epistemology*

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Muzeum na okraji věčnosti

Abstrakt: *Tento článek pracuje s argumentem, že porozumění jakémukoliv prostoru či místu se odvíjí od znalosti jeho čtvrtého rozměru – krajiny času. Toto tvrzení probádává tak, že zasazuje výzkum do muzea – místa se zvýšenou mírou machinace, již by bylo snadno povrchně interpretovat jako „pouhý styl“. Článek obhajuje novou metodu zkoumání temporality muzea, jež v sobě kombinuje fenomenologii i literární teorii a nahrazuje myšlenku geoeπισtemologie geochronickou epistemologií: porozuměním kontextu a situaci, jež je umístěno jak v čase, tak v prostoru. Tím, že tak činí, se článek posunuje od pojetí muzea jakožto místa mimo čas a zasazuje jej do sítě významů, moci a politiky, v nichž jsme žili a stále žijeme. Takto se „veškerý prostor výstavy“, jak poznamenal Lyotard, „stává pozůstatkem všeho času: muzeem na okraji věčnosti.*

Klíčová slova: *muzeum; čas; literární fenomenologie; geochronická epistemologie*

Introduction

Museums are sites of epistemological complexity and contestation. They are both materially arranged spaces located in geographic place, and spaces of memory and cultural cognition, existing in the minds of the designers and viewers, and depicting lifeworlds disparate in space and time. In a museum, a spatial encounter is both corporeal and cognitive, and that cognitive element is bound up in the remembrance of things past and the personal production of new knowledge. Museums have been called sites of memory, ruins, traces, dreamscapes, and heterotopias.

The following paper will use these sites to argue for the value of a particular method of reading, investigating and analysing sites which exist in both space and time. It will begin by defining geochronic epistemology and the concept of the timescape, commenting upon the complexity of museum timescapes in particular and critiquing the theoretical stances which have already been deployed in attempts to analyse the ontological status of, and construct an epistemological framework for, the museum site. It will then use and critically reflect upon some of the analytical tools of literary phenomenology, which this paper will promote as an alternative to these limited analyses.

The final part of the paper will make a general statement about the value of the method and how it does not, in fact, merely make recourse to “styles and lingering preconceptions.” Secondly, it will consider the implications of these new methods, in particular how they argue for the importance of temporality as a perspective from which to explore the museum and, by extension, any site in space.

Context: Academic Background

Geoeπισtemology is that philosophy and understanding which is produced when a geographical location becomes the organizing perspective for the production and framing of knowledge, environments, subjectivities and narratives.¹ Geochronic epistemology requires the addition of a time-based

I would like to thank my anonymous reviewers for their kind words and help, my supervisor, Simon J. Knell, for his input on my thesis, my examiners, Jonathan Hale and Ross Parry for their time and effort, and the museums I use here for putting up with me wandering around them.

¹ Claudio CANAPARO, *Geo-epistemology: Latin America and the Location of Knowledge*. Bern: Peter Lang AG – International Academic Publishers 2009, p. 21.

element: a temporal situation which functions similarly and in parallel to the emplaced geographic frame.

This temporal situation has two forms. The first we shall term the “historical”: that is, a definitive era characterised by consistent dominant attitudes in culture and fashion or similarly affected by political events. This “historical place” may well, but need not, precisely align with specific geographical areas, and the idea of such a place adds a new level of complexity to the idea of a geographically situated epistemology.

The second we shall term the “contextual and located”. This temporal situation is produced in the interactions between the corporeal objects within an environment and the minds which encounter and interpret it. Another name for this temporal situation is the “timescape”, and we shall explore the nature of timescapes, and how and where they are made manifest and defined, in a following section.

Sites of Four Dimensions: Time in Space

Why is temporality so important to the understanding of place and space? Because it is a fundamental element of every part of human life and creation,² being the glue which binds together physical phenomena.³ It is particularly important now that there are increasing numbers of “virtual” places, and geographical distances are more easily surmounted than those of different time zones. The time or moment of a meeting or encounter is equally, though differently, as important as the place.

In philosophical, scientific and cultural study, ideas regarding time have long been related in spatial terms. The way in which we understand space also influences the way in which we conceptualize the nature and structure of time – with a beginning and ending, or being comprised of a particular shape.⁴ For Immanuel Kant, both space and time were forms of human sensibility⁵; therefore, both must be interrogated if we are to understand the epistemologies of site and place.

But there is also a deeply political and ethical element in this. Temporality and time are also means of exercising control over others. In Revolution-

² Barbara ADAM, *Time and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press 1990, p. 5.

³ John URRY, *Global Complexity*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2003, p. 7.

⁴ Robin LE POIDEVIN, *Travels in Four Dimensions: The Enigmas of Space and Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003, pp. 73–88.

⁵ Paul GUYER and Allen W. WOOD, “Introduction.” In: Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998.

ary France, for instance, traditional time was obliterated in law, replaced with a Republican system which decimalised calendars and clocks.⁶ This politically motivated attempt to cleanse and regenerate the order of things, to totally break from what was perceived as the corruption of the past, attempted to control the social body and became closely associated with the Terror and secularisation. It had many active opponents, and its twelve year reign came to an end when Napoleon reinstated the traditional Gregorian calendar in 1806.⁷

Time, then, is political. It is also culturally significant. Temporal conceits drastically influence the ability of humans to understand each other: Evans Pritchard found it difficult to communicate with the Nuer, whom he studied, largely because their temporal ontology was very different than his own.⁸ In anthropological and ethnographic terms, time is also representational: the idea of the ethnographic present, in which writings of anthropologists depict an unchanging inviolable and often apparently backward culture as it would have been prior to contact, is part of a project of exoticisation and even demonization of the Other, historically undertaken by anthropologists from the Western world.⁹ The tense used to describe a culture determines how active, and how real, that culture appears to a reader or observer.

Time and space are fundamentally allied. Both are culturally significant and politically powerful. That is why, in any epistemological conception of environment, one cannot be understood without recognition of the other.

Four Dimensional Landscape: The Timescape

Given the fundamental twinning of time and space, each and every spatial environment is geochronic: that is, the scape which it produces is not just one of land, sound or sensory experience, but one of time – a timescape. For Barbara Adam, the timescape is a “temporary temporal environment, built from the shifting interactions of entities and matter”.¹⁰ Yet the timescape

⁶ Eviatar ZERUBAVEL, “The French Republican Calendar: A Case Study in the Sociology of Time.” *American Sociology Review*, vol. 42, 1977, no. 6, pp. 868–877.

⁷ Matthew SHAW, *French Revolution: The Republican Calendar, 1789 Year XIV*. Woodbridge: Royal Historical Society – The Boydell Press 2011, pp. 52–56.

⁸ E.E. EVANS-PRITCHARD, “Nuer Time-Reckoning.” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 12, 1939, no. 2, pp. 189–216.

⁹ Johannes FABIAN, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press 1983, p. 80.

¹⁰ Barbara ADAM, *Timescapes of Modernity: The Environment and Invisible Hazards*. London: Routledge 1998, p. 10.

is no passive emergent thing, but something productive, manipulating the physical world and the human imaginings of it. Like place, the timescape is that which arises alongside and within the shifting relationships between consciousnesses and the experiential world.

Holy and Enchanted: Eulogising Museum Temporality

The Museum and its timescape have been conceptualized within many disciplines of thought and equally numerous ideological frames. In general, they have been understood as sites of temporal peculiarity, but the methods by which this conceptualization has come to pass, and indeed the conceptualization itself, are fraught with presumption and lack in subtlety. These explorations often eulogise the Museum and make it, and its informational and social authority, inviolate, so relying on “lingering preconceptions” about the position of museums in a social hierarchy. The presumption that museums occupy an honorific position in the hierarchy of spaces should not go unquestioned, and we cannot assume that they are any more special than other socially produced sites. Works which touch upon the idea of museum temporality fall roughly into two broad categories – the “historic” or “memorial”, and the “Othering” or “heterotopic”. Both are limiting and have problematic philosophical and ethical implications, and if the museum timescape is to be understood on its own terms, the assumptions each of these categories brings must be interrogated and, if necessary, dispensed with.

Museums may be understood as historic or memorial on both personal and collectively social levels. In Gaynor Kavanagh’s *Dream Spaces*, they are presented as sites of provocation in which personal pasts are recalled as a result of encounter.¹¹ They have also been framed as storehouses of memory and history by writers such as Susan A. Crane, who understood the museum as an archive of sorts.¹² For Huyssen, such an archive is crucial to provide a temporal anchor in a world increasingly complex and mercurial, as well as sites for the resurrection of stories and selves.¹³

¹¹ Gaynor KAVANAGH, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum*. Leicester: Leicester University Press 2000.

¹² Susan A. CRANE, *Museums and Memory*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000.

¹³ Andreas HUYSEN, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. London – New York: Routledge 1995.

Yet to understand museums as simply “temporally retroactive”¹⁴ is to ignore the richness of their relationship to temporality and their powerful intertextualities. It is also to confuse time with history. More problematically, however, the focus on the past suggests an absolutism – that the truth of history is fixed. This can reinforce the stories we tell to make ourselves feel safe and special, but it stops us recognising that human history is not a planned teleology, but a sequence of related, yet ultimately arbitrary accidents. If the museum is to become more of a forum than a preacher, then the academic discourse around it must cease to talk as if it were the dogmatic arbiter of an absolute and objective historic truth. In itself this is enough to support a call for the reconsideration of museum temporality. But it is by no means the only reason to do so. Equally morally and philosophically problematic is the Othering of the museum site.

Museum theorists have long designated museums as special sites, as places different from the outside world, encouraged in part by Foucauldian ideas of heterotopic spaces. Heterotopias are “effectively enacted utopias”,¹⁵ real sites which are, nonetheless, outside and reflective of reality, areas with physical presence which, from their position of removal, comment upon and throw into sharp relief aspects of the everyday world in which human beings live out their lives. In terms of their temporal characteristics, these fall into two broad types. First, there are heterotopias of transience and the ephemeral, those of holiday and festival, where time is irrelevant. Secondly there are those in which time lies heavy, accrues and mounts up, adding layer upon layer to an indefinitely increasing pile. It is this second kind which, Foucault argues, museums have become.¹⁶

There is some justification for Foucault’s designation and it has certainly been widely taken up in museological theory: Tony Bennet uses the concept extensively in his canonical text *The Birth of the Museum*.¹⁷ Nonetheless, to accept this kind of Foucauldian position uncritically would be academic laziness. Just how valid is it as a concept?

¹⁴ Jean-Louis DEOTTE, “Rome, the Archetypal Museum, and the Louvre, the Negation of Division.” In: PREZIOSI, D. – FARAGO, C., (eds.), *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, p. 59 (51–65).

¹⁵ Michel FOUCAULT – Jay MISKOWIEC, “Of Other Spaces.” *Diacritics*, vol. 16, 1986, no. 1, p. 24 (22–27).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Tony BENNET, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. Abingdon: Routledge 1995.

The word *museum* has its etymological origins in the Classical world, as a place consecrated to the Muses, somewhere private to go to contemplate and gain insight into the mysteries of existence.¹⁸ These contemplative heterotopias are very varied in kind and use and with developing technologies they are becoming varied in form as well. Places of spiritual significance, churches, mosques, temples, sacred and ancient sites; mausolea, graveyards, memorials; urban sites such as department stores; books and DVDs; even the internet. All these, alongside museums and libraries, are experiential phenomena somehow removed from the quotidian.

In museological literature too, museums are set apart, accorded special positions, and this is made manifest both practically *and* theoretically. So often in museum publicity visitors are asked to “come on a journey”, or “step back in time”, to step into a physical building in which objects from diverse times and origins are brought together in a sequence and layout which is unlike that encountered in the outside world. Much scholarship has been devoted to this subject, one notable publication being David Carr’s *A Place Not A Place*.¹⁹ In this work, the disjunction between the museums and other places is made explicit.

However, overemphasising the heterotopia flattens the complexities and unique characters of the multifarious institutions that exist around the world. For museums come in many forms and are part of many academic fields, often inextricably linked to the history and existence of particular disciplines. There are anthropological and ethnographic museums, art museums, natural history museums, geological museums, technological museums, local history museums and more. On a basic level the subject matter and mission of each discipline varies, and each individual museum has unique characteristics based on such independent variables as location, staff culture, local community and financial status. Museums vary in age, in architecture, in policy, in political standing and in geography. Beth Lord demonstrated that it is reductive to lump all of these museum-forms under one noun, and even more so to place them unthinkingly alongside other in-

¹⁸ Paula FINDLE, “The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy.” In: PREZIOSI, D. FARAGO, C., (eds.), *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2004, p. 161 (159–191).

¹⁹ David CARR, *A Place Not A Place: Reflection and Possibility in Museums and Libraries*. Oxford: Alta Mira Press 2006.

stitutions and constructs with different social purposes and values without questioning the aspects which make them alike and distinct.²⁰

Assuming a complete disassociation between the museum and the outside world is impossible. Visitors do not come into the museum as *tabula rasa*; they bring with them their own social backgrounds and implicit assumptions. While a museum experience may indeed change the mental configuration of a visitor, the institution does not hold total power. The idea of the museum as a dissociative space cannot be maintained in the face of contemporary conceptions of the museum as a place of inclusion, cohesion, and identity creation, nor in a world where the boundaries between the real and the virtual are becoming ever more blurred. The plethora of places in which one might step outside physical reality is vast in number: in regard to stepping outside of the mundane, museums are no more special than videogames.

Foucault was wrong in his statement that museums were “immune to [...] ravages” of time.²¹ They are filled with progression and change. Buildings suffer structural damage. Collections are subject to pests and natural physical deterioration. The people within an institution come and go, and they themselves age and change. Fashion fluctuates in design, technology and theory, exhibitions close and change: museums are just as bound to temporal considerations as the rest of the world. These are not timeless institutions, but living, breathing and dynamic.

To attempt to understand the temporality of museum space without resorting to history or to a sense of Otherness and uncritical Foucauldianism, my PhD thesis proposed a new analytical methodology, and tested it upon three museums: the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, the Pitt Rivers Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, and the Oxford University Museum of Natural History. It is this method which is outlined below.

Literary Phenomenology in the Abstract

Literary phenomenology is based upon two complementary investigative methods: phenomenology and literature. The first, an immersive, embodied approach to spatial analysis, provides the actuality of experience. The second, taken from various methods of studying literature, provides the

²⁰ Beth LORD, “Foucault’s Museum: Difference, Representation, and Genealogy,” *Museum and Society*, vol.4, 2006, no. 1, p. 4 (1–14).

²¹ FOUCAULT – MISKOWEIC, “Other Spaces,” p. 26.

abstract, but solidly intellectual frames for the structuring and communication of that very experience.

Both elements were vital in the performance of temporal analysis. One cannot analyse a space in which one has not been, but neither can analysis occur without a frame to produce communicable knowledge from physical experience. To combine the literary with the embodied is, in the interpretation of time and space, to fold the self into a relationship with the object of analysis to produce a reading which is grounded, powerful, and unique to that site, at that time.

There has long been a relationship between spatial phenomena and literature. Henri Bergson recognized the importance of rhythm in architecture,²² and Gaston Bachelard's spatial poetics took this idea to a new, far more abstract phenomenological level.²³ There are those who consider the worlds of literary and cultural theory to have taken a spatial turn in the middle of the twentieth century, producing notions of "literary geography" and "geocriticism" as well as an increased focus upon the spatialised aspects of writing, reading, and theorising.²⁴ Maurice Blanchot's seminal text *The Space of Literature* is exemplary of the last.²⁵ This relationship of texts to space has played out in studies of material culture, including Tilley's analysis of prehistoric art as textual form,²⁶ and increasingly in those of museums and heritage sites: Sophia Psarra uses narrative ideas to explore a diverse multitude of heritage sites and museums²⁷ and the recently published *Museum Making* explores the relationship between spatial design and a loosely defined idea of narrative.²⁸ The methodology presented in this paper takes the use of literature further, using its very strategies and creative techniques to build a much more concrete mesh of page and place.

²² Henri BERGSON, *Time and Free Will*. New York: Macmillan 1959 [1910], pp. 15–16.

²³ Gaston BACHELARD, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press 1994 [1964].

²⁴ Robert T. TALLY JR., *Spatiality*. London: Routledge 2013.

²⁵ Maurice BLANCHOT, *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln – London: University of Nebraska Press 1982.

²⁶ Christopher TILLEY, *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity*. London: Routledge 1991.

²⁷ Sophia PSARRA, *Architecture and Narrative: The Formation of Space and Cultural Meaning*. Abingdon: Routledge 2009.

²⁸ Suzanne MACLEOD – Laura HOURSTON HANKS – Jonathan HALE, *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions*. London: Routledge 2012.

Aspect One: Phenomenological Investigation

Phenomenology is a philosophical discipline whose central concern is the study of the structures of consciousness and experience. It allows for us to explore and describe subjective experience in a critically introspective manner, and has produced seminal works on both time and space. Heidegger's *Being and Time* and Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* were particularly influential foundations for the development of this methodology.

Time, like space, is part of our immediate experience, but whilst we have sensory organs with which to encounter the physical world, we have no equivalent organ for the temporal. So we must rely upon a combination of all modes of bodily and cognitive perception²⁹ mind and body fully enmeshed, and situated in place.

For Heidegger, time and temporal experience is revealed in the actions of the everyday,³⁰ and to explore a place, human beings tend to walk. The walk as cultural and anthropological investigative technique has a long history – Ingold and Vergunst claim that it has provenance stretching back to Mauss' 1934 essay "Techniques of the Body".³¹ The "phenomenological walk", however, is an active process in which the walker attempts to strip away the mediated, representative aspects of landscape, and describe perception from first principles, noting the experience as they go through writing, recorded speech, or film.³² It is also considered to be an artistic and enunciative practice, a way of "tactically remaking" space.³³ It thus takes into account the continuously mutable nature of temporal environments, the naturally peripatetic museum encounter, and the critical use of the body to mediate between thought and the physical world³⁴ in a highly temporal way.

For my PhD, I tested the phenomenological walk as a method of reading the museum timescape throughout the summer of 2010 at New Walk Museum and Newarke Houses in Leicester in the United Kingdom. But the results lacked any kind of structural consistency, notes being taken on different days, in different bodily and mental states, and contingent physical

²⁹ ADAM, *Timescapes*, p.55.

³⁰ Martin HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*, London: SCM Press Ltd 1962, p. 277.

³¹ Tim INGOLD – Jo Lee VERGUNST, (eds.) *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2008, p. 1.

³² Christopher TILLEY, *Body and Image: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology* 2. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press 2008, p. 269.

³³ Sarah PINK – Phil HUBBARD – Maggie O'NEILL – Alan RADLEY, "Walking Across Disciplines: From Ethnography to Arts Practice." *Visual Studies*, vol. 25, 2010, no. 1, p. 4 (1–7).

³⁴ TILLEY, *Body and Image*, pp. 13–14.

and social circumstances. Thus, comparison between the walks was made difficult. To make the research data for such a project wholly reliant upon such a mercurial method would have severely limited the research's ability to theorize about wider applications and issues.

This period of research produced data which did indeed reduce itself to a description of "mere style". Whilst the phenomenological walk was a particularly practical way of encountering the temporal in space, something more formal was required for the description and analysis of that embodied experience itself. That more formal thing was literature.

Aspect Two: Literary Investigation

The study and production of literature and museums might at first appear to have very little to do with each other. But although they are not wholly analogous, they have a great deal in common. In fact, literature has a great deal to offer to other forms of human cultural performance and critical theory, and this has, in one way or another, been explored in the critical discourse for a number of years.

Both a work of literature and a museum are forms of temporal art which unfold and progress over an extended period of time, rather than making their entire content visible in one moment of immanent apprehension.³⁵ Museums and literary works are both curators of times and spaces, real and imagined, both expressive media which frame objects and ideas and make them communicable. Both are also, as a result of this, entangled in sets of social relationships between author, work and audience, and thus face similar structural and ethical issues of representation and expression.

Literature has long been a driving force for the development of philosophy, cultural theory, and the anthropocentric disciplines. Both Ferdinand de Saussure and Ludwig Wittgenstein produced new conceptions of language in which words became central to the ways in which human beings produced and communicated their world, and in which meanings changed dependent upon context.³⁶ Their ideas of shifting and relational meaning-making

³⁵ Gotthold Ephraim LESSING, *Laocoön: As Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications 2005 [1898], p. 2.

³⁶ Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd 2009, pp. 31–39.

influenced wider cultural theory – notably providing some inspiration for Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*.³⁷

Language and literature sat at the heart of theoretical movements throughout the twentieth century, influencing most, if not all, disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences, including museology. Semiology and ideas of narrative had particular power: Mieke Bal used them to comment upon the problematic representational approach of the American Museum of Natural History,³⁸ and Paul Basu used the idea of the labyrinthine aesthetic to express how MOMA produces a reified and inaccessible environment.³⁹ What is particularly interesting, however, and more directly related to museology and museum production, is the rising influence of narrative.

In April 2010, a conference called “Narrative Space” was hosted at the Universities of Leicester and Nottingham. The resultant edited book, *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions*, was published in 2012, and is indicative of the current fashion for the creation of “narrative experience”, that is:

Experiences which integrate objects and spaces – and stories of people and places – as part of a process of storytelling that speaks of the experience of the everyday and our sense of self, as well as the special and unique.⁴⁰

In the context of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ turbulent relationship with narrative as an ideology,⁴¹ this recovery and return to narrative is interesting, potentially powerful, but also potentially problematic, particularly in that it suggests the creation of singular meanings, epiphanies, even.⁴²

All of these works, however problematic, provide a precedent for literary phenomenology. This methodology does not align itself with any particular theoretical stance. It is based upon the practical and conceptual exploration

³⁷ Jean-Francois LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984.

³⁸ Mieke BAL, “Telling, Showing, Showing Off.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, 1992, no. 3, pp. 556–594.

³⁹ Paul BASU, “The Labyrinthine Aesthetic in Contemporary Museum Design.” In: BASU, P. – MACDONALD, S. (eds.), *Exhibition Experiments*. Oxford: Blackwell 2007, pp. 47–70.

⁴⁰ MACLEOD *et al*, *Museum Making*, p. xix.

⁴¹ TALLY JR., *Spatialities*, p. 13.

⁴² Lee H. SKOLNICK, “Beyond Narrative: Designing Epiphanies.” In: MACLEOD, S. – HOURSTON HANKS, L. – HALE, J. (eds.), *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions*. London: Routledge 2012, pp. 83–94.

of literary strategies with the intention of following their implications, both empirical and ideological, as far as possible. Thus open, it deliberately seeks to be something more than an appropriative and shallow “reading” of “mere styles”.

To achieve this depth and make full use of literature’s diverse modes of analysis and creation, four sets of questions were developed during the ground work for my thesis. These focussed on four different literary areas pertinent to the study of temporal spaces – plot, perspectives, language and prosody. These were combined with the “phenomenological walk” in a series of visits to each of the three museums, each lasting, in the first instance, a week. Using both the methods allowed for a direct and embodied reading of space and produced extensive transcripts for each museum which are reminiscent of interviews. In each individual museum space, whether small galleries devoted to single subjects as in the Ashmolean, or courts or floors of mixed topics, as in the Pitt Rivers and Natural History Museum, these questions were asked and answered to produce an intense, experiential, close reading of space – and of self.

The design of the questions was based upon four main strategies for the analysis of literature – narratology, grammar, semantics and prosody. In what follows, each of these four categories will be explored using a single museum, to provide a coherent example of what the techniques and concepts they provide can offer to the analysis of individual sites, and the power of some of the results and implications they provide.

Literary Phenomenology: In Practice

Narratology

Narratology is the study of the form and functioning of narrative: the various parts of the discourse, the shape of their arrangement, and the position of the individuals involved in its creation. Narrative is not simply a coherent and linear structure, but the representation of events or of a series of events.⁴³ This representation may occur in any media, and need not be presented in a linear order. Narratology is the study of the constituent parts of this form of complex representation of reality. This section will use the fundamental elements of narrative which are story and discourse, anachronies, events and

⁴³ H. PORTER-ABBOT, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, p. 13.

narrative posture to move far beyond limited notions of “narrative space”. To provide concrete examples, it will turn to the Ashmolean, which, with its multiple galleries and overarching design strategy, has a great deal of scope for a narratological reading. The author recognises that, being a more social activity than reading, the museum experience for any single visitor is contingent upon more unreliable and uncontrolled variables. Yet the reading of a book may still be interrupted, or be as mercurial as the reader. The basic constructions and tools of narrative, then, remain equally important in the construction of experience in both the textual and physical realm.

There are in narratives two distinct levels: the actual chronology of events related, and the way that they are represented in the telling, known as “story” and “discourse” respectively. The Russian Formalists would use the terms *fabula* and *sjuizet* to mean the same thing. In the case of a museum, the actual ordering of historic events may often be matched by the spatial arrangement of objects and ideas, but this need not necessarily be the case. The Ashmolean as a whole is centred on the “Crossing Cultures Crossing Time” display strategy, a narrative structure which is largely linear. But objects, and even galleries, do not always accord to this teleological structure: one of the most dramatic examples is the pair of Japanese galleries on the second floor, *West Meets East*. The first gallery after the Orientation space is named *Japan from 1850*, and the one which follows it *Japan 1600–1850*. Chronology has jumped backwards, and the placement of events in the discourse no longer aligns with that of the story. This indicates the distinction between *fabula* and *sjuizet*, and unintentionally gives an indication as to how the disjunction between the two might be used to create dramatic, puzzling, disorienting and affective narrative structures. Linear, cyclical and fragmented forms of discourse can provoke very different responses and give stories a very different tone and focus. Using these structures with awareness is also to know that their effects are only partially predictable, and that they lead not to the whole truth, but only to a version of it.

These forms of discourse are produced with the help of certain devices that disorder linear chronological structure. These are called anachronies.⁴⁴ The French narratologist Gerard Genette identified four kinds – analepsis, prolepsis, ellipsis and paralepsis. Analepsis and its opposite, the flash-forward prolepsis, are powerful tools for creating layered and rich discourse. Because both pitch the audience into a time beyond the ostensible present,

⁴⁴ Gerard GENETTE, *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1980 [1972], p. 36.

they allow for reflection and speculation, thus offering insight into character or cause. But because they are situated outside of the immediate now, they permit, and indeed imply, that the insight offered by reflection and speculation might be partial and biased.

Thus for the museum maker, analepsis is fraught with ethical issues. Because it can be used to legitimate a current situation – say, the presence of an object in the gallery or the reasons for the demise of a culture or species – there is a responsibility on the part of the maker to ensure that the limitations of the story this tells are overtly recognised. For without this recognition, analepsis can enhance an idea of singular, teleological causality, and restrict the chaos of happening to a preordained structure of events.

Sometimes analepses tell a complete story, bringing things up to date, but sometimes they do not. When complete and partial analepsis are displayed side by side, cultural politics are put on display. In the Ashmolean's Money gallery, there are a series of cases devoted to the currencies of the world. Whilst those of Europe and the Middle and Near East are brought up to the present, that of China displays only ancient coins, the latest dated to around 220AD. There is, however unintended, an exoticisation at play here, a temporal distancing and social Othering of the Orient.

The research indicated that prolepses are more infrequent, at least in the museums it studied. This is perhaps unsurprising, given their typically historic focus. But it is problematic, for without any proleptic features to indicate an awareness of future time, the museum and its displays are stuck in the Now, fixed and unchanging for all time. Many objects in the Ashmolean are displayed in cases inset into the walls, difficult to remove and change. Yet there is a more abstract problem: because the permanent galleries of the museum are so highly orchestrated, to alter these objects would be to change the whole character of the space. Without prolepsis to express possibility, there appears to be no expectation of a labile future here, but instead a static and eternal now. Without prolepsis, a museum is indeed a mausoleum.

Anachronies manipulate the things common to fabula and *sjuizet*: the events which are the heart of narrative tellings. Roland Barthes identified two forms of event: cardinal and catalytic.⁴⁵ The former are central to the progression of the narrative, the latter merely time fillers, used for decompression and delay. Such a designation of things that happen can of course

⁴⁵ Roland BARTHES, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." *New Literary History* vol. 6, 1975, no. 2, On Narrative and Narratives, pp. 247–248 (237–272).

only arise in manipulations such as narrative, whether fictive or historic. The designation of cardinal events is therefore always a biased action: the selection of events of importance for a museum similarly so.

In a museum, cardinal events may occur in two forms. Either they are parts of the museum's content displayed as significant in the story they tell – often, human history – or are a significant moment in the personal experience during the museum visit. The Ashmolean cleverly combines these two forms in the Orientation galleries which appear on every floor of the Mather extension. The purpose of these galleries is to act as a starting point and an introduction to what the rest of the space will have to offer – particularly the Ancient Worlds Orientation Gallery, which is also the first gallery encountered by most people who enter through the main façade. They often contain objects that are iconic of the themes of the floor itself: the trading objects such as jars and model boats. These are sometimes labelled “Connections Objects”. Like a cardinal event, these galleries and objects are used to orient the visitor, and their absence could lead to confusion regarding the relationships between the rest of the galleries on the same floor.

The placement and quantity of cardinal and catalytic events has a large effect upon how fast or slow the museum experience appears to be. With a short, but visible space between cardinal events, the discourse moves at a brisk pace, skipping on from crux to crux without disorienting the audience. The Ashmolean's Islamic Middle East gallery lays its objects out in long, clearly structured narrative rows, the space between the objects a brief catalytic break between the cardinal artefacts. Museums, however, can also produce solid, turgid discourse, using sets of objects and ideas undifferentiated in their narrative importance. One gallery which stands out in the Ashmolean is European Ceramics, which packs as many objects as it can into its cases, and as many cases as it can into the room in an impenetrable block of pottery which makes it impossible to see the wall at the other end. The deep physical layering of items means that it is impossible to state which are cardinal and which catalytic – relative to each other, all might be both. Because most objects are equally important in the procession of the gallery's discourse, the temporal movement of that discourse seems to cease, seized in a single moment.

This discussion of anachronies and events has highlighted something crucial about the nature of a museum's narrative performance: that its layering is far more complex than a singular storyworld and discourse. Any museum is in fact a nexus point for a multitude of these event worlds, from the ones it overtly displays to the ones it implies within its own built struc-

ture. This multiplicity is one of the most valuable things a nuanced use of narratology can offer the museum analyst.

Genette also highlighted the importance of narrative posture.⁴⁶ Able to cope with the subtle perspectives and positions which narrative actants – generally the narrator or focalisor (the consciousness through which the story is related) – hold towards a text, it is useful for describing the degrees of involvement a viewer or commentator might hold to the series of events being related. The heterodiegetic focalisor sits outside the represented story-world, the homodiegetic narrator within it, and there are granular degrees in between. Each provoke different effects in the audience, allowing them to relate to the text or the museum in a variety of ways.

Heterodiegetic stances are not restricted to a singular identifiable and bounded perspective. They can often appear abstract and omniscient, and allow for a wealth of historical detail to be presented which would be invisible to a stance much more enmeshed in the action. Hence perhaps why museum texts are often written from such perspectives, for anonymity confers a kind of scientific authority. But the visitor can also take a heterodiegetic perspective, when the architecture of the building allows them to reflect upon their experience. In the Ashmolean, when a visitor stops on the bridge gallery of Italy Before Rome, they can look down onto the Human Image gallery in the basement, where many of them will already have been. This juxtaposition of then and now may remove them from their homodiegetic immersion in their own personal experience of the visit, making them more distanced and reflective.

A museum can also play host to homodiegetic positions. They can actively permit a visitor to become directly engaged with and immersed in perspectives other than their own natural one. In the Ashmolean's Conservation galleries, a table is set up in a simplified representation of a conservator's workshop as an interactive that the visitor can sit at and engage with. Thus they gain a homodiegetic perspective upon the back of house storyworld for which the museum is also a form of discourse.

A museum itself can also be overtly homodiegetic, a character in its own discourse. This is most evident in its texts, in particular on the Welcome board of the Ashmolean, which frequently uses the word "we". Using this personal pronoun, the Welcome panel defines the institution as a living breathing collection of individuals, involved in the ongoing discourse of the museum. The institution is as much a part of the fabula as the collections

⁴⁶ GENETTE, *Narrative*, p. 244.

which it displays, a manipulative but involved narrator. Narrative posture permits the museum analyst to understand the sets of relationships which are always, in every museum, implied between museum and stakeholder, and gain some notion of the museum's self-ontology. It is, thereby, a useful and politically significant tool.

Grammar

Grammar, at a basic level, has to do with structure – that of words is known as morphology, that of phrases and clauses is known as syntax.⁴⁷ For this research, it was most crucial to understand the functions of words, and thereafter tense, aspect and mood, for each of these, in a more or less concrete fashion, are useful analogies for understanding the operation of museums both temporally and more generally. The exemplary museum for this section will be the Pitt Rivers, for the morphology of its objects and the syntactical arrangements between them are complex, and it also has a deeply moral stake in the use of tense as a tool of representation.

The link between word classes and the museum may not be immediately obvious. But the analogy is actually a very useful one to draw, for it offers to the museum analyst a corpus of terms and concepts with which to draw a nuanced picture of the sets of relationships in which all extants within a museum space are involved. Of course, one cannot draw direct parallels and designate certain objects as nouns and certain doors or staircases as conjunctions for all time – if at all. But yet again, another grammatical precedent appears – “distributional analysis”, which defines the class or function of any particular word by “looking at the company which [those] words keep”.⁴⁸ This same principle can be put into effect to understand the unique function of each part of any individual museum timescape. This research was, unfortunately, restricted to using the English grammatical system, due to a limited knowledge of other languages. The basic principal, however, holds true, and many other languages may have a lot of subtle tools to offer – particularly in regard to tense.

Concrete nouns refer to tangible, observable things – table, cat, William. Abstract nouns, conversely, refer to non-physical things, to concepts, qualities, or states, such as love. The semantic connotations of nouns can be used to affect how the moving action of a text is understood. Cramming nouns

⁴⁷ Bas AARTS, *Oxford Modern English Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011, p. 3.

⁴⁸ AARTS, *Grammar*, p.42.

together, particularly if their semantic connotations reek of the turgid or the static, can bring a whole discourse to a halt. The opposite is also true – nouns can be limited such that a breathlessly quick, intensely unplaced and impossible to locate text can be built. Concrete nouns create a strong, sensorial reality, abstract nouns something far more elusive. Similarly, proper nouns, which refer to the names of specific people or things – William, Helsinki, November – are much more precise in their time-space location than the more generic common nouns – table and cat could refer to any cat, on any table in any place or time.

Noun functions occur in a number of ways throughout the Pitt Rivers Museum, dependent less upon the material nature of the “noured” item itself, than upon the position of the observer. The objects in the cases, of course, provide powerful noun functions, and indeed people, photographs, and imagery, as well as the Museum itself, can also provide this function. The elements of display which operate as nouns, therefore, can be concepts and emotions, as well as concrete embodied things. In the Pitt Rivers, there are both concrete and abstract nouns on display: cases displaying “Musical Instruments” sit next to those covering the more intangible notions of “Magic, Ritual, Religion and Belief”, and in this case the objects, rather than being the nouns themselves, are rather more adjectival, used to describe and illustrate the concept rather than directly embody it.

Determiners, which limit the referents of nouns, also affect how specifically these can be located in time and space. Definite articles mark nouns out as identifiable and specific things – “the cat” or “that cat” for instance. Indefinite articles, on the other hand, refer to “a cat” or “any cat”.

Determiners specify identity, particularity or generality in time, place and ontology. Thus, acquisition numbers, which accord to a single object a determinate self, an identifying number, contribute to the particularity of the noun. Lighting, which points out and identifies particular objects of note, or defines the independence or collectivity of objects, also functions as a determiner. Most obviously, perhaps, in the case of the Haida Totem, which as an iconic and large object is very brightly lit. In much of the rest of the museum, the lighting is consistently dim. The Haida Totem, already highlighted through lighting, but also its position and inherent size and colour, is given extra textual contextual information and a specific biography on the gallery labels. This totem, as a result, is less an exemplar of a type than it is an individual being it its own right: “that” totem pole, and no other – no generic representation of its form. When other objects, no matter how small and visually inconsequential they appear to be,

are accorded such unique identities, they have also been subject to a definite article.

For Roland Barthes, adjectives were “those doors of language through which the ideological and the imaginary come flowing in”,⁴⁹ for they modify and add description to nouns. In describing and adding colour and brilliance to the concepts for which nouns are the bare bones, they give scope for the understanding of beauty and ugliness in the world.

Labels, photographs and images, when used in conjunction with other objects to describe their use or their process of creation, perform a descriptive, contextualizing, and thus adjectival role. But descriptive activity can also be performed by the more environmental, decorative aspects of the museum space. At the back of the Great Court a large wooden case has its glass front covered by two deep red velvet curtains, hiding a Hawaiian Feather Cloak. These curtains add to the ambiance surrounding this object – they give it mystique, marking it out as something dramatic and theatrical, a special object to be revealed. In this sense, the curtains are inherently adjectival.

Tense is central to the temporality of a text and the timescape of a museum, and it has important implications with regard to cultural attitudes and hierarchical schema. Tense is used to locate situations in time, and in most languages, it is communicated through inflection – that is, slightly altering the morphology of a verb so that they indicate the temporal locale. In most languages, systems of tense are complex, in English certainly, and there are a fine gamut of tools which they can offer to the analyst of any communicative space, including the museum, and significantly, its written texts. Though all tenses, past, present and future are important, and can be deployed to good effect in museum creation, our example will focus only on the present, for in the context of ethnography, the present has very particular connotations.

In English, there are four forms of the present. The simple present expresses things as they are – “I walk”, “William walks”. The present continuous, as noted above, expresses ongoing activity – “I am walking”, “William is walking”. The present perfect expresses a state which is ended, but whose effects remain – “I have walked”, “William has walked”. The present perfect continuous, more commonly used to express the past, is formed thus – “William has been walking”. The present can be used to express a situation which pertains now and is permanent – “The ball is red”, “William has long hair”. Such statements make these states appear achronic and eternal, and this

⁴⁹ BARTHES, “Structural Analysis”, p. 14.

is crucial to our understanding of the political implications of something expressed in the Pitt Rivers Museum: the ethnographic present.

On the Upper Gallery of the Pitt Rivers, there is a case displaying the weaponry and artefacts of an African culture known as the Nuer. The texts which discuss them are written entirely in the present, and describe the Nuer from a removed perspective, positioning them as they were prior to contact with white Western anthropologists such as Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard. This is known as the “ethnographic present”, and it is problematic because it eternalises a single moment in the development of a culture, depicting them as though they are unable to progress and change. The texts in the Nuer case are also problematic because these ethnographic descriptions are overlaid with references to other anthropological works on the Nuer – and thus are a people objectified.

Semiology, Semantics and Style

Semantics is the linguistic study of signifiers and their connections to the things that they signify. Semiology, the study of signs in society, was proposed by de Saussure in the *Course*. In 1979, Umberto Eco proposed that “every phenomenon of signification and/or communication” – and thus by implication all cultural forms – could be studied under a “general semiotic theory”.⁵⁰ These ideas apply in the context of the museum and here we shall use them as the basis for understanding two abstract emanations of the museum timescape, which are built in the relationships between signifier and signified – the chronotope and the aura. A museum with an almost paradoxically chronotopic and deeply auratic character is the Oxford University Natural History Museum, and it is this institution which will form the basis for the examples given here.

In his essay, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”, Russian semiotician and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin defined the chronotope as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”.⁵¹ It is the temporally characterised locale in which action takes place, expressed through features of style, structure, content and genre. It expresses “the inseparability of space and time”, and

⁵⁰ Umberto ECO, *A Theory of Semiotics*. Milan: Indiana University Press 1979, p. 3.

⁵¹ Mikhail M. BAKHTIN, “Forms of Time and Of the Chronotope in the Novel.” In: HOLQUIST, M. (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Austin: University of Texas 1984, p. 84.

thus is crucial for any conceptualisation of museum spatiality.⁵² Bakhtin claimed that to some extent it was the chronotope that defined genre.⁵³ In the essay he presents a number of different chronotopic generic forms, from the Greek Romance to the Rabelasian novel.

Chronotopes exist in all museums, for each has their own entanglements and characteristics of space and time. The chronotopic appearance of the Oxford University Museum of Natural History significantly belies its content and ideology. Built in the form of a Gothic church, its ecclesiastical architecture – decorative brickwork, rosette windows, vaulted ceiling, tall, graceful columns – is somewhat at odds with the evolutionary, scientific collection, and is representative of the complex relationships which existed between science and faith at the time of its foundation, in the University and in the world at large. Whilst it appears to be a cathedral, this is not a place of faith, but of science, and learning and discovery still goes on within its walls. Unlike a cathedral, which invokes the eternal on Earth and is predicated upon the idea of a heavenly life everlasting, the OUMNH is not a reified or reifying space – there are no inviolable icons here, and it is open to change. In its taxidermy and preserved specimens, it displays objects which are dead and which are decaying. All parts of a museum, then, from the vault of its architectural body to the tiniest object, are fundamental constituents of its chronotope. And chronotopes aid in the production of aura.

Walter Benjamin defined aura as “the unique phenomenon of distance” which surrounds or emanates from an object or location.⁵⁴ It is an abstract quality, experiential, emergent, something generated in the interactions between objects, environments, and consciousnesses. It can be said that a museum’s act of acceptance confers an aura on an object. This is known as the “museum effect”,⁵⁵ and it is akin to the “making strange” of language that characterises certain forms of literature. The defamiliarisation that results can enhance the auratic qualities of objects. Small shrivelled, pickled things which would mean nothing in the outside world are elevated to the status of specimens, of things of import and interest by their placement in museum cases.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 85.

⁵⁴ Walter BENJAMIN, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In ARENDT, H. (ed.), *Illuminations*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World 1968, p. 216 (211–244).

⁵⁵ Svetlana ALPERS, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing.” In: KARP, L., – LAVINE, S.D., (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press 1991, p. 26 (25–32).

In his discussion of the phenomenon of antaeic magic, Mattias Ekman pointed out that auratic sites are often “strange”, “unapproachable” and “alienated”,⁵⁶ these qualities cyclically and reciprocally feeding back into the aura emerging around a place or thing. Something rare, unusual, hidden, even grotesque, has an auratic lure. Anonymous objects are particularly strange and politically powerful, for they defy singular authority and shimmer with a kind of achronic auracity. In the OUMNH, unidentified specimens are surrounded by what Eco termed a “halo of indefiniteness”,⁵⁷ a blank space in which many interpretations may play, but in which none may settle and be supreme. One specimen, a fossil shell of some kind, has no label, and is located in an unprepossessing position at the base of a case. The Museum has no final authority over this and similar objects, and they become far more open to the speculation of the audience, who suddenly find themselves in a much more powerful position. This is where aura takes on its more political cast. Style then, is no simple and shallow thing – it is, in fact, what allows us to see the world.

Prosody

Rhythm is a basic phenomenon of temporal existence. Language sits on top of rhythm, and those who can wield this underlying device have access to an astonishingly affective tool. In poetry, rhythm is crucial – and prosody its study. The following section will define and then explore how its central concerns of punctuation, stress and echoic features can be used to understand the museum and its timescape. For our examples, we will return to the complex and highly varied prosodic space of the Ashmolean.

Punctuation, in prose or poetry, is a powerful tool: it affects the communicative efficacy of a set of words, delicately affecting their meaning. It is always there, and ranges from the smallest mark to the setting out of pagination. In his analysis of poetic punctuation, John Lennard included not only conventional marks (stops, tonal indicators, dis/aggregators, signs of omission, rules and signes de renvoi), but also stanzaic structure, lineation, pagination and interword spacing.⁵⁸ Using all these devices, an author can

⁵⁶ Mattias EKMANN, “Architecture for the Nation’s Memory: History, Art and the Halls of Norway’s National Gallery.” In: MACLEOD, S. – HOURSTON HANKS, L. – HALE, J. (eds.), *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions*. London: Routledge 2012, p. 148, (114–156).

⁵⁷ Umberto ECO, *The Open Work*. Harvard: Harvard College 1989, p. 9.

⁵⁸ John LENNARD, *The Poetry Handbook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, pp. 105–152.

incite shifts in focus and time, pauses, commencement, cessation, continuance, flow and recursion.

How cases are laid out is vital not only to the way in which the visitor moves around the gallery, but to the meanings that space produces or implies. In the Ashmolean's Rome gallery, large freestanding cases stand in a square just smaller than that made by the walls of the room. This creates a four-cornered corridor, which surrounds a smaller interior square lying on the other side of the corridor cases. These cases bracket off that part of the gallery, differentiating it from the corridors and allowing for a shift in tone. In the surrounding corridors, the objects and histories displayed are public – of communal activities such as farming and war, and of the general long term history of Rome and its lands. But in the inner square, the ambiance, tone and content are much more private – sacred objects are on display here, jewellery, homewares. This is a personal and domestic space. The differentiation between the sections of the gallery is effective precisely because of the punctuative function of the cases. It is also worth noting that doors, and certain arrangements of walls, can also act in this fashion. They are reminiscent of caesura, the medial pause in a line of poetry that permits one sentence, or one line, to hold multiple different foci and tones.⁵⁹

A punctuation mark of particular interest to museums is the *signes de renvoi*. Known also as “signs of sending back”, these are used to associate matter in the text with other material. This can be used to good effect in a museum space, which relies on contextual matter to create or enhance meaning. In the Ashmolean, certain objects are labelled as “Connections Objects”, and the purpose of these is to highlight the relationships between different parts of the museum and the different cultures on display within it. The label that marks these out as “Connections Objects” acts as a *signes de renvoi* by forcing the prescience or recall of other objects along the journey through the museum – in the past or in the future. These signs of sending “elsewhen” encourage active and reflective reading by breaking the smooth flow of the text, and indicate how the text is always limited and biased in its perspective. These markers show the limitations of labels, the limitations of the discourse within the museum space, and they imply that about any object, there is always the potential to learn more.

Punctuation helps to create patterns of stress, and metrics is the study of the stress patterns of poetry. In English, it is based on an accentual-syllabic system, which is concerned not with the length of syllables but on the way

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p. 188.

in which emphatic stress is or is not placed upon them.⁶⁰ Its basic unit is the line, and this is further broken down into a repeated unit called a foot. How many feet make up a line determines the metre of the poem, and the different lengths of foot – two, three or four syllables – and the different stress patterns in which they are arranged, all have different names, and serve different functions in a poem. A two syllable foot with an unstressed-stressed pattern is called an iamb. Five of these together in a line make an iambic pentameter – a line very close to the rhythm of English speech. If the pattern of the foot ends on a stressed beat, this creates a rising rhythm. If it ends on an unstressed or elided beat, it produces a falling rhythm. These features can be used in a museum setting to produce experiences of smooth, progressive continuity and sudden wonder.

In the Ashmolean's basement, there is a gallery focussed upon textiles. It is a long, narrow gallery, with evenly spaced freestanding floor cases in a line down the middle of the space and smoothly continuous wall cases, all oriented towards the archway which leads to the next gallery, Reading and Writing. The wall cases produce a sense of flow, smooth and unbroken, in which the central floor cases sit. If these cases are seen as the ictic, or stressed, syllable in a foot, and the floor space between them the unstressed syllable, then they produce a rising rhythm, moving towards Reading and Writing, directed by the pointing finger of the manikin in a case which begins the metrical sequence.

Whilst the positioning of objects can enhance or undermine their icticity, many objects across the three museums are ictic in their own right, through their size, patterning or colour. The placement of these ictic objects is central to the resulting rhythm of the gallery, and can be used to generate intense experiences of wonder, and powerful museological *mise-en-scene*. The Battle of the Animals tapestry is immediately visible on entrance to the West Meets East orientation gallery. Its size, intricate and bold images and bright colours make it an inherently ictic object which immediately draws the attention of the visitor, and provokes an intense experience of wonder that overwhelms the tiny gallery in which it sits. Ictic objects such as this twist space about themselves, rather than being manipulated and positioned to fit the metrical ideal of the curator.

But the structures and forms of poetry in English are not based upon patterns of stress alone, but also on rhyme and echoes. Echoic devices come in many forms, including rhyme, alliteration, assonance and consonance,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p. 2.

and each form can be used to create very particular results. Perhaps the most important function of echoes in the museum are to produce a sense of institutional cohesion, or a sense of recall and reflection in the visitor. In the Ashmolean, the Laocoön is a perfect example. It appears twice – once as a cast of the full statue, and once as the cast of the bust. The first is situated in the Cast Gallery in the new Mather extension, the bust in the Britain and Italy gallery of the old Western Art wing. Thus the Laocoön unites not just two geographically disparate galleries in one museum, but two very different halves of the Ashmolean, disparate in content, ambiance and social culture. This echo also produces reflection upon the nature of museal framing, and how limited singular interpretations can be. In the Cast Gallery, Laocoön is presented as an archaeological piece, occasionally used to teach drawing and sculpture. In Britain and Italy, it is presented as a commercial object of decorative art. Rhymes might be recollective, but they are not always identical. Danielewski once wrote that, “Since objects always muffle or impede acoustic reflection, only empty places can create echoes of lasting clarity.”⁶¹ Like the temporal space between experiences of the same thing, the Ashmolean is in no way empty.

Conclusion

Literary phenomenology has much to recommend it. It is built on conceptual ancestors from two disciplines, and endeavours to bring the methodological strengths of both to the table: the potential arbitrariness and incoherence of the unstructured phenomenological walk eliminated by the literary frame, and the abstraction of that frame grounded in immersion in the material world. It moves beyond previous attempts to theorise the temporality of museum spaces, because it does not eulogise or reify them. It also moves beyond the historicising approaches towards museum temporality, which concentrate on the relationship between museums and the past, by taking a much more contextual and located perspective which assumes nothing about the temporal focus nor the general ontological status of any museum. It leaves behind “lingering preconceptions” that suggest a museum has a social position more powerful, legitimate and special than other spaces, and positions it as equal alongside the other spatially and temporally complex sites inhabited by human beings. It proves, too, that style is not necessarily

⁶¹ Mark Z. DANIELEWSKI, *House of Leaves*. London: Doubleday 2001, p. 46.

just “mere style”, but that it can be something meaningful when looked at in depth, and always has something to contribute to analysis.

The purpose of this conclusion, however, is not just to defend the method and prove its value, but to explore its potential implications for museums, their study and their production, and what effect it might have on other fields of culture and academia. To begin, we will look at the importance of temporality itself.

Temporality is an important frame for the analysis of museums and existence in general, because it is tied inextricably to space and one cannot be fully understood independently of the other. Time is also a tool of political control and cultural representation, and it is particularly crucial to remember this when creating museum displays. But it is also relevant to other cultural performances, and the diplomatic and social relationships of the everyday. It is vital, then, that all studies of place and society move beyond pure geographical location and geoepistemology, to a form of understanding that accounts for the temporal element of being and becoming – a geochronic epistemology.

Literary phenomenology is particularly significant for the design and creation of museum space, the making of new buildings, the designing of new exhibitions and the writing of interpretive material. What possible exhibitions might be inspired by the techniques and styles of Modernism? What changes might be made in architectural design based on Russian Formalism? How might case labelling and text panels be altered by the study of grammar and the chronotope? What has prosody to say about the arrangement of cases? The potential is great; it is up to those who design and create museum spaces to take it on.

This method also has significant implications for the ontology of the museum itself. It presents new ways of investigating the political and ethical issues which may be hidden and yet still at play within the museum space – the Othering of China in the Ashmolean being a case in point. Narratology in particular, when used in a subtle fashion, can undermine as well as support dogmatic narratives authored by museums with the intention of creating particular experiences. Narrative posture in particular allows for nuanced and critical reflection upon the relationships between the actants involved in the museum experience.

Ultimately, however, this method shows that the Museum in general is no more extraordinary than other cultural sites, and that any particular museum is less significant, yet far more complex, than its previous analysts have dared to show. For them, a museum was a site focussed on the past, or

a place out of time. Literary phenomenology invites all tenses and all subtle possibilities into the museum, making it a fully intertextual site, potentially of everywhere and everywhen. Then it can be, as Lyotard once wrote, the “remains of all time” – more truly a Museum on the Edge of Forever.