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Past Issues

□ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean:

Museums and Education.

London: Routledge (2007) ISBN: 0415-37946-9 (pbk) pp. 231

□ Sandell, Richard:

Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference.

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A Review by Martin Barker

I want to recommend these two books without any equivocation for colleagues in the audience and reception field to read. Not because I do not have any concerns or criticisms about them – I do have some, as I will try to explain below. But for several reasons to do with the state of our field, I think an encounter with these books – and indeed other work from the same source – would be invaluable. The source is the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester.

My first ground for recommending is my simple suspicion that hardly anyone will have heard of them – or indeed of the other work that has been emerging from museum studies over the last decade. A number of people will know of Tony Bennett's work, and the like, which have examined museum 'from the outside'. And of course there have been substantial theoretical enquiries into notions of 'archives of knowledge' and 'narratives of history' which have been from time to time used to look at museum practices. But these two books are examples of work from within the field of museum studies, and it is really quite extraordinary. Very influenced – one might say, belatedly – by cultural studies critiques and perspectives, this is work that belongs within our broad domain, yet has until now been operating almost entirely within the limits of its own professional field. That's a real pity.

My second reason is that, although coming 'late' to cultural studies, the current state of museum studies has put requirements on its researchers which have made them address issues, and meet challenges, which we should simply and honestly admire. The demands of policy-relevance not only affect the kinds of question asked, but also how these large questions (for example about how children's sense of cultural belonging might be developed by museum-based encounters) have to be operationalised and made methodologically secure. And that is something too few of us in the broader audience and reception field ever get to face. In significant ways, it seems to me that they have

leapfrogged most of us, critically and methodologically, and we should see this work as marking out one cutting-edge.

Third, and perhaps in the long run the most important, these studies raise some fascinating questions about the future directions of our field. Cultural studies-inflected audience research began as an outcrop of a kind of oppositional politics in the 1970-80s, and was viewed with suspicion on all kinds of grounds. Politically, it was seen as somewhere between irrelevant and dangerous, because of its rescuing of 'ignored audiences'. Methodologically, it emphasised qualitative approaches, and was dismissed as at best offering case-study approaches. Within the media and cultural studies field itself, it was viewed with suspicion because of its 'threat' to traditional modes of textual and aesthetic investigation. Over time, it has lost a lot of its political edge, has become to a degree normalised, and has even in a few cases become bolder methodologically. This museums research is distinctive, as we will see, in developing the field in some startling new directions.

It isn't accidental that a great deal of this work is emerging in the UK. Political initiatives from New Labour have pushed an agenda of 'social inclusion' (their term for avoiding talk about class, inequality, and discrimination ...), and demanded of museums that they join a list of agencies which have to promote 'inclusion'. The very substantial changes involved in this lacked any research base. The Leicester Research Centre has taken on the role of generating knowledge about emergent practices within museums across the country. These two books are among the fruits of this research.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's book reports the processes and outcomes of a series of funded projects into the achievements of these new museum practices, from work done with museums across the UK with visitors from schools. Drawing on official reports of each tranche of research (most of which are accessible at the Leicester Centre's website, and are worth the visit), she shows how the research teams debated a series of complex issues around theory and method. What would it mean to say that children 'learnt' something valuable in a museum, how should 'learning' be conceptualised, and then how should tests and measures of that learning be operationalised? In a complex engagement with learning theory, but with an eye always on researchability, the team developed a notion of five Generic Learning Outcomes (roughly, Creativity, Knowledge and Information, Skills, Collaboration, and Development) which they theorise as working parts of people's cultural identities. Then, with large numbers of teachers and children, they set out to test how far designed encounters with challenging topics (ranging from portraiture, to the workhouse, to slavery) added value in these senses to children's understanding.

Hooper-Greenhill then runs across the key findings of a series of their projects across 2003-5. The book and the research reports are worth looking at not least because of the exemplary treatment of empirical evidence. Here be graphs, tables, pi-charts, significance tests and the like, with resultant quantitative patterns and challenges, as well as insightful collections of comments, joyous quotations, and even grumbles adding flesh

to the numbers. I confess to being particularly struck by the effectiveness of one research tactic used with children, to tap into their museum experiences. Faced with the problem of asking quite young children what they had 'learnt' from their visits, alongside some simple more factual questions they were simply offered a speech balloon they could fill in, to complete the sentence "What most amazed me at the museum today ...". The rich responses to this most simple of devices are wonderful – although I would have loved to see an attempt at a structured analysis of these responses (they are mainly used for good illustrative quotations).

There are points where I felt the outcomes to be slightly 'boosterist' – that is, the goal was clearly to prove benefit. It is *making the case* that museums are fully making the transition from an older, more genteel mode of working to a New Labour style commitment to social inclusion and learning. There are exceptions – the occasional awkward or contrary finding is recorded and considered – but in general everything is good and beneficial. This does have the odd consequence that the very ending, where she delves back again into the history of attitudes to museums, she cites several examples demonstrating that in Victorian times there was a drive to use museums to bring the 'lower orders' out of their primitive lives. But rather than asking whether current obsessions with 'deprived' children might not be the modern equivalent of this, we are instead given a Giddens-esque account in terms of complex identity-formations and the demands of post-modernity. But in the face of the larger virtues of this research, I can understand and forgive! Hooper-Greenhill is tentative in one sense. Her closing discussion evinces this caution about the future:

The power of museum pedagogy can now clearly be seen; this is one of the most positive aspects of the post-modern emphasis on accountability and performativity. While increased government intervention is often felt to be burdensome, it has, for the time being at least, enabled museums to gather and present evidence of their effectiveness, efficiency and efficaciousness in educational work. The research evidence has shown how museums can match and exceed government expectations, can respond to government desires for social inclusion, and can complement the state's provision of educational systems. (200)

'Effectiveness', unarguably. But the *directions* of effectiveness may be a little more in need of investigation than this suggests. Concepts like 'governmentality' and ideas of the management of inequality are still important.

Richard Sandell's book goes on a slightly strange journey through questions of museum coverage of topics around 'prejudice'. Its early chapters are built first around two very substantial research case studies. One explores visitor responses to the Glasgow St Mungo's Museum, which is dedicated to exploring the nature of religious experiences, with an overt brief to encourage recognition of similarities across all world religions and to promote more than tolerance, a valuing of difference. The second case study is of visitor responses to the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam, which not only memorialises her life and eventual death at the hands of the Nazis, but then offers a whole series of

contemporary analogues of prejudice and hatred, on grounds of race, sexuality, religion and so on.

The book not only presents a range of findings from analysis of visitor book comments, and from interviews conducted with visitors, it also debates how these should be approached and understood. Sandell begins from Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, and indeed its potential value is seemingly great, given the highly purposive nature of these two museums. The problems about identifying 'intended messages' or 'dominant meanings' are greatly reduced here. What I find so fascinating in this is the effective reversal of the politics of Hall's model. In its original form, television (Hall's prime object of attention) was seen as providing a conduit for 'dominant ideology'. This did not happen because of the *will* or *intention* of broadcasters, but because of the practices of institutions, and the ways television 'texts' were formed by cultural-structural processes. This shaped the meaning and implications of the three reading positions Hall posited. A 'dominant reading' provided evidence of lack of critical appraisal. A 'negotiated reading' arose where a viewer was *suspicious* of the 'message', but lacked the argumentative resources to challenge it – she therefore made 'exceptional space' for partly disagreeing. An 'oppositional reading' was effectively for Hall a class-based challenge to the system.

All these are in effect turned upside down by their use in this context. These museums are *seeking to develop critical challenges* with their audiences. A 'dominant' reading of these museums becomes one where people are *forced to think*. A 'negotiated' one is where people recognise the 'call' for tolerance, or humanity, but think it is a bit overstated, or etc. An 'oppositional' reading now becomes a marker of resistant prejudice. Sandell's examples are of Christian fundamentalists, Islam-haters, and the like.

In fact the book worries at the value of Hall's model and various modifications of it, using a range of visitor materials to show the variety and complexity of responses, and ends by proposing an approach which sees museum audiences as "co-participating" in a dialogue.

This leads on to a rather different piece of research, into how curators conceive the possibilities of mounting exhibitions addressing issues of disability. The research first asked curators their views on this, and what materials (objects, documents, etc) they had in their collections which could be relevant to the topic. Subsequent exploration of their collections revealed a much wider range than the curators initially conceived. Sandell suggests that an acute nervousness about how to approach a topic like this stymies many possibilities. The book ends by exploring various possibilities for overcoming the political hesitations of museum professionals towards 'taking sides' on controversial issues. The discussion of this is, to my eye, wise and cautious, but emphasises the ways in which it is inevitable even in avoidance – stories are always being told, no matter how purposefully directed or no.

As examples of the kinds of work coming out of the Leicester Research Centre, these books are simply very valuable. Via their website a considerable number of other Reports documenting their detailed research are also available. I hope colleagues will go look, and that through this a broader conversation can emerge.

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