

**BACK TO THE FUTURE:  
THE MUSEUM EXHIBIT *VANCOUVER IN THE FIFTIES* AND THE  
PROBLEM OF HISTORICITY.**

By

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## Abstract

Critics of the museum have repeatedly drawn attention to its paradoxical quality. On the one hand, the museum is an institution dedicated to the historical representation of the past. On the other, the construction of exhibitions and displays is almost entirely dependent on the act of separating historical objects from their actual, temporal existence and subsequently resurrecting them in totalized narratives of interpretation. Not only has the object lost its actual context and temporality in this process, but it is also enclosed in a reconstruction that is epistemologically problematic from the point of view of an accurate representation of that context. In an unexpected way, the museum takes on the metaphoric characteristics of the mausoleum. Consequently, the *experience of historicity* that the visitor might well take from museum is, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's formulation, the historicity of death. Against this, curators can only hope to 'imaginatively' bring the past back to life, thereby running the risk of seriously misrepresenting both the past and our experience of historicity.

I argue that this paradox cannot be transcended by the museum. Moreover, we can infer that historiography faces the same sort of dilemma. However, this is exacerbated by the tendency to focus on the problematic of history as representation over the notion of history as event and process when defining either historical consciousness or historicity. Through a careful reading of both Gadamer's work on historical consciousness and what I understand as a fundamental corrective to it offered by Reinhart Koselleck, I argue that any attempt to understand the experience of historicity must grasp the significance of the dimension of futurity. Whereas the emphasis on history as representation inevitably falls on the past and its relationship to the historian's present, the relation of both past and present to the future constitutes historical temporality. Koselleck shows how the tension between what he calls the space of experience and horizons of expectation constitutes historicity historically.



In order to make this argument, I analyze a new exhibit entitled *Vancouver in the Fifties* at the Vancouver Museum. The virtue of this exhibit is that it manages to portray the tension between that particular present past and the corresponding horizon of expectation that shapes its future present. Potentially; the visitor leaves the exhibit with a sense of the play of temporality implied by the existence of an open future in the past. This stands as a kind of case study aimed at underlining the importance of the historicity of the future for understanding historical temporality.



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## Introduction

**Eric Packer** (*Billionaire Asset Manager*): "There's an order at some deep level. A pattern that wants to be seen... . But in this case I'm beginning to doubt I'll ever find it."

**Vija Kinski** (*his Chief of Theory*): "Doubt. What is doubt? You don't believe in doubt. You've told me this. Computer power eliminates doubt. All doubt arises from past experience. But the past is disappearing. We used to know the past but not the future. This is changing. We need a new theory of time."<sup>1</sup>

This dialogue appears during a journey across town. Eric Packer wants a haircut and he wants to pursue a cataclysmic bet against the value of the yen. Stalled in traffic "...that speaks in quarter inches", various employees, lovers and acquaintances enter and leave his extravagantly customized white stretch limousine, including his *Chief of Theory*, Vija Kinski. Speculation on time, history, memory, and the changing status of the future and past ensues as they move forward towards an uncertain destiny. Reading this novel while writing these chapters, I came to understand Packer's journey as a rich metaphor for the less imaginative one I was making. I won't spoil the ending of the novel, which isn't entirely happy, while I can still hope that my journey is somewhat happier. In any case, the metaphor draws what strength it has from the notion of a journey or road trip with definite goals at the outset and an uncertain end at the end.

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<sup>1</sup> Dialogue taken from Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003, p. 86).



This essay (*essai*, attempt) begins with an experience of an exhibition and proceeds in the direction of an understanding of that experience that overflows the boundaries subjectivity imposes on it. Of course, like every experience, this was not a raw and immediate moment in time. When I viewed the exhibition *Vancouver in the Fifties* at the Vancouver Museum, I experienced it as someone who had taught and studied modern history for a long time. I also experienced it as someone who had lived in Vancouver in the nineteen-fifties and retained memories of it. Moreover, I was visiting the exhibit as a participant in the official opening of *The Centre for The Study of Historical Consciousness* while, in my capacity as graduate student, I was also hoping to generate a term paper for a graduate course on *Memory and the Construction of the Educational Past*.<sup>2</sup> In short, my experience was already radically overdetermined - and these are just the mediations I am willing to talk about! That said, the notion of experience remains as an event or sensation that one has lived through or undergone. In this sense, it entails the content of a direct observation or participation in an event, as long as we recognize that the element of directness does not imply that it is unmediated.

In Chapter One, I discuss the ambiguities that arose from my first two visits to the exhibition. In effect, I describe a dual experience of the exhibit. On the one hand, an experience based primarily on personal memories; on the other hand, an experience rooted in critical, historical understanding. I employ Pierre Nora's discussion of the relations between memory and history to explore the

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<sup>2</sup> The course was EDST 500 taught by Jean Barman. The initial result can be found at "Vancouver in the 50's: Is this Exhibition a 'Memory-Site'?" <http://www.cshc.ubc.ca/viewpaper.php?id=96> (2002).



changing constellation between them. In particular, I discuss his contention that history or historical consciousness has overwhelmed memory in our lived relationship to the past, with the result that what he calls memory-sites have emerged as a key element in the modern, historical form of memory. I also explore his concept of the memory-site as a means of approaching the role and function of the museum within this constellation. In spite of doubts I cast on Nora's conceptual apparatus, I argue that it helps clarify the ambiguous experience that one can have of such exhibits. However, I also argue that it constitutes a disenchanted and disenchanting view of the possibilities of historical representation in the museum. Built into his conceptual apparatus is a sense that, over time, the authentic world of memory is gradually supplanted by the alienating world of historical consciousness.

In my view, this feeling arises from two sources. First, the essentializing of the notion of memory that runs through his argument; and, secondly, his tendency to formulate the relations between memory and history in a stage-dependent theory. In contrast, I tentatively suggest that the temporally oriented perspective of Reinhart Koselleck on history and historical consciousness offers a superior means of approaching the problem of experiencing what I begin to call, in this chapter, 'historicity'. Initially, by this term, I mean the quality of being historical that subtends any of its representations in either narrative or experience. However, one of the tasks of this essay is to make this idea of the experience of historicity more concrete.

Rather than focus on the apparently opposing notions of memory and history (in the sense of historiography) and my experiences of them in the



representations of history in the museum, I turn my focus toward the quality of being historical that the museum presumably wishes to address in such exhibitions. To achieve this, I propose two side trips on my journey. The first, which I address in Chapter Two, explores the relationship between the museum and historical representation as cultural critics and philosophers have thematized it. Secondly, in Chapter Three, I explore approaches to historical consciousness and historicity that will assist in addressing the problematic relationship philosophers have discerned in the museum's relationship to history.

Chapter Two begins with a brief discussion of the link between knowledge and display that shapes the pedagogical impulse of the museum. I suggest that this link also shapes *the experience of historicity* that the visitor takes from the museum. However, critics of the museum argue that it in fact bestows a suspect or ambiguous historicity through their displays in the very act of separating objects from actual, temporal existence and situating them in some kind of totalized narrative that treats them as fully past – that is, over and done with.

Ironically then, both the object and the narrative of historical representation take on a sort of ahistorical quality – what Merleau-Ponty calls *the historicity of death* (1993, p. 100). I pursue this critique from the perspective of both philosophers and historians, for it is evident that many modern conceptions of historiography partake in this paradoxical idea that historical representations take on an ahistorical flavour. In Philip Rosen's words, they "...seek to mummify change" (2001, p. 72).

I follow various twistings and turnings of this critique that seek to find a way out of the problem, but I conclude that the museum does indeed stand in a



somewhat paradoxical relationship to historical representation. However, I argue that the dualism that continually re-asserts itself in the contrast between the historicity of life and death partly reflects the ambiguity of the term history itself. Although it denotes both event and representation (Koselleck, 1985, p. 92), notions of historicity have a tendency to focus on the latter. In a discussion of the museum's relationship to history this is surely inevitable, for the museum is primarily dedicated to exploring the dimension of the historical in the same way that the historian does. But if history is understood to include the dimension of event and process, then the nature of the historicity we find in the museum must ideally find a way to reflect that dimension as well. If this is even possible, it is necessary to explore the notions of historical consciousness and historicity more closely, which is the subject of the next chapter.

In Chapter Three, I focus on the work of two thinkers who might be understood as developing what Paul Ricoeur calls a 'hermeneutic of historical consciousness' (1985, p. 207-241). Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics approaches the problem of interpretation as both an experiential and historical act of understanding events and objects that are themselves historical, which is also a useful description of the experience of historicity awaiting the visitor to the museum. I focus on one work of Gadamer's that directly addresses the problem of historical consciousness (1987a). In particular, I emphasize the connection between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*. This has the advantage of situating historicity in being-in-the-world, and thus beyond the scope of subjective methodology. The German language makes this clearer by distinguishing two senses of the word history. Thus *Geschichte* signifies history



as event or process, while *Historie* signifies history as representation or story. So, to put the point another way, *Geschichte* is understood as transcendent with regard to *Historie* (Koselleck, 2002, p. 3). However, by situating Gadamer's key notion of tradition in relation to historicity, and the critique that Jürgen Habermas has made of the privileging of tradition in his philosophy, it becomes apparent that while Gadamer has constructed a hermeneutic of historical consciousness, he has not succeeded in sufficiently grasping the temporal dimension of futurity. His extrapolation of the structure of *Dasein* into his hermeneutic of historical consciousness actually narrows the notion of historicity as event or process. In effect, it impoverishes the notion of experience insofar as it constitutes historical consciousness by downplaying the dimension of futurity that is fundamental to the experience of event or process.

At this point, I turn to the work of Reinhart Koselleck in order to remedy two shortcomings in Gadamer's discussion. First, Koselleck provides us with a conceptual apparatus that functions at the level of the historical event proper. His notion of historicity neither privileges tradition over the future (Gadamer), nor privileges ontology over history (Heidegger). Consequently, he situates both historical consciousness and historicity in historical development. He achieves this by developing a theory of historical temporality based on the experiential tension between what he calls the space of experience and the horizons of expectation. The latter term, in particular, restores the importance of the temporal dimension of the future to concepts of historical consciousness and historicity. In a manner similar to Heidegger's critique of historicism, he moves away from historicity as function of the past, and towards historicity as a function



of the future. For him, it is the increasing gap between experience and expectation that accounts for the birth of historicity and historical consciousness in the modern period. This sets the stage for the final chapter.

In the final chapter, I try to accomplish two things. First, and following on the concluding discussion of Chapter Three, I discuss the importance of the shifting relations of experience and expectation as determinants of historicity in the debate around the temporal crisis detected on the borderline between notions of modernity and postmodernity. Once I have established this, and some of the implications for understanding means of disclosing the nature of historicity conceived as temporality, I return to the exhibit.

In the final part of the chapter, I continue my journey down the streets of the exhibit, narrating what I saw in terms of 'the historicity of the future'. My contention is that the exhibit, whatever its intentions, has significantly succeeded in disclosing *a sense of historical time*. Maria Grever, whose questions first sent me on this journey, has pointed out that when the terms of *sense of time* or *sense of history* are used - and surely these are basic elements of an experience of historical consciousness - it has to be admitted that the notion of *sense* is difficult to operationalize. Yet in contrast to more common phrases such as 'deal with the past' or 'relationship to the past', the ideas of a sense of time or history are more relevant and useful *as expressions of temporal experience*. Indeed, Grever argues that it is a necessary precondition of historical consciousness.

A sense of time indicates that people are aware that objectively measurable time and subjectively experienced time may diverge. The concept itself refers to the perception of duration...and intensity in daily life.... It is the fundamental awareness that the



present is somehow always based on past events. The self-evident carry-over of the past into the present is considered a pre-modern sense of history. We speak of modern historical consciousness when people regard the past as fundamentally different from the present, when they experience a breach with the past (Grever, p. 8).

However, even a careful reader of Koselleck like Grever fails to emphasize the dimension of futurity in making this breach. The virtue of the Vancouver exhibit, I argue, is that it does not neglect this dimension. By design or by accident, the tension between the present past of the fifties and the horizon of expectations that shapes the future present of Vancouver in the fifties is expressed in an experiential sense of temporality in play. This experience, it is argued, goes some way to ameliorating the limitations of historical representation in the museum.



## **Chapter 1**

### **Museum and Memory-Site**

Every historical account is a pedagogical proposal, and to that extent, every historical account is a public act.<sup>3</sup> To tell something about the past, or about the relation of past and present, is an act of communication, while in every act of communication there is a sharing of knowledge – or of propositions about knowledge – that constitutes, at the very least, the conditions of mutual teaching and learning.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, this act of communication is not just a relation of knowing, it also an experience of the account that is presented.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the historical accounts that populate the museum. The museum collects artifacts from the time of history and displays them – or some of them – in a form that can be considered both historiographic and educational. The museum provides a space that mediates the communicative relationship of historical accounts and their pedagogic subjects, so that to enter a museum is to encounter a mode of exposition of artifacts that intends to make meaning of that which is displayed.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while the museum thereby invents a history for public consumption “...by defining the space of a ritual encounter with

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<sup>3</sup> Making the claim that all historical accounts are in the public sphere, expands the conventional definitions of public history that tend to separate the past as it is constructed for and by professionals, and the past as it is presented to the public and understood by the public. For an excellent discussion of public history see Jordanova (2000, Ch.6).

<sup>4</sup> This statement intentionally leaves aside the problem of the truth conditions of communicative action, or the problems of ideology, misrepresentation, and plain untruth.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to imply that only intended meanings are to be found in the museum.



the past" (Maleuvre, 1999, p.1), the visitor also experiences that encounter in terms of what Mieke Bal calls a particular form of 'discursive behaviour' (1996, p.2).

The particular form of discursive behaviour that frames the evolution and function of the museum is exposition, whose gestures imply 'this is the way it is' when they say 'look' (Bal, 1996, p.2). In the act of exposition, something is both shown to the visitor of the museum and shown from a position of authority. Built, therefore, into the founding gesture (exposition) of the museum is a discrepancy between that which is presented and experienced, and the statements made about it. The latter could take the form of textual commentary on the walls *vis-à-vis* the objects on display, or the form of interpretations about the exhibition as a whole, but in principle these statements do not extend to all the possible experiences of the presentation. In the spaces between ambiguity flourishes, providing the opportunity for debate over the meaning of the statements that are initially underwritten by this epistemic authority. Debates of this kind can take many forms, but in the contemporary period, they are often framed as struggle between memory and history. Both arrogate authority based on different standards and claims about the past, and both do so from many different subject positions. Provisionally, we might nevertheless safely define memory as the power of retaining and recalling past experience while history, in the sense of historiography and the institutional apparatus implied by it, is best understood as organized knowledge of the past.

From the point of view of the experience of the visitor, the museum certainly calls upon both personal and social memories of the past. And where we



lack personal memory of a represented past, we often fall back on socially-derived memories – memories of history lessons half-learned, media representations, myths, and all the other resources from our own past that might provide interpretative keys or just vague sentiments.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, all kinds of epistemic authorities are conjured up to vouch for these recollections, including those from our parents, from our belief systems, and definitely from the institution of the museum itself. In this sense, memories and historical understanding work together in various constellations to construct a meaningful past. More recently, the precise relation of memory to history has been subjected to ever-closer scrutiny in an effort to sort out the significance of the distinction for thematizing the past (Huysen, 1995).<sup>7</sup>

Kerwin Klein has drawn our attention to the meteoric rise in recent years of so-called memory studies, or the scholarly interest in memory. He describes the emergence of the term ‘memory’ as a kind of metahistorical category subsuming all sorts of well-established practices, such as oral history, folk history, and, one might add, social history. (2000, p. 127-8).<sup>8</sup> In spite of denials by defenders of memory studies, he notes that “where history is concerned, memory increasingly functions as antonym rather than synonym, contrary rather than complement and replacement rather than supplement” (2000, p. 128-9). The ambiguities of the museum’s complex relationship to memory and history is one such site of the struggle for meaning, because contesting claims over the past

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<sup>6</sup> I am reluctant to use the term ‘collective memories’ because it both implies a unity of memory that rarely, if ever, exists and a collective subject that does this remembering.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 1, in particular, for a useful discussion in terms of the museum.

<sup>8</sup> On this, see Olick & Robbins (1998) for a thorough discussion of what they call the ‘centreless enterprise’ (p. 105) of social memory studies – which they try to remedy in a sociological perspective.



are increasingly framed in this way. To the historian's understanding of an event, one might counterpose personal memory as a more authentic understanding. And because historiography owes so much of its method and self-knowledge to the western traditions that gave birth to it, one might equally counterpose other traditions and modes of explanation that contradict it.<sup>9</sup> These sorts of difficulties go beyond contesting claims about the past, however. The experience of the museum visitor can also be framed in terms of an encounter with both memory and history, which leads to many related questions about the museum's status with regard to historical understanding. The understanding of an exhibit by the curator or historian might be quite contrary to the experience the visitor has of it. This can happen when the visitor's understanding of the past lacks the disciplinary requirements of the historian or curator, or when his personal relationship to objects and items in an exhibit overrides it. To illustrate, I will begin with a personal experience of the 'discursive behaviour' of a particular museum exhibit and the ambiguities it created for me.

### **Encountering Vancouver in the 50's**

The 2002 celebratory opening of *the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness* featured a visit to a new exhibition at the Vancouver Museum called *Vancouver in the 50's*. The 'streets' of the gallery were crowded with celebrants, leading me to engage with the exhibition in a sporadic manner, looking at elements of the display either when I could get near them or when they sparked a personal memory I wanted to pursue. Part of me regretted that I was

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<sup>9</sup> For a good example, see Clifford's account of 'Identity in Mashpee' (1989) and particularly Klein's account of it (1995, p. 288-294)



unable to take in the exhibition in a more systematic and linear way, if only because I habitually look for a starting point and follow the path exhibitions usually construct for the visitor. In a subsequent address, the curator would refer to this linear and rigid strategy of display as the 'toothpaste tube' approach, which I had clearly been well trained to appreciate, squeezing my progress through exhibits from the bottom until I emerged out the other end (Seidl, 2002).<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, the exhibition is both small and densely packed with displays that could, it soon became apparent, either stand alone or be viewed in any order. In contrast to the toothpaste tube, the curator felt it was a strength of the exhibition that the visitor could exercise choice over the display, thereby giving the public the opportunity to counteract the inevitable impact of the curatorial voice (Seidl, 2001). That said, there is a kind of unity at work in the exhibition, for the various tableaux or displays are connected by a sense of walking the streets of a city. Whatever the intent of the exhibition's designers was, on my first visit I was more or less forced to randomly make my way through it. And so it was, that as a former member of the *Quarterback Club*, I randomly lingered over images of the *B. C. Lions'* initial season in 1954 at Empire Stadium, a venue built for the Commonwealth Games and bearing a name still appropriate for the time. As a former subject of *Foncie* photos, I looked for familiar faces, poses and backgrounds. The exhibition included one of the portable cameras that were used to capture images of people as they strolled through the streets,

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<sup>10</sup> I am not alone in this. The discomfort of visitors has been documented for the 'directionless' direction of the Pompidou Centre's exhibits. See Bennett, 1995, p. 45.



reminding us of the vibrant street life of the period and the desire of inhabitants to be seen there. Viewing an installation centred on a wringer-washing machine inspired painful recollections of catching my finger in one, not to mention spilling precious food from *White Spot* car trays onto my lap, and labouring over the *McLean's Method of Handwriting*. In short, I plunged into a reverie of fragmented moments that only the very polite would be prepared to indulge afterwards, so I will halt a potentially endless recounting of my personal memory lane here, noting only that the exhibit quite skillfully assembled objects and constructed scenes guaranteed to elicit these sorts of emotions.

Responding through the medium of memory and sentiment, I left the gallery with a sense of the exhibition as an enjoyable display of recently collected items that certainly typified the Vancouver of that time. As to be expected of a gallery dedicated to the 1950's, the choice of text font and colour was nicely coordinated with the objects chosen to represent the period, a fancy car – in this instance a mint 1955 Ford – working jukebox, sensationalist movie posters, neon signs and the like. Not as clichéd as *Happy Days* perhaps, but not far from its movie parent *American Graffiti* – somewhat grittier and more mature, but relying on nostalgia for its emotional affect, and still recognizably idealized.

Not surprisingly, a gallery experienced in this manner found little to challenge what might be described as the traditional role of a city museum: that is, to celebrate the story of the city as mostly benign progress. I noted instances of critique here and there, but they seemed consistent with the story of a progressive distancing from the past towards a promising future. In short, it appeared to be perfectly consistent with the usual record of urban achievement, all wrapped up



and ready to admire (Kavanagh & Frostick, 1998, p. x). To be sure, isolated elements undercut these perceptions, but not so much as to shake the memory-effect of my experience of the gallery.

In any case, the gallery visit was to be followed by a discussion entitled “Local History in a Cosmopolitan Settler City”. In anticipation, I returned to the adjacent *Joyce Walley Learning Centre* and took my seat. Taking up the program for the afternoon, I was immediately struck by the power of the words ‘settler’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ over image and memory as I now entered the world of critical reflection. My first thought was that I must have ‘resisted’ the curatorial voice implied by these terms only by allowing private memory to transcend any historical accounting the exhibition actually presented. Neither word had surfaced to disturb my reverie in the duration of my visit, but now both words shocked me back to ‘historical consciousness’ – perhaps not unlike the shock effect of the surrealist image of the ‘beautiful as the chance encounter, on a dissecting table, of a sewing machine and an umbrella’.<sup>11</sup>

While I am uncertain of the existence of a cabal of neo-surrealists among the organizers of the opening, it was doubtless their intention to stake out this contrast from the outset. The choice of a softened postcard image of Vancouver’s (then) main street, Granville, to embellish advertisements, posters and T-shirts is just one of those openings on memory and nostalgia that I would encounter in the objects and design of the exhibit. However, emblazoned on the image was an infamous remark on the subject of the relations of history and memory signifying

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<sup>11</sup> The surrealists adopted this image from one of their heroes, the Comte de Lautréamont. Indeed, André Breton rescued this text from the archive. This also echoes the surrealist leanings of Walter Benjamin’s dialectical images, also intended to deliver such shocks.



the irony of historical distance and self-consciousness. "Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists," or so proclaimed the eminent French historian Pierre Nora (1996, p.1). Adding this caption to the picture succinctly foregrounded the uneasy relationship between memory and history that I was experiencing in the transition from museum space to colloquium space. Indeed, Nora's words burst this uneasiness asunder by forcefully implying that history is memory's enemy. Two notions that one might reasonably expect to find yoked together were treated as rivals in the battle to stake out dominion over the past, as is so often the case in contemporary discourse (Klein, 2000, p. 128).

After considering my experience of the exhibit and contemplating Nora, and after listening to the speakers at the colloquium, I made a second visit with the precise goal of writing about it.<sup>12</sup> I was now in a better position to submit my personal memories of the 1950's and early sixties in Vancouver to the demands of historical interpretation as embodied in the exhibit. I now understood the 50's exhibit as an account of a key transitional time for Vancouver in several dimensions. For example, in the everyday life of the city the passage from its roots in a primary economy to contemporary consumer society is made quite evident. At a more subterranean level, there is also a sense stirring within the city of the public emergence of a diversity of peoples that belies the 'British' in British Columbia – not to mention the 'Empire' in Empire Stadium! Indeed, it appears that the same sense of everydayness that suppressed this diversity in the name of conformity also prepared the ground for the eventual differentiation of society

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<sup>12</sup> See Knights (2002) for the results.



into the present of diversified 'lifestyles' and 'multiculturalist' forms.<sup>13</sup> The historian Jean Barman, in her commentary on the exhibition, captured this and more with her suggestion that Vancouver is thematized in the exhibit as a kind of city-state, more at home in the world of globalizing economic and social forces than the relatively weakening forces of nation, province and hinterland (Barman, 2002). Indeed, the title of the symposium "Local History in a Cosmopolitan Settler City" might have been effectively re-arranged to disclose a temporal sequence: *'Local, Settler, Cosmopolitan: A City in History'*. What had heretofore appeared to as an occasion for a memory experience, now appeared as a critical historical account shaped by contemporary concerns about the quality and direction of progress in the postmodern, globalizing city. This, at least, is one clear interpretation that can be derived from the exhibit's history discourse.

Now I was in possession of two memories of the exhibit: one suffused with personal memories and another with critical and historical consciousness. Both memories were a function of the 'discursive behaviour' of the museum, and both carried epistemic authority. In the one instance, the authority of style and detail filtered through personal recollection and the dominant narrative of media culture; in the other, the critical presence of curatorial voice and historiographic sensibility. Nora's epigram suggests that there is a relationship between these two kinds of memory, but that it is one that has changed into a relation of opposition. It also suggests that what was no longer – a connection between memory and historical consciousness – once did exist. To me, this signified that the museum

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<sup>13</sup> I will discuss the exhibition in somewhat more detail in the concluding chapter.



experience, as a complex intermingling of memory and history, perhaps had a history of its own, and that it was tied to this changing connection.

### **Pierre Nora's Memory-Sites**

Whether we construe the relationship of memory and history as opposing relations to the past or not, as suggested above, it is, as we suggested above, commonly observed that the problem of memory is on everyone's mind these days.<sup>14</sup> However, it is less obviously the case, *pace* Nora, that memory 'no longer exists'. If this is so, what was the status of my potent memory experience in the museum? Perhaps he would describe this as something other than a memory experience? And if he is correct, is this statement a possible path towards a resolution of the ambiguity of my experience between the historical and the memorial?

His argument pivots on an understanding of another much-observed phenomenon: the acceleration of history. On the surface, there is nothing unique about this idea, for the sense that history has been 'accelerating' has been evident at least since the era of the 'dual revolutions'.<sup>15</sup> But Nora has something quite specific in mind. He means that the permanence of continuity and tradition characteristic of even the recent past has been increasingly replaced by the permanence of rapid change and rupture.<sup>16</sup> Here Nora joins a long list of cultural critics such as Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and Paul Virilio, who in different ways have investigated the effects of this acceleration on contemporary experience. The nature of the impact is nicely captured by Alexander Kluge's

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Wood (2000), Sherman (1999), Klein (2000) and many others.



infamous aphorism describing this situation – “the attack of the present on the rest of time”.<sup>17</sup> Reading Nora, one might rephrase Kluge to say that we are also witnessing the attack of the future on rest of time - especially the present. In Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis*, which I quoted at the outset, the Chief of Theory puts it this way:

But you know how shameless I am in the presence of anything that calls itself an idea. The idea is time. Living in the future. Look at those numbers running. Money makes time. It used to be the other way around. Clock time accelerated the rise of capitalism. People stopped thinking about eternity. They began to concentrate on hours, measurable hours, man-hours, using labor more efficiently. It's cyber-capital that creates the future. ...Because time is a corporate asset now. It belongs to the free market system. The present is harder to find. It is being sucked out of the world to make way for the future of uncontrolled markets and huge investment potential. The future becomes insistent (2003, p. 78-79).

Nora, less dramatically, describes these changes as the reversed placing of tradition and change in the priority of historical experience. These kinds of processes, manifestations of the acceleration of history or time, shatter the former unity of historical time (the supposed chain linking past, present and future), and drive a wedge between memory and history.

Simplifying somewhat, this process takes place in three stages. Patrick Hutton, in his presentation of Nora's argument, argues convincingly that it must however be noted that these are not constructed as progressive stages leading to

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<sup>15</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm's classic work, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848*.

<sup>16</sup> There is a good case for adding contingency to this list. See Kolbl & Straub, (2001)

<sup>17</sup> But not so infamous that I have been able to attribute it! Huyssen (1995) repeats it, also unattributed.



certain knowledge in the manner of a positivist history (1993, p. 149). Because Nora is concerned with representations of the past rather than the events of the past *per se*, these 'stages' are reconstructed from the various self-images of 'present pasts'.<sup>18</sup> For example, memories and myths in the present provide the interpretative key to disclosing the prior memories out of which the image of the nation was formed. However, regardless of Hutton's warning, it must be noted that method has a way of turning itself into process, such that Nora often slips into a mode of presentation that seems to actualize these stages as events. For example, he boldly postulates a fourth and future configuration of memory out of the present; and he also all but identifies the 'second stage' with the example of the French Third Republic (see below).

The sense that he is developing a stage-dependent theory is complicated by the fact that he could be understood as working within the tradition of notions of collective memory, particularly as developed by Maurice Halbwachs. As a term describing certain kinds of social or psychological experience, the idea of collective memory is notoriously hazy as a concept (Wood, 1999, p. 1-3). In a period in which all forms of subject position, collective or otherwise, are subject to intensive deconstruction and genealogical analysis, it is decidedly odd that it has re-emerged to make a claim to be a normative concept in memory studies. Nancy Wood offers a partial defence of the term when she argues that Halbwachs would view the definition of collective memory as "the selective reconstruction and appropriation of aspects of the past that respond to the needs of the present" (Wood, p. 2). However, this definition could also be construed as a workable, if

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<sup>18</sup> That is, images or notions of the past that exist in the present.



partial, definition of history. This conceptual slippage exemplifies the indeterminate nature of concepts like collective memory, 'public memory', and 'national memory'. The same holds for older versions of memory discourse that were expressed in terms such as 'the revolutionary tradition', which was a staple of French history for decades prior to Nora's work.<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that memory and history should be defined as conceptually distinct discourses, because they are indeed related, if only by a temporality that encloses them both. At the same time, the slippage back and forth in meaning is disconcerting, perhaps signifying that other forces are in play that would account for the resurgent popularity of the idea of collective memory.

Certainly, memory and history are not easy to distinguish. Not only do they share a temporal location, but because both are constructions of the past. As Huyssen points out, memory is an anthropological given, but contingent and subject to change, closely tied as it is to "the way a culture constructs and lives its temporality" (1995, p. 3). The past is not immediately present in memory, it must be recalled and articulated. There is no authentic origin that will serve up some "verifiable access to the real" because memory, like history, is based on representation (Huyssen, 1995, p.2-3). In this view, history is one of these representations of memory, but it is not separate from memory.

Nancy Wood attempts to rescue the idea of collective memory by arguing that Nora employs it in a performative sense.<sup>20</sup> She argues that for both Nora and Maurice Halbwachs the representations of the past that are called collective

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, David Pinkney, *The French Revolution of 1830*, Princeton University Press, (1972).

<sup>20</sup> Nora rarely uses the term collective memory, preferring the general term 'memory', *pace* Klein's criticism that the notion of memory is employed indiscriminately.



memory “do not pre-exist their expression at any given conjuncture”. She adds, extrapolating from Nora, that the emphasis should further fall, therefore, on the specific kinds of memorial activity that bring collective memory to consciousness through a performative act; for example, the building of monuments (Wood, p.2). This is a useful refinement of the idea and partly relieves the concept of the mystical connotations it potentially carries.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, even this formulation suggests that the memory effect of memorial activity is collectively experienced in a more or less unified manner, and that memories so constructed retain a collective dimension that remains unspecified. Moreover, once collective memory is performed in a given conjuncture, it then pre-exists any future conjuncture and the difficulty Wood is trying to resolve with the notion of performativity returns. The problem has only been postponed.

I think that it is partly to break this hermeneutic circle that Nora has effectively posited an experience of memory in relationship to its environment that assumes a kind of undivided origin. From a functional point of view this permits him to substitute a history of the memory-history relationship for the notion of either long-existing subterranean memories or a series of performative origins. However, difficulties surface in his sketch of the developing configurations of memory and history. Prior to the modern period, Nora describes “...settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience” which he labels *milieux de mémoire* (1996, p. 1). This term designates a period of continuity and tradition, in which memory has a spontaneous, almost natural relationship to its surroundings, quite in contrast to the contemporary period in

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<sup>21</sup> The idea of performance correlates nicely with Bal’s discussion of display and discursive behaviour.



which all memories are historical reconstructions. At best, this image conjures up a world based on oral traditions, or at worst, an era of the so-called 'savage mind' or a 'people without history'. It is also evident that the power of the idea of *milieux de mémoire* depends on the gradual separation of memory from its living context in the course of the history that follows, a process of separation and alienation from what appears to be an originary unity. If pressed, Nora would no doubt admit that even *milieux de mémoire* are representations, but might counter that, at the very least, that memory is experienced in a more immediate manner. The ambiguity arises, as Klein suggests, in the valorizing of the term memory as a kind of essentialized quality (2000). Substituting the singular term memory for the notion of collective memory only seems to cloud the issue at hand.

Looked at this way, we can see that Nora founds his interpretation on an apparent dualism between memory and history, creating the suspicion that there is a circular element at work here. In effect, perhaps he is projecting into the past what he sets out to explain when he assumes a continuity of meaning for the term 'memory'. Although the very recent present and the very distant past are construed as opposites, there nevertheless seems to be a continuous thread stretching from the oral traditions of *milieux de mémoire* to what Hutton calls postmodern historiography (1993, p. 149). As history takes possession of memory, both memory and history are transformed. But in Nora, and in Hutton's presentation of Nora, it is the secret continuity of memory that holds the transitions together.



What he describes as “true” memory...is the memory of oral tradition. It was a self-renewing resource on which traditional French society continually drew. But as memory was incorporated into modern history, its inner voice grew weaker. In the guise of history, memory was seen rather than heard in the visible forms bequeathed to the present age (Hutton, 1993, p. 149-150).

In order to describe the process of 'growing weaker', we find Nora generating a middle stage between the era of history and the era of memory that might be called the period of memory-history, a term he uses in a sometimes unspecified manner at various points. By looking at when he most uses it, however, we get a sense of what role it plays in the overall scheme.

The stage of memory-history might be broadly located in the period from the age of revolution to the 1930's.<sup>22</sup> This period is characterized by a synthesis of memory or history, or at least the appearance of one, as they commune in the glory of the Nation and (for some) the Republic. The existence of a temporary synthesis of memory and history in the figure of the nation lends a sacred quality to both the nation and the history that supports it. Again, the hint of an underlying mythical unity is at work in this notion, but it allows him to account for the transition to the contemporary period during the crisis of the interwar years, when, as he frames it, the idea of society increasingly supplants the idea of the nation in these discourses (Nora, 1996, p. 6).<sup>23</sup>

This 'stage' occupies a key spot in Nora's analysis because it includes the myth-making Third Republic, the very example of a polity self-consciously re-

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<sup>22</sup> This chronology holds for the French example, but could be quite different depending on the national history in question.

<sup>23</sup> Wood (p. 20) has a good discussion of this contentious claim.



constructing the history of France as a sacred work. After the failure of two constitutional monarchies, two republics, two dictatorships and a restoration – and with each transition mediated by ‘the revolutionary tradition’, it is no wonder that the men of the Third Republic took the problem of ideological consensus seriously! This is, after all, the period of ‘peasants into Frenchmen’, the Dreyfus Affair, and the promotion of the secular public school and secular teachers (“*les instituteurs*”) as agents of change.

It is also worth remembering that two seminal and pioneering texts on memory and history spring from a study of this period: Maurice Agulhon’s analysis of *Marianne* (1981) and Antoine Prost’s study of *Les anciens combattants*, not to mention the first volume of Nora’s seminal edition of *Les Lieux de Mémoire, Volume I* (1992).<sup>24</sup> The Third Republic functions as a kind of normative base in Nora’s analysis because it brings the problem of memory into the historiographic frame without eviscerating memory altogether. Indeed, one wonders if this period is the normative ‘present’ from which the analysis extends backwards into the past and forwards into the future. It is also worth considering to what extent his problematic is an idiosyncratic product of the historiography of France, but these are questions that cannot be answered here.

In any case, the subsequent fragmentation of this political synthesis of memory and history seems almost regrettable in Nora’s account, not just because it marks the transition to the contemporary period of the erasure of memory, but because the contemporary period seems to fall into a subsequent state of alienation from the nation in the process. There is no reason to believe that Nora



himself actually feels this way; indeed, in *Volume 3* he objects to the way that this huge collective work was appropriated in the name of the patrimony of France – a process of memory construction he was trying to understand and not encourage.<sup>25</sup> It is as if his work both named the crisis and provoked the accumulation of memory-sites all in one go. Indeed, deconstructing memory discourse in French social thought and historiography might well begin with myth of the Third Republic and the subsequent reception of Nora's work. However, at this point we must return to the stages Nora seems to be constructing.

Following the period of memory-history, and in the wake of defeat, war, the collapse of the Republic, and subsequent occupation, France underwent a period of rapid modernization.<sup>26</sup> The acceleration of history broke the memory-history couplet in two, bringing us to the third stage in which memory no longer exists as such. This is marked by two symptomatic events. The first is historiographical, marking the point at which historians begin to reflect on historiography as a practice whose history can itself be written. In this contemporary period, however, there remains “fundamental vestiges” of an older commemorative consciousness, or *lieux de mémoire*.<sup>27</sup> These sites of memory provide ‘ritual space for a ritual-less society’, functioning as a means of buttressing identities against the onslaught of a now unleashed historical consciousness (1996, p. 6-7). Of course, memory-sites proliferated in the prior

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<sup>24</sup> On this, see Sherman's work on memory during the Third Republic (1999).

<sup>25</sup> See Wood's excellent discussion (p. 28-9).

<sup>26</sup> See Ross (1995) for an excellent evocation and analysis of this period – which corresponds neatly to the time of the 50's Gallery.



period, but the inception of historical self-consciousness in the last stages of the Third Republic had already begun to relativize them. (This, of course, is signified by the simultaneous birth of the *Annales* School of history initiated by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch).

With the disruption of continuity, there comes a challenge to all forms of identity, whether personal, social, collective, ethnic or familial. The parallel disruption of the various forms of identity shaped within the unity of historical time creates anxiety over an uncertain future, and at the same time, it puts the past at an ever-increasing distance from either present or future. Because the past no longer appears as our spontaneous milieu, and with the rupture of memory-history embodied in the nation-state, it only exists 'for-us' in traces. Motivated by an overwhelming sense of loss on the one hand and future-anxiety on the other, collectivities and individuals begin to 'rememorate' it, such that in this latest stage "we are experiencing history's 'remembering moment'"(Nora, 1999).

If this act of rememorization is already history, the singling out of sites, places, concepts, and stories so that they can be placed in a narrative of memory or identity creates a second order of memory-history. The lived memory supposedly characteristic of traditional societies is replaced by a reconstructed memory more characteristic of the monuments and the sites that commemorate the nation-state. These sites are not merely objects in the landscape. The objects (and non-objects) that compose a memory-site are historical constructions whose

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<sup>27</sup> The term *lieux de mémoire* is now widespread in contemporary discussions, and nowhere more so than in France, where it has entered the dictionary of the *Académie Française*.



role is to replace the ever depleting "vast fund of memories" that shaped the more intimate environments of the past.

*Lieux de mémoire* arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course (Nora, 1996, p. 7).

Of course, the irony is that the need to defend identities and the memory-sites that support them is only experienced because of the acceleration of history and the self-consciousness that accompanies it. Nora turns to a suspiciously naturalistic if marvelously effective metaphor to make this point:

...if history did not seize upon memories in order to distort and transform them, to mold them or turn them to stone, they would not turn into *lieux de mémoire* which emerge in two stages: moments of history are plucked out of the flow of history, then returned to it - no longer quite alive but not yet entirely dead, like shells left on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded (1996, p. 7).

By using this metaphor, Nora, perhaps unintentionally, lends the aura of nature both to living memory and the process whereby historians select what they can and make it available for remembrance. Indeed, the appearance of natural necessity central to the metaphor of the sea-shore only gains power from Nora's tendency to describe the relation of memory and history in terms of historical stages, for stage dependent theories are commonly reified into evolutionary schema. The point is that part of the value of Nora's notion of memory-sites and his analysis of the memory-history relationship is that it provides some



additional tools for understanding the way in which nations and peoples construct a necessary consensus from historical contingency: one that unveils the historical determinants of values and sentiments taken for granted. However, as the many histories of the Third Republic should make clear, concepts capable of doing much the same work, such as 'ideology', 'hegemony' or even 'technologies of the subject', possess a conceptual clarity and historical specificity lacking in a memory discourse built on a kind of fatalism while accomplishing many of the same goals.<sup>28</sup>

By the third and contemporary stage of this process the modern museum is, once and for all, constituted as a memory-site both for what it contains and for what it is. We also get a glimmer of how this might be useful in disentangling the ambiguities of museum presentation, for it provides an interpretative key to the relations of memory and history at the heart of the discursive behaviour of the museum. In the light of Nora's conception, the question that arises out of my experience now begins to impose itself in a quite specific form; that is, is the exhibit of *Vancouver in the 50's* a potential memory-site? On the surface this appears to be a good question. However, it bears a closer look, given some of the reservations that I have regarding Nora's presentation of the relations of memory and history.

Within Nora's framework, the answer to the question above is almost certainly yes – almost by definition – and thus there is little reason to proceed. In fact, however, Nora's framework does create ambiguities and difficulties and

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<sup>28</sup> The ideas of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) and 'the invention of tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) are superior organizing ideas for the same reasons. Indeed, one might ask if memory studies



requires a more sustained look at the themes we have encountered thus far. Our question relies entirely on the notion of memory-site to connect this particular museum exhibit to the problems of the museum and historicity in general. Nora has taken us into this territory but it is not clear that he offers us the best map for navigating it now that we have arrived. This still needs to be established in terms of the cultural and philosophical discourse around museums that might offer more detailed maps and guides both to the general territory and museum spaces in particular.

To recapitulate some of my concerns, I have already indicated that Nora's analysis sometimes suffers from a kind of circularity that tends to conjoin, in Klein's words, "...preindustrial and postindustrial uses of memory..." (2000, p.134). This haunts his discourse in the form of a nostalgia for a more authentic and intimate relation to environment, evidenced in the way that the story that unfolds is ultimately framed as a story of loss (Hutton, 1993, p. 149; Maleuvre, 1999, p. 49). It is this strand that Klein identifies as tending in two directions: toward "the stereotypic identification of the savage and the sacred" and the notion of a people without history; or towards a kind of political counter-history rooted in memory and fueled by a kind of return of the repressed, one that defends against the accelerating inroads of historical consciousness, (2000, p. 137).<sup>29</sup> In both instances, memory possesses an essential quality that seems to transcend the history of its representations.

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is a somewhat depoliticized method of using these concepts, or older critical concepts like hegemony and ideology.

<sup>29</sup> These ideas find support in Foucault's notion of counter-memory.



Certainly, the account of *milieux de mémoire* and even of the transitional stage of memory-history seems to imply a happier or more authentic time from the point of view of lived experience. The former carries with it an image of man's natural environment, while the latter features a brief communion of memory and history that mirrors the former in the construction of the nation, albeit temporarily. Once again, I don't think this is either Nora's intention or opinion, but it is difficult to finally ascertain his position, perhaps accounting for the significant ambiguity in the reception of his work. The third stage is characterized by frustration with the impact of the acceleration of history culminating in the complete alienation from the past and the predominance of individualized memory over any kind of shared, community-based memory.<sup>30</sup> Insofar as shared memories do manage to find a political form, it is in the guise of identity politics; that is, in the form of historically constructed memories motivated by the desire to find an anchor in the past that is ever more distanced from everyday life. Increasingly, these politics predominate over the politics of class and nation as it was understood in previous Republics.

The instability of this configuration is underlined when Nora postulates a kind of fourth stage in which history conquers memory once and for all, and returns to an environment in which memory and historical consciousness are thus no longer in conflict (1996, p. 3). In these moments, the developmental movement of Nora's scheme is almost Hegelian. Out of the original *milieux de mémoire*, historical consciousness developed as a contrast to the understanding of the past and introduced critical understanding into the politics of the past.

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<sup>30</sup> Or, if it is a preferred term, social or collective memory.



Social memory is subsequently constructed in terms of historical understanding. At the point memory is entirely a function of historical construction, whatever the self-understanding of the citizens of the nation might be, history effectively consumes itself in consuming memory. In this sense, we might say that posthistory or the end of history is achieved at this point.<sup>31</sup> Subjectively, this is experienced as a *milieu de histoire*. Ironically, the critical distance associated with historical consciousness loses its critical edge and is absorbed into everyday life in the manner of the original *milieux de mémoire*.

In postulating a fourth stage of this type, Nora dons the garb of cultural critic, predicting the victory of history at the point it achieves a kind of social amnesia. History culminates in a dystopic *milieu de histoire* by returning to an environment possessing a kind of second nature. History now functions like memory in traditional societies: as a milieu lacking in critical consciousness. At this point, Nora's sketch of the changing configuration of memory and history joins with a neo-Weberian theory of history as an inevitable progression towards a rationalized world of total disenchantment.

Whether this fourth stage will ever actualize itself is speculative at best, but it is understandable that Nora is tempted to speculate on the outcome of the struggle between memory and history in the context of the ever increasing acceleration of history. From the perspective of the third stage, every museum exhibit is either suspect or defeated from the start, however the relationship between memory and history is configured in exhibitions and displays. On the

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<sup>31</sup> There is an interesting parallel with Jean Baudrillard's controversial book *America* (1988). Baudrillard describes America as a utopian society which had sought the end of history since its inception. History, in



one hand, history obliterates memory and exhibitions are understood as exercises in either antiquarianism or celebration; on the other hand, memory concerns arise as a defence against the incursions of critical historical consciousness by throwing an emotional anchor into the ever more rapidly consumed past. In the first instance, history simply registers its victory over memory and descends into pastime; while in the second, memory is granted certificates of authenticity over historical reconstruction, completely forgetting that it is 'always already' an historical construction itself. Alternatively, and following critical appreciations of the relationship between memory and history such as Nora's, the museum is understood as an agent in the hegemonic discourse of the memory-history of the nation-state. To choose between a nostalgia for lost memories or the disenchantment of secular, critical history would seem to be a return to my dual experience of the 50's gallery, where one response is as good as another, entirely dependent on the disposition towards the past that one brings to the experience. For this reason, Nora points in a direction that will only return us to our starting point and not move us forward.

### **The Temporal Perspective**

It will be my contention that Reinhart Koselleck's work provides a way out of these dilemmas (1985; 2002). Although I will address this in detail in a subsequent chapter, a brief look might point in the direction I intend to go. Like Nora, Koselleck observes the disruption of the unity of time by the acceleration of history. Rather than sketch a virtual stage-dependent history, he develops meta-

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his description, is either domesticated, exotic, or both. As such, it stands in for memory in the national



historical concepts that allow him to describe the different temporalities that characterize the changing relationships between past, present and future. In this way, he sidesteps the problem of memory as an essentialized discourse and focuses instead on the temporal coordinates of our experience of the past. This is a positive step in-itself, particularly if we agree with Klein that many of the excellent recent works on the problem of memory are compromised by projecting contemporary notions of memory into the past in a kind of parody of the Whig interpretation of history (2000, p. 132-134).

Koselleck argues that with the changes brought about by the acceleration of history, the organizing point of departure for action in the present, which was heretofore based primarily on the "space of experience", is now increasingly supplanted by "horizons of expectation".<sup>32</sup> In this view, the space of experience, which parallels Nora's notion of a *milieu de mémoire*, is not contrasted with history as a different entity, or even as a different kind of discourse. Rather, we now see a dynamic relationship between experiences of the past and future turning on specific temporalities. The changing relationship between experience and expectation signifies a new temporality, whereby more linear notions replace more cyclical or traditional conceptions of time in modern historical consciousness.<sup>33</sup> The future orientation of linear temporality supplants action based on experience, which privileged the past and tradition. This notion of the interplay between the space of experience and horizons of expectation is a useful

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consciousness. However, in his view Europe can never attain this utopian state.

<sup>32</sup> I will define these terms in detail below.

<sup>33</sup> Koselleck's description takes into account all sorts of transitional or mixed forms of this dynamic. Thus the contrast between linear temporalities and cyclical ones should not be understood as an absolutely oppositional difference.



way of re-configuring Nora's conception of memory and history. It emphasizes what is at stake in Nora's discussion of the memory-history relationship – the historicity of historical consciousness – while sidestepping the antimonies of historical representation it creates. The latter might include oppositions that tend to arise in this discourse between immediately experienced, concrete memory and abstract history, the authentic and the inauthentic or alienated, lived experience and the archive, the natural and the artificial, the savage and the civilized, people with and without history, and so on.

If we take Koselleck's theory as a preferable means of conceptualizing the dynamic of historicity, this is not to say that the problem of stages disappears entirely. At the heart of Koselleck's theorization is also a theory of modernity as a distinct period in time, one that can be distinguished, therefore, from the pre-modern. In this view, the shift is accomplished as a change in the consciousness of time, or more specifically, historical consciousness envisaged as a new form of temporality. In this shift, the nexus of past, present, and future is re-oriented in terms of relationships to the future. David Carvounas, in his study of time, modernity and politics in the work of Kant, Hegel, and Marx, puts it this way:

...it is fair to say that for the last two hundred years many have been either enticed or forced out of premodern forms of temporality and sociability and into the project of modernity – a project that has been *increasingly distinguishing* itself from the premodern precisely by the diminishing use of the exemplary status of past experience, and by its unique rapport with the future (2002, p. 2).

Of course, in Koselleck's theory, modernization is not an irreversible or strictly unilinear process. The thorough historicization of historical consciousness means



that it is dependent on specific situations and temporalities. In what follows, I will therefore be using the terms 'modern historical consciousness' and 'historical consciousness' more or less interchangeably. The historicization effected by Koselleck claims that historical consciousness as we experience it is a product of modernity.

Nor is this to say that so-called pre-modern periods lack some sense of historical consciousness or future-orientation. Barbara Adam points out that to suggest 'pre-moderns' lived their lives in some kind of eternal present characterized as cyclical, is to deny "...those cultures something that forms an integral aspect of *all* life forms" (1990, p. 134).<sup>34</sup> As the last sentence of Carvounas (above) suggests, it is the shift towards future thinking relative to past experience that is at stake – not the total subsumption of one type of consciousness by another. Put another way, a relationship between past, present and future exists in all cultures, but the configuration of these dimensions in different historical periods is unique – that is, the configuration of temporality might go a long way towards defining these periods.

To realize the benefits that might accrue from re-conceptualizing Nora's framework in this way, two steps are necessary. First, I must assess contemporary discourse around the museum insofar as it touches on the problems of historicity, memory, and experience. The notion of the museum as memory-site, it appears, does not take us beyond the oscillatory relations of memory and history; nor does it specifically address itself to the space of the museum. In the chapter that

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<sup>34</sup> This will be developed further in Chapter 3 where we will analyze elements of Gadamer's discussion of historicity as it was established in the Heideggerian tradition, a tradition Koselleck shares.



follows, I will trace arguments about the historicity of the museum that will assist in specifying the dilemmas museums face. Following Huyssen, my intention is not sociological. It is neither a top-down critique of the institution of the museum as a “power-knowledge-ideological apparatus,” nor a bottom-up investigation of audience response or the role of interest groups, segmented public spheres and the like. Instead, I am concerned with “broader cultural and philosophical reflections regarding the changing status of memory and temporal perception” (Huyssen, 1995, p. 17). However, my focus will fall on historicity and temporal perception rather than on the changing status of memory *per se*. So, rather than ask whether museums are memory-sites, which they most definitely seem to be, I will first explore the troubled relationship that seems to exist in the relation of the museum to historical consciousness or historicity.



## **Chapter 2**

### **The Museum as a Site of History**

Cultural and philosophical critics are rarely found among the supporters of the museum (Witcomb, 2003). My goal in this chapter is to arrive at a clearer picture of the criticisms the museum faces, particularly those aimed at the museum as a site of historical representation. To achieve this I will take advantage of the detailed analysis of Didier Maleuvre's *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (1999). Although he is working in a different conceptual vein than Nora, Maleuvre's book could be loosely construed as a closer look at the notion of the memory-site through the prism of the museum. I am not interested, however, in assessing either its conformity to or its difference from Nora's argument, which I have treated as somewhat problematic in any case. Although the museum's role extends well beyond any potential it might have as a memory-site, Nora's analysis has been helpful in sizing up the ambiguous nature of institutions like the museum in relation to history and



memory. The concept of the memory-site and Nora's sketch of the changing relations between memory and history points to the existence of changing configurations of the experience of the past at sites of memory and history. It also helps explain the desire for the authentic experience of historicity that institutions, including memory-sites, claim to offer the public. For Nora, the model of this authenticity seemed to be located in *milieux de mémoire*, whatever his intention. And indeed, in many respects, it is often the apparent effect of experiencing historicity that gives memory an edge of apparent authenticity over strictly historiographic presentations of the past. In turn, understanding this has a major impact on the public face of the museum, especially in its pedagogic function.

### **The Historicity of the Museum**

Insofar as all historical representations have a pedagogic function, all history is public history. This general point is all the more true for museums. By collecting, preserving, and protecting objects deemed worthy of historical value, museums propose to the communities that support them that they should share these valuations. By exhibiting and displaying them, they make a pedagogical commitment to underwrite this relationship. In this process, they communicate a sense of the past to the observer-visitor, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not. The link between knowledge and display that shapes the pedagogical impulse of the museum also shapes *the experience of historicity* that the visitor takes from the museum. For the contemporary museum, the visitor's experience of historicity is often taken as indicative of the success of an exhibit. Thus Joan Seidl



hopes the *50's Gallery* will convince the visitor that "the past really happened", while the *Royal B. C. Museum's* latest pamphlet asks the potential visitor to "imagine life then". British Columbia's history, the latter says, is well documented, but no matter how many books we read or films we see, we still ask: "what was life *really* like back then? *The answer lies where the past still lives.* At the Royal B. C. Museum. Here the past comes to life through meticulously-crafted galleries and exhibits that feature *thousands of authentic* artifacts" (my emphases).<sup>35</sup>

In this age of spectacle the invitation to participate in the past is not so surprising, but the confidence that this can be achieved in a historiographically sensitive institution certainly is. However, once we accept that even the visitor's experience of historicity is historical, responding to different needs and desires in different times, a number of possible understandings of the past can be imagined. For example, in contrast to today's "experiential museum", Goodman makes the case that the nineteenth century museum "feared the circus" and therefore stressed the system of representation over the event. Thus museums were based on a "subordination of other senses to sight, by its attachment to the classificatory table, and by its rejection of theatre and show" (Goodman, p. 20).

Where the 19<sup>th</sup> century museum defined itself against the circus and the zoo, today's museum is defined by its difference from the book, the cinema and object. It is thus now emphasising, not classification, but the experience of the real object (Goodman, p. 33).

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<sup>35</sup> Royal B. C. Museum: *Where the Past Lives*. "Dragon Bones", March 13 – Sept. 15, 2003.



However, although authentic experience of the past was not necessarily the kind of experience intended for museum-goers in the nineteenth century, there are early signs of a more contemporary relationship of spectacle to the past in the presentations found in world exhibits, dioramas and the like. Thus Stephen Bann argues that a strong impulse towards what he calls 'resurrection effects' in various media was well established by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (1984, p. 139).

Even in its "enduring cognitive educational" function, the museum transmits this knowledge and an experience of historicity to the visitor (Bal, 1996, p.16). In addition, as a product of history, *in history*, it also carries a historicity of its own.<sup>36</sup> Bal points out that a museum of any size and ambition becomes a museum *of the* museum, a kind of "reservation ... for an endangered cultural self" (1996, p.17). Arguably, the case can be made that all museums take on this 'meta-function,' in part because they are willing to, but primarily because they are located in a discursive field that encompasses all museums and their history. In this sense, even the smallest museum partakes of the prestige, practices and historic legacy of the greatest. Both representing history in exhibitions and representing itself as history are elements of the museum's discursive behaviour, and shape the experience of the visitor. As a bearer of historicity and as a producer of historical knowledge, Maleuvre argues that the museum fills a role *towards history*.

One must look at museums historically not because method dictates it, but because they are *essentially* historical. By putting forward image of the past and managing the handing on of tradition through artworks and artifacts, museums participate in a historical



production of history. Historiographic through and through, museums beg the question of their historical appearance, of the role they fulfill toward history, in history (1999, p. 9).

When we consider all these dimensions of the museum's historicity, it is easy to agree with Huyssen that those who wish to understand attitudes toward the past both as they are produced and as they are received, must pay attention to museums – particularly in a period when their popularity is on the rise (Huyssen, 1995; also Sherman & Rogoff, 1994).<sup>37</sup>

Following on the heels of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the inception of the modern museum coincided with new and very specific reflections on the idea of history. Increasingly history was understood to have a temporality of its own, distinct from either a natural temporality based on cycles or cultural/religious temporalities based on known and expected futures ('the end of time'). For Koselleck, this was vital to development of history's concept of itself in the modern age (2002). European societies and their institutions began to think and act as if they existed in history, or in Hayden White's words, "...as if its *historicity* was a feature" (White, 2002, p. x). From this self-regard, critical historical consciousness develops a systematic awareness of the gap between the events of history and the means of representing them. White points out that this disparity, which is recognized both by the agents of history and historians, is the basis of source criticism. Moreover, "it is also the basis of the recognition that every historical account is a construction in discourse of past reality rather than

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<sup>36</sup> As noted earlier, provisionally the term *historicity* signifies the quality that makes something historical.

<sup>37</sup> This renewed popularity is part of the renewal of interest in memory, which is not necessarily reflected in a renewal of interest in history.



simply a translation of the facts (2002, p. xiii).” Of course the extreme skepticism that arises from this recognition comes much later in the history of historiography, but its possibility lays within the dynamic of temporalization underlying both historical consciousness and its institutional embodiments in, for instance, the museum and the professionalization of history. It also lays the groundwork for radical suggestions that the past only exists in and through the present. Nora, for example, goes so far as to suggest that unlike historical objects or approaches to memory based on *mentalités* or revolutionary traditions, *lieux de mémoire* have no referents in reality – which allows them to stage an “escape from history” (Nora, p. 19). Although Nora is not prepared to go much further, cultural critics like Jean Baudrillard sometimes seems willing to go so far as to all but deny the referent’s existence altogether. In this sense, critical historical consciousness even contains the seeds of the denial of the possibility of history.

### **The Museum as the Mausoleum of History**

This tension between lived history and constructed history is appropriated by the museum in its own way, most notably in the physical acts of collection, preservation, protection and display. By these acts, history is no longer “the space where one dwells”; nor are the objects on display ones that we live with and touch in the course of daily routines. Rather, history and its objects become objectively removed spectacle, “...a way of holding tradition as a *thing*” (Maleuvre, p. 13).<sup>38</sup> In this way, Maleuvre’s writes, “the creation of the museum is a historical *coup* staged on the idea of history itself” (p. 9). In the same movement that brackets



art from existence in the museum, the nation-state becomes the caretaker of national memory and the ruins of the past.

This process takes place concretely in the establishing of academies and institutes, in the museification of music via repertoires, in the annexation of literature by philological studies. Art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century becomes an object of historical expertise (Maleuvre, p. 9).

This aspect of the museum's historicity is articulated in the difference between history as event and representation as it was simultaneously developed by critical historiography. But it also reflects the need of bourgeois society to represent itself as either a reflection of the eternal or natural order of things, or as the highest point of historical evolution. Both options embody an attempt to arrest secular progress, in part by using the museum as a means of defining what is past once and for all. Paradoxically, according to critics of the museum, this meant that the museum separated history (its objects and artifacts) from 'temporal becoming', as if it truly believed in history on the one hand, yet preferred to represent it as over and done with (Maleuvre, p. 57). This idea is ironically mirrored in the contemporary documents quoted above that suggest the museum can convince us the past really existed, or that it can be represented as it was. Implicit here is the separation of the past as a totalized entity from both the present and any possible future. In effect, this is but another way of describing the contradictory nature of the memory-site as both inside and outside history simultaneously. In the most extreme contemporary<sup>39</sup> form of these kinds of criticisms, usually inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, the museum was

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<sup>38</sup> Didier Maleuvre's work develops in detail the many implications that follow from the museum's



identified with the disciplinary institutions of the modern state – the school, the prison, the factory, the barracks and the hospital. In this view, the museum curbed the nomadic movement of art and history in the same way these institutions constructed and controlled the modern subject (Maleuvre, p. 11).<sup>40</sup>

Without entirely endorsing this view, it is still possible to assert that the development of the museum and its particular mode of representing the past took culturally predictable forms.<sup>41</sup> In contrast with the old ‘cabinets of curiosities’ (and, one might perhaps add, the kitsch of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois interior<sup>42</sup>), museum sponsors and professionals sought to impose a well-ordered story on their collections that obeyed the instructional and scientific demands of the new era (Bennett, 1995, p. 2-5). Not surprisingly, given that the formation and development of the modern museum takes place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that order tended towards the rationalistic, chronological, and evolutionary, calling forth the particular historical temporalities and narratives that situated the museum in a time of progress and modernization. This method was so pervasive that the contemporary museum visitor still experiences variations on the linear, historicized environment of the 19<sup>th</sup> century museum today. Even alternative strategies that avoid the toothpaste tube of linearity, are determinate negations of it, and often leave the visitor unmoored by the experience. Typically, this strategy

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activities and I will follow several of his arguments closely in what follows.

<sup>39</sup> That is, present-day, or, if preferred, in the postmodern period.

<sup>40</sup> Crimp and Hooper-Greenhill draw some of these analogies. Bennett offers a subtle counterpoint that is nevertheless based in Foucault’s work (p.92-98).

<sup>41</sup> To deal with these sorts of problems, Bal has argued that museums might develop a means of indicating a critical and historical consciousness in reworking the verbal element in the verbal and visual exchanges characteristic of displays (1996, p.19).

<sup>42</sup> See Maleuvre on the interior, the bibelot, and bourgeois kitsch for a discussion of “the loss of historical grounding” in the bourgeois home (1999, p. 117, and Ch. 2 generally).



of display encompasses both natural and human history in a continuous and untroubled unity (Bennett, 1995, Ch. 7; Bal, 1996, Ch.1).<sup>43</sup>

Bennett identifies Darwinian evolutionary schemes as the model of this untroubled unity, but both he and Bal find other points of contact in 19<sup>th</sup> century culture. For Bal in particular, the rhetoric most suited to these kinds of display is the third person realistic narrative of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel. Each item or set piece in these exhibitions carried a framing, descriptive narrative that was part of the sequential structure of the museum. A key function of these narratives was to fill the gap between the 'look' and the 'that's how it is' characteristic of the museum gesture described in Chapter One. The here and now of the object is made visible to the viewer, as is the information about it. This connects the present of the object or display to the past 'of their making and meaning', which is then 'doubled up' by placing it in a sequential presentation characteristic of a certain kind of narrative (Bal, 1996, p. 4). This method leads to the not uncommon observation that the experience of walking through the museum is akin to following the narrative of a book – the realist novel for Bal (1996, p. 4) or the detective novel for Bennett (1995, p. 180-1).

Narrativization is also an effective 'carrier' of ideology in the display of historical and everyday life, particularly in the form of what Bal calls "myth models".

This term refers to the...paradigmatic myths that serve as models for the construction of similar myths, such as the myth of the noble savage that informs other...myths of primitivism. The term also refers to underlying combinations of ideas deployed in a variety of

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<sup>43</sup> Especially see Bal's excellent analysis of the American Museum of Natural History (1996, p. 13-56).



narrative forms. A powerful example is the combination of opposites, in binary thought, where the idea of civilization is opposed to negatives, such as barbarism... Discourses are repositories for myth models that become “naturalized” – taken for granted as obvious truths. (Bal, 1996, p. 4-5).

These myth models enable both the ideological aspect of the discourse of the museum and a particular representation of historical temporality modeled on the evolutionary connection of past, present and future. The idea of myth models underlines the fact that the educational *telos* of the museum is laden with ideology, and that the function of the museum as an ‘ideological state apparatus’ interpellating subjects as citizens of the myth-nation, for example, cannot be separated from its function as pedagogue.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, knowledge and ideology exist together in a tight-knit configuration. Nowhere is this clearer than in a myth model of no little importance for both the museum and the discipline of history itself – the nation-state.

Museums are a relatively recent invention of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – at least as we know them (Anderson, 1991; Vergo, 1989; Maleuvre, 1999; Bennett, 1995). Like so many of the institutions and practices of the modern nation-state took on the function of constructing and further imagining the nation, Thus the *Louvre*, which opened in the midst of the radical revolution of 1793, not only displayed the deprivatized and now nationalized assets of the aristocracy, but also staged an educational *mise-en-scène* for the revolutionary masses.

Conceived as a *pedagogical* tool for the people, the revolutionary museum was an instrument consolidating a newly revamped

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<sup>44</sup> Both Bennett and Hooper-Greenhill describe this in Foucauldian terms as ‘technologies of the subject.’



national character, promoting the myth of a nation's innate "genius" as well as the image of a grand historical destiny (Maleuvre, p. 10).

What was achieved as part of the democratic ethos of 1792, was achieved more gradually and piece-meal in most of the rest of Europe through a variety of state-led actions, but with the same pedagogical goals in mind (Bennett, 1995).

In pursuit of these or similar goals, the museum goes about systematically salvaging artifacts from history. For Maleuvre, this is a three dimensional historical gesture: "it takes place in history; it passes a judgement on history; it grants artworks [*in fact all artifacts*] a historical character" (Maleuvre, p. 12). In his reading, removing the artifact from historical becoming and inserting it into myth-history is a kind of sacred act, bestowing an almost timeless essence that absorbs the particularities of these objects.

Objecthood is invested with the aura of fate. Thus the museum is historical *and* ahistorical [*my emphasis*]: the former because it actively shapes the historical becoming of its collections; the latter because it seeks to raise them into a realm above the vagaries of history...(Maleuvre, p. 12).

In this view, the museum takes that which survives history's material forces and bestows a suspect historicity on them. By plucking the object from historical temporality and situating it in a totalized narrative of historicized meaning, the object and the narrative that frames it take on a peculiarly ahistorical character. The myth model of the nation combines with the selecting function of the museum, redoubling on each other to construct a domesticated historicity. While the myth model subordinates historical objects to the story of the nation, the



selection process does its best to capture that story and put it in a bottle, much like those model ships of splendid detail and reduced proportions.

### **The Philosophical Critique of the Museum**

Not surprisingly, the attempt to impose order on art and history through the museum and the gallery, the exhibition and the library, encountered criticism right from the beginning. The example of the *Louvre* inspired the wonderfully named Antoine-Chrysotome Quatremère de Quincy to challenge the very authenticity of the process. In doing so, he anticipated criticisms of the museum by artistic and philosophical avant-gardes from Nietzsche onwards. This critique of authenticity, whether from the left and the right of the political spectrum, also looked forward to a *reconceptualized* museology in the 1970's, one that focused less on the problems of conservation and display and more on the cultural meaning of museum *praxis* (Bennett, 1995).

Quatremère, a man of the 1789 revolution and an influential cultural bureaucrat from the period of the Restoration right through to the July Monarchy, became suspicious of the cultural policies embodied in the *Louvre* as the radical revolution took hold. While French armies pillaged works from across Europe, he protested the removal of historical and aesthetic objects by revolutionary armies; and not just because of the potential damage, but because they were being wrested from their living context. Under the conservative Restoration, he was able to write more openly of his opinion of this practice:

One destroys the vital example of art by taking it out of the public sphere and disassembling...[and]...reconstituting the debris in those warehouses called *Conservatoires*...To what wretched



destiny do you condemn Art if its products are no longer tied to the immediate needs of society and if its religious and socializing uses are curtailed...You may have carried the material hull there; but it is doubtful you transferred the network of ideas and relations that made the works alive with interest...(Quatremère, quoted in Maleuvre, 1999, p. 15).

Here Quatremère, well in advance, for example, of the similar critique of the museum by conservative man of letters Paul Valéry at the turn of the next century, inaugurates a line of criticism taken up in different ways by the Surrealists and Walter Benjamin, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and John Dewey – to name but a few of the more prominent critics.<sup>45</sup>

Nora's conception of the memory-site is consistent with this critical tradition. As we have seen, his analysis tends toward the critical sentiment that living memory has been historicized by historical practices and representations. Indeed, in hypothesizing a kind of progressive disenchantment that culminates in the transcendence of memory by history, he effectively asks the same question that others have asked since the inception of the museum: namely does the museum, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's vivid expression, embody a historicity of life or a historicity of death?

The museum kills the vehemence of painting as the library, Sartre said, changes writings that were originally a man's gestures into "messages". It is the historicity of death. And there is a historicity of life of which the museum provides no more than a fallen image (1993, p. 99-100).

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<sup>45</sup> I am following Maleuvre's account (1999, p. 13-22) closely in this paragraph.



The distinction between the historicity of life and death is reminiscent of Nora's distinction between memory and history. There, memory seems to carry a kind of authenticity that history, as a discourse about memory, lacks. Indeed, this lack is an active negation of memory's spontaneous relationship to its world. The critique of the museum is articulated on these kinds of distinctions between the immediate and the mediated, lived history and historiography, sign and thing signified, authentic and inauthentic, and so on.

Thematizing the problems of the museum's appropriation of history in terms of these kinds of binary oppositions is not confined to particular philosophical positions either. Merleau-Ponty the phenomenologist refers to Sartre the existentialist, but their poststructuralist successor, Michel Foucault, operates with a similar distinction. He contrasts 'heterotopias' like museums and libraries which "indefinitely accumulate time" by establishing archives that will enclose all epochs and tastes with those heterotopias that are linked to time in "the mode of the festival".<sup>46</sup> The former constitutes a place "of all times" that is outside time, while the latter is "fleeting, transitory, and precarious" (Foucault, 1986, p. 26). Sherman (1994) and Maleuvre (1999) identify similar contrasts hard at work, as we have seen, in the founding critique of the modern museum by Quatremère de Quincy.<sup>47</sup> Nor are these types of oppositions confined to critics of the museum from left and right. Bennett identifies similar binaries as variations on the 'discursive coordinates' of the museum's early "rhapsodists", who used them to contrast modern museums with the royal collections and cabinets of

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<sup>46</sup> Bennett makes the interesting point that there was a mediator between the heterotopias of museum and traveling festival. The fixed-site amusement park took on a sense of temporal and spatial order from the museum while introducing the museum to crowd control in an entertainment setting (1995, p.3-6).



curiosities that preceded them (1995, p. 1-2). In this instance, the scientific and rationalist evolutionary schemes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought knowledge to a past blighted by jumbled memories and the darkness of tradition. In every case, the discourse surrounding the museum was caught in the glare of binary headlights.

Of course, this view of the museum extended well into the emergent critique of culture in general. It is no surprise to find one of the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and critic of 'the culture industry', Theodor Adorno, capturing the museum's situation in an incisive image contemporary critics understandably cannot resist quoting – so how can I resist? He characterized the death grip of the museum on culture this way:

The German word, 'museal' ['museumlike'], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. ... Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture (1975, p. 175).

Although the museum/mausoleum comparison has haunted critical museum discourse ever since, Adorno nevertheless recognized that whatever pleasure remains in looking at 'art treasures' still depends on the existence of the museum. And he is even more certain that the healing effort that seeks to re-contextualize art in the exhibit "is even more distressing than when the works are wrenched from their original surroundings and then brought together". For him, this is "the fatal situation of what is called the 'cultural tradition'".

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<sup>47</sup> Sherman too suggests this might be the founding text of modern cultural critique.



Once tradition is no longer animated by a comprehensive, substantial force but has to be conjured up by means of citations because 'It's important to have tradition', then whatever happens to be left of it is dissolved into a means to an end. Anyone who thinks that art can be reproduced in its original form through an act of will is trapped in hopeless romanticism...But to renounce radically the possibility of experiencing the traditional would be to capitulate to barbarism out of devotion to culture. That the world is out of joint is shown everywhere in the fact that however a problem is solved, the solution is false (1975, p. 175).

Here as elsewhere, it should be noted that the philosophical critique of the museum tends to focus on the art museum in describing the 'fatal situation' of preserved culture. But as the connection drawn between aesthetic pleasure and cultural tradition can be quite widely conceived, surely the focus on art treasures does not shield collections of other kinds of artifact from this critique. The link between tradition, culture and history is self-evident, and the terms in which artifacts are described by this tradition make it clear that the art museum does not stand apart from the essentially historical nature of all museums. True, there are aesthetic issues that are specific to the art museum, but even these, as we will see, are suggestive for museums in general.

Maleuvre argues that this critique of the inauthenticity of the museum is all but synonymous with "esthetic modernity" (p. 20). But where Adorno is skeptical of any 'act of will' that might rescue art from the museum, others are less so. Andrea Witcomb, whose recent book is tellingly subtitled 'beyond the mausoleum', makes a heroic attempt to rescue the history of the museum from criticisms of this type, arguing that the museum never entirely conformed to the



picture painted of it (2003). By usefully emphasizing that the museum is not a 'single discursive block', and by pointing to the variety of institutions and types of displays in different periods and contexts, she shows that museums have been in constant struggle with the so-called 'mausoleum tendency' described by radical critics of the museum.

However, it is not always clear that the practices she supports – interactivity, inclusion of electronic technologies, the growing interest in everyday life and popular culture, non-linear displays – entirely overcomes the problem, but merely sidesteps it (Witcomb, p. 166). For are these not 'acts of will' aimed at restoring some kind of authenticity to the museum experience of historicity, either by turning system into event via 'resurrection effects'<sup>48</sup>, or by reconstructing an identificatory tie to the museum's audience or community? Maleuvre provides examples of this, pointing to the mobilization of multicultural issues to revivify the museum, ecomuseums, and even the so-called 'postmodern' museum<sup>49</sup> as examples of reforming efforts that fall back on just this possibility of a constructing an authentic relationship to culture through recontextualization, community control, and identity-building (Maleuvre, p.21; pgs.109-12). He concludes that a philosophical consensus has built up around these issues in recent years, evincing a yearning for immediacy, truth, and authenticity in culture – which, of course, is reminiscent of the nostalgia we detected in Nora's work. His question to this essentially romantic instinct is to

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<sup>48</sup> See the contrast between Bann and Goodman in the opening paragraphs above.

<sup>49</sup> By this he means Douglas Crimp's influential effort to argue for artworks that are reflective and critical of the museum even as they are exhibited (1993, p. 44--65).



ask, as we will see below, whether or not culture is by definition none of these things (Maleuvre, p. 21).<sup>50</sup>

### **The 'Historiographical' Critique of the Museum**

It would be wrong to assume that concerns about the museum's authentic relation to culture and history end with the philosophical critique embraced by cultural studies.<sup>51</sup> In fact, the philosophical critique of the museum as an inauthentic practice finds an echo in properly historical criticism as well. In her discussion of public history practice, the historian Ludmilla Jordanova notes that any discussion of the ambiguities of the term 'history' itself are echoed in the issues that arise around institutions of public history. Thus the problems of constructing narrative and interpretation from the archives of the past are common to all forms of historical representation. Yet museums, as Jordanova puts it, operate in particularly "insidious ways" in this regard because the past they present is almost by necessity "highly refined". Ironically, for a public institution whose role is to make objects visible, and which relies on the sense of sight to summon an experience of them, the careful restoration; selection and classification of objects and ideas for display "...renders both the original materials and the means by which they have been processed relatively invisible" (2000, p. 143).

Neither are the "ancillary materials" required for interpretations displayed, with the result that this very public institution actually possesses

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<sup>50</sup> His argument on this score is indebted to both Adorno and to Hegel. Indeed, Maleuvre's work can be interpreted as an extended creative riff on Adorno's classic essay *Valery Proust Museum*.



“many silences” (Jordanova, 2000, p. 144). So, while museums might satisfy public curiosity about the past, Jordanova is on target when she points out that they also “shape the forms such curiosity is allowed to take”. She musters several examples of exhibition practice that discomfit historians, including the impossibility of truly portraying living conditions in the past, the not uncommon stress on “moral clarity and the agency of individuals”, and the difficulty of representing social abstractions (law, ‘mankind’, childhood, nature) (1989; 2000). In pointing this out, she provides support for Quatremère’s early concerns that the museum was ripping objects from their living context. The experience of historicity that visitors thus take from the museum is artificial when compared to the historiography of a period, yet carries a convincing emotional impact.

So, we want to understand and respect the forms of public history found in museums, and acknowledge their influence, but equally we must be clear about their, admittedly diverse, effects on general historical consciousness, which operate at emotional levels that are hard to get a grip on (2000, p. 146).

Nor do the problems of representation in general end with the specific problems of representing either the grit of everyday life or abstract concepts of social organization. Jordanova describes museums as exercise in classification. She notes that museums are divided by type, based on their content or purpose. These distinctions are not always clear-cut, but classificatory displays must make them. As an example, she points to the problem of classifying textiles as either fine art or crafts, and thus as primarily aesthetic or technical accomplishments.

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<sup>51</sup> Witcomb (2003, p. 10), whose work is subtitled ‘Beyond the Mausoleum’, argues that cultural studies has internalized this critique to the point that museum studies could never challenge its prejudices.



Depending on the classification, which often disguises the criteria in play, boundaries defining art and technology are made – either uncritically or rendered invisible.

Museum interiors are also often divided into major areas of interpretation, in terms of schools, periods, nations, and the like, that come to appear quite natural because they are deeply conventionalized over time. Finally, individual objects are classified, and labels offer a plurality of taxonomies based on originality, significance, and authorship. These offer context, which is often quite simplified, and bestow value and status on an object simply through labeling and placement (Jordanova, 1989, p. 23-24; Bal, 1996, 2002). Because the organization of museum display relies on strategies of objectification, convention, and classification to present information, there is a heightened tendency to view knowledge in the museum as totalized and complete, in the same way myth models do. This can be further exaggerated by the pedagogical aims of museums. For example, notions of art appreciation, schemes of evolution, or histories collapse fact/value distinctions that scientific practitioners or historians might claim to make, or privilege interpretations where many might be able to frolic if given the opportunity. Indeed, as she argues, the tendency to identify with displays goes hand-in-hand with the reification these strategies promote, embodying another instance of the “aura of fate” described by Maleuvre.

In order to gain knowledge from museums, viewers, whether they are aware of it or not, *both* reify the objects they examine, treating them as decontextualised commodities, *and* identify with them, allowing them to generate memories, associations, fantasies...It is in



combination that they produce the insight and understanding that, ideally, typify a museum visit (*her emphasis*, 1989, p. 25).

However, as she shows, the result is rarely ideal because the processes of reification deny insight into the historicity of displays by definition.

To illustrate, Jordanova examines both these processes in a number of examples of the kinds of knowledge museums are expected to produce. For example, the museum often claims to offer an educational experience that is difficult to conjure up in ordinary pedagogical circumstances, and that is a sense of the past as 'really existing'. She cites the impressive *Jorvik Viking Centre* in York, England, which offers not only a sense of the past but presents itself as an actual simulacrum, exploiting the three senses of sight, sound, and even smell. The idea of a mimetic past implies a theory of history based on using objects as a means of entering into and vicariously experiencing the past 'as it really was'. Visitors cannot but respond positively to the apparent authenticity of the experience. Yet, in her words, it is "an open lie" – ignoring the real work, hunger, disease, war, and death of the historical Jorvik, as well as sidestepping the impossible to represent abstractions of legal systems and the like that are fundamental to the 'reality' of that social organization (1989, p. 25-6).

As a result, both historical scholarship and the very opacity of the past are devalued by this approach. After all, historical scholarship achieves its depth in handling these abstractions, something museums cannot easily do. And by making clear to the eye what is in fact opaque, another historical myth is generated – the familiarity of the past as a potential source of identification for the 'ordinary' person. Indeed, this familiarity prepares the ground for the



absorption of the past into the well-established myth of the nation. In this sense, the past is not such a foreign country after all; or, to put it another way, it is foreign enough to be interesting, but not so foreign as to be unfriendly. Here tourism and the museum are liable to meet in a kind of *Disneyland* of the past (see Horne, 1984).

Philip Rosen has studied the dialectic of preservation (maintaining the old for as long as possible) and restoration (reconstructing an original style prior to historical wear and tear) as types of historicity (2001, Ch. 3). In a fascinating contrast between two American museum villages, Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg, each sponsored by scions of industrial capitalism, Ford and Rockefeller respectively, he demonstrates that they share an anxiety about historicity itself. Each is representative of either the impulse to preserve or to restore, and both embody different kinds of temporality. But, as he points out, many museum villages of this type tend to be set in the period that just predates industrial capitalism, and in both cases there is a tendency to idealize or harmonize the different historical social strata. Ford's Greenfield highlights individuals experiencing social mobility through their industriousness, while Rockefeller's Williamsburg restores a period portrayed as free of class struggle between a planter elite and the craftspeople of the period (p. 71).

Inspired partly by Koselleck, Rosen argues that modern historiography is "an ordering of time" that always accepts the possibility of change (p. 89-146; especially pgs. 104-109). But in these instances, an attempt is made to domesticate the historicity of the present.



Paradoxically, the need to construct the past seems to lead to a form of historiography – as the discursive construction of history in the present – that must function to overcome history.... These museum villages aim to immobilize historical temporality. One might say they seek to mummify change (Rosen, p. 72).<sup>52</sup>

Of course this is reminiscent of Maleuvre's description of the balance of ahistorical and the historical in the museum, as well as in Nora's notion of the memory-site. In this case, the balance has perhaps swung too far. When, in 1947, Simone de Beauvoir visited Williamsburg, she called it "one of the sorriest shams to which I've ever fallen victim... Here this past – so raw, so real in Savannah and Charleston – is a conditioned past, like the nature offered to newlyweds on the Mississippi *Show Boat* (Beauvoir, 1999, p. 252-3). Nevertheless, these sorts of strategies that aim, consciously or not, to buffer historicity in the museum form, indeed by using the museum form to denaturalize it, possess a particular pedagogical dimension as well.

Sweden is a pioneer in historic village restoration. Aronsson & Larsson (2001) have investigated recent efforts at the *Fotevikens Viking Reserve*, and similar sites at *Jamtli* and *Visby*. These village-sites specialize in time traveling, role-playing, and vivid historical reconstruction as forms of pedagogical experience. They are oriented toward fostering a common value system based on democratic and egalitarian ideals deemed suitable for modern Sweden and its citizens. The public use of history, then, promotes values that potentially transcend historical goals.

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<sup>52</sup> Rosen actually uses the image of 'change mummified' to characterize modern historicity as a whole (p. 139). At the very least, this trope effectively describes the paradox of the ahistorical and the historical that



The aim...is only partly to teach historical knowledge in a traditional sense. Instead efforts are made to provide a pleasurable experience of the past, and to use history as a resource for discussions on fundamental values and existential questions, identity and community, and to develop the student's social interaction... (Aronsson & Larsson, 2001, p.1).

By using the past 'as a resource for value discussions' and pedagogical experience, these extra-historiographic goals often stand in contradiction with open-ended and critical thinking about history. The latter might entail different goals altogether; for instance, by contradicting the values in play. On the positive side, they note that the creation of a 'pleasurable experience' to draw students into a participatory relation with the past usefully contradicts the traditional binary of Swedish school studies between the good present and the dark past. But even then, the tempering of this traditional binary creates an illusion of a familiar past by emphasizing the continuity of time, a problem that Jordanova had already identified at *Jorvik*.

In Aronsson & Larsson's study of children's responses to the kinds of strategies employed at another site, *Foteviken*, they reported that there was no doubt that the children enjoyed the experience.<sup>53</sup> With some concern, they forecast that the combination of this kind of pleasurable experience with a situation in which these young visitors to the past remain pupils who are not in charge of their own time, means that this environment of role-playing and transmitting values will continue to grow regardless of pedagogical concerns

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keeps recurring in our discussion of the museum.

<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, they also note something of a negative reaction by adults to the idea of enforced participation, underlined by a kind of nostalgia for being left alone with the object.



about the history being learned. In spite of the inventiveness of these sites, in their view the students will continue to experience a story of progress not so dissimilar from the textbook one. Moreover, they will retain a limited ability to compare past and present in a knowledgeable way (Aronsson and Larsson, p. 10). The upshot is that identification with the past invariably requires a falsification of the past, while the attempt at verisimilitude actually makes the artificiality of presentations somewhat invisible.

This might seem to stand in contradiction with one of the museum's great virtues – that is, making historical objects visible. In this function, museums rely heavily on the sense of sight to make an impact (Jordanova, 2000, p. 143). This logic of display coincides with the fundamentally public and thus 'socially visible' nature of the museum. And in the same way that special effects support the visibility of film, or in the way that the 'feelies' of *Brave New World* bind the viewer to the image, the addition of sound and smell in sites like the 'restored village' only renders the experience more 'socially visible'. However, as Jordanova's discussion of reification in the museum suggests, the visible is but one mode of the appearance of objects and their historicity. At the heart of both this visibility and the logic of classification and display, lies the problematic of realist representation (Jordanova, 1989, p. 35; Bal, 1996; Maleuvre, 1999; Vergo, 1989; Hein, 1998). By embracing this problematic, the display practices of the museum spontaneously partake of the illusion of unmediated vision. This notion that the realistic representation of objects signifies truth, regardless of the mediated or constructed nature of exhibits, is only emphasized when subjected to strong narrative presentations or storylines.



...the “that’s how it is” aspect connects the object with an epistemology, anchored in a belief, almost tautologically referred to as positivist, that what you see must be real, true, present, or otherwise reliable. After all, it is visible; you see it there, before you. Although every visitor knows at an intuitive level that an exposition is a representation, the presence of the object provides an undeniable urge to recognize its “truth” (Bal, 1996, p. 5).

The other side of this epistemological effect is the tendency to treat the visitor as the passive recipient of this evident truth. In her analysis of childhood museums, Jordanova shows how easy it is to misread the evidence encapsulated in objects, be they toys, clothes, or any of the countless items of everyday life that might be displayed. Rather than see these objects as texts or text-analogues to be interpreted in their historical and social context, they are spontaneously seen as nostalgic indicators of one’s own childhood and, by extension, childhood in general. In this way too, we see another example of the reifying effect of the museum. Social relations are directly read onto objects *via* a visual relationship; for example, the imposition of one’s own childhood on the childhood of the past through the identificatory relation to the toy. According to Jordanova, this is a good illustration of the general import of Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism, underscored by visual metaphor of the *camera obscura* he uses to make it (1989, p. 38).<sup>54</sup>

What can we draw from these analyses of the museum’s predicament in relation to history? First, it is clear that the museum’s ability to represent and narrate history runs into numerous ‘historiographic’ obstacles. Apart from the



general difficulties it shares with historiography when it comes to constructing the past, and these are considerable, the methods and means of telling a story or constructing a display in the museum creates inevitably artificial, misleading, and ideological accounts. Perhaps most seriously, the reification of artifacts and social relations stemming from these methods and the assumption that the immediacy of display captures the reality of the past – its factness – stands in the way of the museum offering narratives that are sufficiently consistent with contemporary standards of historiography.

Secondly, the museum is nonetheless historical through and through. It is not just a container for history; it is a historical institution in its own right. In both dimensions, it transmits a sense of the past to those who pass through it as knowledge, sentiment, and experience of historicity. In fact, the very existence of the museum in its ubiquitous social role as one of the guardians of the past, guarantees that it imparts a sense of the past even to those who never set foot in one. The concern to overcome the museum's historiographical limits underpins Jordanova's analysis, which she concludes with several interesting recommendations.

She feels that more attention must be paid to the emotional reception of displays, and that museums should give up teaching visitors about abstractions – or more to the point, they should recognize the impossibility of museums of childhood, nature, mankind, and the like. It is an illusion to believe, as she says, that knowing through looking is even possible, and that understanding the

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<sup>54</sup> "The light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside itself." Marx in *Capital, Volume I*.



historical roots of that illusion, which she associates with issues of mastery over nature and culture, is synonymous with “the history of our society” (1989, p. 40). Consequently, she also believes that museums must become more reflexive about their own practices by provoking questions about the museum’s relationship to the society that created it. Presumably she hopes that museum practice can more accurately reflect historiographic standards if the museum comes to a realistic understanding of its limitations. She concludes:

Museums reach deep and far into past and contemporary cultures, hence they become crucial test cases through which to develop an understanding of the peculiar preoccupation of modern Western societies with mastering ‘objects of knowledge’, and then publicly commemorating the victory by putting on a show. We must lose our childish awe of ‘treasures’ and ‘wonderful things’ in order to replace it with a measured appreciation of the awkwardness, the limitations, the downright intractability of objects that...we endow with value (1989, p. 40).

However, and thirdly on our list, the philosophical critique of the museum questions how far reflexivity and contextualization can actually go towards overcoming the museum’s problems in this regard. For some critics, the museum is a graveyard of living culture and historicity. The museum has inspired a kind of dread amongst those who fear its sepulchre-like qualities. The ‘historical avant-garde’, perhaps best embodied by the Surrealist movement, hoped to reconcile art and the praxis of existence, to put art back into the service of life from whence institutions like the museum and autonomous aesthetics had extracted it (Bürger,



1984).<sup>55</sup> From its inception, philosophic critics of the modern museum took up this understanding that the museum separates artifacts from temporal becoming and installs them in an artificial space that is relatively free from the ravages of history. History, as represented by the objects in the museum where it is now ensconced, takes on a paradoxically ahistorical quality. In short, it is both dead and boring. Yet insofar as critics protested this in the name of restoring some lost unity or immanence in culture, they fall prey to Adorno's acerbic description of this as 'hopeless romanticism' – although he does concede that hopeless protests are necessary (1975, p. 184).

### **The Caesura of Culture**

What is to be done? Maleuvre, who is also suspicious of Nora's implicit nostalgia, nevertheless acknowledges his portrait of the alienated status of memory concretized in memory-sites like monuments and museums. By this he means that the need to memorialize is a function of the 'oblivion' that increasingly threatens the past, the perpetual divorce of the subjects of culture from that culture as it turns into an object. Because we won't remember, we need the museum to collect and construct historical objects, which is intrinsic to this process of objectifying the past (Maleuvre, p. 59). He defines this "process of passing" as historicity (p. 85). But, 'in passing', it should also be re-emphasized that it is the acceleration of history that is piling up the store of potential historical objects for the museum. In the modern period, the acceleration of history and the need to memorialize entails museums for everything –

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<sup>55</sup> And it certainly appears that they had good reason to fear the museum, for today that is where their art is



agriculture, flight, mining equipment, or potentially any institutionalized social activity. In his view, this only "...shows that every thing in our self-liquidating culture is now threatened with oblivion" (p. 59), just as DeLillo's Chief of Theory predicted.

It is to be recalled that critics of the museum point to the process whereby the museum lifts objects out of history in the name of historical preservation, and in doing so give the historical object an ahistorical character. Maleuvre calls this break in historical continuity the 'caesura', which creates the possibility of the monument or memory-site by taking that which is threatened with oblivion and recognizing it as historical. It would appear that his notion of the caesura acknowledges the justice of the critics' charge against the museum; indeed, he develops these ideas so thoroughly the reader might be excused for failing to recognize what is distinctive about his interpretation of this phenomenon. For him, this same idea of 'caesura' points to an alternative to the romanticism of the critics and the parallel temptation to relegate the museum to 'the dustbins of history' that their critique does so much to create. Witcomb is particularly insightful on the counter-productive results of such critique, emphasizing the way it immobilizes the possibility for change the critique is supposed to inspire, but her exhortation to a more positive approach does not represent a significant challenge (p. 166-8). The particular interest of Maleuvre's response lies in his attempt to answer the philosophical and romantic of the museum in terms of its own discourse.



Maleuvre explores an alternative strategy by turning to elements of the aesthetic philosophies of Hegel and Adorno – perhaps surprisingly in light of the latter’s crack about mausoleums. In the *Phenomenology of Mind* (para. 753), Hegel repeats Quatremère’s case against the museum as one moment in his own treatment of art. However, he goes on to argue that the context of the work of art, so fundamental to romantic critics, is ultimately quite incidental to the artwork. In Maleuvre’s recounting, Hegel argues the work of art is no more related to its context than a tree is consciously connected with the landscape. Art is born in context, and in this sense it is a mere unreflective act of nature. But when the work of art is recollected and reflected upon, it is inwardly comprehended.

Thus...the mediation of historical consciousness has opposite effect of alienation commonly imputed to it: plucking the artwork out of its natural context does not sever it from its context but presents this context as what in fact it always is, a product of mind (p. 27)

Without accepting the idealism of this position and the undoubted result, which is that Hegel does end up sequestering culture in the Idea,<sup>56</sup> he usefully demonstrates that the separation of the work of art from temporal becoming can be understood as a defining moment of culture. As Maleuvre puts it, in order to found a culture, a historical period must abstract itself and reflect on what it is and how it is different from other periods (p. 28). From this point of view, “the museum preserves the self-estranging drive of culture. In this sense, the museum stands true to antiquity by doing to it what antiquity, as culture, did to itself”

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<sup>56</sup> After all, Hegel ‘is the museum’ according to Merleau-Ponty (p. 21). Of course, the idea of sequestered culture is at the heart of the critique of the museum.



(Maleuvre, p. 30). Adopting the Hegelian mode, it could be said that the alienation of historical objects contains an 'authentic' act of culture.

Ironically then, Hegel reveals the closet idealism, or essentialism, of purely Quatremèrian objections to the museum. Hegel challenges the idea of 'spontaneous' culture, of a culture that simply is its own environment. (Recall here the unmediated nature of Nora's *milieu de mémoire*, and the essentialist idea of memory that seems to haunt his discourse). For Hegel, culture is a way of stepping out of the "mere happening of history" in a way comparable to the museum's construction of historical objects (p. 30).<sup>57</sup>

Of course, it is this Hegelian insight that lies behind Adorno's reminder to those who would blame the museum for the death of the artwork that "what eats away at the life of the art work is also its own life" (p. 184). In a sense, the museum only registers the act of culture itself. In response to Paul Valéry's romantic allegory comparing artworks to children that have lost their mother, Adorno responds that

...one must remember that in myths the heroes, who represent the emancipation of the human from fate, always lost their mothers. Works of art can fully embody the *promesse du bonheur* only when they have been uprooted from their native soil and have set out along the path to their own destruction (p. 184-5).

Here Adorno grasps the freedom that characterizes the work of art and that 'eats away at its own life' in the breaking loose from natural circumstances and subsequently is represented as something left behind. Art embarks on its own



adventure, and as such is, in Maleuvre's gloss on Hegel, "the very model of a free activity that propels history forward" (p. 31). This is the fundamental caesura of art and of culture, stemming from what Adorno calls the 'truth content' of art – its non-identity. From this point of view, the contradictions revealed in the debate around the museum testify to the irreconcilability (neither entirely autonomous nor heteronymous) of the work of art (Maleuvre, p. 81).

By putting art in museums, culture perhaps acknowledges the rebellious, uncategorical nature of art, its non-identity. ...To complain...that artworks lose all value upon being removed from their context is...to subordinate the restlessness of art to the identity principle (place, nation, people, and historical setting) (p. 38).

In this version, the notion of non-identity is the counterpart to the totalizing nature of myth-models. As such, it points to a role for conceptualizing art and historical objects in the museum that recognizes a different historicity.

There is a glimpse of this in Maleuvre's discussion of the historical object's historicity as anachronism. In his view, cabinets of curiosities and the like frankly acknowledged their anachronicity by presenting objects in 'abrupt juxtapositions'. In them, there was no attempt to represent history as a context or container into which they fit. The modern museum, born under the sign of new ideas of history, revised this by adopting strategies of display that were meant to deny the anachronism that comes from dislodging objects from historical becoming.

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<sup>57</sup> To be sure, Maleuvre seems to uncritically take on Hegel's idealism. With Koselleck, one might ask whether the periodization of cultural periods implied by this 'self-estranging drive' is itself peculiar to certain historical periods (Koselleck. 1985).



Soon...the museum compensated for the dislocation it inflicted by arranging the galleries in a clear-cut chronological order. It sought to mend the historical uprooting it caused by means of historiography and...started ruling out any form of historical 'inaccuracy' (p. 60).

When the painter and curator of the *Louvre*, David, condemns historical paintings that contained historical anachronisms, that is, paintings that disobeyed the dictates of homogenous chronological time, Maleuvre describes him as repressing representations "...of the historical caesura which, in actuality, it (the museum) introduced into culture as a whole (Maleuvre, p. 60)".

In contrast he points to the Giovanni Pannini's *Alexander the Great Before Achilles' Tomb* (1740), which anachronistically puts Alexander in a landscape "shaped by our historically alienated perspective" (p. 61). Poor Alexander now lives in ruins, in the very image of the present's time past (what Huyssen, following Koselleck, would call a 'present past'). In doing so, Maleuvre claims that Pannini is questioning whether Alexander can exist anywhere outside the present's retrospective glance.

Insofar as the past lies only in the act of remembering, it is indeed wholly contained in the present. The past, as a product of the present, is always a ruin because it always appears *anachronistically*, in the present. Alexander the Great exists only in the landscape of our memory. Thus, while Pannini's image may not be chronologically accurate, it is nonetheless *historically* correct (p. 61).

When Maleuvre writes that Pannini's image is 'historically correct', he might have better said that it captures the actual historicity of the past in the present, for I am not sure it is wise to entirely uncouple chronology and historiography in this



way. Still, Pannini, like the historian or the curator of the museum, cannot hope to create an authentic relation to the past, which only ever appears in the present – anachronistically, so to speak – so he presents it as ruin, as a memory in the present.

With the idea of the past as a ruin we come to the conclusion of Maleuvre's important critique of the romantic critique of the museum. When the museum monumentalizes artifacts, it can only do so by displacing the artifact from historical becoming. It has now lost its authentic connection with the period it once embodied (and potentially takes on a new life of its own as a ruin or self-destruction). It might try to re-assert this authenticity by putting it the proper chronological context, for instance, but it is too late. Pannini 'corrects' Quatremère, as it were, by showing that the monument or artifact cannot live in its time (for it would no longer be an artifact, monument or historic object), and that therefore it can only exist in the present through a dislocating act of remembering that names it artifact, monument or historical object. Maleuvre thus calls history (in the sense of historiography) "a caesura, that is, the work of inauthenticity" thereby adding it to the caesuras of the artwork and of culture (p. 63).

Accordingly, one does not seek the past where it seems to be, in the past, for it actually never took place there (only the then-present happened in the past – the past, like the future never happens, for only the present is capable of happening) (Maleuvre, p. 271).<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> The difficulty with this statement is that it tends to de-temporalize the present. We will use Koselleck to show that the future acts on the present, just as the present is an experience of the past. Perhaps this is where historicity lies, not in the ruin or the caesura.



Thus the very notion of the historical past requires dislocation and uprooting, and it can only be accessed through its present constructions. There is no chance of vicariously re-experiencing the past through the museum, the monument, the narrative, or any other historical object. For Maleuvre, "history is not a discourse about the past or present, but rather a way of conceiving one's alienation from time, a way of suffering the disjointedness of consciousness in time" (p. 271). This is as true of memory as it is of historiography or historical consciousness.

Contrary to the critics of the museum's de-authenticating activities, Maleuvre makes them the basis for a possible vision of the museum as a sort of simulator of the fate of art, culture, and history in history.

In fact, his preference is that "...like art, the museum ought to become a site of resistance to the sanctity of identity itself: it would then perhaps become truly cultural, that is on the side of invention" (p. 112). Here he takes up Adorno's insight about the non-identity of the artwork and makes it the basis for a politics of resistance against the myth-models of the museum, a politics that the museum can take up if it recognizes the fundamental caesura at the heart of its activities. But is this not but another variation on the quest for authenticity, somewhat comparable to Douglas Crimp's 'postmodern museum' that Maleuvre criticized (Crimp, 1993; Maleuvre, p. 21)? Whereas Crimp wishes to recontextualize the artwork in the museum, in part by making the critique of the museum part of the work itself, Maleuvre wants the museum to take up non-identity as a strategy of display. By emulating the *authentic* nature of art as the moment of non-identity, it can upset the very notion of cultural identity – the myth models of nation, triumphant history, and civilization, etc. – and challenge the cultural status quo



in its ongoing practice. Clearly the notion of the authentic and the romanticism it inspires is not so easily dispensed with.

If we return to Adorno, it is noteworthy that he draws no overt political alternative of this type from his argument about non-identity. For him, this is because the world is seriously 'out of joint,' such that the paradoxes of the type besetting the museum are moments of contradiction that cannot be overcome simply by understanding them. The only sanctioned approach to art in the museum, he says, is the one that takes it with the same seriousness as we should take the potential for catastrophe in the world today.

...by one who leaves his naïveté outside along with his cane and his umbrella, who knows exactly what he wants, picks out two or three paintings, and concentrates on them as fixedly as if they really were idols. Some museums are helpful in this respect (p. 185).

From this perspective, the various positions critics have taken on the museum represent contradictory moments of the truth, each incomplete in themselves and immersed in a specific history that overdetermines them.

Thus we need to ask if Maleuvre's attack on historical representation goes too far in effacing the referent in the name of the ruin. In part, this is a function of the focus on the art museum, which, as we noted above, is characteristic of much of the critical literature on the museum. Maleuvre's use of the aesthetic reflections of Hegel, and Adorno, and even Merleau-Ponty or Quatremère lends itself to an emphasis on the art object as it appears in the museum. Of course art objects are historical objects too, but the argument as presented by Maleuvre tends to fall more on the (failed) act of representation than on the 'lived



historicity' from whence it originated. This seems to me to underplay the impact of the acceleration of history as the dislocating force driving this process.

Between the tensions involving lived history and constructed history, the discussion of the historicity of the museum has fallen on the problems stemming from the latter while underplaying or failing to consider the former. Thus the importance of the notion of accelerating history we find in Nora, Huyssen, Koselleck, and even DeLillo's *Chief of Theory*, which forces reflection on history as a process linking past, present and future.

Is the failure to think consistently about this a reflection of the failure to distinguish clearly between the historiographic meaning of history and the notion of history as lived experience and ongoing process that is called *Geschichte* in German, in contrast to *Historie*? While the latter refers to the aforementioned linking of past, present, and future and denotes event, the latter refers primarily to the past and stories about the past and denotes representation (Williams, 1976, p.119; Koselleck, 1985, p.92). Thus the former emphasizes process, development, and action, while the latter focuses on representations of the past. Merleau-Ponty names the former the historicity of life, which is perhaps overly romantic, but serves to emphasize that the term history overflows the historiographic dimension ('the historicity of death'). The museum and historian partake of the historical, while history retains the possibility of being historic.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps these problems are best understood, as Philip Rosen's argument suggests, when these kinds of contradiction are recognized as essential qualities of modern historiography itself.



To secure historical knowledge, historiographical positionality had to somehow exit history, to limit the impact of time itself on the historian's work. But the authority of historiography is predicated on the universal force of temporality (p. 123)

As we have seen, Rosen nicely characterizes this trope of modern historicity as "change mummified". Without pursuing his work further, it is worth noting that he too uses Adorno to think through this problem. He follows him in the argument that modernity is not just a Western modernity but also a capitalist modernity "...that produces both a certain conception of a time-filled universe and the consequent anxiety about finding a secure positionality for a subject confronting the real" (p. 138).<sup>60</sup> For Rosen too, it is the loose metaphor of the acceleration of history, realized in specific social and political processes of rationalization (of time, amongst other phenomena), that subtend the "unsettling cultural and intellectual consequences" – most notably, in the nineteenth century, in historiography itself (p. 141).

Stephen Bann, in a brief comment on Maleuvre's "intelligent and provocative study" suggests that even if we accept his "radical impoverishment of the concept of historical representation", this other dimension of historicity will continue to assert itself. Pannini's ruin might capture the paradox of historical knowing, but is it the only representation of the past that is, in Maleuvre's odd choice of words, 'historically accurate'? "At the very least", says Bann, "we need to know how it was that historicity took root in Western consciousness, before we

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<sup>59</sup> See Raymond Williams' discussion of the term 'History' in *Keywords* (1976, p.121-122).

<sup>60</sup> Both of Eric Packer's goals, to get a haircut where he has always got one, and to gamble (as he always does) against the yen (a gamble predicated on his sure grasp of the future), reflect this search for secure positionality.



can understand the condition of 'alienation from time' as our contemporary predicament" (Bann, 2002, p. 125). Another way of approaching this problem is to look more carefully at the notions of historicity and historical consciousness themselves, as Rosen's comments suggest we must. Although we now possess a better understanding of the museum's ambiguous and contradictory relations with history and memory, we have been relatively vague about the attributes of historicity and historical consciousness that situate them.



## Chapter 3

### Historicity and Historical Consciousness

Coiled within the heart of our discussion thus far is the question of historicity and historical consciousness. My experience of the *50's Gallery* was an encounter with at least two distinct experiences of historicity, while Nora's discussion of memory and memory-sites is about the relationship of memory and historical consciousness. We have also seen that the ambiguities of historical representation in the museum are problems of its relationship to temporal becoming and historicity. The goal of this chapter is to explore the problems of historical consciousness and historicity by carefully scrutinizing the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Reinhart Koselleck. There will be no pretense of constructing a single, correct definition of these terms; only an effort to arrive at an understanding of them that is useful to our exploration of both the museum and the museum experience.



## Gadamer and the Problem of Historical Consciousness

We have already seen that the modern museum is born in the cauldron of the dual revolutions and, by implication, so is modern historical consciousness.<sup>61</sup> One of the most developed discussions of the nature of historical consciousness that is founded on a variant of this proposition can be found in the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer's hermeneutics approaches the problem of interpretation as both an experiential and historical act of understanding events and objects that are themselves historical. On the face of it, this certainly stands as a good description of the problem of interpretation faced by both historians and museum visitors. This resemblance, and the focus on experience in the phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition, constitutes a *prima facie* reason for beginning with his discussion.

In 1957, prior to the publication of his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, but in terms consistent with it, Gadamer delivered a series of lectures on *The Problem of Historical Consciousness* (1987a).<sup>62</sup> In these lectures, he argues that the appearance of historical self-consciousness is among the most important revolutions of the modern period, a view repeated in different ways by Koselleck, Nora, and Maleuvre. Gadamer further describes historical consciousness as a European development, which, however problematic from a postcolonial or world-historical perspective, is consistent with both his hermeneutic orientation to tradition and the argument that modern historical consciousness is rooted in

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<sup>61</sup> In fact, Koselleck has pursued this idea in depth (1985; 2002).

<sup>62</sup> I have also chosen to focus on these lectures because they are framed around the notion of historical consciousness more directly than in *Truth and Method*, and because the role of language in understanding



the acceleration of history begun in the period of the dual revolution.<sup>63</sup> However, from within the European tradition as a whole, he further specifies that the problem of historical consciousness was first and foremost a concern of German philosophy (1987a, p. 82). And, in his foreword to the second German edition of *Truth and Method* (1987c), Gadamer characterizes Germany's role in this respect as 'pre-revolutionary' because of the way in which aesthetic humanism soldiered on in the midst of the development of modern scientific thought. In other countries, he says, "there may be a larger element of political consciousness in what sustains the humanities..." (1987c, p. 340). In these statements, he seems to want to rescue a certain orientation to a humanist tradition unfettered by the rise of scientific consciousness as a characteristic of hermeneutics from the revolutionary events of the dual revolutions. This reflects, of course, the comparatively experienced temporal delay of the dual revolution in the German states. In an oddly reminiscent way, this is a kinder mirror image of Marx and Engels' scathing indictment in the early and unpublished *German Ideology* of the primacy accorded to philosophy in Germany as opposed to economics in England and politics in France. Although the two revolutionaries were dismissive of Germany's philosophical tradition in that early work, the subsequent impact of that same tradition has been as constitutive of the modern as the revolution in political and economic thinking – not least in the development of Western Marxism.

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is not as central a theoretical issue in the essay. The role of language creates another dimension of interpretation that cannot be broached here.

<sup>63</sup>However, although these revolutions first emerge in Northwestern Europe, there is no question that these are also world-historical events.



Working in a vein mined in different ways by Dilthey and German historicism, and then later by Heidegger and phenomenological hermeneutics, Gadamer defines historical consciousness as a fundamental element in the constitution of the modern even while he tries to locate it in an ongoing German tradition.

We understand historical consciousness to be the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions...<sup>64</sup> Today no one can shield himself from this reflexivity characteristic of the modern spirit. Henceforth it would be absurd to confine oneself to the naiveté and reassuring limits of a jealous tradition while modern consciousness is ready to understand the possibility of a multiplicity of relative viewpoints. Thus we are accustomed to respond to opposing arguments by a reflection which deliberately places us in the perspective of the other (Gadamer, p. 89).

Gadamer defines this reflexive attitude towards tradition as *interpretation*, which is applied not just to text but also to “everything bequeathed to us by history”.<sup>65</sup> He attributes this generalized notion of interpretation to Nietzsche for whom “... all statements depending upon reason are open to interpretation, since their true or real meaning only reaches us as masked and deformed by ideologies” (1987a, p. 91). Thus he also understands it as the necessary orientation to a past that is not transparent to understanding. From this perspective, the methodological orientation of the social and human sciences possesses an interpretative dimension, even in its more positivist forms, but Gadamer is hardly interested in

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<sup>64</sup> Note that Gadamer’s emphasis on the experiential dimension draws his notion of historical consciousness into the sphere of the ‘sense of historicity’ discussed in the introduction.

<sup>65</sup> And not just texts *per se*, but ‘text-analogues’.



methodological questions. Instead, he wishes to establish that these sciences are constituted by "... an entirely different notion of knowledge and truth"(1987a, p. 91).

### **Historicism and Historical Consciousness**

In the tradition of German philosophy to which Gadamer belongs, 'the problem' of historical consciousness is central to this claim that it is based on a 'different notion of knowledge and truth', notably in the search for a foundation for historical reason that was the intent of Wilhelm Dilthey and German historicism generally (Meyerhoff, 1959, p. 15-25; Hughes, 1958, p. 192-200). However, 19<sup>th</sup> century historicism retained methodological ambitions, which Gadamer ultimately believes compromised their actual goal: the pursuit of a different kind of knowledge from the scientific/analytic type. Once again, we are reminded of his characterization of the German tradition as 'pre-revolutionary', and certainly the qualitative distinction between scientific and humanist reason is at the heart of many of the debates issuing from the attempt to make this distinction stick.

The historicist argument that Gadamer does embrace is the idea that because historical knowledge must interpret human action, it cannot be identified with the procedures of scientific inquiry in the natural sciences. Dilthey, for example, saw the social and historical world as a product of a shared human spirit or psychology, however different the past might otherwise appear. In a lecture delivered on his seventieth birthday, *The Dream*, Dilthey claims



historical consciousness has shattered the last chains left unbroken by philosophy and the natural sciences. In his vision, he gives it another role:

At the same time, however, historical consciousness saves the unity of man's soul; the glimpse into a final harmony, although otherwise incomprehensible, is revealed by the creative power of our essential being (in Meyerhoff, 1959, p.42).

This postulate of a common psychology overcame the problem of historical distance between past and present. Methodologically, he therefore recommended empathy as a means of allowing the historian to re-experience historical situations the way historical actors more or less experienced them, enabling an understanding of why they acted as they did. Collingwood would take up this idea in his own way by later describing historical method as the historian re-enacting the thoughts of the past (Carr, 1964, p. 22).

The empathetic idealism of historicism tries to establish what sometimes appears as the Holy Grail of thinking about historical consciousness: to arrive at an historical *experience* of the past as a means of understanding the past. And certainly this has been one strategy of representation for the modern museum from the *Musée de Cluny* described by Bann (1990) to the contemporary spectacle of *Jorvik*.

However, Gadamer rejects the philosophic idealism underpinning Diltheyian historicism because for him it stands in contradiction with the intimate connections that the human sciences actually do have (and desire to have) with the natural sciences. He characterizes the human sciences as having adopted the goal of becoming verifiable, empirical sciences, free of metaphysics



and the philosophy of universal history. Yet he also thinks that this legitimate desire to be anti-idealist and anti-speculative has prevented the human sciences from gaining the radical self-understanding that the historicists sought (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 93).

In his view, neither an envy of nor an attraction to the Cartesian and mathematized models of the natural sciences is a meaningful way to arrive at an autonomous and specific knowledge appropriate to the human sciences. The result of this desire to emulate the natural sciences only drags them back into the sphere of methodological imitation. And the latter, in turn, constructs an object of knowledge that cannot be understood reflexively, as both subject and object of reflection. It seems then, that either the human sciences must embrace positivist method and define their object as similar to the natural world, or they must embrace variations on the empathetic method based on a universal human psychology as a means of achieving a comparable scientific certainty.

It is the latter choice that Dilthey made, and for Gadamer this led to the failure of historicism. In Dilthey's desire to arrive at a method appropriate to historical knowledge, Gadamer detects 'latent Cartesianism'. Dilthey's goal was to achieve an ideal of objectivity for the human sciences that would equal that of the natural sciences. In pursuit of this goal, Dilthey and the historicists assume the object of study is a text to be understood, but they also assume that every encounter with the text is *an encounter of the Spirit with itself*. The minds or psychologies of the past are not, in the end, so different from those in the present. The assumption of a shared Spirit uniting both text and interpreter suggests that they ultimately exist on the same plane of reality, and therefore that all texts



exist, for the interpreter, in this way. Thus, in spite of different methods, the human sciences can aspire to an ideal of objectivity comparable to the natural sciences in the act of addressing "... our questions to an object already fully present, to an object that contains every answer" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 107). Dilthey fails to construct a truly historical experience of knowing because by framing it as a meeting of minds that are finally identical in nature, and regardless of their historical genesis, he has separated the act of knowing from the historicity of the object. We might say that he achieves a consciousness of history, but not a historical consciousness. In a way, Dilthey commits a version of the error Jordanova situated in the illusion that seeing is knowing (1989). Whether we forget the relations that contextualize the object because of the reifying strategies of the museum, or because it is impossible to visually represent them, or because, as Dilthey does, we assume a common human psychology, the tendency is to collapse the real distance between past and present.

If I understand Gadamer correctly, Dilthey achieves his desired ideal of objectivity by proposing a subject (the interpreter, but also the creator of the text to be interpreted) who constitutes an objective world according to rules or categories of the spirit, while the natural sciences achieve the same ideal by positing a neutral subject who discovers objective facts about the world through the application of method. Both approaches understand '*understanding*' as a subjective stance *vis-à-vis* a given and present object. While the one attains truth through methods of participation and empathy in the act of deciphering a text; the other attains it through methods of reason and regularity based on the nature of reason. The subject-object dichotomies of western philosophy, particularly



between historical being and the being of nature, are re-affirmed in both cases. Although the methodologies of the historical sciences are derived from the uniqueness of the object that is to be known – its particularity – Dilthey detects a spiritual harmonization of text and interpreter at work in the process. It is the universal character of understanding as an expression of life, pitched on the same level of reality, which guarantees this. Dilthey ends up in a subject-position that is effectively ‘outside history’. And, in addition, the past is “made to stand still – a unique and singular past that may be grasped objectively, once and for all time” (Hutton, p. 158)

The reason I have dedicated space to deciphering Gadamer’s critique of Dilthey’s historicism is two-fold. First, it clarifies by contrast, as we will see, Gadamer’s attempt to arrive at a notion of historical consciousness that remains, as it were, ‘inside history’. Secondly, it draws attention to the recurrence of a kind of anxiety we have already traced in the relation of museums and historical representation. In the same way the museum removes historical objects from historical becoming and thereby creates a kind of ahistorical space in which to entomb and preserve them from historicity, the discourse around historical consciousness and historiography finally seeks a standpoint from which it can defend and reassure itself against the instability that inheres in modern temporality (Rosen, ch. 3; also p. 352). Gadamer’s solution to this two-fold problem is to attempt the thorough historicization of historical consciousness.



## Understanding and Historical Consciousness

Gadamer tries to overcome Dilthey's idealism by situating his argument in the analysis of *Dasein* by his teacher Martin Heidegger, and by adapting aspects of the latter's line of inquiry to problems of historical understanding and hermeneutics. For Heidegger, understanding is not one among many modes of action on the part of the subject but the "primordial accomplishment of human *Dasein* as being-in-the-world". As such, it constitutes the very possibility of any subsequent differentiation of understanding into "pragmatic interest and theoretical interest"(Gadamer, 1987a, p. 109). Looked at this way, historical knowledge is not an opinion, disposition, or method. Instead, to use another language, it is an existential reality.

Moreover, "...to be historical...is itself a mode of being for human *Dasein*"(Gadamer, 1987a, p. 112). Only insofar as we are historical can we even speak of history – it is a precondition of our ability to revive the past. As a consequence, the whole problem of prejudice or interest for practicing good method and science is a false one. What was previously considered pejoratively 'subjective' is now considered as the starting point of inquiry. This is the way Gadamer's hermeneutics would claim to productively confront the anxiety of positionality Rosen detects at the heart of modern historicity. The subject position the historian wishes to occupy (a position outside history, epistemologically secure and methodologically guaranteed) is forced to recognize the impossibility of this goal without abandoning it (Rosen, p. 354). The subjective position in a concrete, historical situation is, in Gadamer's view, part of the object to be interpreted and understood, and not separate from it.



Understanding, then, is no longer a function of applying hermeneutic procedures or historical reason in the human sciences; rather, it is the very basis of the mode of being human. "Understanding is the very movement of transcendence" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 110).

Gadamer underlines that the German verb *verstehen* (to understand) has two meanings, such that to understand the meaning of something also signifies how to go about doing something. This double significance applies to all situations of understanding - from that of the mechanic to that of the hermeneutic scholar. To understand an expression, then, is not merely a decipherment of its immediate meaning *pace* Dilthey; it is a discovery of *know-how*. "In this case one rightly says that accomplishing an understanding is to form a project from one's own possibilities" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 111). Put this way, we can see how the problem of historical understanding is now grounded in a notion of human existence that could be interpreted as essentially oriented to the future - what Heidegger called *pro-ject*.<sup>66</sup> This is part of a temporal structure conceived as the existential ground of the human condition (Hutton, p. 157; Bambach, p.244-250).

The temporal structure of *Dasein* is also characterized by *thrownness*, which Gadamer relates to the idea of *affinity*. For Gadamer, *thrownness* and *affinity* are ways of getting at the idea of tradition in historical understanding. *Affinity* "conditions human interest" in the choices of a theme or question or an interest. For Heidegger, *thrownness* and *pro-ject* must always be thought of

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<sup>66</sup> Critics of Gadamer, like Habermas and Osborne, argue that Gadamer privileges the dimension of tradition (facticity) over the dimension of futurity, with significant implications for the conservative nature of his hermeneutics. See below.



together as the existential structure underpinning any understanding or interpretation whatsoever (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 112-113). As *Dasein* projects towards its future possibilities, it does so, and can only do so, as a being which *has been*, that is which has a specific past - a *facticity*. On this basis, Gadamer argues, following Heidegger, that the human sciences owe their access to history to the process of tradition (of facticity), which is itself historical.

...the authentic attitude is that of looking at an inherited culture - in the literal sense of both inherited and culture, that is, as a development (a cultivation) and a continuation of what we recognize as being the concrete link among us all (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 114).<sup>67</sup>

Science in the objectivist mode treats tradition as essentially alien, whereas the human sciences appreciate tradition as something like a mirror in which each of us potentially recognizes him or herself. As such, "the reality of tradition scarcely constitutes a problem of knowledge, but a phenomenon of spontaneous and productive appropriation of the transmitted content" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 114).<sup>68</sup>

So if understanding is to be thought of as having the existential structure of *Dasein*, of both *thrownness* and *pro-ject*, what is the impact of the appearance of historical consciousness? Does it create an "unbridgeable abyss" between our scientific and spontaneous approaches to history, between our personal appropriation of the past and a rigorous understanding of it? Gadamer thinks this contrast between tradition and historical investigation at stake here is too abstract, and that a proper hermeneutics must overcome it in the realization that

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<sup>67</sup> Of course it must be asked: who are "us all"?

<sup>68</sup> Once again, it is worth noting this characterization of our lived relation to tradition is all but identical with the way Nora characterizes memory.



the lived tradition and historical research form an effective unity to be analyzed as a network of reciprocal actions.<sup>69</sup>

The effort to close the abstract distinction between history and tradition would seem to follow from his discussion of Heidegger and the structure of *Dasein*. Understanding is both the mode of consciousness of hermeneutics and the mode of being human. Historical hermeneutics must be consistent with this 'effective unity'. However, having arrived at this point, Gadamer claims he is 'forced' to admit that historical consciousness is not quite the radically new phenomenon he originally painted; rather, it is a "relative transformation, although a revolutionary one, within which man has always constituted his attitude toward his own past" (1987a, p. 115). In other words, if he wants to overcome the abstract opposition between history and tradition, he cannot create another opposition between the revolutionary advent of historical consciousness and other traditions.<sup>70</sup> As a relative transformation in historical attitude, he must now clarify the role of tradition within it, for historical knowledge is thoroughly imbricated in the mode of being human. In particular, Gadamer believes he needs to explain how it is that 'the same message transmitted by tradition (something *general*) will be grasped differently on every occasion', and "that it is only understood relative to the *concrete* historical situation of its recipient" (*my emphasis*, 1987a, p. 115). In this analysis, Gadamer does not move beyond a discussion of the philosophical and ontological connections between history and tradition. Ironically, he might be replacing an abstract opposition between these

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<sup>69</sup> This could be construed as a variation on the problematic relation of memory and history in modern discourse and the nature of their 'effective unity'.



two notions with an abstract continuity. The question that we will ask below, at Koselleck's behest, is whether the notion of a revolutionary transformation in historical consciousness still holds for properly historical reasons – that is, the actual “concrete historical situation” in which it arises.

Returning to Gadamer's argument, he turns to Aristotle's ethics to clarify the relation of hermeneutics and tradition because he sees a similar problematic at work in the relation of reason and ethical behaviour. Aristotle contrasts the Platonic Good, which is abstract, with the human good; that is, the good in relation to human activity. Men only acquire the good, their own particular good, inside a practical and unique situation, so “the task which befalls ethical knowledge can only be to ferret out just exactly what demands this situation places on him” (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 116). It cannot appeal to general rules because their very generality means that these rules are “unmindful” of concrete exigencies, and worse, it has the potential of obscuring the meaning of the situation at hand. In the domain of ethics, one cannot expect the exactitude of mathematics or the stable laws of the natural domain. True, ethical knowledge can help clarify the problems of ethical consciousness, but it can never take the place of concrete ethical consciousness – which presupposes a number of things:

To begin with, a listener must be sufficiently mature so that he does not demand of the instruction he receives more than it can give him. In more positive terms we might say: it is indispensable that through practice and education the listener may have already formed a *habitus* which he takes

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<sup>70</sup> It is at this boundary point that Koselleck inserts his concepts of space of experience and horizon of expectations to address this problem.



into the concrete situations of his life, a *habitudo* which will be confirmed and solidified by each new action (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 117).

In this account of Aristotle's practical ethics, Gadamer echoes the previous discussion of the affinity between the interpreter and the tradition. Neither ethical knowledge nor historical knowledge can be characterized as objectivist. And, in both cases, the relation of the general and the concrete is structured in terms of the particular object in such a way that understanding and interpretation are always in play.

The strength of the analogy is that it provides a model for hermeneutic understanding. The discussion of Aristotle's ethics aims to highlight the applicative dimension of knowledge that necessarily comes from hermeneutic understanding (and which, once again, echoes the mode of being human as both *thrownness* and *pro-ject*). Also, by contrasting theoretical and scientific knowledge (*episteme*) with ethical know-how (*phronesis*), Gadamer can make the point that the human sciences are essentially moral sciences, bearing on man and what he has to know about himself as a moral actor; in other words, bearing on "action-oriented self-understanding".<sup>71</sup>

This human self-apprehension concerns him from the very first as an acting being; it does not in any way aim at verifying what is always the case. Quite the opposite, it relates to what is not necessarily what it is and what could be otherwise at some particular moment. Only in things of this sort (i.e., in that which is not immutable) can human action intervene (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 118).

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<sup>71</sup> The phrase comes from Habermas, 1989. p. 162.



Again, Gadamer is relating understanding to the mode of being human; in this instance, particularly *Dasein* as *pro-ject*. But what is the nature of this knowledge-guided action? Is this know-how a kind of *techne*, the skill of the artisan who knows how to go about making something? Is the man who makes himself what he ought to be acting in the same way as an artisan acts when he makes something according to a preconceived intention and plan? Certainly, both ethical and technical know-how “imply a practical knowledge fashioned to the measure of the concrete tasks before them” (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 118). In both instances success resides with those who know their craft, having acquired a teachable technique in the concrete experience of everyday practice. But how are they different?

Gadamer, following Aristotle, argues that *phronesis* is knowledge for the sake of oneself; an insight that follows from the notion that man doesn’t deal with himself in the same way the artisan deals with his materials. It might be objected that in *phronesis* the material is the concrete situation that confronts the subject of an ethical dimension. In response, he adds three differentiating elements (I will list them in the order that Habermas (1989, pgs.163-4)<sup>72</sup> has chosen to summarize them because his arrangement makes their interconnections clearer):

1. Knowledge for the sake of oneself means practical knowledge has a reflective form (like hermeneutic understanding, and like historical consciousness). It is a form of self-knowledge, such that we experience

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<sup>72</sup> This is an effective critical summary of Gadamer’s argument in *Truth and Method* from the point of view of the issues in play in this paper.



errors of judgment personally, and lack of insight has the objective force of blindness (Habermas, 1989, p. 163; Gadamer, 1987a, p.124).

2. This is connected to the internalization of practical knowledge, such that it has the power to determine drives and to shape passions. While *techne* remains external (it can be forgotten, or put aside to embrace another profession), *phronesis* becomes part of the personality structure. Ethical knowledge is only useful to the listener if she possesses acquired knowledge based on traditions she has assimilated and situations she has experienced. *Phronesis*, therefore, is tied up to an ongoing socialization process. Because practical knowledge is internalized, it always arises in 'acting situations'. Therefore, Gadamer says, defining concepts of law or natural right cannot be thought of as having one fixed meaning. Concepts are what they are only in concrete situations, and can only be defined as they are variously used and applied (Habermas, 1989, p. 163; Gadamer, 1987a, p.120-122).
3. Ends and means are differently related in *techne* and *phronesis*. As Gadamer says, the whole problem is summarized in the fact that in moral actions there is no prior knowledge of the right means that realize the end – precisely because it is the ends that are at stake and not fixed in advance. However, it is also worth emphasizing with Habermas that practical knowledge is therefore global; that is, it doesn't refer to particular goals to be determined independently of the means of realizing them. The goals that orient action are moments of the same social life form as the pathways through which they can be realized. But the rules that stem from inherited



tradition must be interpreted as the historical circumstances change (Habermas, 1989, p. 163-164; Gadamer, 1987a, p.123-124).

For Gadamer, this establishes the autonomy of *phronesis* as practical knowledge from theoretical or technical knowledge *per se*, and "... in my opinion, one of the greatest truths by which the Greeks throw light upon [the] scientific mystification of [the] modern society of specialization" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 86). With this argument, he has gone some way towards achieving his goal of legitimating the distinction between scientific and humanist reason while providing the latter with a means of critically 'de-mystifying' elements of the former.

### **The Hermeneutic Circle**

It is at this point that Gadamer feels he is in a position to sketch the foundations of a hermeneutic because the latter, like *phronesis*, includes application as a constitutive moment. By this he means that application isn't an action that comes after understanding; rather "the object of our application determines from the beginning and in its totality the real and concrete content of hermeneutical understanding" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 125). Thus the interpreter does not attempt to apply some general criterion to a particular object (text, event, etc.), but looks for its original significance. To repeat an earlier point, the object determines method in each case.

Moreover, in the same way that ethical consciousness is both ethical know-how and ethical being, so historical knowledge is both historical know-how and historical being. To make this jump from the model of ethical consciousness to historical, hermeneutic consciousness, Gadamer uses the notion of a hermeneutic



circle to elaborate more concretely on the structure of understanding this entails. The circle, of course, refers to the relation between the whole and its parts: the anticipated meaning of a whole is understood through the parts, but it is in light of the whole that the parts take on their illuminating function. As he says, and this is a key point, the essential affinity of hermeneutical understanding with tradition is made evident in this image (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 126).<sup>73</sup> Described in this manner, it is evident that the appropriation of tradition in understanding is quite different from the empathetic method of the historicists that seeks to cut through what they describe as a vicious circle. Once again and in contrast, Gadamer re-asserts the lesson of Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* as the ground of this elaborated notion of understanding. For Heidegger, the circle is not an obstacle to the hermeneutic intent of restoring the authentic intention of the text; it is neither vicious nor a limit to be tolerated. Rather, it points to a primordial kind of understanding "as everyone who understands has always accomplished it" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 130).<sup>74</sup>

To be sure, Gadamer says, the limitations of 'unconscious habits of thought' and 'baroque ideas' still plague the interpreter of the text, and this is why attention must forever be refocused. The back and forth between interpreter and the object or text, this circle, is the outcome of the effort to understand. When the interpreter first approaches the text, meaningful elements will appear if she sets about the task with definite interests and the authentic intention of understanding, which he defines as the expectation that it will inform us of

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<sup>73</sup> On this account` Osborne argues that Gadamer betrays Heidegger's insight into the radical futurity of human existence (1995, p. 131)

<sup>74</sup> Gadamer does a nice job of locating his problematic in the everyday life of the 'ordinary' subject.



something (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 132).<sup>75</sup> Gadamer calls this the preliminary project, which will be corrected in each successive interpretative reading (1987a, p. 130). In this view, objectivity is that which confirms whether the anticipation prepared by the project actually conforms to the object or not.

For how do we judge that an anticipation is arbitrary and inadequate to its task, if not by confronting it with the only thing that can demonstrate its futility? Every textual interpretation must begin then with the interpreter's reflection on the preconceptions that result from the hermeneutical situation in which he finds himself. He must legitimate them, that is, look for their origin and adequacy.

Having reached this point, Gadamer concludes that historical consciousness cannot therefore be "an unbounded projection" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 133). First, consciousness has to be vigilant about both its anticipations and prejudices, including preconceptions about what constitutes historical method or historical fact. Failing to take account of these pre-understandings 'flattens experience' and betrays what is specifically other about it. However, unlike the traditional hermeneutics embraced by historicism, these obstacles are never finally overcome in some kind of perfect understanding that overcomes unavoidable preconceptions. Gadamer, following Heidegger, insists that understanding a text never ceases to be determined by our original anticipations. In addition, the 'tension' produced by the dual characteristic of familiarity and foreignness particular to especially historical texts, which is an inevitable function of these anticipations, is not a mere psychological tension. Rather, and

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<sup>75</sup> And thus she will be receptive to the origins and 'entirely foreign features' of that which comes from beyond her horizon.



again following Heidegger's ontological precepts concerning *Dasein*, these tensions are part of the object itself and therefore the very "meaning and structure of hermeneutical historicity" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 136). Whereas the traditional hermeneuticist achieves understanding in a purely subjective and divinatory act, Gadamer's hermeneutics enters into a kind of permanent dialogue with the object because of the inevitable duality of the text as both distant from the present and yet part of a shared tradition (it might be said that the two terms are in dialectical tension). And, to repeat, this is not an obstacle; rather it is the condition of hermeneutic understanding.

### **The Affinity with Tradition**

In this view, the temporal gap between past and present cannot be bridged or overcome in some final synthesis. The opposite and 'naïve prejudice' guiding historicism was the hope of achieving a kind of objectivity by assuming the vantage point of the past – in Rosen's terms, another kind of secure positionality.

Actually, it is rather a matter of considering temporal distance as a fundament of positive and productive possibilities for understanding. It is not a distance to be overcome, but a living continuity of elements that cumulatively become a tradition, a tradition which is the light wherein all that we carry with us from our past, everything transmitted to us, makes its appearance (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 136).

This is the radical element in Gadamerian hermeneutics, and perhaps the most distinctive element in his analysis of historical consciousness. The essential affinity of tradition with hermeneutics does not entail the melting of past and present into some unbroken or 'flattened' continuity that is glimpsed through



methods of empathy and the casting aside of prejudices.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, there is a 'lived continuity' that forms a *productive* tradition, which requires reconfiguring the very idea of a tradition within the ontological perspective he has been developing. In effect, Gadamer is arguing that prejudice, bias, prejudgment and the like make understanding possible. They are not necessarily untrue, unjustified, distorting, or – most importantly – *unproductive*. As McCarthy, *et al*, point out, the problem of bias is commonly understood in terms of the fallibistic perspectives of the philosophy of science, in which they represent a potential obstacle to knowledge. In contrast, what is radical here is the notion that the Enlightenment ideal of objective knowledge freed from all bias and perspective is simply a myth, at least within the social and historical realm of understanding (Baynes, Bohman, McCarthy, 1987, p. 320). Or, to put it in an even more controversial way, the Enlightenment ideal is but another prejudice or bias disclosed by the dialectic of interpretation (and, of course, not necessarily unproductive for all that).

So what is 'the productivity of the historical process' that will provide the conditions enabling hermeneutics to think about 'historical reality'?<sup>77</sup> In effect, the hermeneutic circle is a dialectical process, mediated by language<sup>78</sup>, which

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<sup>76</sup> This is also why Gadamer is so concerned to refute the charge of the essential conservatism of his view. See Gadamer, 1987a, p. 87.

<sup>77</sup> See Gadamer's conclusion, 1987a p.140. I think the idea of 'productivity' is a variation on a term "effective historical consciousness" used in *Truth and Method* and more commonly associated with translations of Gadamer. "The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding. A proper hermeneutics would have to demonstrate the effectivity of history within understanding itself" (Gadamer, 1987c, p. 268).

<sup>78</sup> In the introduction, written much later, Gadamer notes that this communicative process "signifies nothing less than that language forms the base of everything constituting man and society" (1987a, p. 87). This point is barely addressed in "The Problem of Historical Consciousness". On the other hand, this is the main thrust of *Truth and Method*.



underpins an ongoing conversation with the past. Temporal distance might stand as a filter between past and present, but it is an evolving filter - what Gadamer calls "universality purified by time"(1987a, p. 137). True, because prejudice can be blind, it can 'take hold' of us unconsciously. But just because a bias is at work in the background of our thoughts, it cannot be taken into account unless it is somehow provoked. For Gadamer, the critical task of distinguishing between "false and true prejudices" is precisely "the fruit of a renewed encounter with tradition." In effect, the otherness of the past calls out to us, and *provokes* the 'bracketing' of our prejudice, to the point that we begin to seriously reflect on the very idea of questioning itself (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 137).

But what happens if we are provoked to discover our prejudice and subsequently adjust our interpretation? Is it replaced by some kind of definitive truth, which is, Gadamer says, "the naive thesis of historical objectivism" (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 138)? He answers his own question in the negative: if only because the conviction now revealed as prejudice continues to play a role as the background to understanding a new interpretation. One might say with Hegel that it is a determinate negation.

The universal mediator of this dialectic is that denouncing an opinion as prejudice and disclosure of the truly different in hermeneutical information transforms an implicit 'mine' into an authentic 'mine,' makes an inadmissible other into a genuine other and thus assimilable in its otherness (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 138-139).

For Gadamer, historical objectivism is naive because it never takes the process of reflection to the end. Relying on method to expose prejudice, it forgets that it too is historical. Oddly enough, historical objectivism seeks to overcome



historical consciousness by overcoming its own historicity and the historicity of the object. But however many and varied the historical interests and interpretations are, behind them all lies the universality of the hermeneutic problem, probing what lies at the basis of any given 'historical question' (Gadamer, 1987c, p. 343). The affinity of the object and the interpreter must be affirmed; and it is affirmed, in Gadamer's eyes, by their mutual existence within a tradition.<sup>79</sup> Historical research cannot avoid the problem of historical consciousness by embracing methodological objectivism.

Having reached this point, Gadamer then suggests that both the concept and the expression 'historical object' is a relatively useless one anyway, if only because it reifies the relationship expressed in the hermeneutic circle of "mine" and "other" on the model of an object foreign to the present (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 139). This takes us back to the idea of temporal distance as a relationship between 'my own' convictions and opinions (the reality of historical understanding) and the other (historical reality), and the possibility of knowing both of them in a relationship of affinity. And, of course, these relationships follow from the ontological structures of understanding as the mode of being human.

In this light, it is worthwhile re-emphasizing that Gadamer is not providing us with a *Discourse on Hermeneutic or Historical Method*. "I never wanted to develop a system of technical rules that might describe, or even direct, the methodological procedures of the human sciences." Nor is he concerned with "what we do or what we ought to do". Rather the question is, "...what happens to

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<sup>79</sup> This points to a problem. What 'tradition' do 'we' all belong to, such that nothing falls outside it?



us over and above our wanting and doing" (Gadamer, 1987c, p. 339). In other words, we are historical beings to the core, and 'what happens to us' is the very experience of this historicity. And it is in that concrete experience of historicity, historical consciousness emerges out of the affinity we necessarily have with the tradition that constitutes us.

### **Appropriating Tradition versus the Critique of Tradition**

I have already quoted Gadamer's plea that it is a grave misunderstanding to think that this reliance on the affinity of tradition implies "uncritical acceptance" of that same tradition, or even "sociopolitical conservatism". As his description of the hermeneutic circle attempts to show, every confrontation with historical tradition is a critical challenge to that tradition (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 87). This, of course, is his response to the criticism of Habermas, amongst others, who argue that by treating the Enlightenment 'tradition' as one interpretative prejudice among many, Gadamer displays the innately conservative character of his hermeneutics. At the end of his second foreword to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer does admit that he has tended to single out "the orientation toward what is past and handed down" over the breaching, criticism, and disassembling of tradition (Gadamer, 1987c, p. 348). Perhaps, he suggests, this orientation or one-sidedness of hermeneutical interpretation, has "the truth of a corrective".

It enlightens the modern viewpoint of making, producing, and constructing in regard to the necessary presuppositions under which it stands. In particular, this limits the role of the philosopher in the modern world. However much he may be called upon to draw the radical consequences from everything, the role of the prophet, monitor, preacher, or even know-it-all ill suits him. What man



needs is not only a persistent posing of ultimate questions, but also a sense for what is feasible, what is possible, what is right, here and now. In my view, one who philosophizes must be all the more aware of the tension between his own claim and the reality in which he stands (Gadamer, 1987c, p. 350).

The fine ironies he expresses here are clearly aimed at the still thriving consequences of the Enlightenment, whose *telos*, in the eyes of both Gadamer (and his teacher Heidegger), seems to be the expansion of science into total technocracy, and even the 'cosmic night' (Nietzsche) of nihilism. Thus the hermeneutic consciousness that Gadamer seeks to awake has, he admits, a chimerical unreality when faced with the will of man to continue the intensification of the critique of "what has hitherto existed", even "to the point of utopian or eschatological consciousness".<sup>80</sup> Although Gadamer admits that all this "making, producing, and constructing" also belongs to "the nature of man", and that it might well be "something far more primordial in our relationship to being" than the understanding and appropriation of tradition, he seems to hope that hermeneutics can act both as a reminder of the contingency of enlightenment impulses and of the fullness of being.

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Gadamer to the effect that historical consciousness of the historicity of everything was a reflexive attitude characteristic of the modern spirit, and that this attitude stood as the very definition of interpretation.<sup>81</sup> But in the end, tradition seems to remain the primary means of establishing the validity (or not) of one's prejudices, creating

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<sup>80</sup> This is a paraphrase of much of p.350 in Gadamer (1987c), "Foreword to the Second German Edition of Truth and Method".



the suspicion that a fundamental conservatism lies at the heart of this enterprise. Tradition also stands as the single mode of 'being-affected-by-the-past'.<sup>82</sup> Thus Habermas argues that Gadamer's hermeneutics limits the power of reflection, which from his point of view "proves itself in its ability to reject the claim of traditions" (1989, p. 170). More specifically, although there is agreement that the traditional contexts of the interpreter cannot be leapt over, it still does not follow that "the medium of tradition has not been profoundly transformed as a result of scientific reflection" (1989, p. 168).

At some point the validity of tradition and legitimate authority passes over into what Habermas calls "the less coercive force of insight and rational decision". Enlightenment, in this view, is not just one form of tradition but proposes a qualitatively new relationship between past and present. From this point of view, we might even say that modernity and its associated historical consciousness have actually ended the hegemony of tradition as the key to understanding. *Elective* affinity has, at least partially, replaced *essential* affinity as a way of characterizing the relation of past and present, and Habermas 'elects to think' that this is the real legacy of German Idealism. Far from being 'prerevolutionary', *pace* Gadamer, he argues this notion of reflection prevents what he calls the 'dangerous' separation of the German tradition from the Western tradition, a separation for which Gadamer shows some nostalgia.<sup>83</sup> As

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<sup>81</sup> See Gadamer, 1987a, p. 89.

<sup>82</sup> See Osborne on this (1995, p. 132). He argues that Ricouer's attempt to remedy this shortfall in Gadamer fails for him too.

<sup>83</sup> See Gadamer, 1987c, "Foreword to the Second German Edition of Truth and Method", p. 340. Also see note 6 above.



with so many nostalgias, there is a claim that this is an essential sentiment, but perhaps it too is an election in the face of a cosmic night.

The right of reflection requires that the hermeneutic approach limit itself. It requires a system of reference that transcends the context of tradition as such. Only then can tradition be criticized as well (Habermas, 1989, p. 170).<sup>84</sup>

Just as Marx and Engels slammed 'the German Ideology' in the name of historical materialism, Habermas criticizes Gadamer, albeit more kindly, in the name of what he likes to call 'philosophy of history with practical intent'. The question he raises, like Marx before him, is whether 'the problem of historical consciousness' can be understood by philosophical means alone.

This dispute about the 'rights' of reflection underlines the extent to which there still remains a significant degree of uncertainty about the nature of historicity and historical consciousness as cultural innovations in relationship to past traditions in Gadamer's work. In particular, what is the mark of the conditions of the emergence of historical consciousness on the phenomenon itself? If historical consciousness is shaped in the context of the emergence of the modern, what impact does this have on understanding? In other words, once the notion of historical consciousness is historicized, what is the actual mark of history on it? As defined by Gadamer, it retains the aura of a philosophical understanding somewhat abstracted from the conditions of its birth. In this regard, it is once again worth remembering that Gadamer amends his understanding of the emergence of historical consciousness as a revolution into a



‘relative transformation’, ultimately characterizing it as but “...a new element within which man has *always* made up the human relation to the past”,<sup>85</sup> and “within which man has *always* constituted his attitude toward his own past” (Gadamer, 1987a, p. 115).<sup>86</sup> It is this re-assertion of the power of tradition over the specific conditions of the birth of historical consciousness that induces Peter Osborne to effectively argue that when Gadamer arrives at this position, it is apparent that he undermines Heidegger’s emphasis on the *radical futurity* of human existence (the anticipation of death, which is the basis of temporalization) to the point of compromising the understanding of *Dasein* as it is found in his teacher’s work (1995, p. 130-2).<sup>87</sup>

From a Gadamerian perspective, the role of tradition – or facticity – cannot be denied. Indeed, it might appear that critics are quibbling over the degree of emphasis that is to be laid on the centrality of tradition in the act of interpretation. In his defence, it might be said that the adverb *always* that he employs to describe the relative transformation that is historical consciousness was *always* to be inferred from his use of Heidegger’s ontology of *Dasein* to ground the structure of understanding, for this guaranteed the historicity of being. There are two objections to this, however. Adorno has argued that there is an irresolvable contradiction between “timeless ontology and history”. He sees a tendency in Heidegger, and by implication in Gadamer, to camouflage these

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<sup>84</sup> He adds that this means legitimating such a system of reference other than through the appropriation of traditions. And thus the circle takes on a more vicious character...

<sup>85</sup> This is the wording in *Truth and Method*, p. 251.

<sup>86</sup> See note 6 above.

<sup>87</sup> Osborne also argues that Ricoeur’s corrective of Gadamer, which is aimed at answering Habermasian objections, also describes the time-consciousness of modernity as a modification of a more general temporal-historical form, more a disruption than a qualitatively new form (1995, p. 132).



contradictions by ontologizing history as the historicity of the structure of being (1983, p. 188). In other words, the level of history proper is not attained by the ontology of being.

Secondly, the equivocation between the terms 'revolutionary' and 'relative' transformation points to the valuation of tradition in his scheme, while the adverb *always* suggests that Habermas and the historicists, from different points of view, are right to suggest that an element of transcendence, a basis for taking a perspective on tradition, must assert itself if there is to be any perspective on either tradition or historicization. For the historicists, this perspective ultimately stems from *spirit* empathetically grasped, while for Habermas it will be communicative reason as a condition of possibility for understanding.

Moreover, even if we accept that Gadamer's account of historical consciousness is a fully historicized one, the significance of its historical emergence in a specific time and place remains imprecise. There is agreement amongst our discussants that the birth of modern historical consciousness takes place in the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, from the outset, the problem of historical consciousness and historicity has surfaced and re-surfaced at the boundary between the modern period and a past that pre-dates it in some indefinable way. We have seen Nora wrestle with the relationship between memory and history at the border of the modern, and we have seen how this struggle has been re-conceived in terms of the understanding of the museum. Both Nora and Koselleck locate the modern emergence of historical

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<sup>88</sup> Habermas echoes Koselleck in this regard. See the introduction to his *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.



consciousness in the period of the dual revolutions, while Gadamer further specifies the conditions of its appearance by stressing the role of the emergent discourse on both hermeneutics and the philosophy of history in Germany from Kant onwards. His stress on the German tradition might over-privilege the valuation of tradition and facticity in both his account of historical consciousness and its emergence, but it is nevertheless understood as contemporaneous with the materiality of the dual revolution. It is at this point that Koselleck's contribution is fundamental to specifying the significance of historical consciousness as an historical event in its own right.

### **The Problem of Historical Time**

Just as his teacher Heidegger influenced Gadamer, so is Koselleck influenced by his teacher Gadamer (and through him, Heidegger). Not surprisingly then, Koselleck can be understood as moving within the same interpretative framework. Thus Keith Tribe, the translator of Koselleck's *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, can describe the latter's project as "...a hermeneutic procedure that places understanding as a historical and experiential act in relation to entities which themselves possess historical force..." (in Koselleck, 1985, p. xiii). Paul Ricouer, who mobilizes Koselleck's work to conclude his monumental work on these themes, *Time and Narrative*, utilizes it as a step "...towards a hermeneutics of historical consciousness", and thereby places Koselleck's work in the same tradition. Yet, it is worth noting that Koselleck's analysis does not visibly move within the terminological conventions of either Heidegger's ontology or Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. This no



doubt reflects his professional status as an historian of social and political concepts,<sup>89</sup> but also it also reflects the placement of his concepts-in-use at the level of historical understanding proper.

Thus we can see the influence of Heidegger in two fundamental concepts that raise the structure of *Dasein* as facticity and pro-ject to the level of historical interpretation. He does this by transmuting them into two quasi-transcendental or 'anthropological' concepts: *the space of experience* and *the horizons of expectation* – which we will define below. In *Futures Past*, Koselleck economically situates his own work in relation to both Heidegger and Gadamer, constituting one of the few substantive references to either thinker – at least in that work.<sup>90</sup> He notes the use of similar temporal concepts in Augustine's *Confessions* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, specifically Chapter five, the section on 'Temporality and History'. In the latter, he says, Heidegger demonstrates that the temporal constitution of human existence is a condition of possible history. In a footnote, Koselleck then adds:

Of course, neither Augustine nor Heidegger extended their questioning to the time of history. Here it remains an open question whether the intersubjective temporal structures of history can be adequately adduced from existential analysis.<sup>91</sup> The following pages seek to use the metahistorical categories of experience and expectation as indicators for alterations in historical time. Gadamer disclosed the historical implications of all experience in *Wahrheit und Method* ( 1985, p. 323 n. 4)

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<sup>89</sup> On this, see Richter (1995, Ch. 2)

<sup>90</sup> Their influence is reflected slightly more in discussions in the new collection of translated essays, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (2002).

<sup>91</sup> One might look to either Merleau-Ponty or Sartre for this kind of effort from within this tradition – broadly conceived (my note).



Here we can see Koselleck's intention to historicize 'the existential and transcendental, and therefore basically ahistorical category of birth-death as the framework of the human condition'<sup>92</sup> on the one hand, and the desire to supplement Gadamer's discussion of experience (and tradition as constitutive of experience) with an analysis of expectation. In both instances, the category of futurity will play a larger role.

Koselleck defines the space of experience as "...present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered" (1985, p. 272). It includes rational interpretations as well as unconscious modes of conduct. There is also an element of what he calls "alien experience" that is contained and preserved in experience as it is conveyed by generations and institutions. Ricoeur clarifies this when he says that "... it is always a question of something foreign being overcome, of some acquisition that has become a *habitus*" (p. 208). Koselleck describes the past as a *spatial* experience because the past has been assembled into a totality comprised of "...many of layers of earlier time simultaneously present, without, however, providing any indication of the before and after" (1985, p. 273). In this way the past is not conceived chronologically, which signals that it is of a quite different order from the realm of expectation.

Chronologically, all experience leaps over time; experience does not create continuity in the sense of an additive preparation of the past.  
...[I]t is like the glass front of a washing machine, behind which

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<sup>92</sup> I am using Bo Strath's words describing a related aspect of Koselleck's work on concepts (p. 533). Also see Koselleck's related comments on Heidegger, where he says the latter "points the way from the finitude of *Dasein* to the temporality of history" but fails to thematize "intersubjective or transindividual structures", leading to the danger of a transhistorical ontology of history" (2002, p. 2).



various bits of the wash appear now and then, but are all contained within the drum (Koselleck, 1985, p. 273).

The term *horizon of expectation* is like the concept of *space of experience* in that it can be both “person-specific and interpersonal”. It also exists in the present as a ‘future present’. Historically, it would also be possible to talk about horizons of expectation in the past; in other words, as a ‘future past’, or perhaps as former horizons of expectation. It is important to emphasize that this notion of horizons of expectation, because it includes hopes and fears, wishes and desires, cares and plans, rational calculation, curiosity, and the like, also points to the not-yet experienced, to “every public and private manifestation aimed at the future” (Ricouer, p. 208).

However, it is important to note that although both these concepts are present-centred, they do not – as Koselleck puts it, mutually relate past and future as in a mirror image (1985, p. 272). Just as experience is united into a focus, the ‘not-yet’ is spread over, in Goethe’s words, “...minutes, hours, days, years, and centuries; consequently, that which is similar never appears to be so, since in the one case one sees only the whole while in the other only the individual parts are visible” (Koselleck, 1985, p. 272). Ricouer helpfully adds that this opposition between gathering together (experience) and unfolding (expectation) implies that the former tends toward integration while the latter tends toward the breaking open of perspectives (Ricouer, p. 209). The notion of an unfolding or breaking open is implied by the term ‘horizon’. “Put another way, the previously existing space of experience is not sufficient for the determination of the horizon of expectation” (Koselleck, 1985, p. 275). Thus past and future



never coincide, even though they might mutually condition one another. Moreover, the notion of horizon sets a limit beyond which a new space of experience will open, but it cannot yet be seen or experienced as such. Koselleck uses a 'recent' political joke to make this point, and it bears repeating when theoretical description runs as dry as this.

Communism is already visible on the horizon," declared Krushchev in a speech.

Question from the floor: "Comrade Krushchev, what is a 'horizon'?"

"Look it up in a dictionary," replied Nikita Sergeevich.

At home the inquisitive questioner found the following explanation in a reference work: "Horizon, an apparent line separating the sky from the earth which moves away when one approaches it."

Koselleck goes on to emphasize that these two terms are not simple counter-concepts. Somewhat like Heidegger's notions of *facticity* and *pro-ject*, but on the level of historical existence, these are not opposing ideas; rather, they "indicate dissimilar modes of existence, from whose tension something like historical time can be inferred" (Koselleck, 1985, p. 274). He describes this difference as a "structured feature of history". In a phrase that echoes Marx in *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*, Koselleck notes that one can neither entirely deduce expectations from experience nor fail to base one's expectations on experience. "In history, what happens is always more or less than what is contained by the given conditions" (1985, p. 274).<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> I am referring to Marx's aphorism: "Men make their own history, but not just as they please."



## **The Condition of Possible Histories<sup>94</sup>**

Koselleck understands both 'experience' and 'expectation'<sup>95</sup> as anthropological constants. As such, they constitute the condition of possible histories, which is to say that history cannot be understood without the expectations (hopes, desires, plans) and experiences (memories, traditions) of active human agents.

Without metahistorical definitions directed toward the temporality of history we would, in using our terms in the course of empirical research, get caught up by the vortex of its historicization (Koselleck, 1985, p. 271).

The vortex Koselleck wishes to avoid is, of course, the circularity that results from using thoroughly historicized concepts as a means of understanding history. In this concern he echoes Habermas' requirement of "...a system of reference that transcends the context of tradition as such,"<sup>96</sup> and which will take him beyond the orbit of Heidegger and Gadamer.

Carvounas argues that although there is much merit in Koselleck's anthropological argument, the important thing is that he has effectively used these concepts to uncover the changed relations of past and future in modernity (2002, p. 7).<sup>97</sup> This is an attractive fallback position that pragmatically avoids both the controversy between Gadamer and Habermas and a reckoning with the

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<sup>94</sup> In his recent collection of essays in English, Koselleck identifies historicity as the condition of possible histories (2002, p. 3). This supports my understanding that the tension between experience and expectation is central to the concept of historicity.

<sup>95</sup> Henceforth, when I refer to experience and expectation, I am using these terms as shorthand for the two concepts 'space of experience' and 'horizons of expectation'. This reflects Koselleck's practice.

<sup>96</sup> See note 49 above.

<sup>97</sup> Ricouer, on the other hand, enthusiastically endorses Koselleck's position as fundamental to a successful hermeneutics of historical consciousness (p. 207-9).



*aporias* of historical thinking, but it seems to me that Koselleck's 'anthropological' understanding of his concepts is fundamental to the architecture of his enterprise. In particular, with reference to our discussion of Gadamer above, it sustains the revolutionary nature of modern historical consciousness – as Habermas seems to understand, even if he takes a different route from the anthropological one offered by Koselleck. Finding a position of interpretation (or 'system of reference') that avoids the acid bath of historicization, helps Koselleck specify the particular impact of the conditions of the birth of historical consciousness by comparing the different temporal relationships characteristic of each historical period – or develop criteria with which to define those periods.<sup>98</sup> However, it is now far more evident than in the work of either Heidegger or Gadamer that this emphasis stems from the very historical context that gives rise to the phenomena of historical consciousness in the increasing tension between experience and expectation that characterizes modernity.

In part, it is the emphasis on futurity in Koselleck's hermeneutic that enables him to modify significantly the privileging of tradition Habermas detects in Gadamer – although, once again, not in the way Habermas chooses to reckon with it. The conditions of the birth of modern historical consciousness are infused with futurity and Koselleck's historical semantics restores this dimension to modern historicity and time-consciousness, thereby re-establishing the revolutionary character of historical consciousness. In Gadamer's terms, the

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<sup>98</sup> See the essay "The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity" (Koselleck, 2002, esp. pgs. 165-168) for a list and discussion of criteria marking the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They can be usefully compared with Seixas' list of elements in the structure of the discipline of history. (1996).



relative transformation that the birth of historical consciousness ultimately signified now appears as radical as he initially described it. As we have seen, Gadamer acknowledged the revolutionary quality of historical consciousness but only insofar as it was understood as "...the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of the historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions" (1987a, p. 89). Peter Osborne, however, recognizes the limitations Gadamer imposes on the notion of historical consciousness when he contrasts Koselleck's project with the use made of it by Paul Ricouer, which is also aimed ultimately at salvaging the notion of tradition in the context of acceleration.

It (*Gadamer's tradition, or Ricouer's traditionality*) acquires its transcendental status only by abstraction from (and a forgetting of) the historically specific social forms and modes of expectation through which the past is renewed. Habermas recognizes this... He uses Koselleck's semantics to derive the central philosophical problem of modernity (the need for it 'to create its normativity out of itself'<sup>99</sup>) from the idea of the present as a 'continuous renewal' (p. 132-3).<sup>100</sup>

Osborne's point, which applies equally to Gadamer, is that modern historical consciousness is not merely a new element to be added to the mix of attitudes that constitute the past, or even a relativization of perspectives; it is a new mode of being in its own right. Gadamer's adaptation of Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* indicates that. But it is a mode of being that arises in a specific historical context and thereby possesses "specific social forms and modes of expectation". One

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<sup>99</sup> Habermas, 1987, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Osborne goes on to argue that Habermas nevertheless fails to grasp modernity as an ontological form of historical being and moves on to a discussion of a 'superior' notion of tradition in Walter Benjamin's work (1995, p. 133).



might say that in viewing the horizon, the prognosis can be made that the advent of historical consciousness is a qualitatively new space of experience for the future, marked by the conditions of its emergence in the form of an emphasis on project and futurity.

This is most evident in the practical application Koselleck makes of his two metahistorical concepts. Initially, Koselleck's question was the following: how in a given present, are the temporal dimensions of past and future related? This query led to the hypothesis that in differentiating past and future, or (in anthropological terms) experience and expectation, it is possible to grasp something like historical time (1985, p. xxiii). Having established this, he modestly, states that his essential thesis is that during *Neuzeit* (modernity) the difference between experience and expectation has increasingly expanded (1985, 276; 284).<sup>101</sup> In itself, this does not sound particularly earth shaking, but it brings a series of insights concerning historical consciousness into play. To help specify these, it is useful to begin with Ricouer's summary of three themes that follow from Koselleck's discussion.

First, the belief that the present age has a new perspective on the future that is without precedent. Second, the belief that changes for the better are accelerating. Third, the belief that human beings are more and more capable of making their own history. A new time, an acceleration of progress, and the availability of history – these three themes contributed to the unfolding of a new horizon of expectation that by a kind of recoil effect transformed the space of experience within which the acquisitions of the past are deposited (Ricouer, p. 210).

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<sup>101</sup> See pages 231-267 for a careful analysis of the emergence and significance of the term *Neuzeit*.



Taken together, these three themes broadly constitute the basis of the Enlightenment philosophy of history, which is not surprising in that the Enlightenment straddles the period in which experience and expectation significantly diverge.

Simplifying radically, because Koselleck is more than aware that historicity is experienced in various mixed forms of temporality<sup>102</sup>, he argues that pre-Enlightenment historical temporality essentially consisted of a contemporaneous reservoir of experiences from which to draw lessons. If, in the *Discourses*, Machiavelli could say that “he who wishes to foretell the future must look into the past, for all things on earth have at all times a similarity with those in the past”,<sup>103</sup> this was because history was primarily conceived of as a collection of examples – in the classical sense of *historia magistra vitae* (Koselleck, 1985, p. 23). This classical sense of history survived in and through the persistence of the Christian notion of the apocalypse or Day of Judgment. Both these notions of temporality set an immovable limit to the horizon of expectation, binding the past to the future in a relatively tight configuration of experience and expectation. In the Christian configuration, all events anticipate the same End, while in the classical view, history itself presents a series of fundamentally common traits to be re-experienced or drawn upon over and over again.<sup>104</sup> Both notions accept the absolute contemporaneity of the past, corresponding neatly to Koselleck’s definition of space of experience.

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<sup>102</sup> For instance, it would be a mistake to oppose cyclical and linear views of history as opposing concepts that correspond to opposing historical periods.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Koselleck, 1985, p. 280

<sup>104</sup> Both these conceptions, taken separately, constitute a ‘future past’.



As long as the horizon of expectation was understood as reversible, repetitive, and recursive in terms of a past that existed in a kind of universal simultaneity, there was little reason for these notions of historical temporality to change. Even the potential opposition of Christian expectations (the end of time) and worldly experience (the end never comes) nevertheless manages to remain in a non-contradictory relation experientially (p. 278). In general, this is because the expectations cultivated in the peasant-artisan world were the only ones that could be cultivated, and changed so slowly and in such a long-term way that those traditions were rarely undermined sufficiently to sustain what appears to us as unsustainable contradictions (p. 276).

### **The Historicity of the Future**

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but keeping in mind that mixed temporalities had opened this possibility well before, the particular relation between past and future is overturned as experience and expectation enter into increasing tension. The effects of 'progress', experienced as the acceleration of history, transformed history from a repository of universal experiences into a process with potentially different futures. If history could be formulated and experienced as unique, then so must the future be unique, in the sense of distinct from the past (281). And now that it was possible to conceive of historical sequences as unique, unrepeatable, and even directional, so was it possible to characterize the past in terms historical periodization – including, of course, the modern and the corresponding opposition of old and new as qualitatively distinct periods ('new time'). And since these sequences are not repeatable, it means that they are



unified in-themselves; that is, they have their own logic and internal principles.

Now, as Koselleck puts it:

Time is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality. Consequently, history no longer occurs in, but through, time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right (p. 246).

The new quality of historical time clearly stems from a new relationship to the future for, after all, it is the changed relation to the future, or the ever-growing distance between experience and expectation, that structures it (Ricouer, p. 210). Thus the awareness of the historical nature of temporality manifests itself as a *historicity of the future* in the modern period. Expanding expectations are clearly tied to emergent notions of progress; meanwhile, the space of experience begins to noticeably shrink in relation to it, because the expectations reaching for the future were detached from what previous experience, tradition and memory had to offer by way of resources (p. 279). With this comes the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous (in opposition to the universal simultaneity of pre-Enlightenment modes of temporality). It is now possible to talk about the divergence of ethical and intellectual development, or the divergence of historical progression (or lags in development). Thus Marx can describe Germany in 1843 as standing in the same position socially as France in 1789, while, as we have seen, Gadamer can characterize Germany as 'pre-revolutionary'.

The temporalization of history in this manner is also an enabling condition for the historiographical discovery of the specific object 'History' as well (Rosen,



p. 108).<sup>105</sup> Prior to historicized modernity, history could not exist when the past always referred to the present as a moral or political lesson, or to the future as a known Event. Now every generation was in a position to consider the past afresh, based on changing relations to the future (281). In this manner, history could be made and re-made by historiography. This was due, in part, to the understanding that if history possessed this dynamic quality, then the active transformation of the world, measured in terms of progress and expectations could be embarked upon (p. 279).

The immediate question that arises from this account of temporality centres on the status of the 'Enlightenment project' as a characterization of modernity. It is relatively easy to agree that the period 1750-1850 saw both a transformation of society and the concepts adduced to understand these changes. But are the concepts of experience and expectation, which Koselleck admits can only be understood as such at the point they begin to diverge, entirely dependent on the historical situation that gave rise to them? From the point of view of deconstruction, for example, the idea of a *new time* could be linked to the illusion of origins, of some pure starting point that then determines all that follows.<sup>106</sup> And even if Koselleck is sensitive to the problem of mixed temporalities, it is legitimate to wonder if an entire epoch can be labeled as both a break and a point of origin (Ricouer, p. 212). In any case, most notably in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, even those working in traditions committed to the future have expressed serious doubts on the problematic of progress. Has the gap

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<sup>105</sup> Rosen's summary of the transition is excellent (2001, p. 104-109).

<sup>106</sup> Thus Frederic Jameson quotes Derrida, 'it is always too late to speak about time', as a reason for not employing Koselleck's framework to discuss modernity. (2002, p. 19).



between experience and expectation grown so distant, that not only has the former shrunk but the latter has withdrawn too – in that the horizon has grown so distant that “we see our dream of a reconciled humanity withdrawing into an ever more distant future and one ever more uncertain of realization” (Ricouer, 212-3)?<sup>107</sup> Huyssen, who creatively enlists Koselleck’s categories to analyze present temporalities, thinks that the temporal boundaries between the past and present have actually weakened, such that even though the space of experience has shrunk, the contemporary focus is on “present pasts rather than the present futures typical of modernity”. Historical consciousness has thus entered into crisis, while memory has emerged as the key cultural and political concern of Western societies. This “shift in the experience and sensibility of time” implies a waning of the importance of the future and the entire problematic of the Enlightenment (Huyssen, 2002, esp. pg. 11). Finally, the idea of unintended consequences has undermined any notion of mastering history, as has the challenge to the status of collective subjects in a position to carry out such a project. The concern, of course, is that Koselleck’s anthropological concepts are historicized like everything else, and will disappear with the social formations that generated them and brought them to light. Koselleck certainly recognizes this:

Again and again, one is faced with the *aporia* that enduring formal criteria are themselves historically conditioned and remain applicable only to phenomena that can be delimited historically. In other words, in the course of research, all metahistorical categories will change into historical statements (2002, p.3).

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<sup>107</sup> For a similar point, see Habermas (1987, p. 12-13).



Taken together these objections are not insubstantial, but Koselleck's effort to define experience and expectation as anthropological constants goes some way to answering them, although in his view this would also require a theory of periodization that remains untheorized (2002, p. 4-5). This would take us down a road we will not travel here. For our purposes, the usefulness of experience and expectation in disclosing a specific historical temporality as a fundamental dimension of historicity is the key. And the test of their usefulness as indicators of the variations affecting the temporalization of history is ultimately to be found in effectively employing them to understand different situations – exactly as both Huyssen (1995; 2002) and Helga Nowotny (1994) have done in defining postmodernism in a temporal frame.

Koselleck, for example, in an extended discussion of the emergence of *Neuzeit* in German constitutional concepts, uses them as a standard to register conceptual changes and the attempt to bridge them politically (1985, 284-286). He also produces an analysis of republicanism that shows it playing a role in political action similar to the role of progress in producing a concept of history (1985, 287-8). And, of course, the long analyses of pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment modes of historical temporality stand as testaments to the usefulness of the concepts.

As Ricouer notes, these concepts are also capable of providing the means to make sense of “the dissolution of the *topos* of progress as one plausible variation of the relationship between these concepts (p. 214)”.<sup>108</sup> Koselleck points

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<sup>108</sup> The work of Andreas Huyssen might be regarded in the light.



in this direction when he attests to the flexibility of these 'concepts of movement', for example, when he acknowledges that the Enlightenment configuration of progress is not the only one to be derived from his analysis, but only the "first" one.

The concept of acceleration involves a category of historical cognition which is likely to supersede the idea of progress conceived simply in terms of an optimization [improvement, *perfectionnement*] (1985, p. 284).

This demonstrates Koselleck's intention of developing a 'proper concept of history' that can take account of this 'flexibility'. Hayden White usefully clarifies the notion of a concept of history as one which will specify the common content of all those ideas of history (including both subject matter and forms of historical writing) that inform historians (which vary from historian to historian or philosopher of history).

A concept of history will identify the shared contents of all the ideas of history that have contributed to the definition of a distinctively historical way of knowing reality as history (in Koselleck, 2002, p. xii)

At this stage, like Habermas' idea of modernity, this remains 'an incomplete project', but Koselleck's substantial efforts in this direction need to be analyzed more carefully.

Ricouer, for his part, thinks that the universal ambition of the metahistorical categories of experience and expectation must finally be assured by their ethical and political implications. He too agrees that modernity remains



an “incomplete project”, but he emphasizes that Koselleck’s description is also a prescription.

If, therefore, we admit that there is no history that is not constituted through the experiences and expectations of active and suffering human beings, or that our two categories taken together thematize historical time, we then imply that the tension between the horizon of expectation and the space of experience has to be preserved if there is to be any history at all (215).

If Ricouer thinks the political and ethical task that arises from Koselleck’s analysis is to prevent the schism between experience and expectation from becoming too wide, it is because he sees the expectation of progress giving way to utopian demands without any anchorage in experience. “Our expectations must be determined, hence finite and relatively modest, if they are to be able to give rise to responsible commitments” (p. 215). In this view, Ricouer draws closer to Gadamer’s concerns, specifically the desire to bind tradition and history together. Huyssen, of course, has voiced an almost opposite anxiety – the decline of utopian thinking and the replacement of the hypertrophy of history, which inspired Nietzsche to urge creative forgetting, with the hypertrophy of memory (2002, p.2-3). Nietzsche might respond to this by recommending creative remembering – in this case, of the future.<sup>109</sup>

Habermas also draws a political lesson from Koselleck, based on the perspective that the latter tends to overlook the extent to which progressive expectations serve “...to close off the future as a source of disruption with the aid of teleological constructions of history” (1987, p. 12). He takes this lesson from



Walter Benjamin's attack on both historicism and the social-evolutionary version of historical materialism in his *Theses on History* (1971). Oddly enough, when progressive expectations become the historical norm in the form of the appearance of evolutionary inevitability, the quality of novelty is actually eliminated from the present's relationship to future. Indeed, it might be said, that from the point of view of progress becoming an evolutionary norm, the horizon of expectation begins to take on the quality of tradition, and falls back into the space of experience – which partly accounts for the phenomena Huyssen identifies. For Habermas "... modern time-consciousness has repeatedly slackened" under this pressure, and therefore "...its vitality has had to be constantly renewed by radical historical thinking... (p. 13)." Here Habermas is thinking of works by Nietzsche, like the *Untimely Meditations*, or works by Marx and the Young Hegelians, Yorck von Warthenberg, Heidegger, and, of course, Benjamin himself.

Habermas uses Koselleck to illumine Benjamin's radical historical thought in an interesting way. He says Benjamin effects a "*drastic reversal* of horizon of expectation and space of experience".

To all past epochs he ascribes a horizon of unfulfilled expectations<sup>110</sup> and to the future-oriented present he assigns the task of experiencing a corresponding past through remembering, in such a way that we can fulfill its expectations with our weak messianic power. In accordance with this reversal, two ideas can be interwoven: the conviction that the continuity of the context of tradition can be established by barbarism as well as culture, and the idea that each respective present generation bears the responsibility

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<sup>109</sup> This seems to be Huyssen's view (2003, p. 29)

<sup>110</sup> Presumably these could be understood as 'futures past'. [My note].



not only for the fate of future generations but also for the innocently suffered fate of past generations (Habermas, 1987, p. 14).

This radicalizes the political responsibilities of the present, for now both past and future generations have claims to be answered. The idea of reconciliation through remembering, because the injustices of the past cannot be undone, now surfaces as a political concern for modern time-consciousness.<sup>111</sup>

Koselleck himself seems content to only draw conclusions about the foundation of historical science and set tasks for it. He mostly eschews discussion of the political and ethical commitments of his contribution (see 1985, p. 287-288). In his view, historical science needs to be furthered by developing a sense of the structural underpinnings of the 'space of experience'. Because the latter are repeatable, and presumably accumulated, there must be long-term formal structures that allow for the amassing of experience. A better notion of these structures needs to be developed if historical experience is to be transformed into historical science.

History is only able to recognize what continually changes, and what is new, if it has access to the conventions within which lasting structures are concealed (288).

It might be possible to detect a position closer to Gadamer or Ricoeur than to Habermas or Benjamin in this statement, at least insofar as traditions might certainly constitute elements of these 'lasting structures'.

On the other hand, his thinking here is distinguished from either Gadamer or Heidegger by his orientation to structures that transcend subjectivity

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<sup>111</sup> In many respects, this is the thrust of Huyssen's argument for "productive remembering" (2002, Ch.1)



(Koselleck, 2002, p. 2). One thinks, for example, of variations on Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*. In any case, according to Hayden White, the key point here is found in his concern to isolate a proper concept of history – that is, a model of relationships that allows us to distinguish “between a properly historical account of reality and a nonhistorical or ahistorical or antihistorical account thereof (in Koselleck, 2002, p. xii)”. The notions of space of experience and horizons of expectation comprise an essential element of such a model. Above all, from our point of view, it constitutes an essential element, perhaps *the* essential element, in what we have heretofore labeled historical consciousness or historicity. Inevitably, *Vancouver in the 50's* should embody Koselleck's insight “that the more a particular time is experienced as a new temporality, as modernity (*Neuzeit*), the more demands on the future increase”. In the museum, I would add, this means “special attention” must be “devoted to a given present and its coexisting since superseded, future (White, in Koselleck, 2002, p. xxiv)”.



## Chapter 4

### The Historicity of the Future in the Museum

One hundred years on, museums *in* cities are now more often than not museums *about* cities. They have moved from places where the city is reflected, through its accumulated wealth and the gifts of the powerful, to places where the city is explored through the memories, materials and images of a range of its citizens (Kavanagh, p. x).

This is a good description of changes taking place at the *Vancouver Museum*, which is currently organizing its exhibits *about* the modern city around the theme of 'Vancouver Stories.' Even though the Vancouver Museum does not possess the legacy of a wealthy elite found in the museums of large European cities, parts of the older exhibits – notably the Edwardian display of rooms and furnishings – certainly reflect the gifts and influence of then powerful. This display has been re-titled, as have the rest of the older history exhibits which were developed between 1972 and 1983. In turn, they are: *Vancouver Stories 1742-1865*, *1865-1898*, and *1898-1914*, reflecting the changes that are planned for them. The new *50's Gallery*, which most faithfully reflects this thematic, will soon be followed by *Vancouver Stories 1960-1980* and *1980-2000*. As the most recent



exhibit, the *50's Gallery*, which is deftly supplemented by the interactive and portable stations that fill *The Joyce Walley Learning Centre*, is apparently setting the standard for what will follow. In this chapter, I first want to review some of the questions that arose for me in my dual experience of the exhibit as memory and history during my first two visits. Subsequently, I want to re-assess these experiences in terms of the notions of historicity and historical consciousness that developed from my journey through the landscapes of museology and historical theory.

### **Memory and the Problem of Reification**

As the first in a new generation of galleries in the museum dedicated to the history of Vancouver, it so happened that this exhibition is the first reconstruction of a historical period that still resides in living memory.<sup>112</sup> It is no doubt fair to say that the closer one is to the past on display, the greater the potential memory-effect it possesses for the visitor. My experience during my first visit to the exhibit certainly reflects the power of memory-effects based in living memory. This is particularly true of the decades straddling the nineteen-fifties, which has been reconstructed for modern memory in every dimension of popular media from that same point in time onwards. For every person that possesses actual memories of the fifties, there are as many and likely more that possess secondary memories which are no less vivid for being subsequently constructed by media. Indeed, for many whose youth was informed by these decades, the two are nearly indistinguishable because during the postwar period mass media takes a

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<sup>112</sup> See the curator's discussion of this (Seidl 2001).



qualitative leap into every dimension of popular culture – and the exhibition reflects this. By the mid-sixties, the decade of the fifties was already taking mythical shape through the music and styles that were taken to symbolize it. It is also a decade in which modernization is truly experienced as an event constructing a world that is identifiably *ours*, so that even those who did not live through it in actual time nevertheless live through it in its immediate effects.<sup>113</sup>

These reflections provoke a question: what is experienced in an exhibition of this type? Is there what we might call a 'historicity effect,' or is it best described as a memory effect, or is it some hybrid experience with infinite variations? And is there a likelihood of one dominating the other? In the first chapter, the notion of *lieux de mémoire* helped us appreciate what is at stake in the museum with respect to these questions without providing a final, satisfactory understanding. Indeed, this is what set us on this journey.

Recall that at the level of definition, as Sherman points out, there is a tendency to understand *lieux de mémoire* in terms of materially existing and monumental sites, whereas Nora's usage is actually much broader.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, the concept includes "...any signifying entity, of a material or ideal kind, which has through human will or the work of time become a symbolic element of the memorial patrimony of a given community".<sup>115</sup> Nora therefore classifies these sites very widely to include both the abstract and the symbolic, but if we nevertheless think of some of their most obvious and typical manifestations – statues, monuments, and the like – we arrive at the image of a memory erected

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<sup>113</sup> See the extremely suggestive work by Kristin Ross (1995) on this period in France.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999. p. 3



into a thing taken out of the time of history. The meaning of this thing-image will change over time as it takes on new significations, or as it rediscovers old ones,<sup>116</sup> but it's thing-like, hypostasized, and totalized character remains. In Nora's words, cited earlier, the intention of the memory-site is 'to pluck' something out of the 'flow of history', leaving it in a state neither quite dead nor alive – like seashells on the shore. In short, a memory-site can be construed as a reification of history. That is to say, as a complex social reality that takes on the comforting form of a thing, relatively free of the contingency that would characterize it as part of the flow of history. As in the infamous commodity fetish, social relations take on the phantasmagoric form of a thing, a form that lends itself to the construction of more abstract and symbolic elements imagined as communities, narratives and identities capable of resisting the corrosive impact of historical understanding.<sup>117</sup>

If we recall Jordanova's description of the viewer's appropriation of knowledge from museum exhibits, the notion of the memory-site as reified form and the problematic of museum display as the reification of experience both echo and mutually support each other. She said:

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<sup>115</sup> Nora, see Sherman p. 334 note 15, volume 3 of Nora

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Agulhon's monograph tracing the history of the image of *Marianne* in France, a book that inaugurated the modern discussion of memory in France. Koselleck's essay on "War Memorials: Identity Formation of the Survivors" suggests that the forms and sensibilities of memorials, while subject to historical transformation, seem to change along different temporal rhythms (2003, p. 324).

<sup>117</sup> Breaking through these phantasmagorias is never easy. Gerhard Rempel recounts the controversy over who could claim victim status in the *Neue Wache* (New Guardhouse) Memorial in Berlin, which inevitably turned on the nature of the community both remembering and remembered. In Rempel's account, it was Koselleck who argued "...that Helmut Kohl's proposal treated the Third Reich as an outside force that left victims in its wake: 'Are war and tyranny a kind of traffic accident, then? No one wanted it? Everyone is a victim?' As an alternative to the undifferentiated recognition of all victims, Koselleck proposed a different dedication... 'To the Dead: Fallen, Murdered, Gassed, Died, Missing.' This dedication would honor the equality of all in death without putting the dead in the service of a national cause. Many intellectuals praised this compromise, but Koselleck's...morbid version of German history held no appeal for Helmut



In order to gain knowledge from museums, viewers, whether they are aware of it or not, *both* reify the objects they examine, treating them as decontextualised commodities, *and* identify with them, allowing them to generate memories, associations, fantasies... (*her emphasis*, Jordanova, p. 25).

The reification implicit in the memory-site finds support in the gift of associations born of objects viewed as fetish-objects. Thus one way to answer whether or not this exhibit is a *potential* memory-site is to ask whether it has this thing-like quality and how it becomes manifest.<sup>118</sup>

Two linked elements lend themselves to this process: the felt obligation of the museum to nurture memory in the community, and the tendency to construct harmonized images and narratives of the community when conflicts between memory and history arise. This particular exhibition, like so many others, is composed of a variety of memory-objects, photos, written memories, voiced recollections and the like, many of which have been donated by members of the community. As a collection of these memories, the museum has an obligation to respect these donations and "nurture memory" in the construction of the exhibit. However, this obligation is also an initial source of potential tension between memory and history. It arises from the fact that the making of such an exhibit is an historical construction and thematic construal of these treasured items, at the very least involving the selection of items to include or to leave out. Of course this process of selection is as inevitable for the public as for historians and curators,

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Kohl. (Taken from Professor Gerhard Rempel's website:  
<http://mars.acnet.wnec.edu/~grempel/courses/berlin/lectures/34CapitalofNewGermany.html>).

<sup>118</sup> Although I have already argued that the exhibit is a memory-site, there is an element of popular acceptance that necessitates qualifying this exhibit as a potential memory-site only.



for what the latter two must do professionally the former will do 'spontaneously'. But more fundamentally, the placement, textual commentary, and historical research that will contextualize these objects can challenge the integrity of individual memory from any of the points of view of a very differentiated public with a stake in the remembered past. It is in this sense that, as Benedict Anderson argues, the construction of imagined communities requires selective forgetting of the process of construction and contextualization by that community (p. 205). To sustain the integrity of memory and to hold back the corrosive nature of historicization, this process of selective forgetting is forgotten or underplayed in the interests of shaping a collective, imagined memory that takes on the characteristic of a completed totality.

As I suggested in the first chapter, the exhibit is informed by a fairly sophisticated historical argument that runs counter to its reifying potential. It is composed of discrete tableau linked by the illusion of the street. Each element is careful to present scenes that should inspire memories of the recent past, including elements that retain a purchase on the present. Each of these memories, however, is subject to a degree of historicizing argument, placing them in an interpretative framework that often owes a great deal to contemporary concerns about present-day urban life, racism, class relations and the impact of mass media. As such, the exhibit tries to resist the materialization of *Vancouver in the 50's* into a static image of the community as 'it' would perhaps like to be remembered – in particular, as we will see, by exploiting the connections between *futures past* and *futures present* (or, to put this more clearly, between horizons of expectation in the past and present respectively). However, if there is a



contrasting quality to the critical, historical understanding that informs the exhibit, one that captures both the formal and experiential dimensions of reification, that quality is best located in the notion of 'style'.

There is a *fifties' style* that reverberates for us all. To counter its effects, the exhibit makes a noble effort to display many of the sources that spur this recognition while constantly historicizing them. The trick, as the curator says, "...is to dispel the increasingly inevitable aura of the antique stores. We struggle to present the objects as anchored to real lives in the past". She adds, "...the exhibit lets some of its raw materials show, so that the visitor can sense how the ideas [that shaped the exhibit] emerged" (Seidl, 2002). These are excellent strategies, but they are perhaps less successful in addressing such a highly mediated and recent environment as the fifties because many of the elements that constitute this style must nevertheless be included as legitimate objects of display. These elements can take on a life of their own because of the way media has subsequently mobilized them for the culture as a whole.

This is a prime example of the way in which, as the media and cultural critic Andreas Huyssen argues, information networks that function synchronically provide images and narratives that are non-synchronous. In other words, images and sounds on television, on radio and in movies make this past a permanent feature of the present. For him, this characteristic of postmodernity "...threatens to make categories like past and future, experience and expectation, memory and anticipation themselves obsolete".<sup>119</sup> Indeed, for him this is nothing less than the historical explanation for the crisis of temporality that has lead to



“the waning of historical consciousness” (1995, p. 9). One thinks of Koselleck’s image of the washing machine as a metaphor for the space of experience. As more and more detritus from the past whirl in front of the window face, the less our eye is turned to the future.

From this perspective, the struggle of the museum with the decline of historical consciousness, which manifests itself in problems of reification and the effacing of past/future distinctions, becomes part of the larger battle over both the relations of the modern and the postmodern and the different temporalities each of them represents. Put another way, in the period of modernity the museum was accused of promoting the historicity of death over the historicity of life.<sup>120</sup> Although not all postmodernists would choose to phrase it this way, in the postmodern period the museum is now charged by some with the task of resisting the historicity of death with the historicity of life.<sup>121</sup> In this instance, the target of resistance might well fall on the problem of style. One of the first obstacles to understanding the highly mediated decades of the fifties and sixties is finding a way through the barrier of images we carry with us. A good example is found in Kristin Ross’s work on the fifties in France, where she pulls out numerous theoretical guns to demonstrate how the problematic of decolonization shapes and is shaped by consumerism and Americanism (1995).

A fifties style can be identified in any number of ways that are too familiar to us all, but in every sense it is a manifestation of that burst of modern consumerism after World War II that the exhibition tries to capture in images of

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<sup>119</sup> Note his use of Koselleck’s vocabulary.

<sup>120</sup> See Chapter two above.

<sup>121</sup> Huyssen (1995), Crimp (1993), and Witcomb (2003) fall into this camp – albeit, in different ways.



futures past – for instance, as in the car tableau that is centred on dreams of luxurious mobility and freedom, and the prosaic reality. Inevitably, however, the focus tends to fall on the actual images themselves: on the neon, the dress, the advertisements, the jukebox, the gadgets, black and white television, and all the rest as embodiments of images brought by visitors to the exhibit in perceptions already mediated and formed by style. These elements were but one part of the lived historicity of the fifties, but they are also the elements that are subsequently remembered through a screen of images and representations, and it is on them that memories and nostalgia tend to fix.

Of course, these images and representations are signposts of horizons of expectation in the past (futures past) that the exhibition must try to picture. But ironically, capturing the corrosive effect of these new horizons of expectation in the medium of style entails rendering the dream in its own language, perhaps allowing the dream to corrode in turn the critical and historical eye that shaped and selected it as significant historically. Although this dream, like all dreams, carries its own slips, swerves, and symptoms to be decoded, there is no guarantee that the necessary act of analysis will take place, even if there is text and juxtaposition promoting just this intent. We are *Far From Heaven* <sup>122</sup> indeed, but perhaps it is still our heaven – a potentially nostalgic and idealized image of the past making a claim on the future to continue in smooth continuity.

On the one hand nostalgic, on the other an image of the first taste of consumer freedom, the exhibition runs the risk of emotionally validating a

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<sup>122</sup> I'm referring to Todd Haynes' excellent movie, *Far From Heaven*, which tosses irony out the window in an effort to show that the fifties are still with us.



relatively unproblematic and linear progress of a city that is mirrored back to the visitor by the outstanding view from the exhibit of the prosperous city outside and the preceding galleries of relatively primitive stages behind. Here again, the exhibition is caught on the cusp of the modern and the postmodern. The traditional linearity of museums organized as time-lines only promotes this illusion, and proves that the toothpaste tube effect is deep and pernicious. The very notion of memory-sites arises in a critical, historical appreciation of the building of the nation-state, so it is no surprise that the idea of a city-state carries a similar will to legitimate a contingent historical path as a necessary one via memory-sites of their own. Moreover, the dimension of futurity begins to fade from historical consciousness, to be replaced by an extended present of ever repeated horizons of expectation (Nowotny, 1994). It is at this point that Habermas would call for a renewal of radical historical thinking to stimulate the renewal of futurity in consciousness (1987).

Naturally, the curator is not unaware of this problem. Referring in particular to the contextualizing text which is found with each set piece, and which they have chosen to render in period-appropriate colours and angles redolent of the fifties, she indicated that plain, minimalist text would have been preferable.<sup>123</sup> However, other considerations intervened; for example, both the problems of 'nurturing memory' for the community, mentioned above, and the necessity of drawing paying visitors to the exhibition entered into the decision. Of course this is to acknowledge that there exists certain expectations of style and content that the public will want to see realized. The fear, of course, is that the



typical visitor will attach symbolic meaning to the style and to the discrete memories inspired by both the exhibit as an enclosed whole and the individual objects that comprise it, while simultaneously overlooking the historical argument that informs them.<sup>124</sup> Arguably, it is the connection of this representation of the fifties to an identifiable style that might well turn the exhibition into a successful memory-site, a discrete moment plucked from the flow of history, either representing a nostalgic Vancouver lost in a kind of local variant of 'Happy Days' or an emergent and proud Vancouver, progressively overcoming the barriers of class, race, and gender on the road to prosperity. Although both responses are explicitly qualified by the exhibit's self-understanding, neither response would be surprising.

In the year the exhibition has been open, visitor comments in the guest books suggest that the reifying memory-effect behind this dream of untroubled modernity indeed predominate.<sup>125</sup> Of the many comments, I only found one that addressed the interpretative side of the exhibit. This individual picked out the critical elements that question such issues as land claims, environment, and public transit, and suggested the past was best forgotten in the name of a better future.<sup>126</sup>

With this exception, it might be argued that any potential lack of critical reflection on the part of visitors is simply a function of the way most of the tableaux are arranged. The critical and contextual element is strategically

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<sup>123</sup> In a personal communication.

<sup>124</sup> Much like I did the first time through. To be fair, it was pretty crowded!

<sup>125</sup> Of course, without a proper survey this is mildly suggestive at best.

<sup>126</sup> Unsigned said: "What is in the past is in the past...Let's build a more positive future. Its time to forget the wrongs and focus on future rights."



underplayed, almost in the manner of footnotes to each of the scenes – which, because the display must take precedence, is nevertheless the only choice in my view. In fact, the exhibition opts for complex layering strategy of messages that situate the objects on display. Each interpretative panel boasts a headline and one-sentence summary. Eyewitness testimony is found in brief quotations. A few interpretative paragraphs, photos and captions often follow this. There is even a ‘sidebar’ comment suggesting another way of looking at the scene (Seidl, 2002). For example, the slick Ford at the centre of the exhibit foregrounds the consumer dream while the interpretative context quietly lurks in the background pictures and text (see below for a more detailed description). Nevertheless, the point is that from the immediate point of view of the visitor, and with the notable exception of the modest *Fraserview* living room, the mundanity of the fifties, the backdrop of dreams, rarely pushes itself to the fore. Instead, the manifest content of the dream bubbles over into consciousness. Looked at from the point of view of the separation of form and content, the form of the exhibition risks undermining its critical content, precisely because the form becomes the content as the content is unconsciously absorbed into the form.

### **Limits of Reification**

Certainly every contemporary cultural medium embraces a well-established appetite for the simulation of experience, an appetite that is often shaped by the logic of style as a substitute or cover for substance. This contrast between form and content drawn above is a variation on the contrast between the historicity of life and of death that characterized the critical debate around the



museum in Chapter Two. In both instances, musealization is understood as running contrary to historicity. And there is little doubt that the inevitable tension stemming from this contradiction between musealization and historicity leads to a paradox: once in the museum, which is an institution dedicated to preserving history, the historical object risks assuming a virtually ahistorical character. From this perspective, the conflict between form and content, style and substance, is just another dimension of the 'caesura' described by Maleuvre.

It might well be the case, as we have seen, that every act of historical representation will fall victim to this logic of the caesura – such that even the historical monograph takes on a paradoxically ahistorical quality by attempting a totalized interpretation of events (Rosen, Ch. 3). The museum often heightens this paradoxical experience because it presents special difficulties, as Jordanova's analysis made clear. However, the likelihood that these paradoxes are finally irresolvable in this culture and that they faithfully reflect Adorno's "world out of joint," does not mean that museum practices must simply resign to the inevitable when faced with them. The point about reification, which arises from a world out of joint, is that there might be a tendency for historical objects to take on the characteristics of thing; but they do not actually become things-in-themselves as a result. Critical practice is still capable of disclosing the causes of their paradoxical appearance as things, which in some traditions would be a defining characteristic of historical consciousness.<sup>127</sup> In effect, they still carry within them an element of negation and freedom (or surplus of meaning, says Huyssen)<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Of course, I'm thinking of the Marxist tradition and related offshoots. See Balibar (1995).

<sup>128</sup> See below.



that differentiates them from the thinglike (both as determined object and illusory appearance).

Therefore, as might be expected, museum professionals have responded to this challenge in all sorts of ways – from interactivity strategies to community involvement, from designing displays around local issues to mobilizing new media.<sup>129</sup> For this reason alone, a negative prognosis of the visitor experience of historicity on the basis of these paradoxes and problems would be presumptuous, if only because these concerns have not been suppressed in either the design or the realization of modern exhibits, and because their designers have taken advantage of the many display options available to them. In our example, it might be said that the acceleration of history has permitted the designation of the 1950's in Vancouver as a memory to be recovered, and *the intention to remember* embodied in the exhibition includes a reconstruction of the stakes implicit in the progress of a city-state (Barman, 2002). In this sense, it provides an anchor in time from which visitors can assess the direction of the city, reconsider lost options (public transport, housing), and even the content of their own dreams. Moreover, it is worth noting that there is a kind of utopian content implicit in the sentiment of nostalgia and even in the idea of linear progress, a sense that things were different in the past and therefore can be different in the future.

Andreas Huyssen, for one, infers an interpretation of this sort from his exploration of museum practices and memory discourse on the divide between modernism and postmodernism (1995; 2003). As such, the changing

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<sup>129</sup> See Andrea Witcomb for a sustained look at the alternatives museums can exploit in opposition to the criticisms of cultural critics and philosophers (2003).



relationships that constitute this divide are, in his analysis, a historical problem that forces museums to the forefront of understanding, not in spite of their limitations but because of them (1995; 2003). Huyssen notes that the museum has been subject to cultural criticism of the type found in Chapter Two at least since the *avant-garde* attacks launched in the last century. In fact, as we have seen, it is as old as the *modern* museum itself. From his point of view, it is time to put this critique, with its “surprisingly homogenous” attack on the museum as ossified, reified, mummified, and culturally hegemonic, in the museum too (1995, p. 18). In opposition to the prevailing view, he argues that the *avant-garde* project to re-unite art and life which was at the heart of their critique of the museum and the ‘institution of art’ in general,<sup>130</sup> has spilled over into the museum, inspiring it to democratize itself in terms of accessibility; bringing it closer to the practices of a mass medium, and metaphorically ‘bringing down its walls’ (1995, p. 20).

Moreover, without denying the substance of much of the museum as mausoleum critique, it is nevertheless the case that there is always a “surplus of meaning” that overflows any cultural hegemonic functions the museum that can be developed (1995, p. 12; Witcomb, 2003). He goes so far as to suggest that in the contemporary period the museum is beginning to function less as a mausoleum and more as “our own *memento mori*”. This means that in opposition to the destructive denial of death implied by mummification, this therapeutic reminder of our finite temporality turns out to be “life-enhancing”. This productive relation to finitude makes the museum a potential “site and testing

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<sup>130</sup> Here he follows Peter Burger’s influential thesis (1984).



ground for reflections on temporality and subjectivity, identity and alterity” (1995, p. 16). By embracing the age of spectacle the museum is now in a position to try to overcome both its congenital elitism and its inclination to national encouragement based on a completed past of or nostalgic sentiment. For Huyssen, these changes and the renewal of interest in the museum reflect a new conjuncture.

My hypothesis would be that in the age of the postmodern the museum has not simply been restored to a position of traditional cultural authority, as some critics would have it, but that it is currently undergoing a process of transformation that may signal...the end of the traditional museum/modernity dialectic (1995, p. 21).

In this view, it is the crisis of modernism and the consequent decline of the so-called master narratives that creates the potential for the cessation of modernist museum practices and the critique that has accompanied it from the beginning.

Maria Grever suggests that this is actually one of the outcomes of modernism when she says “the social acceleration process has led to fragmented and differentiated images of the past. At present it is impossible to design a unifying concept of history for the masses” (2002, p. 3). Huyssen thinks that this is what needs to be understood and theorized: the potential for the museum to offer multiple narratives as means of answering the need of people undergoing this crisis to see and hear other stories in a time “...when identities are shaped in multiply layered and never-ceasing negotiations between self and other, rather than being fixed and taken for granted in the framework of family and faith, race



and nation” (1995, p. 34). This could certainly stand as a strong statement of the Vancouver Museum’s practice.

In this interpretation, the exploration of multiple narratives and the very materiality of objects of the past lend an authenticity and aura to the museum experience that is not entirely subsumed by simulation. Indeed, in Huyssen’s view, it is the very excess of simulation and the decay of lived memory that creates the need for an anchor in time that the museum might help fulfill. This understanding was always implicit in Nora’s analysis of memory, even though Huyssen distances himself from the misplaced nostalgia he too identifies at work there.<sup>131</sup> For Huyssen, the interest in memory and the museum is a sure sign that this anchoring need is alive in the culture. As such, it must be taken seriously in “productive ways” that avoid the temptations of both nostalgia and blockbuster entertainment (Huyssen, 1995, p. 24). Witcomb has developed this argument in interesting ways by arguing that the museum has never been entirely divorced from the impulses of popular culture, and that individual museum practices suggest all sorts of alternatives that are overlooked when the focus falls on the museum understood as a generalized discursive object (2002, p. 168-9).

In effect, what Huyssen has done is to short circuit the critique of the museum as the ossification of temporality by separating the dynamic of the museum from its problematic relationship to modernity. This means that postmodernity becomes the site of new possibilities for political progress by democratizing the museum, particularly in a global rather than national context.

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<sup>131</sup> In an essay on *El Parque de la Memoria* in Buenos Aires, Huyssen employs Nora’s concept while stripping it of its roots in national memory. (2003, esp. p. 97) By placing the concept in the ‘expanded



What critics consider a revival of commodity fetishism enabled by an age of populist mass media, he considers to be a fetish that transcends exchange value and the resultant amnesia effect of commodity fetishism; instead, it carries “an anamnestic dimension, a kind of memory value” (1995, p. 33). However, it is not clear from his account how this memory value avoids the mechanisms of exchange and its fetishistic effects – for example, in the dynamic of style displayed in the *50's Gallery*. In the museum shop, for example, one can buy books, postcards and newly manufactured memory-objects that scream nostalgia.

Regardless, it seems that for him the very materiality of the objects on display lends a “temporal aura” to museum exhibits that other mediums, such as television, cannot simulate or duplicate even while they create a felt need for such an experience (Witcomb, p. 127). So for Huyssen, the postmodern museum is not just another simulation apparatus because the very materiality of the authentic object, even when wrapped up in spectacle, ‘revokes Weberian disenchantment’ and ‘reclaims a sense of the past’ (1995, p. 33-4). Rather than offer consolation for the pace of historical change, the museum as a field of memories and auratic objects provides the possibility of an authentic experience that simulation promises but cannot deliver.

In spite of his penchant for overstatement about nearly every aspect of the crisis of modernity, from the ‘incredible’ popularity of the museum as a mass medium to his picture of a culture ‘terminally ill’ with amnesia, this is a very persuasive and attractive reading of the current situation. However, it is not clear

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field’ of globalization and international rights discourse, he argues that it is potentially forward looking rather than backward looking from the point of view of public sphere debate.



how this fetish of the authentic material object as memory-value is all that distinct from the nostalgic sentiment he criticizes in Nora.<sup>132</sup> Certainly the material object seems to play the same kind of role in his analysis as Nora's *milieu de mémoire* plays – as a kind of measuring point of authenticity for a period when history has overwhelmed memory, creating in turn a need for an anchor in time. Memory

...represents the attempt to slow down information processing, to resist the dissolution of time in the synchronicity of the archive, to recover a mode of contemplation outside the universe of simulation and fast-speed information and cable networks, to claim some anchoring space in a world of puzzling and often threatening heterogeneity, non-synchronicity, and information overload (1995, p. 7).

Without valorizing an authentic form of memory to register its subsequent loss to historical consciousness, he nevertheless rescues memory as a form of resistance to the present by describing it as a brake or an anchor defined in opposition to a horizon of expectation that continues to shape the historical future. In this way it takes on an authenticity or aura of its own.

Politically, Huyssen seems to be recommending a strategy of temporal anchoring in a period when “territorial and spatial coordinates” are blurred by increasing global mobility (1995, p. 7). This strategy reflects “a potentially healthy sign of contestation: a contestation of the informational hyperspace and an expression of the basic human need to live in extended structures of temporality, however they may be organized” (1995, p. 9). Of course this relies on a putative

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<sup>132</sup> This is not to imply that his reading is ultimately a conservative one – quite the contrary. This is a radical and progressive statement of hopes for the museum.



need that may or may not be, in his words, 'basic'. It also rests on an analysis of informational hyperspace as a globally hegemonic force that has the potential to seal off once and for all "the very forgetting of memory itself". In a round about way, is this not reminiscent of Nora's destruction of collective memory by historical consciousness, equally reliant on a dualistic contrast between memory and history (need and artifice)? The only difference in this case is that historical consciousness seems to take the spatialized form of globalized information and simulacrum 'all the way down'.

Even if this digression appears to bring us back to our starting point in Nora, it is worth noting that Huyssen actually arrives there by quite different means. When he characterizes the crisis of modernity as a reorganization of the temporal structures within which we live our lives in technologically advanced societies, he is thinking of the changing framework of the "tripartite structure of past, present, and future" established by Koselleck (Huyssen, 1995, p. 8). Specifically, his analysis of postmodernity and memory is predicated on a particular understanding of alterations in the relations of the space of experience and the horizon of expectation. If the pre-modern is characterized by a static, spatial sense of the future as the time of the *Last Judgment*, and the modern by a radically temporalized future thematized in notions of progress and perfectibility, then the postmodern is that period in which the utopic nature of progress is radically questioned and the horizons of expectation are unclear, disquieting, and folding back in on themselves. In the pre-modern era, there is but an imperceptible gap between expectations and experience, whereas an increasing



distance between the two characterizes the modern period. What then is the nature of the tension that defines the so-called postmodern?

For Huyssen, it appears to be a period of hybridity. The future accelerates apace, creating information networks “that function according to principles of synchronicity”. But these same networks provide images and narratives of the non-synchronous, of that which does not exist in the present – other cultures, other experiences, and other narratives. Temporality develops a hybrid structure in which “the future seems to fold itself back into the past”. He points to emergent repetitions of old conflicts, including the rise of religious fundamentalism and ‘ancient ethnic feuds’, as well as to the postcolonial interpenetration of first and third worlds. Meanwhile, paradoxically, the horizons of expectation are still significantly shaped by fantasies of progress through technology while, as noted above, “the organization of the high-tech world threatens to make categories like past and future, experience and expectation, memory and anticipation themselves obsolete” (p. 9)

Mark Poster, another media critic who deploys Koselleck’s framework to describe these new resolutions of temporality, has made this point more clearly. While technical innovations continue to orient experience toward the future, the full context of electronic communications has created a temporal pattern in which, as he puts it, *the future is now*.<sup>133</sup>

The present comes to be infused with the future, and the tense that best expresses the modern individual’s historical sense is the future perfect, the future that has already been since it is embedded in the present. The distance between experience and expectation has



collapsed as the present implodes into the future. One has a sense not that the future is imminent, a horizon that enables one to look both forward and backward, but that it has already happened. The linearity of modernity was sustained by the gap between past and future, a tension that gave the modern the sense of being propelled directionally, of forging ahead. In postmodern temporality, non-linear and simultaneous, the future is here. In postmodernity, technical innovations do not serve to distance one from the past but to thicken an already subsisting technical world (1997, p. 68).

As we have seen, Habermas has addressed the crisis of historicity in a different if related manner, but he chooses to characterize it as an aspect of incomplete modernity rather than developing postmodernity. In his view, when progressive expectations become the historical norm then the quality of the new disappears from the present's relationship to future. In this way, horizons of expectation *appear* as if they are getting closer to the space of experience, which calls for repeated renewals of radical historical thinking to restore the distance.

For the most part, he does not focus on the problem of electronic communications and informational hyperspace as creating fundamentally new patterns of temporality, although he does develop a more general notion of communicative action that responds to this problem somewhat. In the spirit of critical theory, these phenomena appear rather as elements of ideology (1987, p. 12). So when Huyssen and Poster use phrases such as "the future is now" or suggest that the distinction between experience and expectation is collapsing, they are arguing that this is more than just an 'appearance' and those temporal patterns are fundamentally changing. In either case, all three theorists are calling

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<sup>133</sup> Nowotny puts this more critically when she says the future present is really just an 'extended present'.



for a renewal of radical historical thinking because they detect something like a crisis of historical temporality in the present. Finally, however it is conceived, Habermas, Huyssen, Ricouer, and Gadamer all detect a threat to modern historicity in the present. Returning now to a small exhibition in one corner of North America, the question arises: how is this museum exhibition responding to this crisis of temporality in its efforts to historicize the fifties.

### **Futures Past and Present**

In Koselleck's terminology, these thinkers are talking about the *future present*. The discussion about the nature of 'our' future present, which for many is a debate about the relationship of the modern to the postmodern, has the advantage of underlining the contingent nature of historicity – the idea that historicity is itself historical. Put another way, the experience of time is historical because it gains an historical quality through various determinations that are themselves historical – the increasing gap (or closing gap, or a turning in on itself, or an extension without difference – depending on the theorist ) between experience and expectation in the context of accelerating history. With this comes the understanding that historicity, the historical quality of temporality, arises in contingent circumstances and might well dissipate or undergo significant modifications in the future – in spite of any claims for the ontological status of historicity.<sup>134</sup> One might say that like 'man', history and modernity have left footprints in the sand that are now being washed away by the tide (except Habermas, for one, who still thinks modernity is walking forward 'on the beach').

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<sup>134</sup> See Adorno's critique of Heidegger.



On the basis of a contingent historicity reshaped by postmodernity, Huyssen argues that the revival of interest in the museum and the resurgence in interest in memory discourses is a corollary of the contemporary crisis of historical temporality. For him, these are signs that the impulses of modernist culture are increasingly energized by *present pasts* rather than by *present futures* (Huyssen, 2003, p. 11).<sup>135</sup> What Huyssen calls a 'present past' is basically the same as Koselleck's space of experience as it exists in the contemporary present. Recalling Koselleck's washing machine analogy to describe the latter, the present past is an active reworking of experience that is revealed in the machine window as it cycles through. In this sense, Huyssen's work seems to be an exploration of the space of experience that attempts to understand efforts in the present to revive and redeem the injustices and unfulfilled promises or hopes of futures past – broadly comparable to the way Benjamin, as described by Habermas, proposed it must be done. However this task of redeeming the past and resisting present futures is envisioned, *it is these knots of temporality that compose this problematic of patterns of past, present and future, that will help us understand the potential role of historicity in the museum* [my emphasis].

The *50's Gallery* portrays a period of modernization in Vancouver's history. It is also a period that straddles the birth of the postmodern in western cultures (Anderson, 1998). Although, as the exhibitors note, Vancouver did not experience as radical a boom as other cities, this is still a period of innovation,

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<sup>135</sup> Huyssen admits that the present future still energizes liberal imaginings around globalization, which he calls a revived version of the old and discredited modernization paradigm. While he might be correct in this assessment, it seems to me that this is to concede to Habermas that the horizons of expectation remain significantly linear and progressive – that is, modern (2003, p. 165). This can also be glimpsed in his



development and what is commonly labeled 'progress'. In an exhibition devoted to such a period, we should expect to find the strong presence of a future past, of past horizons of expectation – and we do. But of course this quite recent future past is not necessarily distinguishable, in general terms, from our existing horizons of expectation (in the future present), which in Huyssen's analysis is locked in a sort of conflict with the present past (the contemporary space of experience). Following Huyssen, in the contemporary period this future past is consistent with what he calls the "emphatic notion of present futures" that "still operates in...neoliberal imaginings" (2003, p. 165). In Koselleck's work, generally the present future is conceived as broadly the same since the Enlightenment. It was the growing gap between experience and expectation that created a temporal constellation and a corresponding historical consciousness, which in turn enabled the description of different temporal patterns in terms of these two categories; notably, the analysis of pre-modern or Christian futures past. Now, for thinkers like Poster, Huyssen, Nowotny, and Habermas, the concern is to define the postmodern using these categories.

It seems to me, however, that the notion of futures past can be refined to include variants within the broader Enlightenment constellation that founds modern history. Thus the particular mode of understanding future consciousness before or after World War I, for example, might be grasped using less momentous distinctions than those dividing the pre-modern and modern period. One way to achieve this is by following the interpretative conflicts over the nature of the past

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description of emergent postmodernity as 'unevenly developed' throughout the world (1995, p. 8). The concept of uneven development is entirely dependent on modern temporality (Koselleck, 1985).



(for example, in the debates over the nature of imperialism and its relationship to colonialism straddling the World War I period).

Our apparent digression into the temporal patterns characteristic of modernity and postmodernity turns on this insight. The various attempts to reckon with the crisis of temporality – if there is one<sup>136</sup> – has led to these kinds of distinctions being made between the modern and postmodern period. Therefore, if these distinctions were adjudged to be significantly momentous, then presumably this would support the analyses of Poster and Huyssen. On the other hand, perhaps this remains a crisis within modernity, such that the crisis of temporality marks a transitional shift in the ongoing acceleration of history and promoting both anxiety and a sense of *Neuzeit*. And it is worth recalling, Koselleck reminds us, that this need not necessarily take the notional form of progress as optimization or improvement (1985, p. 284). Indeed, the term modernity we have been using in relation to Koselleck's thinking is actually a translation from the German word *Neuzeit*, or 'new times' (see the translator's notes in Koselleck, 1985, p. xx). The valuation of the postmodern as a distinct period is dependent on the notion of modernity conceived of as an actual historical period. But Koselleck is clear that although *Neuzeit* is formal concept designating modernity and following on earlier periodizations, it also contains criteria that are hypothetically applicable to histories of previous ages that might have experienced stirrings of the new, of what we would retrospectively call a

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<sup>136</sup> Of course 'crisis' is almost permanent in societies with accelerating histories, suggesting it is normal rather than unusual. Crisis is a term like others, such as revolution, development, chance, fate, and progress, that complement the notion of history and take on their contemporary meanings in modern temporalizations. They all point to the transformation of experience by the future (expectation). (see Koselleck, 1985, p. xxiv-xxv. )



future past, even if it was not a dominant or even generally perceived as such at the time. Presumably then, the same criteria are also applicable to stirrings of the new in present futures and their prognoses.

Described this way, the first response of the historian or curator might be to display this history of changing futures past and present as an unfolding totality – a *History of Futures Past*, or the *Museum of Futures Past* – that only concludes with the latest example.<sup>137</sup> However, at that point, all the paradoxes kick in and the future is relegated to the past, taking on the ahistorical quality of arrested temporality. The challenge, instead, is to communicate a sense of the historicity of the future, to keep the tripartite distinction of past, present, and future in play. In terms of historicizing existing exhibits, Mieke Bal argues this requires the absorption of critical and historical consciousness into the display. For her, this can be furthered by self-consciously indicating the historicity of the museum itself in specific exchanges between verbal and visual discourses (1996, p.19). Recall that for her the museum has a double function (see Chapter two above). It is a display of its own status and history, and this must be historicized by literally putting its status on the walls. In a brilliant dissection of the *American Museum of Natural History*, she suggests that the existing texts on the wall, which are nationalist, masculinist, and sexist, should remain on the wall, situated in new contexts as they are developed (1996, p. 19). What is then

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<sup>137</sup> In the discipline of history, one might not include the latest example for this is not yet 'history'. As Koselleck points out, recent history is now journalism because there isn't sufficient distance between past and future present to explore its difference. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, recent history was still history because the past was not yet a 'foreign country' (1985, p. 254-5). The gap between experience and expectation would remedy that. Thus the Vancouver Museum's decision to continue Vancouver Stories up to the year 2000 is already a postmodern gesture.



required is to historicize the museum itself, through meta-commentary if necessary.

One could inscribe their agency within the chain of history by pointing out how these statements, meant in the first decades of the century to have everlasting, universal value, demonstrate that history is most prominently change, although not necessarily evolution. The imposing, monumentally inscribed walls could be made the first object of display instead of a display of unquestioned, naked authority (Bal, 1996, p.9).

In the Vancouver Museum, a gallery introducing the idea of the new thematic of Vancouver 'stories' prefaces the old displays. Then, as you enter the old exhibits, there is an example of the kind of meta-commentary Bal recommends. Briefly, they point out that some of the displays fail to reflect the history of Vancouver proper, reflecting instead elements of the larger provincial economy in earlier times. More significantly in terms of the new thematic, they assume that the history of the province and the city are separate from the history and interests of natives. Finally, it is noted that the Edwardian galleries reflect the interests of those who donated these signs of their privilege and wealth, to the exclusion of the history of almost every other inhabitant of the city. By contextualizing itself, the museum and its collection are historicized. In addition, an example for approaching exhibits in a historicizing way is made evident.

Indeed, one could make the case, as Bal does, for leaving these older galleries as they are in order to underline the historiographic character of the museum's presentation and function. The history of the city would then be reflected in its own imaginings, sidestepping any illusion that a totalized history



of the city was being presented. The location of the museum offers a perfect counterpoint as well. Standing on the south side of False Creek, huge windows look out on the modern city core. Observed from afar, the modern future present transforms itself before the eyes of the visitor who walks from one imagined world into another and then emerges into her own future present. This is a powerful experience of historicity in its own right, with the *50's Gallery* functioning as a kind of historiographic pivot on which the imagined city turns.

Bal's second function is the museum's 'enduring educational vocation'. Insofar as history education is the goal, one aspiration of the museum might be to communicate a sense of the historicity of the content of the displays – at least where that is feasible.<sup>138</sup> We have already looked at museums that have tried to achieve something like this: the creation of model villages and historical sites such as the *Jorvik Viking Centre*. No doubt, there is an authentic-seeming experience available in these settings, but as Jordanova pointed out the notion that this was an experience of the past was an 'open lie' because certain key conditions, abstract and concrete could not be represented in this type of venue (see Chapter 2, p. 19 above). The larger problem, of course, is that the past cannot be reconstructed in its totality anyway. If all the elements of the past were available in the present, there would be no past (Rosen, p. 117). Besides, even an acceptably authentic experience would still run up against the problem of including the dimension of the future in such a totalized presentation, and without that the key quality of historicity would be missing. In my view then,

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<sup>138</sup> It does not follow that this can be confirmed by empirical reception studies. For the moment, the only criteria for 'success' are to be found in the concepts under discussion as an illumination of my experience and as an approach to experience in general..



there is only one conceivable way for the museum to liberate this elusive quality from the mausoleum-effect. By exploiting the interaction of verbal and visual elements and other elements of the display, it is hypothetically possible to explore the relation between the historicizing categories of experience and expectation, making evident the historicity of a future past. Or, to put this somewhat differently, the dimension of futurity must be restored to historicity – the *historicity of the future*. If we interpret Koselleck in light of Heidegger, this recognizes that “...as a mode of temporality, history, or *Geschichte*, is not past-oriented but essentially futural” (Bambach, p. 244-245).<sup>139</sup> Although this is not the explicit intention of the design, the interplay of image and text in the exhibit often accomplishes this in the act of historicizing the displays.

However, it is not my intention to provide the kind of systematic discourse analysis of these elements that Mieke Bal offers in her semiotic approach to the museum. At the same time, it is impossible to employ Koselleck’s ‘history of concepts’ methodology that relies on semantic shifts over time. The latter normally requires a longer time shift to discern significant differences – although Koselleck’s analysis of the relatively short period between 1750 and 1850 disclosed numerous examples. However, this was a momentous period in which the modern usage of history is established in the context of creating modernity. Unless the postmodernists are correct, there is no comparable shift on the agenda. Besides, as any historian would tell you, it is too early to tell! Rather, I will simply describe a third experience of walking through the exhibit in terms of

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<sup>139</sup> Bambach is describing Heidegger’s difference from historicism in this passage. In Bambach’s gloss on Heidegger, for the classical historicists like Ranke, the emphasis falls on verification and access – “the past



the historicity-effect disclosed in the interplay of texts and objects – an act which does entail a loosely semiotic approach (see below). And following the “modest intentions” of Koselleck, who directed himself “...primarily to texts in which the historical experience of time is implicitly and explicitly articulated”, I have sought to direct myself toward implicit and explicit examples of the relation of a given past (as experience) to a given future (as expectations)” (1985, p. xxiii). If the first visit was a ‘spontaneous’ walk down memory-lane, and the second a product of historical reflection, this third attempt is the culmination of our reflections on the disjunction of the first two. If the mountain of reflection gives way to a molehill of description, there should be neither complete surprise nor total disappointment because the journey was always the first task at hand.

### **Back to the Future.**

The exhibit is organized in a series of set pieces positioned on two ‘streets’ that give the visitor the opportunity to stroll through the everyday life of the city, loosely construed as either downtown or residential. From the outset, this is a good choice because it puts the visitor inside the experience and sidesteps the illusion of authority found in triumphalist modes of presentation. The latter force the viewer into the subject position of an objective viewer, which replicates a certain model of power based on expert authority.<sup>140</sup> ‘Street mode’ recreates the sense of everydayness and downplays the official voice of expertise, for as de Certeau argues ‘walking’ can be construed as taking possession from below, and

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as it actually happened”. For Heidegger, “...genuine historicity involves an experience of temporality (which lives) and is not the same as mere present-at-hand being of nature (which is)” (p. 245).



as such represents a model of power predicated on use rather than on totalized, rationalized planning (1988).<sup>141</sup>

On entering the room the visitor is faced with two paths into the exhibit. If you turn in one direction, there are vintage black and white televisions screening actual footage of sports events and celebrations. In this footage, we see both Empire Stadium and the Pacific National Exhibition grounds, located at Hastings Park in the East End of Vancouver. We see images of the P.N.E. parade (in downtown Vancouver), of the B. C. Lions inaugural football season, and of the famous Bannister/Landy 'miracle mile' during the British Empire Games of 1954. The film's voice-over describes the exhibition and stadium sites as meeting places for east (poor, ethnically diverse, and working class) and west (wealthier, white and middle or upper class) Vancouver. Indeed, the film narrator describes the events themselves as "celebrations across the great divide". The theme of class reconciliation is supported by what might otherwise appear as gratuitous advertisements for modern refrigeration that are included or spliced into the footage. On the wall is text reminding the visitor of the division of the city into classes, a division that retains significance in the present for most inhabitants. Most notably, a 1951 electoral map showing how different parts of the city voted on the issue of store openings and professional sport on Sundays is appended to the back wall, with the east voting for relaxation of the laws. In this first compact tableau, we are reminded of the introduction of television into home life, the

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<sup>140</sup> Bal's analysis is based on the conflict between variants of this model of power and the difficulties it creates for display. This focus on structures of power is most pronounced in discourse analysis (Witcomb, 2003, p. 14).

<sup>141</sup> I owe this point to Witcomb, who uses de Certeau to analyze the private use of public space (2003, p. 38-39).



concomitant emphasis on the desirability of consumer goods, and the vision of class reconciliation through communal celebration and purchasing power. We have entered the world of consumer desire and, as we will see, elements of consumer actuality. As the exhibition as a whole makes clear, the experience of class acts as a permanent limitation on the realization of expectations taking shape in the future present of the 50's.

Moving on to the centre piece of the exhibit the visitor encounters an immaculate two-tone 1955 Ford Fairlane Victoria, the very image of the new horizons of expectation and desire stretching out before Vancouverites. By contrast, the 'space of experience' draws attention to the gap between actuality and desire. Photographs on the wall behind the vehicle quietly demonstrate the reality of car ownership in the period. The two-tone Ford stands in contrast to the average motorcar of the period – dull, forties-style sedans, dark in colour and pedestrian in function. Text informs the visitor that although only fifty per cent of families owned cars, car ownership doubled between 1947 and 1955, signifying a new leap into the modern. By 1953 accidents are on the rise so a first pedestrian crossing is installed in time for Christmas. Short historical observations sign each of the elements, which include neon displays for car repair and parking, as well as an image of the Granville Street Bridge under construction in 1954. The observant visitor will note that the new bridge lacks a lane for streetcars (unlike the old bridge, pictured next to it). We also see images of drive-in theatres in the suburbs and traffic schools for children. Without drawing an overt conclusion, the strong implication is that the automobile has transformed street culture and



patterns of movement forever as the horizon of expectation is actualized as a new space of experience for our present past.

The car is 'parked' at the White Spot drive-in restaurant; inside the car the local radio station plays authentic international hits (Gene Autry!) and news. The infamous White Spot food tray stretches across the back seat. Together these elements capture the conjunction of the local and the cosmopolitan that characterizes the changing constellation of the postwar world. It is no great leap for the visitor to link the key economic and cultural role of the automobile to the transformation of the local. In this tableau are pictured the substance of dreams and the consequences of our desires and the economy that fuels them: a decline in public transport, and a revolution of city space with the explosion of parking, garages, bridges, and the like. It is no leap for the visitor to recognize in this image of a future past the realm of experience from which their own expectations take flight.

From here, we pass to a kind of telephone booth representing the corner of a rooming house, with a series of local biographies installed in the manner of a telephone book at its base. You can dial the numbers of these (real) people on the phone and get an oral account of their arrival from other lands and their difficult adjustment to the city. The contrast between the hard life of the still somewhat colonial and working city with the economy of desire is striking, but one also detects a note of new possibilities and new futures in their stories, many of which have 'happy' outcomes. One also hears the reality of diverse cultures and values underneath the white-bread conformity commonly associated with the fifties, pointing to the future of a city moving towards its present self-image as a



multicultural metropolis. These stories point to changes undercutting the British in British Columbia and the sentiments symbolized by 'Empire' Stadium and the 'Empire' Games.

On the same side, there is a 'modern' wringer-washer, all the commodities it requires, catalogues, and the promise of purchasing comfort in installments. These machines, popular into the mid-sixties as text reminds us, indicates the permanent obsolescence of the modern – while reminding us, in a sidebar, that these machines were more economical in the use of water and power than those that replaced them. This laundry room is apparently 'connected' to a sitting room, and prepares us for a more comprehensive *mise en scène* of domestic bliss. A modest living room with older style furniture, ceramic flying ducks, bric-a-brac, decorative flowered curtains, linoleum, magazines, a lunch box and worn work boots, denotes a working family's home. A picture album/text tells a real life story of the Cummings who lived in such a neighbourhood. The story itself draws our attention to the hopes and progress of this family. The room itself centres on yet another television that continuously loops a short movie/advert from B. C. Electric. This promotional film from the period endorses the new consumer dream home as the solution to a hard-working wife's distress at the drudgery of the pre-war home – which looks a lot like the home before us.

Our hero, the husband, returns home from work to find Dorothy, his wife, crying in distress over spilled garbage, the demands of 'the twins', and a refrigerator door that opens on the wrong side. The voice-over notes that the world of work can be a troubled one, but when difficulties arise at home the real heartache begins. He observes that Dorothy is 'falling out of love with life'. There



is only one thing for it: a new home. The post World War II desire to rebuild and start again is embodied in the husband's decision to plan a new personalized home ("our own plan for our own problem"), where planning, appliances, and that 'new servant' electricity delivered at 200 amps will do the work. As the building unfolds on an upscale North Shore site with a great view of the city below, the level of 'scientific planning' and expertise (thanks to B. C. Electric) that must go into layout and design surprises the husband. Of course, the future is guaranteed by this same planning, expertise and technical progress, so their dream comes true. Our hero sweeps Dorothy off her feet and carries her over the threshold of the new home.

Of course, all this is in stark contrast to the other stories and scenes in the tableau (although it bears comparison with earlier Edwardian scenes, which are presented without this tension between experience and expectation).<sup>142</sup>

Compared to this trouble and drudgery-free dream of future well-being is the experience of postwar Vancouver for most citizens. Text reminds us that homelessness was a problem for veterans and others until well after WWII – an issue that resonates in the present. One has occasion to reflect that the deserving homeless vets of WWII and the perhaps less favoured homeless poor of the present are in difficulty for reasons that transcend their personal failings and characteristics. We are informed of the protests of the period and the government-sponsored building of residential homes in *Fraserview* at a considerably more modest level – indeed, at a level not so distinct from the home

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<sup>142</sup> The Edwardian rooms represent classical historicism with its focus on the past, while this tableau clearly incorporates futurity in contrast.



that is literally driving poor Dorothy to the brink of despair. Her past looks like the somewhat glorious future for others.

On the back wall, the development of working class *Fraserview* is pictured as if through a window, black and white like the images presented on the various televisions. Small, somewhat uniform homes, fronting on dirt roads with deep muddy yards instead of landscape, rental units rather than properties, they nevertheless look pretty good to the new inhabitants. The stories of growing up in *Fraserview* that accompany the piece, remind the visitor that the inhabitants were eventually allowed to buy these homes and turn the area into a positive community in its time. It is to the credit of the exhibition that the limitations of class are not interpreted one-dimensionally, because these stories connect the expectations of the past, arising out of a past present, to the present past of the visitor. This constant to and fro between experience and expectation, between the war period and the dreams of the postwar, sets up a complex of tensions in which we perceive a present unfolding before our eyes. This brilliant set piece captures the heart of the exhibit in my view, with the existence of class, poverty and an expanding horizon of expectations conjoined in a multi-leveled interpretative whole.

If we had turned in a different direction upon entering the exhibit, we would have entered 'downtown', with its movie houses, sidewalk photos, rock n' roll cafés, nightclubs, meat markets and bars. Dividing the two streets, we find a display of the latest fashions and a café booth. The same kinds of tensions, dreams, and ambiguities are reflected by each of the set pieces on this 'side of the street'. We glimpse the dynamic of the local and the cosmopolitan in the



unfortunately dowdy *Paris Boutique* at *The Bay*. A memorable glimpse into the thriving nightclub scene of those days, resonating of Las Vegas, also admits into consciousness the existence of a thriving gay scene, periodically 'cleaned-up' by the police, echoing another undercurrent of diversity such as it was found in the rooming house. The sense of an active nightclub/dinner club scene, the on-street photos, and a number of other elements, all suggest a vibrant street life that has since declined in relative terms. A portrait of downtown as an integrated shopping and entertainment centre prior to the advent of the car accessed mall emerges, as does the sense that this was a walking city. The purposeful strides of couples and groups in Foncie's street photos underline this, as does the *Reid's* downtown meat market storefront. Nor is this picture of the lively street life of Vancouver fanciful. Describing the city in this period, economic geographers have written that at this time "...along Hastings and Seymour streets in particular, downtown Vancouver was a more lively and profitable place than was the centre of almost any city in North America" (North and Hardwick, p. 207). The exhibition leaves little doubt that the private car, the emergence of the household as a centre of consumption, and the television set, played a leading role in the reversal of a once vibrant street life. One might add that the decades-old effort to revive another part of this core, Granville Street, testifies to a memory of loss that many Vancouverites still retain of this period.

A particularly sly interpretative key is provided by the selection of newspapers that the visitor can browse through while sitting in the café listening to the jukebox (after paying a quarter, which seems inflationary by fifties standards!). The stories and advertisements reflect the same contrast between



consumer dreams, consumer reality, and social conflict. They also manage to provide a meta-commentary on each of the set pieces in the exhibit. Issues raised by the various tableaux, all of which find purchase in the present, are discussed in the newspapers and accounts of the time. Some of these are constructed as 'museum news', while others are actual newspaper accounts – including student newspapers. These echo the brief, well-constructed texts that accompany the set pieces provide the visitor with historical perspective from the present, while the newspaper accounts reflect contemporary understanding from within the period itself, mirroring present concerns in the choices made at the time.

The many layers of image, sound, and commentary in the exhibit combine with the clear intention of creating an historical experience for the visitor. In terms of the exhibition's own self-understanding, this is an experience of memory informed by history and historical thinking. Many elements evoke memory – be they direct memories of the period, mediated memories of the fifties as a whole, or identifications based on the actual stories of fellow Vancouverites. At the same time, these memories of the fifties are historicized, both as evidence "that the past really existed" (Seidl, 2002) and as a reflection on the relation of past and present through the delineation of issues that continue to haunt the present. Each scene is also contextualized by its place in the exhibition as a whole, which transmits a sense of the decade and periodizes it while reinforcing the main lines of historical interpretation. The elements of style, the text on the walls, the stories of Vancouverites, all contribute to this.

The commitment of the designers of the exhibit to this task is reflected in the adjacent *Learning Centre*. In this space there are mobile displays that reflect



back on the thematic of *Vancouver Stories* as a whole, but many of them bear directly on the 50's Gallery and could be construed as part of it. The most outstanding display carries the actual period diaries and mementos of a young pre-teen who managed to accomplish what many might wish they had done in and for their past but never did – record their everyday life, interests, and reception of events in entries and drawings as they occurred. In spite of his youth, he conveys an indelible experience of the decade in the manner of an admittedly very young journalist-historian. For instance, when he notes on March 4, 1953 that the radio and newspapers say “...poor old Joe Stalin died”, we are impressed with the idea that, in the curator's words, the past really existed. The diary is both a record and a historicizing act and manages to make the idea of history both charming and important. Wisely, the museum has made it possible for visitors to communicate *via* posted notes with the adult who donated these wonderful items from his childhood. In this dialogue, the space between past and future is made apparent.

Other mobile displays include a hands-on radio studio from the fifties, period toys, the story of native land claims, a typical immigrant suitcase and more stories of passage. In the midst of these is a mobile display that features a model of the *50's Gallery* inviting visitors to contemplate its design in retrospect. It includes statements from the designers and curator, a list of interpretative approaches to the exhibit that reflect back on it as a presentation of evidence for each of them,<sup>143</sup> and a covering statement pointing out that exhibits are historical interpretations, and asking whether the people made who made them made the



right choices. All this admirably contextualizes the visitor's experience and brings to the forefront the relation of past, present, and future. However, it is possible to imagine a thoroughly historicized exhibition that is less successful than this one in retaining a sense of the open-ended nature of history, so it is important to reflect on the nature of this contextualization still more closely.

It should be evident from my the description that every scene is informed by a sense of historical change and movement, indicating a definite intention to avoid the sense of a past that is complete and finished with – or totalized in a significant way. Of course, this is something of impossibility. As we have seen, every historical account tends to close off the future by achieving a stable epistemological position in relation to the past, even though "...historiography is an ordering of time that always evinces the possibility of change" (Rosen, p. 72). However, it is our contention that this impossibility is destabilized in turn by the sentiment of historicity and historical consciousness. Indeed, it could be argued that this sentiment is motivational in nature, inspiring an interest in the past. I have tried to narrate an experience of the exhibit that demonstrates a sense of the historicity of the future that can be found there. In opposition to the reifying effects of style or the totalizing thrust of historicism, a description of the interplay between text, image, and object establishes a tension that can be understood in terms of the categories of space of experience and the horizons of expectation.

However, this is made more complex by the existence of two dimensions at work in the relationship of expectation and experience. On the one hand, these categories can apply to the exhibition of the past that is being visited. Yet they

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<sup>143</sup> See Seidl (2001) for the list.



also apply to the visitor's present. For the contemporary visitor, the temporality of their historical world is articulated on their own *present past* and a *present future*. But the museum brings them in touch with a previous present past, which I will call a *past present* and a previous present future, or *future past*. The divide between modern and the postmodern temporalities can be seen at play on the boundary between these two layers. The repetition with a difference of issues that engaged both periods – mass transit and the impact of traffic, ecological concerns, land claims, immigration and adjustment, public morality, and the like, all point to Huyssen's folding of the future back on itself. Similarly, the street photos, movie theatre front, radio, and popular music point to the emergence of the world of information networks that he claims have begun to collapse past and future, experience and expectation.

The contextualization of the fifties found in the exhibit, perhaps fortuitously, partakes of this problematic of temporalities because it is consistently oriented to the historicity of the future. This reflects two advantages this particular exhibit was able to exploit. First, the future past of the 1950's is 'emphatically' connected to the present future. Whatever doubts memory discourses might express about these horizons, they are connected in an identifiably continuous linear fashion to our own. The visitor is apt to sympathetically recognize these expectations as related orientations to their present future while maintaining a sense of difference born of the respective



contexts. At the same time, the repetition of issues and the continuity of experiences provoke questions about the contemporaneity of the fifties.<sup>144</sup>

More importantly, once the past was conceptualized as a nonreproducible and unique process of events then the future could be considered as potentially different from the past. This is the increasing gap between experience and expectation that began to unfold during the Enlightenment and gave birth to the notion of history as a singular process. These categories indicate dissimilar modes of existence, from whose tension Koselleck has inferred historical time (1985, p. 274). This tension is a function of expectations breaking free of the traditional determinants of experience. In this sense, the notion of the historicity of the future is nothing less than the historical nature of temporality itself (1985, p. 275; Carvounas, 2002, p. 3). An exhibit that chooses to focus on the recent future past lends itself to analysis in these terms because it is easier to bring our own temporality and experience to it.

Thus it is no surprise that all the efforts to contextualize and historicize the exhibit are consistently if unconsciously informed by a sense of tension operating in both dimensions between memory and hope, experience and expectation.<sup>145</sup> On the one hand a past present showing elements of 'empire', the local everyday, a vibrant street life, the persistence of class division, on the other a future increasingly shaped by immigration, the automobile, and the new consumerism. This future past forms a horizon of expectation for the inhabitants of Vancouver

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<sup>144</sup> Once again, this is reminiscent of the film *Far From Heaven* and follows Huyssen's sense of the postmodern.

<sup>145</sup> At one point, Koselleck seems to all but identify memory and the space of experience, but he quickly qualifies this by pointing out that experience goes deeper than memory, while expectation comprehends more than hope (1985, p.270).



in the 50's, but that horizon is also the "line behind which a new space of experience will open, but which cannot yet be seen" (Koselleck, 1985, p. 273). This space of experience, their horizon, is part of our present past. At the same time, the past horizon is still a part of our horizon. This puts the visitor in the midst of an interpretative knot that can be very productive because the issues of the past present illumine issues both continuous and emergent in the future present by way of comparison and contrast.

In the car scene, for example, we perceive a past present that is being transformed into something other, a horizon doubly constituted by consumer desire and technical innovation that also provides a foretaste of the future that will become part of our space of experience. On the one hand, this is a recognizable version of our own future present; on the other, we perceive the emergence of new expectations around mass transit and, in the context of the exhibition as a whole, a livable city. In recognizing both the expectations taking shape in the past and the limitations on achieving them, we are potentially reminded of similar tensions between our present past, which is partly constructed by the previous tension, and our own future present – which bears the mark of this experience even as it is distanced from it.

The function of theoretical language is not primarily one of furthering narrative description. Instead, the exhibit and the kinds of issues raised above can be described, as I have mostly done, in terms of the elements of the tableau and the way they interact to produce meaning. I have tried to introduce the categories of experience and expectation where possible, while not demanding more descriptive weight from them than they can hold. It is the nature of



exposition, as Bal pointed out, to both show something and to make a claim about it (see Chapter One). This enables a permanent discrepancy between the thing (object) and sign (text), which is what makes the latter both necessary and useful as an expository element. In Bal's view, the act of exposition in the museum makes this semiotic divergence blatant and emphatic because the actual physical presence of a signed object brings it to the fore.

The thing on display comes to stand for something else, the statement about it. It comes to *mean*. The *thing* recedes into invisibility as its *sign* status takes precedence to make the statement. A sign stands for a thing (or idea) in some capacity, for someone. This is the definition of a sign (1996, p. 4).

In her view, the space between must be filled, often with narrative. It could be the narrative of walking through the exhibition, it could be a myth-model to which it conforms, and it could also be the narrative the visitor develops as knowledge from the experience (partially on the basis of the latter two narratives). In this context, the link between knowledge and display that shapes the pedagogical impulse of the museum also shapes *the experience of historicity* that the visitor takes from the museum. While theory does not provide a descriptive language, it can establish the conditions of possible narrative of such an experience. Hopefully that is evident from my account.

In a history museum in particular, the notions of historical consciousness and historicity that are brought to the experience will inevitably structure the narrative a visitor constructs from an exhibit. Theoretically, following Koselleck, I have tried to establish that the very notions of history and historical consciousness are temporal in all three dimensions of past, present and future,



and while produced in a specific historical situation, they are secured by the tensions disclosed by the categories of experience and expectation. These terms, as we have seen, describe the specific temporalities that constitute historical consciousness in a period of accelerating change. Within the overall framework of the modernity, *Vancouver in the 50's* is a period that does embody Koselleck's insight "that the more a particular time is experienced as a new temporality, as modernity ... the more demands on the future increase" (1985, p. xxiv). It is a strength of this exhibit that it reveals these demands for the future past and then revives them again for the future present, not in the form of the zombie-like living dead of the past but as an echo of the historicity of life the museum was believed to have snuffed out.



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