

The discipline of pleasure; or, how art history looks at the art museum

Colin Trodd*

Manchester University

Introduction

Since entering that complex realm known as 'public space', British art museums have tended to be associated with the problematic relationship between value and use. In addition to their status as places of aesthetic refuge, conservation and contemplation, they have been identified as environments where specific practices are measured: the display of social behaviour, the rituals of leisure and the performance of the visit are important components in the history of the visibility of these cultural institutions in part as managerial systems and sites of social assembly.

The central aim of this essay is to generate a critically detailed and fully historicised reading of one specific example of the institutionalisation of visual culture. By attending to its complexity as an aesthetic, social and managerial space, I want to examine how the act of seeing was inscribed in a body of material concerned with the National Gallery (NG) in mid-Victorian London. Addressing the language of exhibition, this essay deals with a form of commentary where writing about the public display of art becomes another way of exploring the mnemonic or kinetic qualities of space. This work asks: what is caught in this fascination with the spatial logics of the gallery? What is formed by the development of an institutional process which seeks the ideal illumination of art? What is registered in the new systems of visual authority that begin to emerge in the 1840s and 1850s? What is caught, blocked or displayed by this new interest in seeing in the NG a visual network of interlocking narratives about the historical development of art?

From Art Worship to Theory Worship

There has been a consistent desire among contemporary commentators to identify the processes that generate a sense of value from the experience of being in the art museum. Such explorations provide important materials concerning the way in which articulations of cultural community are associated with models of aesthetic knowledge. This fascination is registered by Neil MacGregor, the former director of the NG, who writes:

I believe our job in the National Gallery — and the function of scholarship in the National Gallery — is to enable the public to move around the past with confidence. They need the confidence that there are fixed points, individual objects which have been identified, dated, established; and various routes around those fixed points which they can follow and from which, if they like, pursue others. The process is, in a general sense, one of education, but I think in a sense it is not one of learning... I think that the point for the public of museums is not that the public should learn something but that they should become something... I think that the role... of scholars and curators is not to put themselves between the public and the objects, not in any very elaborate sense to explain the objects, but to exhort the visitor to a direct experience, to an unmediated vision. (MacGregor, 1994: 249)

For MacGregor, the purpose of the NG is to provide the authentic conditions for looking, a means of declaring that the charismatic quality of art is a force or power which encourages forms of self-renewal. I would characterise this belief in the cultural enchantment of the art institution as an example of transcendental Liberalism: here the aesthetic is the fantasy form of a community locked together by mutual affection; here the experience of art

is both individual and public because it articulates universal characteristics of human identity; and here the question of arranging the gallery becomes an issue of establishing an environment where 'vision' achieves hypostatic union, the 'moment' of pristine contact between culture and self. This suggests that the cultural institution is authentic in so far as it generates an *unmediated* environment in which an *unmediated* inwardness is experienced. As such, this model claims that the epiphany of aesthetic experience always already invokes a collective realm of human identity. Art, then, transforms subjects by making them look at and confront a vision of what it is to have an experience of the condition of being human.

This is a subtle argument, and in many ways it goes well beyond one of the standard historical claims for the value of art museums: that institutions of public culture, in encouraging citizens to see art objects as public property, connect the experience of looking at art with the idea of ownership. In this sense, then, MacGregor's claim is a continuation of the Arnoldian tradition, which argues against utilitarianism because reason is conjoined with imagination and both are identified as components of a human identity finding true knowledge in the customs and conventions of the beautiful. Instead of the functionalist-utilitarian reading of the art museum, where the experiences 'performed' by self-fashioning subjects can be codified, calibrated and calculated, MacGregor seems to insist on a definition of value that is not fully determined by ideas of self-interest. For MacGregor, enchantment rather than efficiency is the goal of the art museum; the truth-preserving nature of *self-becoming*, rather than the social utility of pleasure being the source of definitional value.

MacGregor's observations are part of a growing body of material which has been produced over the last ten years on the subject of the critical function of the art museum. In the majority of such studies, writers have been concerned with mapping these institutions in order to make visible the display of power and the circulation of knowledge. Art museums have been identified as places where the rituals of citizenship are enacted, where disciplinary technologies are active, where governmental forces are located and where political legitimations are made. If it has become customary to define art museums as places of authority, implicated in the formation and development of systems of social regulation, such theoretical readings have gone against the grain of more traditional accounts, such as Giles Waterfield's *Palaces of Art*. Where Waterfield associates the institutionalisation of culture with the democratisation of civilising values, the postmodernist, post-structuralist and neo-marxian researches of Douglas Crimp, Carol Duncan and Tony Bennett discover a panoply of forces, powers and technologies for the organisation and control of experience and meaning. Where Waterfield locates in the art museum the homely space of cultural refinement (Waterfield, 1991:17-28), the theory-driven writers frame the development of such bodies in terms of the articulation of 'total' institutions. In both cases, I would argue, the art museum is reduced to the structures and values (culture, taste, education, discipline, power) that it supposedly exhibits. Therefore, both 'traditional' and 'radical' models define the art museum as a codification system in which 'messages' are transmitted.

Although recent critical readings of the history of art museums have pointed out the teleological assumptions at work in many traditional accounts of the subject, 'theory' has generated a number of serious problems of its own. To some extent these problems are entangled with the appearance of what in the 1980s was called 'New Art History': an ensemble of practices that locked the discipline into a series of 'interrogations concerning aesthetic value, the canon, gender, class, ethnicity, colonialism, the politics of representation and the representation of power. Art History, it was claimed, could be re-tooled through Literary and Critical Theory, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology; and the critical evaluation of the art museum was an important component of this new 'heteroglossic' formation. Because one of the problems associated with this critical conjunction was the reification of theory into a form of *theoryology*, it would be prudent to review some salient examples of this literature.

In *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill defines the modern public art museum as a 'disciplinary' institution, 'part of the network of constant and multiple relations between population, territory and wealth' (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992: 189). It is further argued that;

in the public museum the producing subject 'works' in the hidden spaces of the museum, while the consuming subject 'works' in the public spaces. Relations within the institution are skewed by privilege and enable the hidden productive 'work' of the museum, the production of knowledge through the compilation of catalogues, inventories and installations. The seriated, public spaces, surveyed and controlled, where knowledge is offered for passive consumption, are emblematic of the museum as one of the apparatuses that created 'docile' bodies through disciplinary technologies (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992:189).

'Disciplinary museum' is, it seems to me, the most supremely oxymoronic of appellations. It is unconvincing on at least four counts. First, by ignoring Foucault's writings about governmental rationality it tends to reduce his 'disciplinary' model to a variant of the social control thesis, with its functionalist reading of the relationship between power and action. Secondly, it simply assumes that the institutionalisation of culture creates an environment analogous to more coercive institutions, such as prisons, factories or schools. Thirdly, by claiming that the museum is 'an instrument of the state' (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992: 188), not only is the difficult relationship between cultural organisation and state formation suppressed, but the state becomes a thing rather than an antagonistic complex of differentiated forces, powers and interests. Finally, by making space an instrumentalised entity, factored and fashioned by the materials of surveillance, this model tends to present the individual as an inert monad, something determined by a sort of invisible materialism working through ubiquitous and ineluctable powers both optical and discursive.

Elsewhere the 'theological' characteristics of this theory-culture, in which the proclamations of post-structuralist gurus are used in ways that they never intended, are all too evident. Douglas Crimp's influential *On the Museum's Ruins* imagines an iconoclastic, utopian transgression of its authorities, powers and legitimations. Crimp claims his 'Foucauldian archaeology' of the museum reveals that the 'modern epistemology of art' is a consequence of art's sequestration by the museum, a place fabricating representational systems and models in order to display modern culture as a continuous process of auto-critique. In opposition to this totalising hegemony, where criticism and practice form a single institutional articulation, Crimp names photography as a 'dissident' force and transgressive power. Thus, he claims, once photography enters the museum its 'epistemological coherence collapses. The "world outside" is allowed in, and art's autonomy is revealed as a fiction, a construction of the museum' (Crimp, 1993: 13-14). Behind his Benjamin-esque rhetoric, we can see how Crimp's Foucauldianism bears an uncanny resemblance to Bakhtin's reading of transgression. Following Bakhtin, Crimp makes the same division between official and demotic cultures; and where Bakhtin discovers in the grotesque body those carnivalesque practices that negate the symbolic codes and social rituals of classical culture, Crimp finds in photography an equally fragmented, dynamic and transformative power. In both cases unrelated heterogeneous forms and practices are assumed to be inherently transgressive, and transgression is assumed to be inherently radical. This is, of course, to romanticise the nature of transgression and to dismember the different cultural, historical and political moments in which it has been articulated.

Unlike Crimp, Carol Duncan uses Comparative Anthropology to support her account of the art museum, which she defines as a space of ritualistic activity. Her model defines such places as 'identity-defining machines', whose 'scripts' encourage visitors 'to enact a performance of some kind' (Duncan, 1991: 101; 1995: 1-2). If the art museum emerges as a monument to ceremonial meanings that are structured as rituals, visitors seem to be no more than passive elements constituted by codifying systems over which they have no real control. For someone interested in the idea of liminality there is little evidence that she wishes to pursue the symbolic forms within which the critical logic of the aesthetic is articulated by cultural commentators. What is missing from this account is any real explanation of how the anthropological-sociological model, where the architectonic culture of the art museum shapes communal behaviour and patterns social experience, is linked to specific critical-rhetorical practices in which different historical agents (cultural commentators, cultural managers and social observers) seek to reconcile and resolve conflicting institutional truth-

claims. As with so many readings of this nature, Duncan fails to explain why the discursivity of aesthetic pleasure is invariably ideological, or why the art museum cannot register the authentic public interests, values and satisfactions of individual subjects.

A similar attitude pervades *MuseumCulture*, edited by Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff. As in Duncan's account, there is little or no sense of how art museums might be complex or disturbed spaces where the relationship between aesthetic experience and social utility does not always validate and guarantee the ideological interests and legitimations of specific groups. These places are simply sites of collusion: what seems to be the self-authorising cultural discourse of the art museum is the occasion for the perpetuation of those power systems whereby a social elite associate their sectional desires with general or communal needs. What tends to be neglected here is any detailed engagement with the critical issue of how the legibility of the art museum is made through the constitution of systems of spatial design and the patterning of visual experience. The question of institutional meaning is reduced to the functionality of transmitted messages because Sherman and Rogoff identify these environments as regimes of domination and control where ideas of autonomous judgement and practical agency are forms of bourgeois bewitchment. The belief that the study of museological meaning could entail visual and textual hermeneutics is largely ignored, for the interrogatory techniques generated by the authors work on the pathology of a deadly space which is taken to dismember the materiality of history as it accumulates and classifies the objects in its collection. Like Duncan, vision is always already conquered by 'master narratives' which colonise the spaces of display (Sherman and Rogoff, 1994: x). Missing from such readings is the idea that what the art museum makes visible and legible is the production of *different* forms of reflective judgement. In its place, seeing is seen as something disciplined by external knowledge-production mechanisms which establish and make coherent the art museum as stage-machinery for ideological programmes.

Such attitudes are now customary in undergraduate programmes in both the UK and the USA; indeed the recent Open University *Art History and its Histories* course has an entire book devoted to the subject of the organisation of museum and gallery exhibits. Although the exact nature and authority of the belief system informing the analysis in *Contemporary Cultures of Display* is never entirely clear, the traditional art museum is identified as a place of 'cultural imperialism', 'social control', and, where it fails to reject 'chronological ordering', a supporter of the 'tyranny of the predetermined narrative' (Barker, 1998: 10, 70, 25). However, we are informed, that the 'quasi-sacred' space of this conventional model is disturbed and contested by the revisionism at work in such places as the Musée d'Orsay, which although it confirms the hierarchical systems of value within Art History, has led to the 'expansion of the canon of nineteenth-century art'. Equally strangely, it is also implied that this institution is *postmodernist* in its embrace of 'a new populist model of the museum as spectacle,' and *modernist* because of its failure to contest the authority of the canon associated with modernism (Barker, 1998: 70, 69).

In addition to the problems associated with the writings from which it borrows, the limitations of any such second-hand critique of the art museum are immediately obvious. The confusing and illogical character of this reading is due to the consistent failure to identify the specific connection between its interpretative eclecticism and the critical authority of the concepts it deploys. In this case, the Debordian term 'spectacle' is rendered performative by a text which collapses it to 'social control' (bad) or 'visual consumption' (good), depending on where the term surfaces in the writing (Barker, 1998: 70). What is lost here is any real critical understanding of the complexity of the processes in which art museums are fashioned, articulated and reproduced. Analysis of these institutions is reduced to a question of their functionality, and functionality is determined by a system in which discourse is defined as the relationship of emitter to code. As art museums are identified with neither, they are always one point in a circuit they cannot command.

Space Generated

As I have indicated, there are fundamental critical problems with the ideas promulgated by

the *theoryology* model in its account of how art museums are involved in the generation of meaning. To cite one further example, in so far as it emerges as a historical issue in the relevant literature, citizenship tends to surface as a repressive force, something which is locked into the inculcation of the ideological needs of the state. There are many points one could dispute here, but the failure to register the state as an amalgam of often competing and contradictory forces and pressures results in a bleakly deterministic and functionalist account of the development of cultural and social policy in the nineteenth century. Therefore, Bennett, in assuming the transparency of institutional intentions, ignores the problem that exhibited objects are not fully codifiable as 'messages' (Bennett, 1995: 59-88; Barlow and Trodd, 2000: 1-2). Conflating Foucault and Bentham, Bennett presents culture as an object of study for a model of political science which appears to be, in J. S. Mill's, phrase, a 'therapeutics of the social body' (Mill, 1973: 876). Like Bentham, Bennett's model is a priori and deductive, devised from axiomatic propositions about human nature; as subjects seek to maximise their own utility this approach assumes that a 'production-mechanism can be found by which raw human materials are transformed into products designed by their manufacturers' (Barlow and Trodd, 2000: 2). Mirroring other examples of *theoryology*, there is little or no sense here that popular social classes in Victorian society might have exercised a legitimate interest in the pleasures and values associated with art museums. Indeed, Bennett tends to see such places determined by hegemonic forces that overwhelm any real sense of social agency. His narrative repeats the tropes of the social control thesis: the art museum is severed from any veridical claims of an aesthetico-critical nature because the system-supporting history of popular leisure is the history of policing social behaviour to produce docile bodies. Somewhat ironically, however, a future is imagined where the demystified art museum, in expressing the interests, values and meanings of the masses, transcends 'the performative resources which programmed visitors' behaviour as well as their cognitive horizons' in the traditional institutional model (Bennett, 1995: 10).

However, instead of insisting that art museums are always governed by extra-institutional powers, it is important to acknowledge that these places have been involved in the production, distribution and circulation of their own meanings about culture and its practices. For instance, the role played by art museums in the generation of models of looking at art is essential here because it demonstrates an *active* interest in the process of engaging with the governing logic of art itself. Clearly it is necessary to examine the specific issues which surface when such places become associated with debates about the composition of the material body of culture within modern society; but this must be undertaken in conjunction with an approach which recognises that art museums engender their own values, identities and problems. Thus the material *look* of culture -what it is seen to store, register or indicate as it comes into contact with real bodies- forms part of the unwritten material history of the modern art museum as a social and cultural institution.

Of course, an interest in the way in which looking is part of the aesthetic and institutional logic of the art museum has been recognised by Bann (1984), Alpers (1991), Baxandall (1991) and Greenblatt (1991), all of whom provide important correctives to some of the problems associated with the *theoryology* model. Rightly, they insist on the centrality of complex processes of seeing and framing art which are not reducible to practices of state incorporation. This engagement with the phenomenological nature of the collection as a set of appearances presented before a consciousness - a consciousness 'illuminated' by the facticity of this specific encounter - constitutes a welcome return to encountering the lived conditions in which subjects experience real objects in material spaces. My purpose here, however, is not to deal with the 'presence' of looking, but to suggest that the history of the art museum is entangled with problems to do with its visibility as a place which endlessly generates and incites vision.

These ideas have implications for how we approach the question of vision as something *situated* within space, both social and discursive. For instance, the belief that public space is one way in which the nation displays itself to its members becomes a primary concern in the nineteenth century. However, this need to discover the conditions that enable the national body to make itself visible could be problematic, particularly when it was a question of reconstituting the historical forms in which such a body might be identified. The

idea of public memory -of recording the monuments and spaces of past communities- was entangled with the issue of tradition. In the case of those reformist journals influenced by utilitarianism, the past itself had to be overcome. Both Tories and Whigs had celebrated national culture in terms of the accretion of conventions and relics that tended to deny the systemic nature of historical processes. As such discourse was actuated by an inductive method concerned with the habits and practices of the customary and collective, of which institutions were taken to be incarnations, utilitarianism was faced with the problem of dealing with this 'organic' image of national memory. If it wanted to transform the spaces in which the communal forms of nationhood were remembered, it had to declare war on the picturesque, the aesthetic manifestation of this political epistemology.

An extraordinary essay on the history of the Trafalgar Square site in the reformist *Illuminated Magazine* (1845) illustrates this point very neatly. Although the changes to the environment surrounding the NG render this space 'less picturesque', it asserts 'we can afford the loss'. In opposition to the proliferation of confusing charms associated with the relics of the past, modern space has been determined by new forces, because 'we are now a ... commercial railroad-making, colonizing people. Instead of an old Maypole in the Strand one hundred and twenty-five feet high, decorated with flags, gilt balls and trumpery, we have omnibuses to the Bank...' (213). Continuing this theme of confronting the reader with the differences between past and present, the essay forces into view a time before 'fine stucco, asphalt, and caoutchouc, fountains, [and] statues', when there were 'houses tumbled by decay into all sorts of convulsive shapes...' (214). Replacing the primitive individualism of the picturesque, the material realm of modernity embodies the efficacy of consumption as social communication. Trafalgar Square, with its 'fine statues', 'fountains of pure water', 'magnificent clubs', and 'rich picture gallery' (217), is a classic example of this new, dynamic urban landscape.

What we see here is the utilitarian fantasy that mechanisms of rationality can reconstruct spaces and subjects through the *enviroming* of citizenship. The modern is characterised as the removal of those pressures and forces which impede the productivity of self-knowledge; and so, although there are scenes of 'misery', 'pestilence' and 'filth' in the 'back lanes and purlieus of even Trafalgar Square',

Day by day, however, we see the carpenter and the builder opening the ways to health and ventilation, — misery, sought in her chamber, brought forth, relieved and purified... The Old Cross of Charing looked but on washing fields and on an old monastic edifice, whose monks and benefactors cared only for the people as they contributed to their own wealth and self-indulgence; but the noble statue of the hero who made England feared by all who dared insult her shores, looks along a vista of strength, opulence, and beauty, to an edifice whose walls re-echo with the demands of the protectors of the poor, and the claims asserted in the causes of humanity and justice (218).

Thus:

Happily we hear no more the sound of lances in the tilting-yard of Whitehall, nor the blows of the cudgels from the old falcon houses of the barbaric Kings of half-populated England, but we meet the honest artisans of London, gazing with admiration on the skill of their fellow citizens, in the fine area of Trafalgar Square, and entering the National Gallery, in there listen to the observations of men, on the genius, of a Hogarth or a Wilkie, whose ancestors knew nothing better than the diversions of the Cockpit and the cruelties of the Bear garden. (218)

There is a certain fascination at work here with what might be called the organisation of the view of culture and history, and the cultivation of laws and conventions. The art museum opens into a space that already contains it; for here is a picture where progress is pictured as a process in which everything is becoming cultural. What is traced here are the tracks that reveal the processes whereby socialisation is cultivated. In this classic fantasy of utilitarianism, pleasure, in being associated with the legitimate claims of the masses, provides the

conditions in which out-moded powers are displaced by civilising manners. Citizenship is exhibited at the moment when the exhibition of art objects, fusing social and cultural space, leads to the formation of a domain of 'rational recreation'. Exiting specific social locales, the subject is always carried within the labyrinths of culture, the world of objects and habits organised to ensure the maximisation of rational order. Here illumination replaces obscurity because landscapes of astonishment have been denuded of their cultic powers. Instead of the disturbed or pathological intensities of the picturesque place we find the rationality of space: now lines, divisions and structures proclaim that vision is made to witness, in the material fabrications of modernity, the dwelling place of truth.

The rhetoric of the *Illuminated Magazine* assumes that the meaning of culture is determined through its social efficacy. Clearly, to subscribe to the view that culture provides the basis for an exhibitory order within which the subject discovers the motivating interests of citizenship, is to suggest that the modern condition of the aesthetic emerges from the need to see public space in terms of a truth-seeking rationality. What is distinct about the realm of culture, we are informed, is that it cultivates the visible display of certain types of social activity: here the performance of 'community-imitation' makes subjects pronounce and enact a knowledge far more valuable than any engagement with the pictorial characteristics of mimesis. Culture, then, is a form of habitation which is known in and through communal patterns of seeing, and these forms of expression are associated with experience of being inside art museums.

Issues relating to space and vision are articulated in the discourses about the NG and other cognate institutions from the 1840s; and we can see how the efficacy of space is bound up with the calibration of critico-philosophical value in two sets of material, both of which begin to dominate the discursive life of the NG in this decade. Firstly, a quasi-meditative popular discourse, one that discovers in art the ideal or unified forms of a common social identity or sensibility (and here we can cite Charles Kingsley), and secondly, a historicist discourse, one that finds the authenticity of art in the serial arrangement of paintings, a system where gallery space and historical time are symbiotic forms. In the former, the spectator is absorbed into the monumental truths of the discrete image; in the latter, the subject is encouraged to view the collection as a narratological structure, seeing meaning in the sequential patterns it generates.

Now, I do not want to suggest that the history of the public art museum can be reduced to the history of vision; however, this framing or codification of the institutional visit around the illumination of sight is worth considering in some detail. For instance, the idea of the labour of seeing which emerges in the 1840s and 1850s can be contrasted to the aristocratic optic that obtained in the previous incarnation of the NG, when it had been run as a private club for connoisseurs and artists. Based on the private collection of J.J. Angerstein, initially the NG was identified as a shrine to patrician taste by two of its most powerful trustees, Agar Ellis and Lord Farnborough. William Hazlitt, the great Romantic critic, agreed that it was an exclusive, specialised environment of aesthetic judgement and contemplation. In contrast, by the 1850s it had become a public institution situated within the general economy of state administration. Re-articulated by art professionals, it was now a space of cultural management. If in 1824 there were no specific acquisition programmes, as early as the 1840s the NG was encouraged to develop an institutional framework for the education of the masses. We read in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1842:

The purpose of a National Gallery is not to delight the Connoisseur but to improve the public taste... It is not sufficient that the paintings in the National Gallery should be open to the public; it is equally necessary that they should be illustrated and explained [for] it is not designed only or exclusively for the painter, but for the... artisan (227).

Such thinking runs against the dominant reading, established by Lord Farnborough, the first Chairman of the Trustees, who, in 1825, claims that because 'those in inferior stations' lack the powers of aesthetic judgement and discernment, the NG could not cater for their needs (Farnborough, 1825: 2; Trodd, 2000: 30-1). This shift in the manner of viewing the

composition of the audience for the NG is accompanied by an interest in the performance of viewing itself. During the 1850 Select Committee Thomas Uwins, the historical genre painter, Royal Academician and assistant keeper at the NG is asked: 'since you have been acquainted with the Gallery, have you observed any improvement in the character of the visitors, with regard to their looking at the pictures' (1850: para 83)? Giving evidence in 1841, to the Committee on Fine Arts his colleague, Col. Thwaites, is asked if workers and artisans 'have... shown much interest in the pictures' (1841: para 2584)? Both are required to see the NG in terms of the functional labour of sight: does vision indicate a type of work? Can the value of the visit be noticed in the viewing habits of the spectator?

These questions are formed in the interstices of two discourses. Firstly, the definition of the NG as a 'traditional' space, which maps out and displays a cursive, sovereignty in the monumental History of Art as Taste or Judgement; and, secondly, the presentation of the NG as a quasi-governmental environment in which, by traversing the historicised avenues of the galleries, visitors are absorbed into the recursive space of national cultural identity. Where the first provides the subject with a viewing itinerary, the second presents the subject with a navigational sequence; where the first grasps in the NG the unchanging order of cultural authority, the second articulates the history of art as the history of paths, routes and avenues; and where the first identifies the NG as a monument, the second identifies it as a matrix. The first position dominates in the early accounts of the NG, those offered by critics commentators and trustees; the second account begins to become the norm in the 1840s and 1850s (Trodd, 2000: 34-7).

The method I have been outlining has certain advantages over the *theoryology* model referred to earlier in this essay. By tackling the critical materials and forces -philosophical, historical and social- that swarm around the public life of the art museum, we can generate a vivid image of the complexity of cultural discourse as it operates within specific moments or periods. Moreover, by stressing the centrality of processes of seeing within the social and discursive life of these cultural institutions, it is possible to connect visions of cultural identity and articulations of political representation without collapsing the former into the latter. This is not a rejection of all forms of theoretical engagement but a resistance to, and critique of, the fantasy of plenitude by which *theoryology* has made itself so suavisly efficient as official academic discourse. Instead of claiming that the art museum is always a manifestation of some extra-institutional power, I want to suggest that critical analysis should engage with the processes which constitute the space in which culture becomes possible as public experience. To be sure, if I am stating that we need to overcome the blindness of *theoryology*, this is precisely because it has overwhelmed our capacity to deal with the way in which material conditions of seeing culture are written into historical accounts of what public art institutions make visible. It is this sense of the relationship between the visibility of the art museum and the public conditions in which knowledge is presented to, or imagined in, experience, that we need to address (Budge, 2000: 43-9).

Generating Vision

We can return to, and, in this process, reformulate, the original questions of this essay: How was the activity of spectatorship seen by writers on the art museum? How was this fascination with observation transcribed into discourse? What inscriptions did it leave there?

In 1848, using the pseudonym 'Parson Lot', Charles Kingsley claims, in the Christian Socialist Journal Politics for the People, that the NG

should be the workman's paradise, and garden of pleasure, to which he goes to refresh his eyes and heart with beautiful shapes and sweet colouring, when they are wearied with dull bricks and mortar, and the ugly colourless things which fill the workshop and factory.

Thus:

If he can get the real air, the real trees, even for an hour, let him take it, in God's

name; but how many a man who cannot spare time for a daily country walk, may slip into the National Gallery... for ten minutes. That garden, at least, flowers as gaily in winter as in summer. Those noble faces on the wall are never disfigured by grief or passion. There, in the space of a single room, the townsman may take his country walk - a walk beneath mountain peaks, blushing sunsets with broad woodlands spreading out below it; a walk through green meadows, under cool mellow shades, and overhanging rocks by rushing brooks... [Thus] his hard-worn heart wanders out free, beyond the grim city- the world of stone and iron, smoky chimneys and roaring wheels, into the world of beautiful things (Kingsley, 1848: 5).

This encounter is a form of enchantment because it wants to imagine the possibility of a pastoral experience for the urban worker. That is, in narrating the experience of this moment in which art is framed by writing, the relationship between substance and surface (bodies and their representation, experience and imagination), becomes unclear, indistinct. Here labour and leisure are traces of each other within the bodily plenitude invoked by the aesthetic. Looking, then, is the fantasy of escape: from power, possession, property; painting an image of what it is to possess something intrinsically valuable and significant. And if gallery space dissolves into the pristine purity of the aesthetic, then this is because the aesthetic is perceived as inherently pastoral. And so, for Kingsley, pictorial space is seen to overwhelm the world of work when the worker projects himself as a subject whose identity is secured by the labouring of vision. Here the perception of painting as the framing of labour is locked into the idea that cultural experience is the frameless facticity of leisure: in walking around the gallery the worker so enters into the experience of nature that he 'watches and watches till he seems to hear the foam whisper, and to see the fish leap...' (Kingsley, 1848: 5). This is to affirm that to write the public experience of art for a popular audience is to write about the processes of aesthetic embodiment. Kingsley's discourse of *ekphrasis* is a form of incantation of the pastoral because it wants to see the complete body that he imagines is retrieved in the moment of encounter between this specific object and this particular subject; and this presentation or performance of presence as pure plenitude is the value Kingsley seeks in writing about and experiencing art.

Is it whimsical, one might ask, to see in Kingsley's 'sentimental' discourse the attempt to conflate different ways of seeing art? Stephen Greenblatt, for instance, characterises the development of the art museum in terms of specific techniques of display. 'Resonance' is an attribute of a collection reaching out from itself to generate a web of associations between objects and their histories. 'Wonder' refers to a system of display where the object works to assimilate the viewer in an endlessly arrested moment of pure presence (Greenblatt, 1991: 42-57). The division, then, is between display-as-reaction and display-as-absorption. Kingsley, it might be claimed, attempts to fuse these models by resisting the normative languages of Historicism and Romanticism, or by transforming the interest in origins and presence into a reverie about a form of looking in which paintings are both physical objects and traces of an illuminating presence or truth beyond themselves.

In this sense, Kingsley's rhetoric is an example of the transcendental Liberalism I referred to at the beginning of this essay. Responding to the question 'what is of visual interest in the art museum?', he answers, 'the display of objects which seek to make the subject participate in a concept of culture as communal experience.' The role of the critic, then, is to invoke a space which simultaneously absorbs the spectator into the visuality of meaning and actuates self-identity. To be sure, the character of Kingsley's interpretation is made even more clear when it is compared to the principles of the historicist discourse, which asserts that the importance of the individual painting is revealed in terms of its relational identity: as an object its function is to confirm multiple connections with other works in the gallery. Within this historicist framework the individual work provides a view of other paintings by affirming the value of a particular perspective from which the collection can be surveyed as a historical totality. Once the gallery is associated with the path the collection becomes a sequence. When Ruskin gives evidence before the 1857 *National Gallery Site Commission*, he, like the majority of commentators, claims that the NG must illustrate and

illuminate the paths of art history, thus to reveal its universal laws and principles. He states:

I think that the chronological arrangement is not connected with the efficiency of the gallery as a matter of study for the artist, but very much so as a means of study, not for persons interested in paintings merely, but for those who wish to examine the general history of nations; and I think painting should be considered by that class of persons as containing precious evidence. It would be part of a philosopher's work to examine the art of a nation as well as its poetry (1857: para 2474).

This differs greatly from the attitude of Kingsley, for whom the path of art does not lead into universal history but restores the power of recollection. What is re-established by Kingsley is memory; what is remembered is a moment in which vision and imagery are one; what happens is that the individual is re-united with a place at once physical and numinous, at once in the painting and inside a primal image the painting labours to restore. Ruskin's evidence, focusing on the relationship between artefacts and cultural structures, operates through synecdoche. If vision moves between the individual object and the national body which created it, this is to sustain an image of the living presence of culture. And thus vision, in directing itself at the interconnected nature of the collection as a historical archive, finds in it a series of readable communities. In addition, through the processes of historicisation, the collection could be identified as a form of organised labour; and Ruskin compares the aristocratic lassitude associated with the contemplation of the private gentlemen's collection with the ordered clarity of the historicist system, defining the former as that which blocks, cancels or frustrates vision. 'Few minds,' he writes,

are strong enough first to abstract and then generalise the characters of paintings hung at random. Few minds are so dull as not at once to perceive the points of differences, were the works of each painter set by themselves. The fatigue of which most persons complain in passing through a picture gallery, as at present arranged, is indeed partly caused by the straining effort to see what is out of sight, but not less by the continual change of temper and of tone of thought, demanded in passing from the work of one master to that of another (Cook and Wedderburn, 1903-12, vol 12: 412-13).

Ruskin defines the technique of the collector as a form of blindness; his interest in the single work erases any real understanding of the historical community of art objects. This entangling of the historical, the aesthetical and the visual -and the concomitant presentation of the NG as a place where objects are subservient to a general law- is widely supported in the period. In 1847, *The Edinburgh Review* supports the spatial articulation of the NG on the basis that this is a system for

gathering together, and arranging in order, such productions as go to illustrate the history of the art itself. Private individuals buy a dozen pictures and hang them up because they like to look at them... but a National Gallery alone can... accumulate with advantage those works which are not always attractive in themselves, though as a series they are highly instructive.... It is only as a series that pictures acquire their full value, and therefore they are particularly fit for an institution which has a corporate existence, independent of the caprice of private will... (212)

Classification, managing experience, frames the collection as an ensemble of relations. A matrix in which objects are held in alignment by the organising principle of history, the collection maps out a landscape of instruction. Thus cultural managers are asked to reframe value and see in the rooms new sequences, new relations; and if it 'is only as a series that... pictures acquire their full value' (212), this is because the NG no longer selects paintings in order to endorse the purity of the canon: now it accumulates specimens in order to delineate the morphology of art history. Arguing in favour of the purchase of early Flemish and Italian paintings, *The Edinburgh Review* states:

such works would not have been attractive to the majority of persons visiting the National Gallery... but we do maintain that, as illustrating the progress of painting before the time of Raphael and Michelangelo, they constitute records of one of the most important chapters in the history of European Civilisation. In this point of view, they are peculiarly fitted for such an institution as a national gallery, where they should be stored up and arranged so as to give them their full historical interest (213).

If within the historicist discourse the function of all objects is to represent the spaces and paths of painting, the duty of the NG is to demonstrate the developmental nature of art and the specific forces, attributes and characteristics it incarnates. Thus the collection is defined as both the totality of physical objects and the powers that are immanent in specific styles of painting. In place of the isolation of the individual painting, we have the endless visibility of the chain, circuit or system (Trodd, 2000: 36).

By way of a conclusion, what, we might ask, can we learn from these accounts of vision and space, these representations of the meaning of the experience of seeing art in public places? Well, it seems to me, that the material we have addressed makes it very difficult to view the art museum as a dominated space, a place producing docile bodies through the generation of disciplinary powers. Although I think Bennett is probably correct when he asserts that it is impossible to disconnect the history of the art museum from the history of those nineteenth-century social programmes and processes which set out to pattern members of the working class as self-fashioning citizens, such spaces were too unstable to project such representations in an unproblematic manner. So instead of seeing the NG as a controlling place or a total institution, it might be more productive to see it as a more fluid, ambivalent or disordered environment. Here Bennett's reference to Foucault's notion of heterotopia might be useful for future research. The idea of heterotopia -the accumulation of competing interests and forces which generate contradictory meanings across a specific locality- certainly represents an important way of describing the sheer strangeness of the public identity of the modern art museum (Foucault, 1986: 26). What I am suggesting is that from the 1840s and 1850s, as it is re-fashioned as a space of mass representation, the NG begins to be marked out as an environment that amasses everything into its structures, systems and processes: different epochs and styles of art; new forms of arranging and exhibiting objects; new methods of remembering the past; new patterns and new communities of cultural recreation; new ways of seeing space and the bodies and objects caught within spatial systems. However, far from protecting the NG against fragmentation and disunity, these new economies of cultural management generated odd juxtapositions, created incongruous social meanings, and multiplied problems in the relationship between modes of cultural display and forms of social assembly.

Two examples of these processes can be cited. First, *contradictory elaborations of temporality*. The historicist discourse claims that it makes available the universal principles of art through the chronological arrangement of the collection; but 'expert' witnesses in the Select Committees assert that, because of what we can call the temporal and spatial matrices of industrial capitalism, members of 'the popular audience' find it difficult to extract aesthetic value from the contents of cultural leisure. The value of the visit for such groups is seen as a perpetual struggle to overcome the conditions in which aesthetic interest loops back into social experience (1836: para 1460; 1850: para 82-3; 1853: para 8187). Therefore cultural commentators tend to look at such figures in order to find evidence that cultural engagement is framed by the experience of work-time. Instead of seeing in the historical arrangement of art the incarnation of different forms of cultural character, the mnemonic process is inverted as members of the 'popular crowd' seek those scenes that reaffirm the centrality of their own experience (Trodd, 1994: 45-47). Secondly, *contradictory elaborations of spatiality*. In the 1820s and 1830s, critics like Hazlitt had seen in the NG 'the permanent form of things' (Hazlitt, 1822: 489-90), a salubrious space that locked out the polluting and ephemeral signs of urban life; and yet, by the 1840s and 1850s, when it begins to attract larger audiences, the quality of aesthetic value is taken to be blocked by the sheer physicality of crowds. To see art is, for Hazlitt, to be absorbed by the vision it creates: it is to enter a space

of pure visibility which is beyond the body; but for cultural managers like Gustav Waagen, to observe the NG is to be confronted with working-class bodies that are mobile signs of urban waste, disease and dirt (Waagen, 1853: 123). These figures make space tactile and visceral; Waagen is denied access to its plastic or kinetic qualities and values by the 'filthy dress', 'disagreeable smell' and offensive 'exhalation' produced by this *soi-disant* 'congregation' (Waagen, 1853: 123; Trodd, 1994: 42-3). Perhaps, then, it is the appearance of this popular audience -an audience tending to transform space itself into a body that the cultural expert must resist- which reveals the heterotopic nature of the art museum; reveals, that is, its endlessly aberrant nature as a social space locked into the perpetual, yet unresolved, mingling of pleasure, hygiene, history, taste, miasma, leisure, work, display, learning, instruction, culture and pollution.

References

- Alpers, S. (1991) 'The Museum as a Way of Seeing', in I. Karp and S. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute.
- Bann, S. (1984) *The Clothing of Clio*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barlow, P. and Trodd, C (eds.) (2000) *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Barker, E (ed.) (1998) *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, New Haven and London: Yale/Open University.
- Baxandall, M. (1991) 'Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects', in I. Karp and S. Lavine (eds.) *Exhibiting Cultures*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute.
- Bennett, T. (1995) *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Budge, G. (2000) 'Poverty and the Picture Gallery: the Whitechapel Exhibitions and the Social Project of Ruskinian Aesthetics', in *Visual Culture in Britain*, (2) 1.
- Cook, E.T. and Wedderburn, A. (eds.) (1903-12) *The Works of John Ruskin, London*, vol 12, London: George Allen
- Crimp, D. (1993) *On the Museum's Ruins*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Duncan, C. (1991) 'Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship', in I. Karp and S. Lavine (eds.) *Exhibiting Cultures*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute.
- Duncan, C. (1995) *Civilizing Rituals*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Lord Farnborough (1826) *Short Remarks and Suggestions Upon Improvements Now Carrying on or Under Consideration*, (privately printed) London.
- Foucault, M. (1986) 'Of Other Spaces' *Diacritics*, 16 (1), 22-27.
- Greenblatt, S. (1991) 'Resonance and Wonder', in I. Karp and S. Levine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institute.
- Hazlitt, W. (1822) 'The Angerstein Gallery', *The London Magazine*, Dec., 488-490.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992) *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London and New York: Routledge.

Illuminated Magazine (1845) 'Trafalgar Square: A Glance at the Past and Present', 213-218.

Mill, J.S (1973) *A System of Logic, in Collected Works*, vol 3 ed. J.M. Robson *et al.*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacGregor, N. (1994) 'Scholarship and the Public', G. Kavanagh (ed.), *Museum Provision and Professionalism*, London and New York: Routledge.

Parliamentary Papers, *Report from the Select Committee on National Monuments of Art* (1841).

Parliamentary Papers, *Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 1850.

Parliamentary Papers, *Select Committee on the National Gallery*, 1853.

Parliamentary Papers, *National Gallery Site Commission*, 1857.

Sherman, D. and Rogoff, I (eds.) (1994) *MuseumCulture*, London and New York: Routledge.

Trodd, C. (1994) 'Culture, Class, City: the National Gallery and the Spaces of Education, 1822-1857', M. Poynton (ed.), *Art Apart*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Trodd, C. (2000) 'The Paths to the National Gallery', in P. Barlow and C. Trodd, (eds.) *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Waagen, G. (1853) 'Thoughts on the New Building to be Erected for the National Gallery of England', *The Art Journal*, May, 122-125.

Waterfield, G. (ed.) (1991) *Palaces of Art*, London: Dulwich Picture Gallery.

* **Colin Trodd** is the co-editor of *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London, Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century, and Victorian Culture and the Idea of the Grotesque*. He is currently preparing two books: *G.F. Watts and the Enchantment of Victorian Painting; Thomas Carlyle and the Modernity of Victorian Art*. He teaches and researches the history of art at the University of Manchester.