

## MUSEUMS AT THE DAWN OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM<sup>2</sup>

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At the beginning of the third millennium a black shadow spreads over Europe. It is the supremacy of economy, the Orwellian "Big Brother". In the face of its needs and its mechanisms, the governments must surrender and the human societies must adapt themselves, subduing each and all individuals; a supremacy which will lead to a universal commercialization. As a result, the care for the community and its individuals will progressively diminish. The concern Europe had for its citizens during the post-World War II years will be sacrificed on the shrine of economy; hospitals, transportation, vital centres of social communality and civil welfare will be privatized and thrown into the commercial arena; moreover, it is predicted a socio-political community might be created, one that is based exclusively on economical factors, highly protected, while the citizens of this community will stay put and accept its assumptions.

This dark shadow of universal commercialization is now attacking the history and the traditions of the European communities. Heritages which in Europe were historically connected to each community, by means of public cultural institutions – museums, libraries, archives – will become private, in pursuit of material gains: the museums will become privately owned foundations, saddling the community with increased taxes for accessing their cultural assets, thus avoiding the direct control of the said community and becoming instruments of economical powers – banks, insurance companies, financial institutions – who will benefit from their political potential, giving them the power associated with communications and the ability to manipulate history and reality. That is the reason why the Museum

remains a delicate instrument, which can be used for good or for evil, in favour of or against the society.

The Museum, placed in 1602 by the Italian philosopher Tommaso Campanella at the core of his Utopian Città del Sole (The City of the Sun) as the main power centre where "our children will know all sciences, before turning 10, without an effort, just by playing" (li figlioli, senza fastidio, giocando si trovano saper tutte le scienze storicamente prima che abbin dieci anni) is a magnificent place, filled with wonders, curiosity and science, but it can also become a place of mystification. It can be used, more or less unconsciously, as an instrument of historical or scientific manipulation. Nevertheless, the Museum will always remain a place of wonder, beauty and knowledge.

But how can it be possible that the Museum is in the same time a blessed place, a seat of science and an instrument of mystification? What can be manipulated in a museum and with what purpose?

I consider the Museum a place of mystification due to two of its fundamental functions – object de-contextualization (removing from its context) and object interpretation. These two allow for a profound manipulation of the symbolic significances of the heritage preserved in a museum, which due to its own value, as a result of the communication by real objects, makes plausible each one of its interpretations.

### Manipulation by de-contextualization

It is a known fact that just by bringing an object into a museum you de-contextualize it, because this simple fact induces situations, spaces and relationships that do

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<sup>2</sup>Intervention presented at the European Conference of Natural History Museums, Bucharest, "Grigore Antipa" Museum, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2008.

not match the reality in which the object was created and for which it was manufactured. Removed from their original environment and introduced into a completely artificial one, artistic, material and archaeological artefacts as well as scientific artefacts will lose their initial meaning, gain a new content, hence they will be at the discretion of any potential manipulation.

Both the so-called “universal” museums with collections from various geographic or cultural backgrounds such as Louvre or British Museum, as well as Western exotic art museums, such as Guimet or ethnographic or natural history museums are artificial dwellings, due to their random origins and the mixture of their collections, and due to the original meaning of the displayed artefacts. Nowadays, the modern trend in museum science, far away from diminishing the conceptual uprooting of objects, actually is inclined to enhance de-contextualization by increasing the artificiality of the museum display. The search for, at any cost, the originality of the museums’ architecture and display, which is very present nowadays lead to the creation of display environments increasingly distancing themselves from day-to-day life, for which most of the museum artefacts had been conceived and produced. For example, the draft of the new ethnographic museum conceived by Jean Nouvel, and which will be built in Paris on Quai Branly. In the case of this museum, the ethnographic artefacts, preserved by the Museum of Man (Musée de l’Homme), although displaced from their original context, are still displayed in a truly esthetical manner, filtered by the Western inclination for everything exotic. Museums such as Guggenheim in Bilbao, called museums by themselves by Horst Bredekamp<sup>3</sup>, represent the peak of an artificial ambience, so artificially that they barely preserve a connection to the objects they should display. Their value

fades, becoming irrelevant compared to the museum-monument.

In such a situation, manipulation becomes not just possible, but extremely easy.

### **Manipulation by interpretation**

The museums are places preserving the artefacts related to the past, history, culture and identity of a community, namely the symbols on which the very existence of that community is based on. Museums are not mere value containers; they have the duty to interpret what they detain and to share these interpretations with the society. Therefore, museums are scientific centres, research institutions where the artefacts eligible to be a part of cultural heritage are being selected. Here they are analyzed and related to specific spatial-temporal references, becoming an integral part of the historical, scientific and artistic discourse. As for the cultural heritage, museums are not limited to a passive activity; they also perform an active part: the creation of the cultural heritage of the community.

The creation of the heritage is now, without a doubt, a purely subjective operation. The created senses are not absolute, but relative, derived from a vision on reality conceived by the museum as a result of the collaborations between the personalities of the museum. That is the reason why the museum can transmit neither an absolute culture, nor any truth. The museum transmits its own culture and its own subjective truth.

### **The museum as an instrument of manipulation**

In both cases – de-contextualization and patrimony creation – what the museum proposes to the public always represents a manipulation of reality, sometimes unconscious, but often subjected to the precise will to interpret reality according to

<sup>3</sup>Bredekamp H., 1999 – *Il museo di se stesso*. Nuova Museologia, 1:2-4.

third party interests. As mentioned before, the museum itself is an authority, since it displays real objects considered less prone to manipulation than printed words in the media or TV images. Well, even so, this authority, together with its intrinsic subjectivity, turns museums into powerful means of manipulation of memory, history and identity.

### **The museum as an instrument of power**

The contents of a museum can therefore be interpreted differently and, as a consequence, manipulated. There is no country in the world, including democratic nations, in which the dominant society groups are not in the same time the dominant political, social, economic, ethnic or religious forces, and in which these groups do not control, or attempt to control the museums and their contents. Finally, the dominant group will attempt to create identities suitable for the historic backgrounds and power which led to their legitimacy. Thus, museums often become places of political confrontation, of ideological debates and of social tensions, places helping various factions of the society fighting for supremacy to impose their cultural model and to create counterfeited identities based on a partial interpretation of history. Through museums, the groups in power try either to proclaim their legitimacy to lead, inventing a "politically correct", linear

history in an artificial way and proving they are the rightful successors of this history, or to increase their own authority and prestige, peeling away the times of this history and making their roots as old as possible.

### **Conclusion: the museum under control**

Using museums for manipulating history and culture requires a control of authorities on the display strategy or the communication method of the museum. In both cases, either if there is a desire to create a mystified significance of the patrimony, or if the manipulation is exerted in the communication stage, the control involves destroying or supervising the intellectual community of the museum, in other words of the global product of all intellectual personalities working at the museum, hence of the museum's culture.

It is what is happening nowadays in many countries in which the political control over museums, justified by economical theories, is accomplished by the privatization of institutions, leading to the destruction of the museum's culture and of the its intellectual staff.

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