

Mediating Our Difficult Past

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History museums have a responsibility to bear witness to the past, however difficult that past may be (Kavanagh in Sandell, 2002: 116)

This is a paper about museums and the challenge of mediating history; about what it means to re-present history, and, on occasion, to ask communities to experience – or re-experience - difficult pasts, in the various spaces of the museum (both online and offline).

The paper emerges from a number of ongoing research projects that I'm involved in, but most specifically the AHRC funded Silence, Memory and Empathy Network. I want to demonstrate the focus of this work by drawing attention to some museum 'texts' that make the challenge of history evident. We will see how themes of silence, memory and empathy are ensnared in texts that seek to mediate - by which I mean represent, but perhaps also 'manage' – difficult pasts. But first, some context.

The Challenging History network

Since 2009 I have been one of the Challenging History group's core participants in the UK, working to facilitate opportunities for knowledge exchange, training and scholarly reflection on museums practice in relation to difficult subject matters. It has become clear from the unique and extraordinary insight this work has afforded me, that 'bearing witness' (to use Kavanagh's phrase on the slide) is rife with complexity, involving institutional, professional, personal and ethical dimensions which are not easily navigable, or reconcilable within heritage work (Kidd, 2011).

So, what do we mean when we talk about challenging histories or our difficult past?

Firstly, certain heritages are often considered to be 'challenging' in their (often contested) subject matters, the agendas they reveal, the political debates they feed into and stem from, the emotions that they engage, and the lack of any sense of 'resolution' to be found in their exploration. They ask uncomfortable questions about our humanity and inhumanity, raise issues around legacy, apology, ownership, voice, repatriation, classification, memorialisation, memory and forgetting.

But challenging history is of course about more than just subject matter.

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Approaches to work that falls within the remit of 'difficult and sensitive' have the potential to do things differently: to challenge the conventional narrative of 'history' itself. It often involves interpretation from different perspectives, revealing hidden, sidelined and forgotten artefacts of culture, and even of our social life and behaviours, exposing the process of history 'making' itself as inherently biased and at its worst, bigoted. Heritage is thus increasingly recognised as in itself a contested site, subjective and subjectifying, incoherent, multiple and of course 'difficult'.

There have been subtle changes in our understanding of heritage 'construction' more broadly, recognising and placing increased emphasis on personal accounts, witnesses and individual experiences rather than any grand narrative. It is recognised that the museum literally, spatially, and institutionally *bears witness* to a potentially infinite complex of visitor narratives and interpretations.

One approach we see more and more is seeking to share the burden of responsibility with the audiences themselves, that is, to engage them in processes of collaboration, participation and co-production, in the very patterns and practices of their representation, often through digital means. This is of course a common response to the 'problem' of representation that we see across the media and culture – and one that is itself rife with complexity (my other area of research interest is around digital media so you start to see how these things overlap).

The texts...

I want to take a moment to briefly outline three cases where silence, memory and empathy intersect in a discourse about museum ethics – especially in relation to how and in what ways museum texts make us 'feel'.

1. The portrait: Uncle Rudi, Lidice Memorial
2. The exhibition: The Museum of Free Derry
3. The online game: Over the Top, Canadian War Museum

1. UNCLE RUDI, portraiture

I want to start with a very typical museological textual encounter; with a portrait such as *Uncle Rudi* [google image it]. A portrait is, of course, never neutral - in the moment of its production, or in the moments of its reception. Artists produce such 'likenesses' in particular ways at particular times and places, but they may come to provenance at different times and places. Yet in gallery interpretations context is obscured; instead we are encouraged to think in very superficial terms about a portraits production: the materials,

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colours, techniques, dates, setting, perhaps pose, status and symbols, but not to ask larger questions about the wider context for production. We accept them, as it were, at 'face' value rather than engaging with the notion that according to Harry Berger, 'Portraits tell stories'.

Uncle Rudi is a fascinating example of how difficult and contentious material heritage can be. The painting, by Gerhard Richter in 1965, depicts his Uncle, Rudi: the Nazi in the family. The painting is based on a photograph, of Rudi posing slightly awkwardly, smiling before he left for action, where he would eventually die in 1944. This portrait was produced as an act of quiet confrontation – an anti-portrait if you will. The blurring effect is signature Richter, and seen, in this portrait, as a way of commenting on our inability to comprehend, acknowledge and atone for the actions of our ancestors. It is a treatise on silence and memory.

In 1966 Richter gifted the painting to the Lidice Memorial where it remains a massively contentious part of its collection.

Lidice is a town in the Czech Republic that was completely destroyed on Hitler and Himmler's orders, in 1942. Most of the townsfolk were murdered, with a few hundred deported to concentration camps where most were gassed, and many children Germanised.

The painting is a toweringly difficult text for the Lidice Memorial. The local community have made their feelings clear to curators. The smiling Nazi does not belong on display in the galleries. It's capacity to engender emotion makes it too 'hot'. Instead, due to Richter's popularity, *Uncle Rudi* travels for frequent appearances around the globe; at the National Portrait Gallery, Tate, in New York and in galleries throughout Germany where it is displayed without suggestion of its contentious ownership. It makes the Memorial money.

Uncle Rudi demonstrates the difficulty at the heart of interpreting challenging histories: the gulfs that remain between what is said and what is silenced (or allowed to remain silent). We might ask whose voices are allowed to speak on such a portrait's behalf? To ascribe it value (or rather interpret value). Is there a consensus about its 'meaning'? and does that possess transcultural validity? What emerges from the study of *Uncle Rudi*, is an insight into the quiet partiality and incoherence of 'display'.

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And so, how can a museum, gallery or archive make way for multiplicity, complexity, and contestation when such an individual text is amplified to the level of 'the exhibition'? and should it?

2. THE MUSEUM OF FREE DERRY

Those of you who attended the tour of the Museum of Free Derry will I'm sure, Like me, have found the presentation of our guide a particularly insightful, and moving, introduction to the exhibition – which gives an overview of the civil rights movement in Derry, the creation of Free Derry, and the (contested) events of Bloody Sunday in 1972, where 14 unarmed demonstrators were shot dead not 15 minutes from where we now sit.

This is a museum that seeks to tell the story 'from the people's point of view'. The exhibition itself consists of 33 wall panels giving an overview of events, alongside a number of artifacts, photos and film, much of which originated from the families of the dead. All are juxtaposed in this narrative of 'a community without'. This is a museum with a stated mission, to contribute to the continued 'struggle for democracy' and for the 'truth' of those events. But it also seeks to set the story of the people of Derry as a struggle that sits alongside civil rights movements in other contexts; South America (for example).

Here, as in all exhibitions but perhaps more crucially so, the objects are a start point not an end in and of themselves, and in the hands of our guide, heritage becomes a 'process' of passing on and receiving memories, not just the artefacts themselves (Smith, 2006). The new museology movement (since the 1970s) has been concerned with recognising not only the multiple nature of 'texts' and the transience of 'history', but also the problematics inherent in any quest for 'truth' and for 'authenticity'. This can make various methods of interpretation used at museums and heritage sites problematic, but equally can be seen as a liberation from the tyranny of an ordered, one-dimensional, fixed - yet still fictitious - 'past'.

Bloody Sunday is of course a difficult history, and one that is still un-resolved for those who continue to experience it – as our guide, whose brother died on that day in January 1972 made very clear. Much remains silenced in the narrative that the museum commits to text – necessarily so – the last wall panels remain to be written even to this day. Here is a truth that has been silenced for 40 years, but in the exhibition, that silence is ripped open, with an audio soundtrack that echoes throughout the gallery – a sound recording of the events as they unfolded, the shots, and the aftermath. We are denied silence, and induced to 'feel'.

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3. OVER THE TOP and ONLINE GAMES

War games are increasingly common as a means of training soldiers, and our experiences of military conflict, according to Alec Charles, become more game-like all the time. It is perhaps a natural extension of such a trend that museums concerned with educating people about war might follow suit. In a recent study of online games I carried out, 20th century conflict emerged as a common focus. *Over the Top* is one such example (google it – Canadian War Museum – Over the Top).

Over the Top is an 'interactive adventure' set during the First World War, which seeks to provide players with an opportunity to 'experience life in the trenches'. At times, the narrative is linear, unfolding sequentially, but then the drama stops and there are decisions to be made. The player assumes the role of a soldier, giving their name, the name of a friend, and the name of their home town in order to give personal relevance. These details are then written into the narrative; the friend is injured and (depending on the choices you make) may die leaving the 'odour of burnt flesh'.

This is an immersive role-play of sorts, one where you encounter gas attacks, the gore of war, and are rewarded for killing German soldiers. In all scenarios encountered in this game, the player eventually dies, prompting a telegram to their parents informing them that their child has been killed in duty.

But is this akin to empathy? And ultimately comprehension? This might be a sobering exercise in the futility of war, but there is something squeamish in the exegesis of the empathetic engagement.

In this game especially, as one replays scenes hoping desperately for a route that might mean survival (if not for your friend, then for you), it is difficult to escape the 'revelation that one's feeling of self-determination was only ever an illusion' (Charles, 2010:68). The pre-programmed linearity of the game means agency is an impossibility.

Empathy

In all of these examples, there are things to be said about how museum texts induce us to 'feel'. One of the stumbling blocks we come across again and again in the network is how and whether museums should make sense of such manipulation of emotions as a learning outcome. It vexes them greatly.

As one of the principles of psychology, empathy has been understood as when a person 'feels her/himself into the consciousness of another person' (Wispé 1987). It is an other-

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oriented feeling, a social interaction that can lead to a number of outcomes, not least, a motivation to respond with care, or with action. But what is its use-value in this kind of context? What happens in situations and scenarios where empathy means weakness is all the visitor gets? Where strength necessary to survive is inaccessible? And what are the responsibilities of the museum to hold people safe during such encounters? Empathy is of course not inevitably or universally a positive experience, nor is it without its limitations. Museums can only partly direct the experiential elements of a museum encounter; they can design the exhibits, dictate the formal structure, but they cannot control how the museum will be inhabited and 'felt'.

The literature shows that without due care, exhibition and experience 'designers' and educators might run the risk of *over*-exposing visitors to representations and experiences of trauma that can result in 'empty empathy' (Kaplin, 2011), or create an 'empathy paradox' where the empathy process has a narrowing effect leading to a monocular and incredibly partial reading of events (Jackson and Kidd, 2008).

Perhaps the best we can hope for is forms of 'empathic unsettlement'. Here, the unsettling nature of empathy itself highlights the very limits of understanding (Williams, 2010), raising questions about what can and can't be known, learnt, felt, and made sense of. Such an approach prevents over-identification and/or harmonizing narratives, and acknowledges that our understanding of the other can never be complete. It acknowledges the limits of empathy: that empathic accuracy might never be achieved, that it might be akin to manipulation, and that in the final analysis our capacity for self-orientation might exceed that for other-orientation. But it raises other questions also: In the museums sector, is the end point of empathy knowledge or action? And what is the relationship between experience and comprehension? (Steyn, 2013)

We need to think more about the relationship between a museums system of representation and how it transforms into an experiential one if we wish to understand how and in what ways experiences of a challenging museum text will be meaningful.

