'MUSEUMS INTO THE MILLENNIUM'

The Construction, Reception and Future of the Past

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ABSTRACT

The dawning of a new Millennium has encouraged global debate and reflection upon the significance of our past, our present and our future. This period of self-reflection has also coincided with intense uncertainty and reflection within museums, as new technologies and changing approaches towards history and the past have raised profound questions about the very identity and even existence of museums.

This thesis explores some of these themes and presents a variety of empirical data on both the construction and reception of museum exhibitions. Underpined by wider theoretical debates about the cultural transmission of ideology, the first part of the thesis draws upon 49 exploratory interviews with a variety of museum staff to unpack the processes determining both the choice of appropriate exhibition topics and the inclusion or exclusion of particular artifacts and perspectives. I argue that a number of developments - such as the growing dominance of commercialism - are impacting upon the treatment of the past by museums in a number of significant and sometimes disturbing ways. The second part of the thesis presents my findings from 200 semi-structured interviews with visitors, which attempted to explore the nature of audience reception within museums. The analysis of this data suggests that, in contrast to the views of some museum professionals and academics, many museum visitors are highly active and discerning in their interpretation of exhibitions and can sometimes be acutely aware that they are witnessing a highly selective presentation of the past. The practical implications of these findings for the work of museums are also drawn out. The third and final part of this thesis draws together these empirical findings to consider their wider implications for the future of museums. I conclude by suggesting that, as we enter the new Millennium, museums and their work seem set to undergo radical change. The future of our past is never likely to be the same again.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The number of museums in the world is now surprisingly large. The UK alone has some 2,400 museums, with new ones opening all of the time, while Europe as a whole has some 13,500 museums. In turn, there are some 7,000 museums in North America, some 2,800 in Australasia and some 2,000 in the rest of the world. The scale of museum visiting is similarly huge - more than 70 million visits are made to British museums every year. In short, the potential of museums for informing cultures of their past and their heritage is huge, which makes their large scale neglect by academics all the more surprising.

The rising number of museums, however, does not indicate a developing security - far from it. On the contrary, museums are increasingly finding themselves struggling to delimit their role and existence, and just what it is that they do. As Macdonald (1996) points out, the widespread, and in some cases quite dramatic fall in visitor numbers, the selectiveness of many visitors and the problems and cost of storage and conservation are all making the contemporary museum a potentially endangered institution, in which debate about its role and position is rife. The rapid rise of alternative electronic media has also led to a real questioning of museums and just what position they are seeking to fulfil. As Sola (1992, p.106) notes, *'the truth is, we do not know any more what a museum institution is.'*

Nonetheless, the development of museums has led to an important resurgence of interest in them, as they have broadened considerably their means of communication, and the breadth of topics with which they deal. Exhibitions covering topics such as women's history, which were once deemed to be highly peripheral to the legitimate work of museums, have now begun to take precedence and, importantly, it has become increasingly apparent that these topics can play an important role in broadening the appeal of museums to groups that were previously somewhat excluded, such as women. Indeed, it is important to recognise the considerable wider importance that museums have in terms of helping us, as a society, to understand and appreciate our heritage and our past. The messages and images that museums portray may carry very considerable influence.

The developing recognition that museums are ostensibly *'an artifact of our own society'* (Ames 1992, p.44), has increasingly seen them being viewed as a legitimate focus for academic study, and not before time. This is the context within which this research lies. Ultimately, it represents an attempt to employ original empirical data to explore neglected issues and develop our existing knowledge of museums as we enter the twenty first century. This research focuses in turn upon three broad yet related areas - the processes by which museum exhibitions are constructed; the manner in which museum visitors may receive these exhibitions and, finally, what these findings may suggest about the future for museums as we enter the new Millennium.

The research project

As I have mentioned, this research is specifically concerned with using empirical work on museums to investigate and expand upon many of the pressing questions and conundrums facing contemporary museums. Yet this thesis also attempts to locate these empirical findings in terms of their wider sociological and theoretical context. In the

work that has already been conducted on museums and the construction of the past, for instance, there is often an assumption, implicit or otherwise, that museums effectively serve as cultural transmitters of a dominant ideology:

> *'Dominant versions of reality tend to suit dominant groups and to uphold a certain social order. As tourists moving among Europe's sights, we are moving among symbols that explain the world in ways that justify the authority of the few over the many.'* (Horne 1984, p.1)

In short, the notion of a dominant ideology or ideologies and its effective transmission through museum exhibitions remains a crucial theme in much existing work on museums. But is it actually based on a false premise? Are museums, as apparatus of ideological transmission, representing a coherent ideology? Moreover, are museum visitors as ubiquitously influenced by this transmitted culture as many commentators have suggested? These simplistic approaches to the work and nature of museums are now finally being questioned, and this work forms an intrinsic part of this process. In the words of Macdonald (1996, p.4):

> *'...the older theorising of museums (and of social and cultural studies more generally) is too monodimensional and insufficiently nuanced to account for the specificity or the complexity of the museum. For example, to look at museums only as agencies of social control, is too simple.'*

Most commentators agree that the museum field is characterised by a paucity of academic work. As Urry (1996) notes, the concern of society with the past has been largely and surprisingly neglected by social scientists. The sociological theorising that has taken place has invariably - particularly in terms of the Marxist-conflict models of society - tended to assume *'a process of reproducing social relations from the past to the present and on to the future.'* (p.45). Importantly, Urry then goes on to claim that :

> *'...what is lacking in such accounts is a clear and coherent account of just how*

> *societies do in fact 'remember' the past. There is little analysis of the precise mechanisms by which societies remember and incorporate the past into the present. How do such mechanisms actually work and what are the contradictions inherent in that process? What are the different mechanisms by which this remembering occurs in different kinds of society?'* (1996, p.46)

This research aims to empirically investigate some of these themes by concentrating on the two essential elements of this debate surrounding museums and ideological transmission - namely, the process of ideological construction and, in turn, the process of ideological reception. In this context, these concerns manifest themselves with an examination, firstly, of the processes by which museum exhibitions are constructed and, secondly, with an examination of how these exhibitions and displays are then received by their visitors.

The construction of museum exhibitions

It is generally accepted that history, as an open-ended experience, is often organised or constructed in certain ways, particularly in museums. What is less clear, however, is just *how* this history is constructed and the rationale behind it. Museums, for instance, have enormous stocks of material - much of which they never exhibit (Lowenthal 1985). Yet how are choices made about what is, and what is not, presented? We already know, for example, that:

> *'It is rare that the perceptions of visitors, their interests, are consulted. Decisions are made according to structures of relevance that relate to the internal concerns of the museum and its immediate context, including its political network.'* (Hooper-Greenhill 1988, p.228)

What is less clear, however, is the subtle nature of this relationship and the linkage between ideological frameworks and actual decision-making. Do those involved in the

construction of museums, for example, in some way consciously omit or censor certain themes, as some have suggested (see Kirby 1988), or is it a more unconscious and ad hoc process? Porter (1988), for instance, suggests that the exclusion and marginalisation of women in museum accounts of history is a largely unconscious one, in essence arising from the fact that museums and museum staff unconsciously adopt dominant norms and ideas. Moreover, has this relationship altered with the elevated importance attached to commercial issues within museums and the more general move towards 'postmodern' museum forms (see Urry 1990)?

In short, this first research theme is concerned with uncovering the processes involved in the construction of museum exhibitions and the nature of the behaviour and decision-making of museum professionals in this process.

The reception of museum exhibitions

My second research theme concentrates on how people receive and interpret museum exhibitions. For instance, are people aware that they are seeing the selective organisation and construction of the past in museums, or do they see museum exhibitions as somehow objective presentations? The common notion (see Hitchens 1990) usually assumes that most consumers of history in museums perceive them as ostensibly neutral. But is this really the case? It may be, for example, that museum visitors are far more conscious of the history-making process than has usually been acknowledged, particularly when one considers that they are often better educated than their contemporaries? Similarly, just what is the influence upon reception where a visitor may have a memory of the subjects being presented and where, in the words of Davis (1979), one is faced with the complexities that are brought with *'the constraint of a lived past'*?

The notion of writers such as Hewison (1987), who implicitly assumes that presentations of history and heritage can somehow only be interpreted in certain ways and that meanings are unambiguously transferred to visitors, have been criticised before, because of the fact that here is *'no sense of the complexity by which different visitors can gaze upon the same set of objects and read them in a quite different way.'* (Urry 1990, p.111). It may be, therefore, that even if museums are transmitting coherent ideological messages, their reception by those who use museums is neither coherent or cohesive. Yet there have been few systematic attempts to unravel this process of ideological production and reception within the context of museums - with some notable exceptions, such as Merriman (1988, 1989a and b). This implies a significant gap in our understanding of museums. To unlock these issues undoubtedly has much to offer our current understanding of the processes involved in the construction and transfer of ideological models of history and the past in the context of museums. Furthermore, in light of recent developments in the museum field, this knowledge also has significant practical implications:

> *'... the need is now very pressing for qualitative information to justify new ambitions, to attract new forms of support, and to account for the spending of often large sums of money.'* (Hooper-Greenhill 1988, p.220)

The practical implications of my empirical work forms the third and final focus of this thesis. In particular, I argue that my research throws some important light on the changing nature and work of the contemporary museum. I move on from this to make some tentative observations about the future of museums and their treatment of the past as we enter the new Millennium.

Before we move on to consider these issues in more detail, however, an obvious starting point must be a consideration of what exactly we mean when we refer to 'museums'. Given the theoretical context within which much work on museums has

been couched, it may also be helpful to briefly examine the concept of 'ideology', and how it has traditionally been viewed in the context of museums. Let us begin by considering the definition of museums.

What is a 'museum'?

The term '*museum*' is an ancient one, coming from the Greek word '*mouseion*', referring to any centre in which learning was cultivated. Yet, in part reflecting the ambiguity of its Greek derivative, defining just what is meant by the term '*museum*' is a difficult and complex task particularly because museums are far from homogeneous. It is also a term clouded by our own preconceptions.

As Wittlin (1949, p.9) notes, most definitions tend to identify the themes of preservation, instruction and enjoyment as being central to museums and the role they play. Yet these themes are so vague as to be almost meaningless. '*Instruction*', for instance, can imply a whole multitude of meanings, as can '*enjoyment*'. This ambiguity is illustrated by the definition offered by the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

> '*Today the museum is an institution that assembles, studies, and conserves objects representative of nature and man in order to set them before the public for the sake of information, education, and enjoyment. By this definition, the term museum includes not only those institutions known as such but also art galleries (non-commercial), picture galleries, secular and ecclesiastical treasures, certain historical monuments, permanent open-air exhibitions, botanical and zoological gardens, aquariums, and libraries and archives in so far as they are open to the public.*'

Similarly, the Museums Association's definition of a museum is an interesting one. They define a museum as:

> '*an institution which collects, documents, preserves, exhibits and interprets material*

evidence and associated information for the public benefit.' (Museums Association 1987, p.6)

The implication is that the definition of museums is almost limitlessly broad and, in many respects, this is not inaccurate. However, I would suggest that a number of refinements can be made to this definition in order to give it more of a focus, but they are largely dependent upon exactly how one attempts to delimit the field of study. The key to the definition of a museum is ostensibly the issue of *'preservation'* - literal or otherwise. Consequently, all institutions which seek to collect or preserve objects and then present them to the public for the purposes of education or enjoyment may be defined as museums. This could also include, of course, libraries and archives but these could be excluded as they deal solely with books and official documents respectively and they have separate identities of their own. Those institutions which deal solely with live animals or plants could similarly be excluded. Museums can then be loosely divided into three broad categories: *'art museums'; 'science museums'* and *'historical museums'*.

'Art museums' may be broadly defined as those museums for whom their exhibits are displayed primarily for their aesthetic value. Initially, of course, this implies traditional galleries, with their presentation of fine art, paintings and sculpture. But they may also include art in the broader definition of the term, such as exhibits of film and the cinema. *'Science museums'*, on the other hand, represent those museums concerned with displaying objects which demonstrate the nature of science and which seek to improve understanding and appreciation of the contributions made by science to humanity. Bedini, for instance, defines a science museum as *'... a repository for the preservation and exhibition of collections relating specifically to the physical sciences and technology.'* (1965, p.1)

'Historical museums' , on the other hand, represent all those museums whose

collections are concerned with the presentation of an historical perspective. Yet this is virtually the only common theme that unites historical museums, for they too are far from homogeneous. Art galleries and science museums which concentrate on an historical perspective, for instance, are ostensibly historical museums. Moreover, even quite explicitly historical museums can be highly diverse - ranging from museums of national or regional history, to personal memorials, to the increasingly popular open-air heritage centres.

It largely goes without saying, however, that these three ideal types are just that - idealised - and the distinctions between museum types are undoubtedly blurred (see Morton 1988). It is clear, for instance, that many museums fit happily into two or more of these classifications, particularly the smaller, more ad hoc, museums that often avoid specialisation. All of this makes an adequate definition of museums difficult.

Having briefly considered the definition of museums, it may also be helpful to introduce the notion of 'ideology' here and the manner in which it has pervaded many accounts of museums and the selective nature of history.

The 'dominant ideology thesis'

The concept of 'ideology' is a popular yet flexible one in sociology. In simple terms, it refers to a body of beliefs or ideas underpining society - most usually, a body of beliefs or ideas which legitimise the subordination of one group by another. Traditionally, the notion of 'ideology' has been most closely linked to the work of Marx and Engels, who emphasised that capitalist societies are permeated by ideas or ideologies which are, firstly, largely generated by the economic structures of a society and, secondly, are necessarily distorted by class interests, presenting a view of the world from the perspective of a ruling class. Central to these arguments is the *'dominant ideology*

thesis' which, in simple terms, argues that the ruling class establish their own ideas and ideology as dominant in society and these are then absorbed and accepted by subordinate classes. It is claimed that this largely accounts for the maintenance of capitalist class relations. In other words, working class subordination in capitalist societies is largely the result of the cultural and ideological dominance achieved by the capitalist ruling class:

> *'The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.'* (Marx and Engels 1970, p.61)

In the words of Merriman:

> *'According to this formulation, the dominant ideology penetrates and permeates the consciousness of the working class, who come to see and experience reality only through the conceptual categories of the dominant class. They therefore fail to understand their exploited position in the capitalist system ...'* (1988, p.40)

Gramsci expands on these ideas by referring to the way in which the dominant class establishes its control through largely ideological means as *'hegemony'*. Central to this notion is the belief that the crude use of force or coercion is simply inadequate for guaranteeing maintained social stability in modern society. For Gramsci and many subsequent Marxist writers, therefore, the key to why dominant classes are able to maintain control of society is by winning consent through the use of ideology. This is embodied in the major institutions of capitalist society: education; the mass media, the legal system and so on - what Althusser refers to as *'ideological state apparatus'*. Consequently, because the ruling class is able to exert its ideological dominance and make its own class interests appear to be the interests of the whole of society, there is ostensibly little need to use force or coercion to maintain control. Sometimes, however, it is necessary for the dominant class to use coercion, rather than consent, to maintain control and this use of force is operationalised by what Althusser calls *'repressive state*

apparatus', which include the police and army. It is thus through a combination of consent and coercion, although most usually consent, that the ruling class maintain their dominance. As Merriman (1988, p.41) points out, these observations in relation to ideology are important in the context of museums and heritage because they specifically identify museums as a means of ideological incorporation by which class dominance is maintained.

Certainly, in much of the work that has already been done on museums and the construction of the past, there is often an assumption, implicit or otherwise, that museums effectively serve as cultural transmitters of a dominant ideology:

> '*... history is used as a political resource whereby national identities are constructed and forms of power and privilege justified and celebrated ... (museums) have become an important vehicle for representing the past, and, therefore, have been drawn into the debate.*' (Lumley 1988, p.2).

> '*From a radical perspective, heritage conservation becomes a cultural production of the ideological state apparatuses through which a society's dominant class establishes its hegemonic definition of the ideological universe.*' (Ehrentraut 1991, p.50)

There appears to be good evidence to support this view, at least on a superficial level. For example, it is widely acknowledged that museums frequently adhere to presentations of the past which emphasise a unilinear and progressive model of change and development. This is particularly pronounced in the Pitt Rivers' museum at Oxford, for instance, which sought to show the evolutionary nature of technology, and the *'processes of gradual development'* (Pitt Rivers 1891, p.116). Indeed, in his assessment of the Pitt Rivers' museum, Chapman has suggested that :

> *'It was at least in its final realisation, a vast propaganda device, designed to convince the working classes of the fundamental necessity of life's present*

inequalities and the need for cautious advancement in the future.' (1991, pp. 137-38)

Undoubtedly, this notion of progressive change has been identified, particularly by the Frankfurt School, as an important theme in dominant ideologies and the legitimation of the relations of production. This is because:

'... the inculcation of a belief in progress and improvement is a most effective way of maintaining the power of dominant groups. People are led to believe that the betterment of their lot is best achieved by letting the social process run its course unhindered.' (Merriman 1988, p.40)

In many respects, it is not particularly surprising that the dominant ideology thesis has represented the predominant theoretical basis within which much work on museums has been couched. In part, its centrality has arisen from the observation - widely endorsed - that museum displays are almost invariably selective in their presentations:

'It is clear that the 'heritage' that mostly gets remembered is that of elites or ruling classes ... This produces a one-sided history which under-represents the poor, those who lived in the north, women, slaves, the disabled, the middle classes, convicts, industrial workers, immigrants, Scottish, Welsh and people living in northern Ireland; and it conceals the social relationships of domination by which that ruling class exerted power.' (Urry 1996, p.57)

Until recently, for instance, museum accounts of history and the past were only rarely populist. Similarly, many museums have tended towards a reconstruction of history which is highly patriarchal:

'The objects on tourist schedules become symbols which can reinforce the dominant values of the public culture ... in European tourism there is one value that would always be reiterated - the continuing legitimation of male authority.' (Horne 1984, p.4)

There is also evidence to suggest that many museums are often ethnocentric. Horne (1984, pp.31-32; pp.180-83), for instance, goes to some lengths to illustrate the distorted images of the Ottoman Empire presented by many Western museums and how, more specifically, many Western art museums effectively devalue and exclude Byzantine art.

The selective nature of museum exhibitions is particularly pronounced in many military museums. Horne, for instance, looks in some detail at how military museums across Europe treat the First World War which, by any standards, was a truly apocalyptic conflict. Yet its interpretation by museums is intriguing. Several studies have noted that museum displays often exclude negative aspects of the past (Ahmed 1991, p.13), and a similar pattern is identifiable in the way in which military museums treat the First World War. In particular, it is notable how they have tended to understate and even ignore military failures, whilst simultaneously emphasising military successes:

> *'Like the Austrians, the Military Museum in Istanbul also shrinks from the war's disasters. There is some celebration of the defence of the Dardanelles - the last victory of the Ottoman empire - but almost nothing about the fronts on which the Turks, at the end, collapsed and saw the collapse of all their conquests.'* (Horne 1984, p.225)

Hewison (1987, p.136) makes a similar point when he highlights the way in which the tactical and military disaster embodied in the Dunkirk evacuation of 1940 has been generally reinterpreted by museums and other media in terms such as the *'Dunkirk spirit'*.

The relative exclusion of women from museum accounts of history has also been noted before (see Porter 1988). Yet in museum presentations of conflict, the patriarchal nature of exhibits is often particularly pronounced. The National Army Museum, for

instance, displayed many thousands of uniforms, of which only one was a woman's (Rosenberg 1985, p.200). It is perhaps ironic that whilst attempts to popularise history have promoted the inclusion of women in museum displays, the nature of this inclusion has sometimes endorsed stereotypes:

> *'In many military museums, women are absent, deliberately excluded by labels which assume that the word "man" speaks for the whole population, or shown only in the role of nurse, whore or domestic servant.'* (Wilkinson and Hughes 1991, p.24)

The elitist images of past warfare are similarly notable. One of the most ostentatious examples of this is identified by Horne (1984, p.102). Namely, the late 1970s saw London's Imperial War Museum devote a gallery equivalent in size to their gallery on trench warfare to the Duke of Gloucester, the Queen's uncle, and to his lavish collection of military uniforms and insignia. When an exhibition to a man who had never commanded a military unit or actually fought in a war is accorded equivalent importance to the portrayal of trench warfare, in which millions of soldiers lost their lives, one cannot avoid concluding that the presentations museums give are often somehow selective. The obvious problem, over which many commentators have argued, is *why* museum displays are almost invariably selective?

Explaining the selective nature of museum exhibitions

In many respects, the selective nature of many exhibitions is not particularly surprising. Following the large body of work on historiography, which examines some of the philosophical and methodological issues raised by historical accounts, it is widely accepted that any presentation of history, of which museums are an integral part, cannot be an objective and value-free presentation of the past (see Gagnon 1982). Much material has shown that history, by its very nature, must be subjective. As Lucien

Febvre wrote:

> '*... history inevitably gathers, classifies and groups together facts about the past in terms of its current needs. It interrogates the dead in terms of the living ... The social function of history can be described as the organisation of the past in terms of the present.* ' (cited in Gagnon 1982, p.5)

Similarly, as Horne noted:

> '*... the present is used to explain the relics of the past, and then the meanings given to the past are used to justify aspects of the present, ...*' (1984, p.29)

The objects or relics which museums display are usually detached from the context in which they had their initial meaning. Subsequently, there is a necessity for interpretation:

> '*Unlike history and memory, whose sheer existence betoken the past, the tangible past cannot stand on its own. Relics are mute; they require interpretation to voice their reliquary role.*' (Lowenthal 1985, p.243)

In other words, whilst the past cannot change, the meanings and interpretations which are attached to the past can and do change. It is notable, however, that many commentators have progressed beyond this observation to suggest that museums may effectively serve as cultural transmitters of a dominant ideology (see Horne 1984; Rosenberg 1985; Ehrentraut 1991). What is far from clear, however, are the actual processes by which ideological frameworks are incorporated into museum decision-making and how museum visitors actually respond and react to the ideological messages with which they are presented. It is to these concerns that the rest of this thesis turns.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

We saw in the previous chapter that my empirical research is broadly concerned with two specific issues in the context of museums. Firstly, it is concerned with the processes by which museums produce an account of the past and construct museum exhibitions. Secondly, it is concerned with the reception of museum accounts of the past and how museum visitors specifically receive the content of exhibitions. Having identified my broad research questions, it was necessary to mobilise these concerns into a viable research project. It is to a brief description of the main methodological issues that this chapter now turns.

The construction of museum exhibitions

Let us begin with my first research theme - the processes and decision-making involved in the construction of museum exhibitions. Theoretical commentators consistently claim, for instance, that museums and their displays embody dominant ideologies. Yet what remains very unclear empirically is the nature of the linkage between ideological frameworks and the actual construction of museum exhibitions. Museums, for instance, have enormous stocks of material, much of which they never display. Yet how are choices made about what is, and what is not, presented? Similarly, how are

choices made about the manner in which displays are presented? Clearly, these are difficult problems to empirically address, but a consideration of these questions can be aided by examining the treatment of particular themes in museum exhibitions. There was already a significant body of material which discussed the historical exclusion of women from museum displays. Part of my research problem was therefore to try and understand exactly how and why this exclusion had taken place. Moreover, the fact that some museums have become increasingly sensitive to the traditional exclusion of women's history from their work, and were increasingly including such themes, offered both a clear focus and a potentially rich source of insight into the processes of inclusion and exclusion within museums. Exploring how and why this has changed in some museums, in conjunction with an investigation of why similar perspectives are still being excluded from certain museums, would - I hoped - be specific enough to allow investigation while simultaneously allowing the identification of the more general processes by which museum exhibitions and their accounts of the past are constructed.

The reception of museum exhibitions

My second research theme was concerned with examining the various ways in which museum visitors receive and interpret museum exhibitions. In particular, I wanted to look at whether or not people are interpreting museum presentations in unambiguous ways, although it seemed likely that the meanings visitors attach to the same displays and exhibitions would be highly diverse. The issue was thus how and why do museum visitors view exhibitions differently and just what does this reflect? In particular, I wanted to examine several key issues.

Firstly, do museum visitors perceive museum displays as objective presentations, or are they aware that they are seeing the selective organisation and construction of the past? The conventional approach has tended to assume that most consumers of history

and museums see them as somehow objectively neutral. But is this really the case? I suspected, for example, that museum visitors may be far more conscious of the history-making process than has usually been acknowledged, particularly when one considers that they are often better educated than their contemporaries. Secondly, and possibly linked to my first question, if a museum visitor has a memory of the subject matter being presented, how does this influence the manner in which they appropriate or interpret a museum exhibition? Finally, given the heated debates in the museum world about the relative merits of authentic objects as opposed to historical reconstructions, how did museum visitors view the relative effectiveness of different museum media?

Research design

To date, there have been relatively few qualitative studies examining the construction of museum exhibitions. Studies of museum reception, however, are more numerous, although they have almost invariably been quantitative in nature. There have been some qualitative studies of museum reception, but they have been surprisingly few in number. There was certainly an identified need for a more systematic attempt to mount a qualitative examination of the construction and subsequent reception of the *same exhibition* (see Macdonald 1996).

Subsequently, this was a predominantly qualitative study and, as such, I utilised semi-structured interviews, taped whenever possible, as my main research technique. Because of the exploratory nature of this research, I did not feel that a quantitative study would be as appropriate, at least not without a substantial pilot stage. Moreover, I had already used such a qualitative approach to elicit the complexities surrounding social organisations and their relationship to wider ideological frameworks, specifically in the context of homelessness (see Liddiard and Hutson 1991). I thus interviewed in depth some 49 museum staff about the decision-making processes surrounding the

development of a wide variety of exhibitions, although I tended to focus upon my four selected exhibitions. I conducted all of my interviews with museum staff before I undertook my visitor interviews. This enabled me to be clearer about exactly what I wanted to elicit from my visitor questions.

Audience research is similarly an area laden with methodological problems, although interesting work had already been conducted on museum visitors and their attitudes. I therefore interviewed some 200 museum visitors - 50 at each of my 4 selected museums - about their interpretation of the museum exhibition and its material. I used a number of highly structured questions in my visitor survey, enabling me to code and quantify this material with relative ease, at least compared with the coding and quantification of more qualitative material. This approach also enabled me to keep the length of the visitor interviews as short as possible, which I anticipated to be an important factor in eliciting visitor co-operation. Nonetheless, I also employed a number of open-ended exploratory questions, which proved to be very fruitful.

My sample of museums rested upon a three-fold museum typology - national museums; local museums and independent museums. The division of museums into these three types is not new and formed the basis for the Museum Association's database on museums (Museum Association 1987). These distinctions are important. For example, relations between staff and the nature of visitors may be very different in national, local and independent museums. The museums that I chose for particular examination were:

National Museum: The Blitz Experience, Imperial War Museum, London.
Local Museum : Dover Museum and White Cliffs Experience, Dover.
Independent Museum: Eden Camp Modern History Theme Museum, North Yorkshire.

These museums all contained exhibitions dealing with the same issues - namely, the

Blitz and the Second World War - and were all using a similar variety of media in their displays. Yet, despite these similarities, these museums were all operating in somewhat different ways. I also examined a fourth museum, the National Army Museum, and its exhibition on the war in Burma, in order to identify particular processes or considerations which were specific to exhibitions on the Blitz. I drew a sample of 50 museum visitors from each of these four museums.

The choice of subject matter for this research was a crucial one and there was much to be said in favour of focusing upon a theme such as the Second World War. For example, it was an event which is likely to have embedded itself firmly into the memory of all those who experienced it. Subsequently, any difference in reception as a consequence of memory may be particularly pronounced by examining such an issue. Moreover, because the presentation of warfare - especially recent conflict - is an issue which has to be portrayed with some sensitivity, museum decision-makers may be particularly self-conscious of what they are doing and the rationale behind the decisions they make. Subsequently, this is why I focussed my research upon exhibitions concerned specifically with the Blitz and the Second World War more generally.

Analysing qualitative material can be both difficult and time consuming. However, to assist my analysis, I used one of several computer packages currently on the market which are specifically designed for such a purpose. In particular, '*ethnograph*' appeared to be appropriate and it was also a package that I had used before, whilst I envisaged that typing my interviews directly onto the computer would aid subsequent analysis. However, the level of analysis using ethnograph was eventually fairly limited. Like many qualitative researchers, I developed rather ambivalent views towards the use of such qualitative analysis packages for a relatively small number of interviews, although the advantages for dealing with larger data sets are obvious . Ultimately, I found it more efficient to consolidate and analyse my 49 staff interviews by hand. In terms of my visitor data, the qualitative responses were analysed in a similar manner to

my staff interviews, whilst the quantitative responses were entered into SPSS and analysed. The key findings from this analysis are to be found in Appendix Two.

Let us turn now to the key findings from this empirical data.

CHAPTER THREE

CONSTRUCTING MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

Introduction

This chapter is fundamentally concerned with an examination of the processes by which museum exhibitions are constructed, and particularly how museum messages are produced and incorporated into displays. History, as an open-ended experience, is invariably organised and constructed in certain ways, particularly in museums. What is less clear, however, is just *how* this history is constructed and the rationale behind it, for as Hooper-Greenhill (1988, pp. 227-28) notes: '... *the principles of collection in the museum are rarely clearly articulated.*' Museums often have enormous stocks of material and whilst some smaller museums may display their collections in their entirety, more often decisions have to be made both about what to display and what not to display and, more fundamentally, which general and specific messages the museum will attempt to convey through its exhibition. It is on the nature of this decision-making process that this chapter focuses. Reflecting the growing recognition of the need for more qualitative data on the processes of exhibition construction (eg. Hooper-Greenhill 1995, Fyfe and Ross 1996), and the experiences of other qualitative researchers in this area (eg. Gable 1996), this chapter presents my preliminary findings from forty nine exploratory interviews with museum professionals.

Influences upon the production of museum exhibitions

Perhaps the first point to make is that the factors which variously affect the construction of museum exhibitions are not fixed or immalleable. A myriad of issues determine how museum exhibitions are put together and what is or is not included. The relative importance of these factors can vary enormously depending on a number of circumstances and, of course, can dramatically shift over time and in different contexts. For this reason, and particularly because of the sheer heterogeneity of museums, outlining the specific role of each factor is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, a starting point must be the overall policy of the museum.

It is evident that museums differ widely in their general philosophy and approach. There may, for example, be significant differences in the kinds of visitors a museum targets. The Museum of Mankind, for instance, clearly targets something of a different audience to more populist heritage centres. Similarly, there may be differences in how museums attempt to communicate with their visitors. One museum may favour highly interactive displays, using the very latest technology, whilst another may be equally content with the use of traditional glass cases. Themes such as these, which combine to form the overall philosophy of a museum, are of crucial importance in terms of constructing museum displays. Indeed, it is of interest to consider the factors involved in the development of the museum's overall philosophy, such as the influence of funding bodies. For the moment, however, I want to concentrate on a number of specific factors which clearly appear from my empirical research to frame and influence the development and direction of museum exhibitions.

Commercialism

Commercialism appears to have had an increasingly dramatic and profound impact

upon the development of museum displays, not least because it is an issue which has - rightly or wrongly - come to pervade almost every aspect of museum work. As Pearce (1991, p.1) notes, this has led to intense discussion about the manner in which museums should be financed and managed in a climate of increasingly scarce resources. This is an important question and raises a plethora of additional issues such as how one might assess quality of service and the whole debate surrounding "value for money" and just what this may mean in the context of a cultural body such as a museum. I return to these vexed cultural policy issues in chapter nine.

Certainly, as Johnson and Thomas (1991) are at pains to discuss, the general paucity of resources with which much of the museum sector are faced, means that difficult and vexed decisions have to be made about the allocation and use of resources within and between museums, and within and between departments. The resolution of these dilemmas requires an understanding and appreciation of the notion of '*economic efficiency*'. This is actually a difficult area to delimit, because efficiency in terms of resource allocation and employment within museums could be measured and assessed in a number of different ways. Museum 'output', for instance, can take a number of very different forms - in terms of the number of visitors attracted to an exhibition; the publicity which an exhibition has attracted; the quality of the museum experience for visitors, and so on. In this way, it is important to remember that 'economic' is not simply synonymous with 'commercial' or 'profit-making' (Johnson and Thomas 1991, p.5)

Interestingly, the issue of commercialism was one of the first themes to be drawn from the dozen or so pilot interviews that I conducted at the very inception of this research, in order to both clarify my research focus and establish initial themes worthy of further exploration. The initial analysis of this preliminary data quickly established that the changing commercial environment within which most museums operate was crucial, and the sheer consistency with which it was raised by my respondents was

striking. Further exploration of this issue in consequent interviews highlighted the complexities here and the very real impact that a market-led approach towards museums has had upon their work. Indeed, it was evident that many professionals are deeply concerned about the implications for future museum exhibitions. I return to these wider social and political debates about the growing marketisation of culture in chapter nine. For the moment, I want simply to unpack the assorted ways in which growing moves towards commercialism are affecting the processes of exhibition construction.

The first point to make is that the tangible shift in museums towards a more commercially-minded approach, and the encouragement of greater financial self-sufficiency, has effectively transcended the entire museum world. Museums and heritage centres in the UK in the late 1990s have, almost without exception, been uniformily affected by this trend, to greater or lesser degrees. However, the sheer ubiquity of more commercial pressures on the work of museums should not detract from the very real fact that the experiences of different museums can vary widely.

In the last chapter, I briefly discussed my decision to focus upon three distinct museum types - national museums, local museums and independent museums. The very real significance of this distinction for unravelling the influences upon museum presentations arose predominantly from my pilot interviews. Quickly it became evident that, although there were clearly a number of common themes that affected all museums, the manifestation of these influences upon exhibition construction could vary, and vary dramatically, according to museum type. One area where the distinction between national, local and independent museums is fundamental, as we shall shortly see, is in terms of the personnel involved in exhibition development and how vexed negotiation takes place between them - or indeed does not take place! However, the experiences of these three sectors can also vary dramatically in terms of how they have been affected by the growing pressure for their work to be more commercially-minded. In short, whilst the importance of commercial factors has now thoroughly permeated

the entire museum field, it nevertheless differentially affects the various museum sectors.

The operation of the independent sector rests almost entirely upon commercial rationale. This is, after all, their raison d'etre - the sole objective, or at least the primary objective, of the independent sector is to make money:

> *'They (independent museums) have to stand on their own two feet. They are certainly sharper commercially. Their marketing ; their customer care and merchandising and retailing are on average much better than the local authority sector. They simply have to and a lot of them are suffering because of the recession.'* (Director - National Museums Organisation)

Certainly, my respondents from the independent sector tended to far more explicit in discussing the importance that they were attaching to commercial considerations. Although these concerns have permeated all museum sectors, staff from local and particularly national museums tended to be far more reticent in acknowledging the growing influence of commercialism - in marked contrast to the independent sector:

> *'At the end of the day, we're a business. So you're not here for the good of your health. You're here, at the end of the day, to survive and to make money. You've got to pay the wages. You've got to be able to develop the new exhibits. The word profit is a nasty word.'* (Director - Independent Museum)

> *'Before you do anything, it has to pay for itself. When it comes to funding things, we have various guidelines and one of the principles is that it has to pay for itself within a year. If it can pay for itself within a year and earn a lot of money, then we'll do it.'* (Manager - Independent Museum)

Entrepreneurs initially began moving into the heritage market in the 1980s and they clearly played a very large part in the heritage boom of this period, essentially because there was a growing realisation that there was a very substantial market for this

product. While the 1990s have often not proved to be such a kind period for the independent museum or heritage centre - as visitor figures have frequently dropped resulting in sometimes dramatic reductions in revenue - the independent sector has nevertheless now firmly established itself in the UK. The enormous importance that this sector has attached to commercial considerations has heavily influenced virtually every aspect of their work and increasingly that of other museum sectors.

National museums, for instance, have generally managed to stay fairly aloof from more fundamental moves towards commercialism. The traditional research focus embodied by many national museums, such as the Imperial War Museum, has meant that they have often been able to justify their existence almost regardless of any commercial rationale. The national museums certainly have a much stronger commitment to research and scholarship than other categories of museum, which is reflected in their staffing figures - national and Government department museums have some 50% of all UK museum staff and approximately a third of museum visitors (Johnson and Thomas 1991, p.9). This has meant, however, that many national museums have run into some funding pressures - national museums and galleries rely very heavily indeed upon public funding, and their share of public funding can be far in excess of their share of museum visitors, which of course raises questions about the appropriateness of their public financing. Nonetheless, the strong commitment of national museums and galleries to scholarship has meant that they are less susceptible to the vagaries of finance than some of the other museum sectors. Indeed, the Museum and Galleries Commission went so far as to describe national museum as *'the intellectual hub around which all the nation's museum system must revolve if it is to command the respect and affection of its paymasters, who are in the end its visiting public.'* (1986, p.103). Nonetheless, it is still evident that even national museums have been affected by the moves towards commercialism and the marketisation of the past:

'Having been brought up in the free museum tradition, which no-longer exists,

commercial factors do play a more important part than they use to and if you have got something to sell, like the Blitz reconstructions, regular film shows or history evenings, or whatever range of activity, then you've got to have something like that to pull the punters in. It's the bums on seats thing.' (Historian - National Museum)

Local museums, on the other hand, have found that they are generally far more susceptible to commercial pressures. With the widespread reduction in local authority spending, local museums have found their very existence being fundamentally challenged from commercial perspectives. When local authorities are finding themselves having to make dramatic spending cuts, so local museums are frequently the prime candidate. This appears to have had a profound impact upon the manner in which exhibitions in local museums are initiated and developed:

'There is a definite movement within museums now to make as much as you can without compromising the museum function. So in the last year, we've opened a shop on the ground floor, which we didn't have before. That's doing really well. ... I think what councils like to see now is that you are being business like and not wasting money, although I don't think many museums ever had any money to waste, to be honest with you.' (Director - Local Museum)

Commercial considerations, in terms of both the revenue generated and the number of visitors attracted, are increasingly playing a part in the development of local exhibitions and in the kinds of issues which are being developed, much to the reticence of staff in local museums:

'We have to continually justify our position and attract business in, so there's much more of an element here of just getting punters through the doors. That's a sort of cynical thing that most people involved in this place would not really go along with but, of course, to improve the displays, to improve the experience, you have to get more people in, and generate more revenue. So commercial considerations are very important here.' (Education Officer - Local Museum)

'We have to make the centre pay. We have targets that we have to achieve on an

annual basis, in terms of visitor numbers, in terms of income and if we are not achieving those targets, we have to look at ways of achieving them through either different marketing activities, additional marketing activities or even making cost savings.' (Marketing Manager - Local Museum)

For instance, the design of exhibitions in the independent sector, and increasingly in both national and local museums, is often predominantly influenced by financial considerations or constraints. The inclusion or otherwise of interactive displays, for example, is frequently determined by their cost. It is thus important to remember that there is a clear relationship between museums, however diverse they may be, and this certainly helps and assists in the dissemination of ideas and approaches:

'... the products offered by different museums are often seen, rightly or wrongly, as closely related. This relatedness of museum products means that a change in one museum's strategy on (for example) pricing, the quality of the visitor experience offered, or marketing is likely to have an impact on other museums. ...It should be noted that interdependence may also exist between museums and quite different activities and institutions.' (Johnson and Thomas 1991, p. 7)

The implications of this quote are important: individual museums do not exist in a social and cultural vacuum. On the contrary, they are closely related to one another and, importantly, to other social bodies and institutions, such that changes in the workings of one museum may rapidly be disseminated to other museums. This point is highlighted by the pervasion of commercialism throughout all museum sectors:

'Independent museums use to be very different, but I think the gap is now narrowing. They led the way. They had to. They were desperate. But now we are desperate as well!' (Curator - Local Museum)

It is important to view museums contextually. They are not detached from the wider socio-economic context in which they are operating, and this has been most pronounced in terms of museum finance. The financial climate surrounding public

sector finance has become much more hostile in recent years, with a variety of moves to attempt to control and preferably reduce public expenditure in all areas. Museums have not escaped from these moves and public funding of museums has come under growing scrutiny in recent years, with the widespread result that museums have had to reduce their budgets and seek private sector income. With these growing restrictions in terms of funding, so museums have increasingly had to address questions of resource efficiency, with a growing emphasis upon performance measurement (see Jackson 1991).

More profoundly, the ability of the independent sector to provide profitable museum facilities with the minimal input of central or local government income, has led to a dramatic revision of the way in which museums have been funded, as New Right thinking has entered the cultural realm. A number of changes are notable - such as the widespread reduction in local council and central government grants, coupled with the highly controversial introduction of museum charges. The implications have been disturbing, as the reductions in income have been increasingly fed into the longer term work of museums, in terms of conservation and the purchasing of new objects, such that the full implications of this policy are yet to be felt:

> *'Background things, like the film conservation programme or the photographic negative duplication programme or other things which are important long term, are not necessarily having the cash put into them at this stage, The main thing to do is to just try and get visitor numbers up and increase income that way and keep getting repeat visits and then that will generate enough money to be able to pump into the behind the scenes stuff.'* (Exhibitions Officer - National Museum)

As this quote indicates, the reduction in funding has meant that museums have had to devote much more attention to financial self-sufficiency. Indeed, it would be erroneous to assume that all museum staff find this development disturbing. Certainly, some in the independent sector feel that it is overdue:

'Museums have always been supported by the local council or the Government. A nice cushy number, an easy ride, not having to look for money. It's alright having nice exhibits which you look after, but you've got to pay for them.' (Director - Independent Museum)

Funding Bodies

In light of the importance of commercial factors, the relative influence of funding bodies has become something of an issue. Some work has already been conducted in this area (see Kirby 1988) and, in many respects, the views and attitudes of the funding body will probably be incorporated, in some way, into the overall museum policy. It is inevitable that a funding body will have some views on how their resources are deployed. The question, however, revolves around the extent to which these views determine what is displayed and what is not displayed. This issue is actually profoundly complex. Although their influence is usually a fairly implicit one, it may be that funding bodies explicitly attempt to control in some way the nature and direction of particular exhibitions. This may be particularly pronounced by the fact that, in the current economic climate, sponsors and funding bodies are increasingly scarce, in effect considerably empowering them and sometimes bringing them into direct confrontation with museum staff. Clearly, the influence of funding bodies varies between museums and national museums, where the quest for finance is not necessarily as central to their existence as it is in other museum sectors, are adamant about their resistance to interference of this kind:

'With permanent exhibitions, there's no influence at all. Temporary exhibitions, where sponsorship is becoming more common, again we would be very reluctant to enter into a deal with a sponsor who wanted to influence the way in which we worked with a particular subject.' (Exhibitions Officer - National Museum)

Of course, this hesitancy to allow funding bodies too much influence may be specific to museum presentations of warfare and other sensitive issues:

> '... *our subject area is a very dodgy one and it is very easy to overstep the line or to get the wrong inference and we have to be extremely careful to make sure that we are always unbiased and objective about things and not be seen to be too aggressive, or over-glorifying war.*' (Curator - Local Museum)

However, there is also evidence to suggest that the museum field as a whole have become increasingly sensitised to this issue in recent years, particularly following the adverse publicity which the Science Museum attracted when it accepted sponsorship from the supermarket chain Sainsbury's to develop an exhibition on food. The subsequent decision to name the gallery 'The Sainsbury Gallery' has been widely seen to signify the difficulties that outside sponsorship can raise for museums and their efforts to maintain a neutral perspective (see Macdonald and Silverstone 1990).

Marketing

Commercial factors are thus a fundamental influence upon the manner in which museum exhibitions are put together, particularly in the local and independent sectors. Yet this issue is also important because of the indirect influence that it has on other features of the museum decision-making process, such as marketing.

The issue of marketing is a very prominent one in the museum field and the debate about marketing has served, in many respects, to personify some of the wider debates about the direction in which museums are going. As Wilson notes:

> '*even the word "marketing" seems enough to send a good proportion of our profession into paroxysms of rage and concern. ... the development of marketing*

departments in some of our museums and the increasing concerns with marketing among most, are seen by not a few as a sure sign of a possible terminal decline in museum standards'. (1991, pp.98-99)

The debates about marketing in the museum world are complex. One concern about the growing centrality of marketing in museums has been one of resources - marketing departments may often swallow large quantities of resources, while the output of this investment can be difficult to quantify. Yet in the free market context in which museums are increasingly operating in the 1990s, marketing has an undeniable importance - not simply for informing the public of what the museum has to offer, but also in terms of informing the museum of what the public wants from them. One suspects that this later issue may be a element in some professional ambivalence towards marketing - that what the museum does, in theory at least, is increasingly mediated by what the public wish to see. The implication is that museums may be increasingly changing and modifying their practices in a attempt to match public demand, which some museums staff feel may be effectively disempowering them.

Nonetheless, most museums are increasingly emphasising the importance of marketing for their work and ultimately their survival in a tight fiscal climate. This issue has pervaded all museum sectors, although unsurprisingly its importance is most explicit in the independent sector:

'If you look at the definition of marketing, basically, you supply the right product at the right time to the right people in the right place. There's no point having a product if it is not what is needed, or if you're trying to give it to the wrong people. So marketing must play an important part and a lot of the decisions have to marketing led. If they are not marketing led, then you are really wasting your time - it will fail without it.' (General Manager - Independent Museum)

In short, museums are having to match their products to the demands of the market. The implications of this are profound and has certainly led to visitor preferences being

accorded far greater significance - at least in theory - than they once were, as we shall shortly see. Yet this influence has also impacted upon the choice of appropriate topics for display and exhibition, as museums attempt to match their products to their market. Nowhere is this more starkly illustrated than in the growing importance that museums are attaching to their educational market, particularly the demands of the National Curriculum:

> *'Everything these days looks to marketing and particularly to the education market and in particular to the way in which the museum fits into the national curriculum. For the museum to survive, this is actually quite critical. ... It is very much the way museums are going. It is going to be more and more the case in the future.'*
> (Lecturer in Museum Studies)

The educational market

A fundamental feature of the development of marketing in museums has been the growing importance which is attached to the educational market. On an obvious level, the sheer size of the educational market, or specifically the school market, is simply too large for museums to realistically ignore. The additional revenue that school visits bring is clearly substantial and some museums even claim that they are financially heavily dependent on the educational market:

> *'Take the school visits away and the museum would go under, simple as that. Education is a very important market.'* (Director - Independent Museum)

However, it would be erroneous to assume that the significance of the educational market is confined simply to independent museums and heritage centres. It was striking that almost all of my respondents, regardless of their background, attached potent significance to the schools market. The sheer uniformity of comments and the

commonality of issues raised was striking:

'Schools make up a sizeable proportion of our visitors and, from a marketing perspective, if you give a good experience to a kid, then they'll bring back their parents in the future' (Education Officer - Local Museum)

The value of the schools market, therefore, is not just in terms of the revenue spent by this group in the museum, both in terms of entrance fees and merchandise, but also the valuable publicity that school visits can incur, encouraging parents and relatives to visit. Indeed, this later point is why a number of museums, even in the financially-minded independent sector, chose not to charge for school visits:

'We don't charge for school groups. That's our policy. You are bringing visitors in and, more often than not, they will come back with their parents, which will generate revenue. So its worthwhile.' (Manager - Independent Museum)

'One of my arguments about schools being free is that school children are just such an important market economically. All the time you hear them saying to their teacher "I'm going to bring my mum and my dad next weekend" and so, of course, it brings money back to the museum!' (Education officer - National Museum)

'We know that 35 per cent of our visitors last year came through word-of-mouth, and what we put a lot of that down to is the children we get through. If you like, they're our ambassadors. The children go home and they tell their parents and then they bring their parents back.' (Director - Independent Museum)

Museums increasingly recognise the potential of the educational market for increasing visitors and revenue - both directly and indirectly - and so they are increasingly matching their products, or exhibitions to the demands of this market:

'You need to cater for that market and we do cater for it, even moreso now that school visits don't go anywhere unless it's part of the National Curriculum.' (Manager - Independent Museum)

This raises a crucial point - namely, the potential relevance of an exhibition to the National Curriculum, appears to be an almost universal consideration when exhibitions are being initiated and constructed:

> '*... over the last few years, the whole of the school visits area, has really focussed on the school curriculum, matching what there is in the museums collections with the National Curriculum, pointing out links between them.*' (Education Officer - National Museum)

> '*The school syllabus has always been enormously important to us ... but the National Curriculum has meant that we now know, for certain, that a large number of schools at say Key Stage 2 are going to be doing something. So we know now that there is going to be a definite interest in anything that we provide on that topic, whereas before we had to try and work it out for ourselves.*' (Education Officer - national Museum)

This last quote raises several points that are worth expanding upon. Namely, school visits have always been seen as important by some museums, particularly the larger national museums. What has made the National Curriculum so important to museums, however, is the manner in which it prescribes the precise topics and areas that schools should be studying. In turn, this removes for museums a large part of the uncertainty of trying to gauge the needs and demands of their potential market, which is an increasingly important consideration when developing new and hopefully popular exhibitions. The implication is that the National Curriculum is prescribing not just what should be taught in schools, but is also increasingly determining museum decisions about appropriate topics for exhibition, as the following respondent acknowledges:

> '*Any exhibitions that are done now are first looked at very closely in terms of the National Curriculum, and how schools can use them. We are very much geared towards the National Curriculum - it is a tremendously good part of our business.*' (Education Officer - Local Museum)

It is evident that the issue of education has been accorded increasing importance by museum staff when initiating and developing exhibitions. The development of the educational role of museums in recent years has been quite striking. A growing number of museums now have an Education Officer whose specific role is to promote the importance of educational perspectives and even those museums that do not possess an Education Officer still appear to attach a high degree of importance to this issue, ostensibly because there is a growing realisation that, from a purely commercial perspective, the educational audience is simply too large to ignore.

Visitor preferences

We have seen, therefore, that museums appear to be attaching greater significance to understanding, and catering for, their market - namely, potential museum visitors. Until recently, most museum staff concede that any consideration of the potential market for an exhibition was highly unusual. Visitor preferences were frequently not considered at all, and even when they were, there was inevitably no systematic attempt to discover just what visitors wanted to see. Indeed, the ambivalence of many museum professionals towards museum visitors has been commented upon before:

> *'It has always seemed to me to be curious, that despite this all but universal agreement - that a museum must have a public to be a museum - so many museum professionals see the public as enemy number one.'* (Wilson 1991, p.89)

This is not to suggest, of course, that the ambivalence with which many visitors are treated is not without understanding - the intellectual and scholarly role which is so crucial to many museums, and not least national museums, is not necessarily conducive to prioritising the needs of the visitor:

'Quite often a lot of the big museums actually see themselves, or their role as research and it just happens that punters come in through the door. It is unfortunate that they do, because they get in the way of their research, but they do come in. Whereas in the better museums, research is important, but it is secondary. Their raison d'etre is that people come in thorough the front door. Once people stop coming in through the front door, that place will be closed down.' (Director - Museum Training Organisation)

The ways in which some museums may be hesitant to take more seriously the demands of museum visitors also reflects a number of other agendas, not least concern about some of the wider changes experienced by the modern museum and the development of a false dichotomy between scholarship and public access. There has tended to be a feeling that the two are mutually incompatible, and indeed there is an argument suggesting that ensuring public access to objects and exhibits may be at odds with their long-term preservation and study. Generally, however, it is important to view scholarship and public access as compatible - scholarship of course adds a new and important dimension to the issue of accessibility.

Nonetheless, there is little doubt that many museums have been woefully ill-equipped for planning properly for museum visitors in the new climate in which they operate:

'Too often in the past, planning for visitors has been haphazard and taken for granted. Many museums have hierarchical organisational structures very ill-suited to planning properly for the needs of visitors, which have grown up largely as a result of the belief that omnipotent, omniscient curators would rule benignly for the benefit of all.' (Wilson 1991, pp.89-90)

Yet as Wilson and others have acknowledged, this traditional approach has been dramatically shaken in recent years, as museum staff have effectively been encouraged and coerced into taking more seriously the needs and preferences of the museum

visitor. In light of the fact that museums have been drawn heavily into the commercial arena, the preferences of visitors and potential visitors have begun to take precedence, certainly more than ever before (see Terrell 1991). Recent years have undoubtedly seen more attention being paid towards the needs and preferences of the visitor and an increase in the number and range of visitor surveys. This development undoubtedly has a potentially significant impact upon exhibition policies, as museums increasingly adopt their exhibitions to what they believe visitors want to see:

> *'In terms of the marketing, a tremendous amount of customer research went into it ... All of these improvements came out of customer research that we carry out and we ask people how they rate each element of the show. We have them analysed on a monthly basis and also we have a cumulative analysis as well, which is good to have, so we can monitor changes. So that we are looking to actually improve the quality of the exhibition.'* (Marketing Manager - Local Museum)

> *'Gradually, over the years, our displays have evolved and are becoming much more visitor led and we know from visitor surveys what people want to see and we know what they like and what they don't like.'* (Exhibitions Officer - National Museum)

Certainly, many of my respondents have been keen to emphasise the central position to which visitor preferences have been elevated in the inception and development of many displays. This should not be particularly surprising - a popular exhibition is clearly a major success for a museum, both from commercial and publicity perspectives.

However, these developments have not been uniformily welcomed. On the contrary, some commentators have been very troubled by these changes in museum practice. Boylan (1992), for instance, notes with interest the growing application of market research techniques, such as visitor surveys, in the work of the contemporary museum. Coupled with the perception of visitors as 'consumers', these features have now firmly pervaded the work of many museums and heritage centres in the 1990s. Yet

the approach towards museum visits as *'a market commodity within a 'leisure' market-place'* (Boylan 1992, p.11) has become a real and pressing concern for many within the museum and heritage professions, not least because of the implications for future exhibitions, a point which I discuss further in chapter eight.

In any event, my interview material also offers a considerable body of evidence which suggests that, despite the rhetoric adopted by many museum staff about the increasing importance attached to considering visitor needs, the reality of the situation is somewhat different. Whilst museums are increasingly paying lip-service to the preferences of their visitors, in reality they may often have very little systematic knowledge about their visitors on which to base decisions about the development of new exhibitions. For example, it is interesting to compare the last quote from an Exhibition Officer in a national museum with the following comment from a designer who worked on the same exhibition:

> *'The museum had no idea when they were doing this refurbishment what the market was really looking for, nor did they have any idea what their visitors were getting out at the end, and how they should be modifying what they got. They haven't got a clue. In spite of what they tell you. ... Instead, museum staff make decisions based largely on their reactions which are not typical reactions, because they come from within the profession. I find it very worrying, very frustrating.'*
> (Designer - National Museum)

In blunt terms, when museums begin to plan a new exhibition, they frequently know little or nothing about the kind of market for the exhibition. Indeed, there is other evidence that the influence and real input of museum visitors into the exhibition process is often minimal. As Hooper-Greenhill notes:

> *'During the entire exhibition process the museum staff ... and the visitors remain invisible to each other. There is no contact or communication.'*(1988, p.229)

The implication is that the consequent displays represent something of a closed system, in which there is little or no possibility of influencing or modifying in any way the exhibition and the displays. Subsequently, this means that museum staff often have to resort to making educated guesses about the kind of exhibition that will be popular with visitors. These guesses are, however, fundamentally important because they largely inform subsequent decisions about how one develops the exhibition. By implication, there is thus a considerable amount of risk involved in the development of many new exhibitions. Sometimes, of course, they prove to be highly successful, such as the Blitz Experience at the Imperial War Museum. Yet sometimes they also prove to be expensive failures, not least because the museum has misjudged the nature of its visitor demands. Similarly, some of my respondents were very candid about how little they now about visitor reaction to their exhibitions:

> *'We don't have a very good mechanism for gauging public reaction really. We just pick up on what appears in the press by way of reviews.'* (Curator - Local Museum)

In addition, it is interesting that despite their protestations that they are becoming much more visitor-centred, many of my respondents were still highly disparaging about the ability of visitors to understand and appreciate what they see:

> *'... the ordinary visitor is just like a butterfly. They float from one thing to the next and they don't really know what they are looking at.'* (Curator - Local Museum)

In fact., we shall return to this issue in chapter five, when we see that many visitors appear to be far more conscious of what they see and experience in museum exhibitions than museum professionals often give them credit for.

Nonetheless, some interesting and important attempts have been made to involve visitors more fully in the development of displays, and museum visitors and their

preferences can and do influence the practices of some museums. The Natural History Museum, for instance, has long sought to "market-test" new ideas for displays before their introduction (see Miles 1989). Of course, this situation does not necessarily imply that exhibitions in which visitors needs and preferences are taken into account are necessarily a success, in the same way that many excellent exhibitions have been constructed with little or no real knowledge of visitor preferences. However the importance of communication is paramount - to be able to communicate with your visitors is an important, even essential part, of what museums should be doing and this is dependent less upon what visitors would like to see, and more upon the ability of museum staff to realise ideas and to communicate with visitors.

The growing importance of visitors in the exhibition process, at least in theory, has nonetheless had some very important implications for the work of many museums, not least in terms of helping to legitimate moves towards displaying issues, topics and areas which were once deemed to be inappropriate for museums to display, such as women's history.

The increasing involvement of museum visitors in the planning process may be due to a variety of factors, although I would suggest that one important issue has been the widespread introduction of museum charges. The rationale behind the introduction of museum charges is considered further in chapter nine. Nonetheless, it does reflect an attempt to address the increasingly precarious financial position that many museums have found themselves in. However, an important consequence of the introduction of museum charges has been the growing expectation of visitors. It almost goes without saying that if a visitor is paying for a service, they are much more likely to consider complaining and demanding the services that they want, than if admission to the museum and its services were free. In other words, I would suggest that the widespread introduction of admission charges to many museums has modified the relationship between the museum and its visitors, whereby visitors may be more

willing to complain, in light of the fact that they are now paying for a service, while museum staff may be more willing to consider the needs and preferences of visitors. These moves may lead museums to be more receptive to exhibitions and displays which are popular with the public, but which may have traditionally been excluded from many museum exhibitions, such as women's history.

But, of course, however detailed and extensive visitor research may be, it is only of use and relevance to the work of museums if it is actually used by them in order to inform their work. One is left to suspect that this is the very real difficulty with research into visitor needs - the motivation to actually heed what visitors are saying to the museum staff. Ultimately, therefore, it is important to place visitor research in context - it can certainly be very interesting and important for telling museum staff more about visitor perceptions, about the museums and what the museum should be doing. Yet their importance is simply in terms of informing decision-making, not necessarily determining it.

These influences on museum decision-making - namely, the importance of commercial factors and, linked to this, the significance of the educational market and visitor preferences, are all extremely interesting. Less interesting perhaps, but equally important, are some of the other practical issues which can be identified as influencing, often in a very major way, the manner in which museum exhibitions are put together, such as the constraints of space and existing collections.

Time and space

Most museum respondents were keen to emphasise the importance of practical constraints in developing exhibitions. Problems of time and space, whilst they do not necessarily influence the messages being conveyed by museums, evidently do affect,

often in a very major way, the manner in which an exhibition is put together:

> '*... we had to do somersaults to try and get a coherent exhibition with a good flow of people; a clear message and to fit into the space ... the message itself didn't change, but the way that the sections came one after the other, had to.*' (Historical Consultant - National Museum)

Museum decision-makers are obviously constrained in terms of the amount of space that they can devote to a particular exhibition and also by the amount of time they have available. In addition, there are other practical constraints, such as the conservation and security aspects which invariably surround an exhibition. In fact, these issues can be so important that they may actually influence the message that is conveyed. A number of professionals involved in the development of one Blitz exhibition, for example, felt that the relative lack of space that they had to work with dramatically affected the intensity of the message that the museum was able to convey and the way in which the final exhibition is actually interpreted:

> '*It had to fit into a fairly small space. We were limited by ceiling and outer walls. We had to really compress the scale. So both its virtues and its failings are, in my view, as a result of the space rather than anything else.*' (Historian - National Museum)

Existing collection

Another similar constraint on the manner in which museums develop their exhibitions is their existing collection. One's existing collection can be a major determinant in the decision to proceed with an idea for a new exhibition:

> '*I don't think that really takes place until the first process of looking at the spaces available and what material you've got basically to start with.*' (Historian - National

Museum)

One of my initial research questions was to understand more about the manner in which museum staff decide what they will display and what they will not display. A crucial determinant of this appears to be the museum's existing collection. In the words of Morton (1988, p.131) '*... if there are no objects available, it becomes very difficult to mount a museum display*', a problem which necessarily arises from the object-centred approach adopted by many museums. Indeed, Porter (1988) uses this fact to help account for the elitist and generally selective images that museums often display. Namely, museums are invariably constrained in what they can display by what objects survive and it is clear that significantly fewer relics survive from less prosperous households. It is evident, therefore, that museums will often build their displays around their collections, although there are of course a number of exceptions to this. For instance, the decision taken by the British Museum in the 1970s to construct an exhibition on human biology was clearly interesting given that they had no relevant collections (see Miles and Tout 1978). This is particularly interesting if we adhere to the comments of authors such as Sheets-Pyenson (1987, p.290), who suggests that the nature and ethos of the museum collections which were formed in the nineteenth century continue to exert a major influence upon all subsequent collections and collecting policies.

Although existing collections may be a constraint on potential exhibitions, they are in no way an insurmountable hurdle. In the current technological climate, for example, museums are not necessarily obliged to produce an object-centred exhibition:

> '*We were constrained - there were certain areas that we had a lot of material on and certain other areas that we did not have very much material on. ... In the end, we were able to do pretty much what we wanted to do with our own collection, and where we did lack objects, we were able to deal with that in a different way.*'
> (Curator - National Museum)

Instead, museums can adopt a variety of alternative media, such as reconstructions, videos and photos, in order to address a topic, without necessarily having recourse to objects and relics. Nevertheless, most museum displays do still rely, in part at least, on available objects:

> *'The focus of any display or exhibition has always got to be generated from within the collection.'* (Education Officer - National Museum)

> *'Obviously, there's no point me coming up with an idea for doing an exhibit, if we've got nothing to back it up.'* (Director - Independent Museum)

Clearly, it is far easier to use one's own collection, although museums have often used loans of material from other sources for specific exhibitions, although these present their own difficulties. One is faced with the initial problem of negotiation, which can be long and protracted and, if this is successful, one then faces substantial administration, regarding insurance, for example. More crucially, however, given the marketisation of museums, recent years have also seen a movement towards charging for loans, which is a cause of some considerable friction and ill-feeling between museums:

> *'It's become a bit more difficult recently because of course the market economy has reached down into the museum world, and so charges are now made in some places for loans ... which has caused quite a big stink.'* (Education Officer - Local Museum)

The importance of one's existing collection is of most relevance with object-centred displays, but it still pervades the entire exhibition process. Indeed, we shall see in coming chapters that many commentators view the material collections of museums, and their application, as being the key to establishing the authority of museums as sources of historical understanding. However, one must remember that ultimately the

use of one's own collection is pragmatic - the choice of one particular object over another is often left to the discretion of the member of staff involved, and what they feel fits well with the proposed exhibition. This was particularly highlighted by the experience of an historian at a national museum who had the main responsibility for choosing the photographs for an exhibition on the Blitz:

> *'On the supporting material, particularly photographs, the position is even more difficult, because you've got 6 million photographs to choose from and you've got 4 photos perhaps per section. Say the Home Front in World War Two, I must have looked at 20-30,000 photographs in order to pick 100 and that's quite difficult. Put again the process is exactly the same as for the objects...'*

The role of museum staff

The above debate brings us to probably the most important influence on the production of museum exhibitions - namely, the views of the museum staff themselves. In particular, what Belcher (1991) calls 'the communicators' and 'the interpreters'. The interpreters essentially interpret the material for the potential exhibition, while the communicators consider the most effective way of communicating the message of the exhibition to the visiting public. These museum staff make many of the crucial decisions about particular exhibitions and displays. In the words of Belcher:

> *'It may well be this group, who, by virtue of their expert knowledge, decide on the topics for exhibitions and how the collections will be interpreted. Almost certainly it will be for them also to decide what the specific objectives of exhibits will be and by what means they can be attained. ... although exhibitions are designed for a purpose, they nevertheless remain a plastic art form, and as such they can be fashioned by their creators to impart their own personalities and knowledge'* (p.77)

In many respects, this holds the key to understanding the construction of museum

exhibitions. Namely, a number of factors determine the direction of exhibitions - commercial factors and the influence of the funding bodies; the perceived needs of museum visitors; the constraints of time and space and the available collections of material. All these issues play an important role in the development of museum displays. However, these themes are ultimately operationalised by museum staff themselves. Subsequently, it may be fruitful to examine the various museum staff who may be involved in such decision-making and just how this decision-making takes place.

Most museums employ a diverse range of staff, who each have particular roles in the museum. In terms of exhibition construction, a number of key individuals can be identified. Within the museum itself, the most senior decision-maker is the museum director, who often initiates an exhibition and, crucially, secures appropriate support and resources. In light of this role as a mediator between museum staff and the funding body, the museum director can be crucially important in understanding more about the initial stages in the development of an exhibition. Other important decision-makers include the curator, or the subject specialist, whose task it is to choose and acquire the material for the exhibition, as well as providing draft labels. In the main, it is the task of the curator to interpret material for an exhibition. Designers and educationalists perform complimentary roles by working on the communicative aspects of the exhibit. These are ostensibly the main museum staff involved in the initial genesis and subsequent development of exhibitions. The problem is understanding more about the decisions they reach and the rationale behind these.

The issues, however, are actually highly complex. Even concentrating on how and why curators choose certain objects to be displayed and exclude others, there is no straightforward answer. Bud (1988, pp.146-152), himself a museum curator, discusses in some detail the processes by which an exhibition is put together and why material is included or omitted. On the one hand, material that is included in a museum

exhibition has to make sense in isolation, given the erratic manner in which visitors may interact with an exhibition. Yet, at the same time, material in an exhibition must also fit into a coherent narrative, or overall rationale. Even if objects fulfil this requirement, some may be excluded because of their sheer size, or because of security or safety considerations.

Similarly, a museum exhibition and the meanings that it is attempting to convey are often as dependent upon the production of labels, as they are upon the objects themselves. Because of the object-centred approach that museums almost invariably adopt, it is clear that these objects are usually devoid of social context. Placing museum objects in context is in large part dependent upon the labels and commentary which are attached to them. Yet, as Bud (1988, p.152) notes, the production and design of labels is a lengthy and complex process, involving considerable negotiation between museum designers and curators. The potential difficulties with such negotiations have been noted before (see Terrell 1991) and are a common source of difficulty:

> *'You always get this problem of a curatorial versus a design side. A curator thinks that they should show every single example of what they've got, and the designers want a beautiful exhibition. The two aren't necessarily compatible.'* (Exhibitions Officer - National Museum)

> *'In a large museum, the curators will decide what are the messages that they want to get across in a new exhibition and they will also decide what objects they feel are very important for that. They may have a show case and the curator will probably put in that show case about 100 objects and this is all the information that they want to give to the visitor. The designer will come along and say "That's no good, because no-one is going to read all of them or see all the objects, so you have got to cut them down to 10 objects". So it is that sort of negotiation, where the curator looks at it from a giving out information role and the designer looks at it from a different perspective '* (Director - Museum Training Organisation)

The role of designers has undoubtedly become increasingly important.

Traditionally, many museums simply expected their curators to act as designers too - with some disturbing results! Now, however, many museums, particularly larger national museums, have acknowledged that it is important for trained designers to take some responsibility for displaying and interpreting collections. Indeed, even local museums have increasingly acknowledged that design and display is a very different skill from curation.

Evidently, a huge range of factors influence the nature of the finished label. Not only does a label need to present a message about the overall aims of the exhibition as a whole, but it must simultaneously give detailed information about the objects themselves whilst also being accessible and concise. How the interplay between these factors is negotiated is highly complex - museum designers may be keen to emphasise the overall message of the exhibition, at the expense of more detailed information about displays, whilst curators may adopt a quite different perspective. Indeed, crucial to this process is the museum's perception of their visitors which, in part at least, must necessarily be hypothetical. A museum cannot be certain of the kinds of visitors they will attract to a particular exhibition, nor of their familiarity with the subject matter of the displays.

What is surely uncontentious is that much museum decision-making is often highly pragmatic. Many different museum staff are usually involved in the development of any specific exhibition and eliciting just why they made the decisions they did is difficult when one considers that so much is the result of personal compromise and agreement:

> *'In the end, no matter what you say, it will come down to personal agreement and personal compromise being struck. A lot of what you do, when it gets done, is because you might get on with someone, in a way that you can work with.'*
> (Education Officer - National Museum)

The fact that involved individuals such as designers, curators, educationalists,

marketing managers and even historical consultants are all bringing diverse and even contradictory perspectives to the development of exhibitions is interesting, not least because it illustrates the importance of the negotiation process in putting exhibitions together. In simple terms, museum exhibitions are almost always the result of drawn out and complex negotiation. This is especially the case in larger museums, where there may be a greater variety of staff and personalities all involved in the same project, and where planned exhibitions may be larger and more ambitious than in smaller museums. The following account, from an historian at a national museum, gives some insight into the extent of negotiation that may surround just one exhibition in the transformation from ideas and suggestions to physical reality:

> *'There's lots and lots of decisions that we have to make to get our own ideas sorted out. There would be a fair amount of good natured, sometimes intense discussion, then we would present an historical strategy or brief to the Director and the Exhibitions Officer, who would then make their own comments. Possibly the Trustees might even have an input. They might say 'you haven't mentioned so and so' and we would say a - because there is no material on it and b - we don't think it's very important. So there would be a feedback. There would be a certain amount of formal meetings at that stage with the Director, then we would go back and sub-divide the sections amongst us. ... So you slice up the cake and then you work on your own sections and it's your choice taking advice from whoever you want to about what goes in, how you choose to illustrate it and you write your own captions and so on. Then there's another series of meetings where you discuss your findings individually with the designer and so on and with the Director. So there are a whole series of meetings. Then there are various sub-committees which spin off from this. ... So there's a whole series of meetings, informal groupings, chats on the phone with designers; odd questions being fired at you all through the day. You can structure it to some extent by creating a deadline and a series of mini deadlines for handing photos in; choosing film; etc. But within all that there is a whole series of ad hoc emergency meetings when something is found not to actually work and so you have to find a new focus exhibit for that section. It's a constant cumulative process. If you're sensible, you can at least listen. ... By this time, you've made a hundred decisions for one section. There's the object selection; there's the photographic selection, there's the map selection. It's like building up a wall. All the time, we are making the fine tuning and constantly adjusting. So you've still got*

the different types of input coming in. People just think you write it all down at the beginning and you just do it, but it just doesn't happen like that.'

It is evident from this account that the processes of negotiation in some museums can be extensive, involving an array of different individuals, and can reflect both formal and informal discussion and debate.

The notion of '*involvement*' in the museum planning process is an important one, and is ultimately much more important than agreement. Indeed, the nature of this negotiation is such that it can be difficult to elicit the precise influences of particular museum staff:

'As with all these things, to actually say "Who made what decision?", or "Who came up with a particular idea?", is very difficult, because in this sort of industry, it can very often be just one word that somebody says at a meeting around the table that sparks off somebody else's train of thought, and at the end of the train of thought, you turn round and say: "Well, who actually had the idea?", you just don't know because everybody contributed to it.' (Production Company - National Museum)

However, it would clearly be wrong to assume that museums are somehow wholly democratic institutions in which each persons' view is of equal value, as the same respondent notes:

'You have to have a strong leader, who knows what they want, but equally that person has to have the ability to listen to what others have got to say and not be prima-donnaish.' (Production Company - National Museum)

Museums are hierarchical institutions and different museum staff hold differential degrees of power and influence which they can and do use strategically. Whilst the development of new exhibitions is largely the result of a process of informal negotiation between all the involved individuals, issues of contention are ultimately resolved by the

museum director who has final control over what is displayed. Indeed, this is particularly pronounced in the independent sector, where the degree of negotiation may be minimal and the power of the director to determine what is or is not included may be absolute, as the following Director of an independent museum outlined:

> *'I tell them what I want to go into each hut, and what topics I want to cover. ... They do that and then it comes back to me to read through. As long as I'm happy with it, that's all right.'* (Director - Independent Museum)

The reasons for this somewhat autocratic approach relate to the way in which independent museums have been generally established and funded by entrepreneurs, whose primary motive is ultimately to maximise their profit, to a degree that is different from national and local museums. For this reason, it is perhaps more understandable that they may be hesitant to delegate too much control over the content of their exhibitions.

Whilst different museum staff may adhere to very different perspectives, there nevertheless seems to be some evidence for suggesting that they often do share a common occupational culture, although the nature of this culture can vary dramatically between museums:

> *'All museums have a different culture obviously, but I think there are set kinds of cultures within museums which affect the way things are put together. In the nationals, it is a traditional sort of role culture - the organisation is the most important thing and you have a very specific role within that. ... Independent museums are a sort of power culture, with a visionary director who has people around to fulfil his or her vision. ... Then the other one is a task culture, where you are breaking things up into tasks, and team work become more important and this is the more modern way of doing things. So I think cultures within organisations are crucial really. It just really depends on the work place.'* (Lecturer in Museum Studies)

This notion of an occupational culture is clearly interesting, not least because it may help to explain why perspectives concerned with women's history have traditionally been excluded from museum displays but are now increasingly being included. On an obvious level, this can be explained by reference to particular staff personalities. After all, as Karp and Levine (1991) note in the opening sentence of their book on museum display:

> *'Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it.'* (p.1)

What remains to be seen, however, is just how the cultural assumptions of museum professionals are shaped? My empirical material certainly raises a number of pertinent complexities here, not least the fact that some museum staff appear to be particularly amenable to innovative and challenging displays and are highly progressive in their approach to constructing exhibitions. In contract, however, other museum staff appear to be quite the opposite, as the following respondents highlight:

> *'We know that the historians are always going to come up with a male dominated storyline, because war is essentially male dominated, and because all their training is as historians and to see everything with an overview, they find it hard to take into account new trends in interpretation and new trends in what schools are studying. ... Probably the new generation of historians coming up are getting much more open to these sorts of interpretations.'* (Exhibitions Officer - National Museum)

> *'We tend to be much keener on the social history aspects. So we tend to push for more on social history and more on women basically. But others parts of the museum will say "Yes, but we've got to have this battle or that battle" and so it is a terrible balancing act. We get listened to up to a point.'* (Education Officer - National Museum)

The issue, of course, is why are some museum professionals so much more progressive than others? A number of my respondents have related this in different

ways to the manner in which museum staff are trained which, in turn, is also intrinsically linked in a variety of ways to wider developments in history and approaches to the past.

Over the past twenty years or so, there has undoubtedly been a sea change in professional approaches to history and the past. In particular, there has been a growing consensus of the impossibility of neutral and objective museum presentations and the necessarily value laden nature of history, coupled with a broadening of the themes deemed to be appropriate subjects for museum displays:

> *'I mean 20 years ago, women's history was never considered seriously by professional historians. Now most professional historians would regard it as an extremely important element in almost anything they're doing. It just takes time for this to percolate downwards and amongst museum curators of under 35 , there's a very strong awareness of this.'* (Curator - Local Museum)

In this sense, there has certainly been a tangible change in the attitudes of museum staff, although some older museum professionals have shown themselves to be particularly hesitant to adopt these new developments in museum work. Nonetheless, these changes in the discipline of history have certainly begun to make a difference in museums: in terms of the work conducted by museums and their staff, and in terms of the inclusion of certain themes or exhibitions which may once have been frowned upon as inappropriate.

In light of the fact that much professional training of museum staff has readily adopted new developments from the discipline of history, regarding women's history, oral history and community history, for example, the manner in which staff have been trained has clearly played an important role in the increasing inclusion of alternative perspectives in museum displays. However, because so few museum staff are professionally trained, this can only be part of the story. Of course, some staff, such as

curators, may have entered the profession directly from the discipline of history anyway, where such approaches are now firmly established. Many others, however, have come to consider and adopt these ideas and perspectives through alternative means, not least through informal training on the job:

> *'In a sense, there is very little training that goes on. Just on the job training.'* (Director - Museum Training Organisation)

> *'I think how I have learnt best is just by working with some really good people, people that I admire and I have looked up to and they haven't necessarily been training me, but it was just observation and working with them, you learn very much through doing the job and working with them.'* (Curator - Local Museum)

The implication of such informal training on the job is interesting. While this may be a route through which new and innovative ideas may permeate through the museum world, it clearly has its disadvantages, as the same curator noted:

> *'It is incredibly hit and miss and that is why I think the museums in this country range from new displays which are brilliant and others which are appalling. There just doesn't seem to be an objective standard because of the ad hoc training and sharing of knowledge.'*

The growing importance of training in museums is highlighted by Kavanagh (1990), who notes that surprisingly little work has been conducted on the nature of curatorship. As she says:

> *'This in itself is indicative of the nature of museum development in Britain. It has not been supported either by a body of theoretical argument or, until 1980, a formal means of training curators in the ideas and skills relevant to history in museums. The growth has instead been sustained by a highly talented generation of curators who, in their various ways, have learnt through practice and through example.'* (p.xii)

That ideas about the inclusion of new perspectives in museum displays have ultimately permeated the museum world from developments in the discipline of history, is not especially a source of debate. What is far more contentious is the route that these ideas have taken. Of particular importance is the growing body of literature written by and for the museum professional. Many of these books and journals have been written from a progressive perspective and have been read widely throughout the museum world. The result has been a profound one as the museums profession as a whole and particular museum staff have begun to adopt these ideas.

> *'Very often the successful museums are run by people who have actually thought about what they are doing and have looked at examples, not just in Britain, but also elsewhere, and have read a wide variety of literature. ... What may well influence museum practice may be a documentary or a book that shows something in a new light or raises questions in a different way about something. If you just looked at the range of literature, the material that has come through, certainly from the second half of the 1980s onwards, has been much more analytical, much more prepared to challenge.'* (Lecturer in Museum Studies)

Of course, many of these notions have been vehemently opposed by a dwindling number of museum staff, but what is clear is that the professional culture of many museums has experienced a quite fundamental shift, with a subsequent impact on the manner in which many museum exhibitions are constructed. Indeed, the informal workplace culture of museums has also played a part in disseminating these ideas to a wider audience of museum staff, with the result that new museum professionals are increasingly open to progressive thinking on such issues as the inclusion of women's history in new exhibitions:

> *'You will find a greater degree of awareness or at least expressions of awareness on equal opportunities and political correctness in the museum world than you will in the photocopier selling world. I don't think it has always been the case, but it is now. It is attracting a kind of radical individual.'* (Director - National Museums Organisation)

Perhaps ironically, some commentators have even argued that the disparate and patchy nature of museum training, which has long been a feature of the museum world, has actually served to encourage more innovative and challenging approaches. After all, the fact that many staff are not specifically trained in museum work suggests, by implication, that they are *'not bound by its conventions and limitations.'* (Porter 1996, p.120)

In any event, it is important to recognise that these developments in museum history may be self-perpetuating. Namely, as these approaches have entered museums from the discipline of history, albeit through a variety of routes, so they in turn have encouraged more individuals with similar interests into the museum world:

> *'It is very complicated the way in which social history developed in British museums over the past 20 years and how social history was transformed as a subject. Yet it is because of the way in which history has been transformed in museums that has attracted people to work in museums, because people came to museums interested in oral history and community history approaches. It seems as if there has been a transformation.'* (Lecturer in Museum Studies)

These changes are becoming so tangible for museums now - and I argue in chapter eight seem set to become even more pronounced in the immediate future - because these ideas have now permeated throughout the museum hierarchy:

> *'The difference in the past 4-5 years is that now a whole generation of people have gone from here into positions of power in the museum community , speaking the same language. So people in senior positions want community history, they want oral history and a completely different approach and so you are able to slot into lower positions and be encouraged to do that. So things have carried through and have reached that higher level now.'* (Lecturer in Museum Studies)

This development certainly appears to account for the growing inclusion of

women's history in museums:

> *'It has taken a whole host of issues for museums to take on women's history, like post-war generation women like myself getting into positions of authority within a certain level of the museum occupation, whereby there are now more women who will not have their history covered up any more so that it has got to the point whereby you now have exhibitions on the subject.'* (Curator - Local museum)

There is therefore no doubt that there has been very significant changes in the work of museums - from the growing insidiousness of commercialism, to the greater importance attached to visitor preferences, to the pervasion of new ideas about history and the past. All of these developments are interesting in their own right, but in chapter eight I return to these themes to consider their implications for future museum exhibitions. For the moment, however, let us consider the implications of these findings for broader debates about museums and ideological construction. It is to this question that the next chapter turns.

CHAPTER FOUR

IDEOLOGY AND CONSTRUCTING THE PAST

Introduction

In this chapter we will be considering the implications of my research findings on the construction of museum exhibitions for the wider issue of ideological production and transmission. These findings do seem to raise some very intriguing issues which may have considerable wider relevance for debates about ideological transmission.

Irrespective of my empirical results, it is evident that there are a number of theoretical difficulties with the notion of a dominant ideology anyway. There is no doubt that the use of the dominant ideology thesis in the context of museums requires some development and a number of authors, most notably Merriman (1988), have raised major doubts about its applicability, particularly in terms of museum reception. Merriman, for instance, argues that for most writers on museums:

> *'The implication of their writings has always been that the public is an undifferentiated, unthinking mass, either all uniformly duped by an easily-assimilated dominant ideology, or all turning back to a romantic past to escape the decline of the present.'* (1988, p.5)

Similarly, Merriman suggests that:

'the consensus of opinion amongst critics of archaeological and historical displays in museums is that the presentations act as agents of the dominant ideology. However, surveys of visitors to museums and other historic presentations show clearly that 'the dominated' - those who are supposed to be kept in their place by their acceptance of the dominant ideology - tend not to go to museums. As a result, the effectiveness of museums as ideological instruments must be questioned.'
(Merriman 1988, p.4)

On the other hand, however, I would propose that if one understands the dominant ideology thesis as suggesting that working class subordination is largely the result of the cultural dominance achieved by the capitalist ruling class, then perhaps the fact that subordinate classes do not visit museums is not incompatible with the dominant ideology thesis. Instead, it may simply be an example of the cultural dominance achieved by the ruling class? It signifies, as even Merriman admits, that the ruling classes have the cultural dominance and capital which enables them to visit and understand museum displays in a way which the subordinate classes may not be able to do.

Whilst we shall discuss these issues in more detail in the next two chapters, there is nevertheless little doubt that the notion of a dominant ideology in the study of museums is somewhat flawed - particularly in the context of the reception of museums and museum displays. Yet Merriman (1988) and others suggest that the notion of a dominant ideology can otherwise be accepted, at least in terms of the construction of museum displays and the production of the past, despite the fact that the whole dominant ideology thesis has been subjected to considerable criticism. The problem for Merriman is that theories of the *production* and dissemination of the past have been transferred to its *consumption.* He does not necessarily dispute that the dominant ideology thesis is appropriate to the production of the past, he simply questions how closely it refers to its reception and consumption.

I would argue, however, that the theoretical treatment of museums and their presentations of the past, which is often couched in terms of the dominant ideology thesis, is in need of some revision. In other words, the crude dominant ideology thesis is not simply an inappropriate theoretical framework within which to couch the study of the public *consumption* of museum displays, but is actually somewhat inappropriate to the study of the *production* of museum displays. Indeed, I would strongly concur with the observation made by Macdonald (1996), that the problem with many attempts to examine and investigate the process of ideological production and consumption is the usual assumption that there is a:

> *'neat fit between production, text and consumption. It supposes both too clear-cut a conscious manipulation by those involved in creating exhibitions and too passive and unitary a public; and it ignores the often competing agendas involved in exhibition-making, the messiness of the process itself, and the interpretive agency of visitors.'* (p.5).

Importantly, Macdonald then goes on to say that:

> *'It also provides no account of the dynamics by which museum exhibitions are formed - including the routes by which 'dominant interests' or unconscious associations might come to make themselves felt, or of the contexts in which they may be challenged.'* (p.5)

The last chapter tentatively explored my empirical findings on this area and in this chapter I wish to draw out some of the theoretical implications of this empirical work. Let us begin, however, with a further examination of the various debates which have surrounded the concept of *'ideology'*.

Defining ideology

The concept of 'ideology' is a popular yet flexible one in sociology. It is possible to extract two basic definitions from the way it has been used in recent social theory (see Thompson 1984). The first is a *'neutral conception'*, where the term is used in a descriptive sense to mean the systems of thought or belief which are allied to social actions. The second is a *'critical or negative conception'*. This sees ideology as acting to maintain domination through asymmetrical power relations, in which sectional interests are represented as universal interests (see Giddens 1979). So, in simple terms, ideology refers to a body of beliefs or ideas underpining society - in many accounts, a body of beliefs or ideas which legitimise the subordination of one group by another.

It is probably fair to suggest that the Marxist treatment of ideology, on which I want to focus, is usually identified with a critical or negative conception of ideology. Certainly, this is the concept that Marx appears to most closely adhere to. However, the situation is considerably more complex than this. After the death of Marx, for instance, the notion of ideology began to acquire a number of new meanings. Firstly, a conception of ideology as the totality of forms of social consciousness - which came to be expressed in the concept of *'ideological superstructure'* - and the conception of ideology as the political ideas connected with the interests of a class. In part, these developments arose because of the way in which some neutral concepts of ideology can be found in the writings of Marx and Engels, despite their general leanings towards a more negative concept. Engels, for instance, mentions on several occasions *'the ideological superstructure'* with sufficient generality to suggest that ideology covers the totality of forms of consciousness. Gramsci (1971) frequently quotes the passage in *'Preface'*, in which Marx refers to *'ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out'* and uses this to support his interpretation of ideology as the all-encompassing superstructural sphere in which people acquire consciousness of their contradictory social relations.

However, the main reason for the development of Marxist concepts of ideology along neutral lines was the way in which Marxism, as a theory of political practice, became involved in class struggles, and the political ideas of the classes in conflict acquired a new importance and needed to be theoretically accounted for. Lenin, for instance, perceives ideology as not a necessary distortion which conceals contradictions, but as a neutral concept referring to the political consciousness of class, including the proletarian class. Similarly, Lukacs uses the terms ideology or ideological to refer to both bourgeois and proletarian consciousness, without implying a necessarily negative connotation. The existence of two major conceptions of ideology within the Marxist tradition is the source of many debates. Some authors accept only one version as the truly Marxist one, whilst others, such as Althusser, try to reconcile both versions. Althusser, for example, distinguishes a theory of ideology in general, for which the function of ideology is to secure cohesion in society, from the theory of particular ideologies, for which the former general function is overridden by the new role of securing the domination of one class.

Ostensibly, I want to concentrate on the negative concept of ideology, because it is, or at least has been, one of the most pervasive themes in much contemporary thinking about ideology and ideological transmission.

The concept of ideology

Traditionally, the notion of 'ideology' has been most closely linked to the work of Marx and Engels, who emphasised that capitalist societies are permeated by ideas or ideologies which are, firstly, largely generated by the economic structures of a society and, secondly, necessarily distorted by class interests, presenting a view of the world from the point of view of a ruling class. The first point, that the character of ideologies

is largely determined by the economic structures of society, is usually represented by the notion of base and superstructure, which I will talk about shortly. The second point, however, that in class societies ideologies are distorted by class interests, is often expressed in terms of the *'dominant ideology thesis'*. In simple terms, this argues that the ruling class establish their own ideas and ideology as dominant in society and these are then absorbed and accepted by subordinate classes. It is claimed that this largely accounts for the maintenance of capitalist class relations. In other words, working class subordination in capitalist societies is largely the result of the cultural and ideological dominance achieved by the capitalist ruling class:

> *'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, ie. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.'* (Marx and Engels 1970, p.61)

According to this formulation, the dominant ideology penetrates and permeates the consciousness of the working class, who come to see and experience reality only through the conceptual categories of the dominant class. They therefore fail to understand their exploited position in the capitalist system.

These are the main themes to the traditional Marxist concept of ideology, although there are a number of questions which surround whether or not Marx and Engels actually subscribed to this fairly simplified notion. Leaving these doubts aside for the moment, it is clear that this fairly standard interpretation of ideology has been developed upon and expanded in a number of ways. Certainly, Marxists have tended to place much greater emphasis on the concept of ideology than perhaps Marx himself would have done. In particular, many writers have argued that the concept of a dominant ideology can help account for why revolutions have failed to occur, by emphasising the way in which ideology has attempted to ensure that modern society remains fully integrated.

Gramsci made a number of important contributions to the concept of ideology by analysing the role of ideological apparatus in its production and by referring to the way in which the dominant class establishes its control through largely ideological means as *'hegemony'*. Central to this notion is the belief that the crude use of force or coercion is simply inadequate for guaranteeing maintained social stability in modern society. For Gramsci and many subsequent Marxist writers, therefore, the key to why dominant classes are able to maintain control of society is by winning consent through the use of ideology. This is embodied in the major institutions of capitalist society: education; the mass media, the legal system and so on - what Althusser refers to as *'ideological state apparatus'*, for Althusser insists that *'an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices'*. Subsequently, because the ruling class is able to exert its ideological dominance and make its own class interests appear to be the interests of the whole of society, there is ostensibly little need to use force or coercion to maintain control, what Miliband refers to as *'the process of legitimation'*. Sometimes, however, it is necessary for the dominant class to use coercion, rather than consent, to maintain control and this use of force is operationalised by what Althusser calls *'repressive state apparatus'*, which include the police and army. It is thus through a combination of consent and coercion, although most usually consent, that the ruling class maintain their dominance. For Marxists, therefore, the state is ostensibly a vehicle for the realisation of the class interests of the dominant class - an agency of class domination, if you like.

Implicit in the Marxist concept of ideology, there is a necessity to address the 'base/superstructure' issue, which argues, in simple terms, that the nature or character of ideologies is largely determined by the economic arrangements of a society. Namely, in terms of classical Marxism, Marx and Engels interpreted ideology in terms of a conceptual distinction between a 'base', constituted by the dynamic processes of production, and a 'superstructure', corresponding to the development of the base, and made up of ideas and institutions reflecting the unequal class structure and embodying

'false consciousness'. The character of the *superstructure* is thus determined by the character of the *base*. As the nature of the economic base varies, therefore, so does the nature of the superstructure. Subsequently, the character of the superstructure, of which ideological structures are an integral part, is largely determined by the economic interests of the dominant social class. In part, this interpretation is not surprising - arising as it does from Marx's materialism, and his emphasis on a critique of idealist thinking. For Marx, therefore, the economic base is the determining force of the social structure of all societies, to which the ideological superstructure is subservient. Yet this point has been one of the most contentious in the field of ideology and the notion that the 'base' determines the 'superstructure', has been criticised as economic determinism.

On the one hand, it has been argued that Marx and Engels did not actually adopt such a determinist perspective. Firstly, they suggested that superstructural elements could be relatively autonomous of the economic base and have their own laws of development. Secondly, they argued that the superstructure will interact with and influence the base. These points have been further developed by many subsequent writers. Althusser, for instance, explicitly attempted to reformulate the base/superstructure model. Instead of seeing superstructural elements, such as ideology, as simple reflections of the economic base, he suggests that superstructural elements, such as ideology, are conditions of existence of the economy. It can similarly be argued that there is a clear sense in which differentiating base from superstructure is impossible. Taking the relations of production, for example, it is clear that because they are partly relations of ownership, they appear to involve legal definitions which can be defined as superstructural.

Similarly, the base/superstructure model suggests that only economic groupings, such as class, can have an impact upon ideology, but I would suggest that there are problems with this. Certainly, it seems fairly clear that some forms of ideology - concerning art, for example - are not necessarily affected by the economy or class

membership. Moreover, social groups other than class have been shown to have an influence on the character of ideology. Mannheim, for instance, took as his starting point Marx's theory of ideology, which he saw as considerably restricted by the notion that ideas and beliefs are necessarily distorted by class interests. He argues that our ideas and ideologies are evidently not created and conditioned simply by social class, even if this may be the major determining factor. Instead, they also reflect our membership of other groups, which can reflect age, gender, ethnicity and so on. Social actors, for instance, have interests by being members of groups, and to examine ideology is to see how symbolic meanings are mobilised to legitimate the sectional interests of those groups. In other words, ideology can be seen to represent interest groups. Yet interest groups are not simply determined in terms of their control over economic resources. Subsequently, a whole myriad of interest groups co-exist simultaneously, each promoting certain ideologies and interests. This, in very simple terms, represents the main themes and some of the specific problems, implicit in the standard Marxist interpretation of ideology, embodied in the dominant ideology thesis. The question that this chapter seeks to examine, however, is just how far these notions of ideology are applicable to the production of museum exhibitions.

Museums and ideological production

Evidently, the decisions reached by museum staff about the manner in which they produce exhibitions and particularly the kinds of messages that the exhibition will carry are not straightforward. Far from it. Instead, as we have just seen, the messages implicit in many exhibitions are the result of a complex interplay of a myriad of factors. Kavanagh notes that the nature of a history museum can be most fruitfully explored by examining and tracing the main factors that created and shaped it:

'These are the ideological circumstances in which it develops; current configurations of popular interest in history; and the character and direction of professional curatorship.' (Kavanagh 1990, p.4)

In other words, understanding the contemporary museum requires an understanding of the wider context within which the museum operates. The role and importance of history for assisting society to come to terms with its past and present has been noted before (see Bloch 1954; Carr 1964 and Marwick 1981). Museums are a very important part of the process of:

're-casting the events of the past into a pattern that makes some sense today. This pattern is crafted - sometimes carefully and critically, sometimes crudely - into forms conducive for contemporary need and understanding.' (Kavanagh 1990, p.4)

In other words, as I briefly discussed in the introduction, the past is mediated by the needs of the present. To use the words of Urry (1996):

'The past is endlessly constructed in and through the present. And we thus add in parenthesis, that all representations of the past involve remaking in and through the present; and this is not true only of the so-called 'heritage industry'. (pp.48-49)

In light of the fact that present society consists of groups that are more powerful than others, it does not seem unfair to suggest that the more powerful groups are in a stronger position to influence and determine societies interpretation of the past to suit their own needs. Power is an important, if not the most important, determinant in terms of the distribution of resources, and the past can be seen as a resource to be used and developed to suit the needs of the present. It is hardly unreasonable to suggest that the presently powerful groups and sections of society have more say and clout about how the past should or should not be interpreted.

The reason why groups such as women or ethnic minorities have been excluded from museum presentations of history is precisely to do with their contemporary power - or rather lack of it. The obvious question, however, and one which this thesis has sought to address, is just why these groups have increasingly been included in museum accounts of the past. I have suggested that this is still very much to do with their power In particular, as museums have moved into the commercial arena, willingly or otherwise, so these groups have taken on added power - the power of consumption.

In the context of society and how society comes to terms with its past, professional groups such as historians; archivists and museum curators become essential to the process by which society understands and comes to grips with its past, because the past does not exist independently. Rather, it is constructed and interpreted by those charged with the task of understanding the past in terms of the present. Yet it goes without saying that how these groups and society as a whole understand and interpret the past is far from objective and neutral. On the contrary, interpretations of the past are necessarily determined and constrained by what is or is not appropriate in the context of the present. In this sense, the past can be used and manipulated to suit the needs of the present, a point made by a number of authors such as Hewison (1987) and Wright (1985). Therefore histories in museums:

> *'... are neither innocent nor pure. They are created using current mind-maps and express dominant ideologies, in essence our beliefs about ourselves and the world. As a result, they reveal the traditions of history-telling that are prioritised in contemporary life.'* (Kavanagh 1990, p.5)

Certainly, a number of commentators are explicit in accrediting this process of historical construction with the widespread exclusion of themes such as the history of organised labour (see Knowles 1987) and that of women from many museum accounts of the past (see Porter 1987, 1996). The question, of course, is why are these themes increasingly being included in museum exhibitions?

The growing importance of social history is evidently an important element in this process. The widespread enthusiasm for social history, and its developing academic respectability, has changed the historical backdrop against which many museums are operating. Social history has undoubtedly proved to be highly popular with the public from all walks of life, and this popularity has been compounded by its inclusion in a variety of media.

Additionally, more recent changes in the political and economic context within which museums are operating has also had an impact, particularly the manner in which museums have increasingly become an important part of the tourist and leisure industries, and especially the way in which the past has increasingly become a commodity, or a product to be consumed. In other words, museums have increasingly found themselves drawn into a process of commodification and commercialisation.

It is also important to acknowledge that the growing importance of museums also reflects changes in the patterns of leisure and recreation, with a notable reduction in working hours, an increase in holiday entitlement and, of course, the burgeoning growth in car ownership. This wider context is important for understanding the contemporary role of museums - because they came to be acknowledged, by local authorities and independent museums alike, as offering an important potential for making money, with the result that discussions of museums and their work began to increasingly adopt the language of marketing and money making

Of course, as we have seen, the importance that museums attach to the views and preferences of visitors may not be as pronounced as some museum staff may claim. Nonetheless, it is clear that from the 1970s onwards, the relationship between museums and their visitors was different to what it had been previously. No-longer was it acceptable for the museum to be complacent in terms of the services that they

provided for the visitor. Museums were all seeking to encourage visitors to enjoy their services over and above those of other museums and heritage sites, a situation compounded by the rapid growth in the number of museums during this period (see Lumley 1988).

However, these commercial developments were taking place simultaneously to other developments regarding the role of history. The quite profound changes which were taking place in both the economic and social infrastructure of the UK encouraged a growing interest in local history. The significant rise in the number of history societies is perhaps indicative of the importance that many began to attach to their own past and history. Moreover, the industrial reorganisation of the UK led not simply to a diminution of industrial forms, but also led to a related concern with the loss of communities and long-established ways of life, which in turn promoted an interest in social history.

Simultaneously, however, the rise in social history as an academic discipline began to have some very interesting implications for the work of museums. A number of developments led to an interest in the history of women and workers, who had been largely ignored by traditional historical accounts, and yet were profoundly influential in the making of history in the first place. A combination of movements, such as the History Workshop at Ruskin College, Oxford; the Workers' Educational Association and of course the rise in the feminist movement, all began to encourage a wider perspective on history and historical coverage.

> *'A vigorous, questioning, probing movement developed, casting aside a great deal of humbug and received opinion in an effort to recover the histories that rightly belonged to those that had created them - ordinary working people.'* (Kavanagh 1990, p.49)

Importantly - and this is in fact a crucial point - some museums and museum staff became increasingly receptive to such developments, particularly with a growing recognition that many museums, in their efforts to present a view of social and cultural harmony, had actually denied some people their historical heritage. As a consequence, a number of curators, particularly amongst the new generation of curatorial staff, began to carry this notion of social history further in their efforts to "democratise" history - although they were simultaneously met with dissent by more traditionalist staff, who were unconvinced by the need to revise their approaches.

The practices of museums in the UK can often be best described as "ad hoc", compounded by the fact that there is very significant disagreement about the appropriate direction of history curatorship in museums. For example, the resultant exhibition is usually the consequence of widespread negotiation and compromise between various museum staff, each with their own personal and professional agendas, and which are often mutually incompatible. The notion of contention in terms of the construction of historical narrative is far from a new one, and was particularly pronounced in the context of the exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, the bomber which dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima (see Zolberg 1996). Importantly, as Zolberg makes clear, the contention was not simply between curators and the directors of the National Air and Space Museum, but between curators themselves, with the result that some staff saw the treatment of the atomic bombing as imperative, while others argued that simply the display of the Enola Gay was an obscenity, amounting to a *'celebration of the bombing'*. Indeed, the potential importance of museum personalities in the negotiation of displays can be illustrated with reference to the National Curriculum. We saw earlier that the National Curriculum, because of the way in which it is so closely linked to valuable school visits, has become increasingly important in decisions about which subjects or topics to display. Therefore, in a sense, one could argue that the National Curriculum represents a clear route by which dominant ideologies can determine museum exhibitions. Indeed, there is no-doubt that it is influencing, often in a very

major way, the choice of subject matter for museum exhibitions. However, the actual manner in which these subjects or topics are interpreted - and any historical topic can be interpreted in a myriad of different ways - is still left very much to the discretion of museum staff. The interpretations of museum professionals are thus crucial.

Evidently, the perspectives taken by museum staff are partially linked to their personal upbringing. This is indicated by the following quote, which suggests that the relative exclusion of women from many museum accounts of the past has:

> '*... arisen not because women or any other part of the museums' audience has been actively written out of the displays, but because the issues were simply not considered when the displays were created. In common with all elements of museum work, military museums are largely run by white, middle class, able-bodied men. How does one group, even with the best of intentions, cater for another group whose perspective it does not share and whose needs and interests are unfamiliar?*' (Wilkinson and Hughes 1991, p.27).

Yet the rationale behind many of the decisions reached by museum staff may have far more to do with their professional upbringing, which in turn may be closely linked to the occupational culture of the museum within which they are working. Whilst an increasing proportion of museum staff are formally trained in museum techniques, the vast majority are still trained informally, learning from their peers and on the job (see Von der Lippe 1985, Kavanagh 1990). Subsequently, the occupational culture of the museum in which people are working may be an important influence on their professional outlook. It may be, for example, that the construction of museum exhibitions has less to do with dominant ideologies as such, and more to do with the professional culture of museum staff. Of course, this suggestion is not incompatible with the notion of a dominant ideology pervading museum displays. It is simply that these ascendant ideas are first mediated by the professional culture of the museums. In other words, this argument is not to deny that many museums will support and endorse

dominant beliefs and ideas, it simply suggests that they are first negotiated through the professional culture of staff. This notion of professional cultures embodying dominant ideologies, and in turn acting as a means of transmission, is an established one, as Larson illustrates:

> *'As a heterogeneous category of the occupational structure, professionals are, in general, only agents of power. Consciously and unconsciously, they spread the technocratic legitimations of the new structures of domination and inequality, contributing to their ideological convergence with other beliefs, aspirations, and illusions. The individual freedom and control which professionals enjoy in and out of work is in part a mask: for themselves as well as for less privileged others, it helps to conceal collective powerlessness, subordination and complicity.'* (1977, p. 243)

I have talked at some length about this notion of a professional museum culture amongst museum staff, and particularly amongst curators. Whether or not this actually exists and the nature of its coherence, however, is less than clear. This doubt surrounding the notion of a clear and coherent occupational culture reflects a number of issues, not least the fact that curators in British museums come from a diversity of backgrounds - some may have history or social science backgrounds, but many will not. Similarly, although there has been a welcome expansion in the number of courses run for museum professionals, such as the qualifications in Museums Studies from the University of Leicester, many curators receive little or no training in terms of history curatorship, whilst museum literature is similarly sparse.

This scenario may certainly be helpful for explaining the manner in which many history museums have modified their displays to include topics and areas previously considered to be inappropriate for museums to cover, such as women's history. In other words, the somewhat ad hoc nature of history curatorship has meant that whilst bad practice - or at least out-dated practice - was perpetuated by the informal manner in which many museum staff were trained, it simultaneously meant that some curators

could show initiative in terms of developing new ideas and concepts about the representation of history, without being unduly constrained by a formalised and limiting professional culture.

However, my empirical work on museums and the construction of their exhibitions raises a number of salient problems with this conventional interpretation of professional cultures and their relationship to dominant beliefs. Namely, if professional cultures of the kind to be found in the museum field are simply reflecting and promoting dominant ideologies, how can one account for the fact that many museums are increasingly presenting highly progressive displays on the role of women and ethnic minorities? In other words, how can it be that the professional culture can just as easily promote contrasting beliefs and ideas, or beliefs and ideas which are subversive in the sense of challenging the established orthodoxy? Let us consider this issue in a little more detail.

In the sense that museum displays are negotiated by museum staff, who are constrained in terms of what they can and cannot include by the occupational culture of the museum, the linkage between dominant ideas and museum displays should be a fairly clear one, certainly if one accepts the conventional interpretation of professional cultures as providing a route for dominant ideologies. Indeed, the importance of professional cultures for influencing the production of museum messages is not in dispute, as the following respondent outlines:

> '*... because the people who are doing displays are always constrained by their personal upbringing and their academic upbringing, the institution's way of doing things and the need to tow a relative line when they are not the people who are actually in direct control of the museum and the need to ensure that they can do what they want without getting on everyone's backs, and also the need to look to their peers for approval, quite necessarily constrains what they feel is appropriate to display.*' (Head of Department - Local Museum)

Clearly, therefore, the professional culture of the museum is an important determinant of what is included in displays. Yet if this factor is so important, how can one account for the development of highly progressive displays on women and ethnic minorities? Evidently, the transmission of dominant ideologies in the context of museums is far from straightforward, but is influenced and determined by a variety of complex factors. For example, the production of many museum exhibitions is often more dependent on the decisions made by previous curators and decision-makers than on anything that current museum staff may desire:

> *'Objects will be acquired because they relate to existing collections. Thus the history of the institution and the decisions made over collection policies by former curators will deeply influence what is possible in the present and the future. This often results in a display of objects that is out of joint with current values'*.(Hooper-Greenhill 1988, p.228).

Bayly (1990) makes a related point when he examines the difficulties implicit in avoiding colonial stereotypes whilst mounting an exhibition on the British in Imperial India. As he notes, it proved very difficult to avoid colonial stereotypes, given that they were endorsed by so many of the historical records of the period, on which the exhibits were based. He summarises the subsequent problem in these terms:

> *'These powerful images could only be critiqued with other images and not simply with prosy exhibition captions written by equivocating historians.'* (1990, p.16)

It is evident, therefore, that museum displays can be in contrast to current dominant ideas because of the fact that many museums have a lengthy history and the nature of their collections may be in contrast to current values. This point, however, does not really help to explain why many museums are increasingly progressive in their interpretations. In the words of Batzli:

'Many history museums in the United States are altering the messages they present to the public through their exhibits. ... Topics involving the lives of women, blacks, and immigrants are now being recognised as important. In part, these changes reflect trends in historical scholarship that place an increased emphasis on social and cultural history' (1990, p.830)

Clearly, as I have alluded to earlier in this chapter, the way in which museum staff are trained is an important point, particularly the way in which contemporary ideas about history and the scope of historical interpretation are instilled into the museum sector, which takes place in a number of ways - through both formal and informal training and also through museum books and literature. That museums reflect changing trends in historical interpretation is not is dispute. What is more interesting, however, is the speed at which museums come to reflect contemporary thinking. The conventional idea, of course, is that the role of museums is to simply react to shifts in dominant ideas and beliefs, albeit with a time-lag during which ideas about history and historical interpretation first become well established. In other words, the role of the museum is very much a *'reactive'* one, slowly reacting to shifts in dominant ideas. However, I would suggest that museums also have the capacity to act in a *'proactive'* manner, vigorously promoting alternative and progressive interpretations of the past. In other words, it may well be that museums are at the forefront, or at least have the potential for being at the forefront, of new and potentially subversive interpretations of the past. Vera Zolberg, an American sociologist who has written extensively on museums, certainly thinks that museums have the potential for this role:

'It is not just the museums reflecting, they're incorporating on-going intellectual structures ... all of these other structures of thinking and so on go on within universities and generally at high levels, at graduate levels. The museum is really the place or the institution which enthuses this to the public - it is really disseminating what have come to be the accepted ways of thinking about the world in a very modern way. Sometimes museums get it 20 years late, but sometimes not late at all - they have the latest thinking.' (Personal Interview)

This is an interesting comment, not least because Lavine and Karp (1990, p.1) have similarly noted that a museum may be a creative agency as well as a *'contested terrain'*. Indeed, this should not be especially surprising given that, as Riegel (1996) notes *'museums not only reflect culture, they also help make it.'* (p.89)

In this way, museums may well *'have a formative as well as a reflective role in social relations'* (Macdonald 1996, p.4). This point is explored in more detail in chapter eight, when I consider the future of museum exhibitions, in the particular context of their treatment of sexuality. Nonetheless, it is already clear that many museums, enthused by new approaches towards social history and coupled with a recognition of the very real potential of museums for challenging the status quo, are already moving in this direction. The Women's Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, for instance, is one striking example, which is premised on a critique of the treatment of women in mainstream museum culture. Jette Sandahl, a former member of the directorate, has already described the potency of museums as a tool for shaping public understandings:

> *'Material collections give museums an unequalled opportunity to provide counter-images, to de-naturalize, to de-mystify the present order. As a museum we wanted to accentuate the dimensions of change and choices in history, to convey a sense of power to intervene in history, to influence decisions and affect the direction of development.'* (Sandahl 1993)

In other words, museums do not simply reflect the dominant ideas and ideologies of society - they also perform an important role in terms of actually constructing and formulating these ideologies. In fact, some commentators have even gone so far as to suggest that contemporary museums actually have a moral responsibility within society for encouraging new and alternative readings of the past (see Horne 1992).

Certainly, I would suggest that museums are increasingly adopting this role of cultural entrepreneurs, and I would further argue that the reasons for this relate in a

number of ways to the increasing importance of commercialism in the museum field, something I discussed in the last chapter. It is certainly the case that contemporary museums are:

> *'increasingly enmeshed in what can be the competing claims of diverse audiences, public accountability and consumer culture.'* (Fyfe and Ross 1996, p.130)

How these competing demands are being addressed by modern museums is having, I would suggest, profound implications for both their work and their wider role within late twentieth century society. Let me illustrate this point by referring again to the manner in which museums are increasingly displaying exhibitions in which women are no-longer the peripheral group that they once were. I discussed earlier that many of the decisions taken by museums are increasingly informed by commercial considerations. It may be that the increasing inclusion of displays relating to women has very close links to this development. Women, as half of the population, represent a huge potential market for museums and one which museums generally, and military museums in particular, largely under-utilise. In 1991, for instance, just 26% of the visitors to the Imperial war Museum were women. Linked to this, women have become increasingly vocal in their demands to be included in historical displays, while the fact that many museum staff are also women has added to this pressure. These issues are illustrated by the following quote from a female Exhibitions Officer at a national museum:

> *'There is influence from the general public. The strongest one at the moment is coming from women visitors who feel that we don't do enough about the role of women in the two world wars. This is something which, when we were planning our displays, we did feel should be represented. Our problem is that our team of historians are all men and don't take kindly to what they regard as peripheral subjects...'*

In short, museums are experiencing pressure from a number of different sources to develop more balanced and progressive displays which include women. However,

these pressures have long existed, to a degree at least, and yet many museums have still been hesitant to include such displays. In part, this shift has resulted from the gradual replacement of older, more traditional, staff with younger staff that are more in tune with recent ideas about the interpretation of history. But this is only part of the reason for these changes. Instead, and this is an important point, these various pressures are evidently compatible with the commercial rationale increasingly being adopted by museums, as they attempt to expand their visitor base and, related to this, their income. Of course, one can make a number of observations about the ways in which museums operate which would question the central importance of commercial pressures. For example, the fact that some museums may not conduct conventional market research could question the degree to which museums have absorbed commercialism, as would the fact that, as we saw earlier, museum professionals often have little respect for their visitors. However, one could argue that both of these factors are the residue of traditional museum practices which are shifting as commercialism becomes more important and central to the work of museums.

In a sense, therefore, one can argue that commercialism has become a dominant ideology, but this has some very interesting consequences. For example, it is a very interesting paradox that if one accepts that commercialism has become a dominant ideology in the museum field, a consequence of this has been a dramatic rise in museum displays which may actually subvert dominant and conventional ideas! Indeed, one could also move from this position and argue that the shared values of commercialism mean that there is no-longer a need for hegemony. These are all interesting points - points which I will discuss at more length in chapter seven, where I examine more thoroughly the notion of commercialism and museums in the context of postmodernism (see Featherstone 1991; Crook et al. 1992; Nava 1992).

Clearly, therefore, the transmission of dominant ideologies in the context of museums is far from straightforward, but is influenced and determined by a variety of

complex factors, not least by the interplay of a myriad of staff all coming to the process of production with an array of differing agendas, by the manner in which museum staff are trained and by the professional culture of the museum itself. This finding interestingly relates to some intriguing theoretical developments in the field of ideology.

Theoretical problems with the 'dominant ideology thesis'

Recent years have seen a number of criticisms raised about the whole 'dominant ideology thesis'. As Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1980) point out, the 'dominant ideology thesis' rests upon a number of questionable assumptions: firstly, that there is indeed a coherent dominant ideology; secondly, that the apparatus for ideological transmission exist and, thirdly, that it is able to exert a cohesive influence upon both the subordinate classes and also the ruling class itself. They suggest that if one actually looks at these themes in terms of the empirical evidence, there are significant question marks surrounding the concept of a dominant ideology.

If one looks at late capitalism, for example, it is evident that the apparatus for the potential transmission of ideology are highly developed. The Internet, the mass media, the education system - all provide the clear potential for the promotion of a dominant ideology. The problem, however, as Abercrombie, Hill and Turner point out, is that whilst the apparatus for ideological transmission are highly developed - more highly developed than they have been in any previous historical society, such as feudalism or early capitalism - there is paradoxically no clear and cohesive dominant ideology. Instead, they suggest that there are a range of ideological themes which are frequently in open contradiction to one another. The ideology of nationalism, for example, is clearly at odds with the economics of the multinational. Abercrombie, Hill and Turner argue, therefore, that supporters of the dominant ideology thesis tend to exaggerate the degree to which modern society is culturally and ideologically integrated.

Certainly, as Giddens (1979) acknowledges, there is a clear tendency to overestimate the degree of integration achieved by dominant ideologies. Indeed, even the dominant class itself are clearly fragmented into a number of interest groups. In general, Abercrombie, Hill and Turner suggest that the role of ideologies in the maintenance of class relations has been over-emphasised. Rather they suggest that the capitalist relations of production are maintained through *'the dull compulsion of economic relations'*. Namely, whilst the system relies on the conformity of workers, workers themselves are also dependent on the continuation of the system for a wage. As such, they clearly have an interest in maintaining existing relations of production.

Undoubtedly, the dominant ideology thesis requires some development. The implication, for instance, has always been that the public is an undifferentiated, unthinking mass, all uniformly duped by an easily-assimilated dominant ideology. I would argue that this underestimates the degree to which subordinate groups are capable of constructing ideologies which are in contradiction to dominant ideologies, something which I will examine in the next two chapters. In other words, subordinate groups within society often have their own views in relation to their own interests. In a sense, this point has been identified by many writers, including Gramsci, in the notion of *'dual consciousness'*. In simple terms, this refers to the way in which people can simultaneously adopt two contradictory systems of ideas or beliefs. Frequently, the term is applied to the working class who may adhere to beliefs generated by the dominant class and transmitted by the education system or mass media, whilst simultaneously subscribing to a quite separate belief system, which directly arises from their experience as a subordinate class. For example, when surveyed, people may strongly disapprove of strikes, and yet may then participate in strikes at their own work place.

Nevertheless, the way in which the dominant ideology thesis treats social actors as unthinking dupes in many respects represents a critical problem with most Marxist concepts of ideology. The general inability of much conventional ideological theory, including the dominant ideology thesis, to recognise the influence of *agency*, or the power of social actors to operate independently of the determining constraints of social *structure*, has itself been a source of some dissatisfaction amongst theoretical sociologists. For example, I would argue that a major criticism of Althusser is that he rejects theories which reduce explanation to the characteristics of individuals. Rather, he argues that individuals *must* be seen as bearers of the structures of social relations. This approach has been criticised, however, by Thompson in '*The Poverty of Theory*', where he opposes Althusser's structuralist thinking, with '*humanism*', emphasising instead human agency. This, in turn, has led to a number of developments, such as the formulation by Giddens of '*structuration theory*', which stresses the mutual dependency, rather than opposition, of human agency and social structure and conceives social structure as both '*the medium and the outcome*' of social action. Social structures, according to structuration theory, should not be seen as barriers to action and as repressive of the human agent's ability to act, but are intimately involved in the production of action. The structural properties of social systems provide the means by which people act and they are also the outcomes of those actions. Whilst there are a number of debates concerning the fruitfulness of 'structuration theory', which I do not wish to engage with here, it may nevertheless potentially be a useful aid to re-considering the concept of ideology. I would certainly suggest that perceiving human agency and social structure as mutually dependent, rather than oppositional, is of some benefit, although given the problems which persist in applying these notions to 'concrete' historical cases, I am not sure how far this issue can actually be resolved.

Similarly, perhaps one of the major criticisms of the notion of a dominant ideology is that it generally opposes 'ideology' with 'social reality', or the 'real' conditions of existence. The social reality, for instance, is ostensibly the inequality implicit in class

relations of production and ideology is perceived as disguising this situation. In other words, 'ideology' is often perceived as 'false consciousness' in so far as it presents a false image of the social actors class interests. There are, however, a number of problems with this concept. Namely, it brings into question how one defines 'inequality'. It is evident, for example, that different social actors will have different understandings as to what constitutes 'inequality'. Such criticisms have led to a number of developments. Althusser (1977), for example, attacked the notion of ideology as disguising reality and suggested instead that ideology is itself a constituent of everyday reality. Linked to this, there has been a growing body of work which has argued that ideologies are not ideas at all, but should be viewed as practices engaged in every day in an unreflecting way. For example, it can be argued that discourse, or structured language use, which may constrain what can be said or thought, is equivalent to ideology. Certainly, Foucault (1977) argued that power does not simply conceal reality, but actually produces it, particularly through the embodiment of power through discourse:

> '*Power is not a general system of domination exerted by one group over another. Rather power is everywhere, produced at every moment in every action. There is an unceasing struggle in which power relationships are transformed, strengthened and sometimes reversed.*' (Hodder 1984, p.350)

In other words, Foucault questions the traditional Marxist notion of power, on which the dominant ideology theory has been based, and suggests that power is not something which is imposed from the apex of a hierarchy or rooted in a basic dichotomy of the ruling and the ruled class. For Foucault, and indeed for other authors, this is a simplification of the notion of power and the way in which power operates. The question of 'power' certainly seems to be central here. It is undoubtedly a central premise of the whole concept of a dominant ideology and the nature of its transmission, and Foucault makes some very interesting and illuminating points. In particular, he argues that Marxist models of power tend to exclusively focus upon the repressive

effects of power in societal life and existence. For he says that: *'power would be a feeble thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, blockage, repression.'* (1980, p.59)

In contrast, Foucault argues that power can be more positive and enabling - freedom, for instance, can ostensibly be a consequence of the organisation and exercise of power. Foucault also goes on to argue that the centrality of social class to discussions of power is misplaced. Marxist discussions of power, for instance, are invariably couched in terms of the power struggle between classes, yet Foucault argues that the exercise of power and action by individuals does not necessarily emanate from the level of class relationships. On the contrary, power is exercised in a myriad of different ways, between individuals, families and institutions. In this sense, for Foucault, even the relatively powerless have power and exercise power:

> *'Power is thus regarded as an omnipresent property in society. It is not a possession, a thing which someone has; rather, it is a chain of relationships.'* (Rojek 1985, p.151)

In the words of Foucault, therefore:

> *'power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.'* (Foucault 1981, p.93)

In the sense that the dominant ideology thesis, or at least a crude understanding of it, is based on the economically-determinist base-superstructure model, there is an evident sense in which Foucault, as Barrett (1991) discusses, is clearly mounting a critique of the notion of ideology. This is not to deny that Foucault acknowledges that power relations are conditioned by economic relations, but instead he argues against the notion that power is necessarily rooted in economic relations. Similarly, he questions

the Marxist tendency to concentrate upon power relations within state apparatus and to see ideology or false consciousness as the prime mover of power relations (Cousins and Hussain 1984, pp.240-241). Instead, for Foucault:

> *'Power is not conceived as a property or possession of a dominant class, state, or sovereign but as a strategy'* (Smart 1985, p.77)

Foucault argues that power is not a simple commodity which is appropriated by individuals or groups, instead power pervades the entire social world through discourse. In other words, power is 'open-textured', and is exercised from innumerable points in the social world in a myriad of ways. Power is omnipresent, in every social relation, embodied by discourse:

> *'Power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations'* (Gordon 1980, p. 198)

In short, Foucault argues for a much wider interpretation and understanding of power and the manner in which power operates and is exercised than that which is usually adopted by Marxists. Although Foucault's work is very much a critique of the notion of ideology, as used in the classical Marxist sense, there is nevertheless a clear sense in which the embodiment of power through ideology is actually very similar to the embodiment of power through discourse, which represents Foucault's position. This link is articulated by Purvis and Hunt (1993) when they suggest the fruitful distinction between discourse as the *process* of power relations and ideology as the *effect* of power relations. In this sense, it is helpful to think of Foucault's work as having developed the notion of ideology and power in order to make it more sophisticated. Certainly, it is claimed that Foucault's conceptions of power are extremely useful for developing the Gramscian notion of hegemony. Expanding on Foucault's thoughts on the exercise of power, it is possible to suggest that:

> *'Hegemony contributes to or constitutes a form of social cohesion not through force or coercion, nor necessarily through consent, but most effectively by way of practices, techniques, and methods which infiltrate minds and bodies, cultural practices which cultivate behaviours and beliefs, tastes, desires, and needs as seemingly naturally occurring qualities'* (Smart 1986, p.160)

These general points has been further developed by authors such as Miller and Tilley (1984):

> *'Rather than opposing ideology to reality, they relate it to interest. Actors have interests by being members of groups, and to examine ideology is to see how symbolic meanings are mobilised to legitimate the sectional interests of those groups'* (Hodder 1984, p.350)

In other words, ideology is seen to represent interest groups. Yet interest groups are not simply determined in terms of their control over economic resources. Subsequently, a whole myriad of interest groups co-exist simultaneously, each promoting certain ideologies and interests. In a cultural presentation, such as a museum display, it is therefore not simply a case of an imposed dominant ideology. Rather, what museum displays may actually represent are the negotiated outcomes of the different meanings held by the variety of different interest groups and in a variety of contexts. Ideology does not, therefore, represent an imposed false consciousness concealing social reality. On the contrary, ideology and the overall negotiation of different ideologies and meanings held by different interest groups *is* social reality:

> *'Ideas are themselves the 'real' resources used in the negotiation of power.'* (Hodder 1984, p.351)

This development may have a number of crucial implications for the study of museums which, until now, has largely viewed museum displays as embodying an imposed dominant ideology rather than the complex interplay of different interest

groups. Indeed, it is interesting that Foucault's conception of power acknowledges that the actual effects of power can often be very different from their intended effects. Whether or not one can apply these kinds of arguments to the issue of commercialism and its implicit encouragement of museum displays which may subvert dominant ideas, remains to be seen.

It is important, however, to place this discussion about the dominant ideology thesis within museums in a wider theoretical context. Ultimately, for example, the importance of the dominant ideology thesis revolves around a wider concern amongst Marxist academics with the processes and mechanisms by which advanced capitalist societies achieve full cultural integration. With this in mind, it is important to place museums within the wider context of the leisure industry and particularly how social theorists have theorised the role of leisure - of which museum visiting is an important element - in capitalist society. For this it is worthwhile to review the work of authors such as Rojek. Not only have Marxist writes emphasised the economic role of the expanding leisure industry in terms of the economic contribution that leisure makes to the dynamics of the modern capitalist enterprise, but more importantly from the perspective of this thesis, Marxist writers have also identified leisure as an important, even essential, element of capitalist integration. Through leisure, the argument goes, so subordinate classes are encouraged to accept their role and position within the capitalist relations of production. In the words of Hargreaves (1975), leisure is so important to the maintenance of capitalist social relations because it is:

> *'unique in its capacity to provide surrogate satisfaction for an alienated mass audience, while at the same time perpetuating its alienation and functioning as a means of political socialisation into the hegemonic culture.'* (p.60)

The inculcation of commercialism into almost every activity undertaken by museums, and the leisure industry more generally, is very interesting from a Marxist

perspective. Neo-Marxists, for instance, view leisure within the capitalist system as being a part of the general process of commodification, whereby the rationale behind the leisure industry is increasingly perceived as strictly commercial. In other words, what we have witnessed is the process by which leisure activities and the entertainment industry have been effectively commercialised. This has been manifested in a variety of different ways of late - most publicly and contentiously through the development of the Premier Football League, which has instilled the enjoyment of football, at least top quality football, with an insidious commercialism, most contentiously reflected in the escalating transfer fees that British football has recently witnessed, and the fact that the public now have to pay to watch top-quality football on satellite TV. However, even efforts to promote leisure and entertainment outside of these parameters has ultimately been absorbed into commercialism - underground movements, for instance, soon find themselves being absorbed and integrated into the market. As one of the chief characters said in *'Withnail and I'* - the cult movie about the end of the 1960s - *"they're even selling hippy wigs in Woolworths now"*.

Importantly, as Rojek and others point out, leisure is an area of very real significance in modern capitalist societies - the manner in which individuals are alienated from themselves in the context of work, means that leisure then becomes extremely significant, from a variety of perspectives - not least because it can be seen as giving individuals the freedom to act as they wish. Yet Marxist writers readily point out that:

> *'leisure is not really free time at all, but an organisation of non-work time that is determined by the relations of capitalist production'* (Frith 1983, p.251, cited in Rojek 1985).

This is an illuminating comment, not least because the relations of leisure closely resemble and parallel class relations, while the notion of a global and universal leisure market, fuelled by the insidious rise of 'commercialism', is pervasive.

Of most significance for considering the role of leisure in capitalist society is the work of the Frankfurt School, most notably Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) who refer to the *'culture industry'*, and argue that its significance in consumer capitalism:

> *'resides in its power to structure leisure relations in accordance with the requirements of the social interests which own and control it.'* (Rojek 1985, p.112).

The work of the Frankfurt School is undeniably influential, not least in terms of the recognition that the culture industry is a crucial and ubiquitous influence upon the social life of modern advanced capitalism. Importantly for Adorno (1975), the culture industry imports the notion of the market and profit directly into cultural forms and activities, while similarly instilling social conformity and consensus amongst its audience. The work of Adorno and Horkheimer is very interesting, not least because it introduces the concept of culture and the cultural industry as being important - even essential - elements in the maintenance of capitalist relations of production. However, their work has also attracted considerable criticism, not least because of the elitist implications of their work - implying that only the intellectual are capable of critically evaluating the false consciousness with which they are represented. It also implies a painful sense of passivity - it clearly understates the sense of critical action that a cultural audience can bring to their situation and circumstances. The leisure industry may indeed be riven with commercialism and the centrality of the market, but this evidently does not mean that cultural audiences are incapable of creating leisure opportunities which transcend this rationale.

Nonetheless, if one subscribes to this so-called *'culture-industry thesis'*, there do appear to be some problems here. If we acknowledge that museums and heritage sites are an important part of the wider leisure market and industry, one can conceivably identify the widespread introduction of admission charges in the museum field as being highly indicative of the wider process of commercialisation. However, it is difficult to see how this can possible help to promote the cultural integration of subordinate classes into capitalist relations of production when these changes effectively exclude many of the subordinate classes from entry or access to such cultural enterprises! If the subordinated do not generally visit museums, how can museums be seen as subduing critical class consciousness?

The work of Marcuse is interesting here, not least because he cites the role of the state in terms of leisure and entertainment. From a somewhat simplistic perspective, the leisure and culture industry, of which museums and heritage are evidently a part, represents the state's interests in terms of the capitalist relations of production. In this sense, leisure and culture are important elements of what Althusser calls 'ideological state apparatus'. The role of the state in the leisure industry is ambiguous, however. Indeed, this is most clearly manifested in the debates about the state support for museums and the arts, which is discussed in some detail in chapter nine. However, if the state is largely unwilling to contribute to the maintenance of museums and the arts, then so this may conceivably negate the role and influence of the state in terms of museums and the cultural world.

There are evidently a number of somewhat vexed theoretical issues here, particularly regarding the whole issue of ideology and the nature of its transmission, and my findings on the construction of museum exhibitions appear to raise a number of vexed issues. The longer term implications for the future of museums and their treatment of the past are discussed in more detail in Part IV. For the moment, however,

it is important to consider the other side of the process - namely, the reception of museum exhibitions. It is to this issue that the next chapter turns.

CHAPTER FIVE

RECEIVING MUSEUM EXHIBITIONS

Introduction

The sheer scale and diversity of museum visiting in the UK is huge, with some 70 million visits a year. Yet, in many respects, it is startling how little we know about the nature and form of this museum visiting. How visitors appropriate exhibitions, the extent to which intended messages and ideas are successfully conveyed to museum audiences and the various influences upon visitor reception, all remain open to conjecture and debate.

Nonetheless, the question of who visits museums and why, is of fundamental significance in the museum world. As we saw in chapter three, the nature of museum visitors and their experiences is an increasing central issue for the work of many museums. For a number of reasons, some of which I have already discussed, museums from the 1970s onwards have attached growing importance to market research on their visitors (see Boylan 1992). Attempts to identify and meet visitor demands and preferences have become a dominant feature of much museum work. In turn, the greater priority accorded to the museum audience relates in different ways to the wider acceptance of a commercial rationale for many museums. In any event, the fact remains that visitors have taken on a much more central place in the thinking of all museum sectors, even if this has long been the rationale behind many independent museums. The outcome has been that all museums:

'are now realising how important marketing is and they're now looking at customers and clients and what people expect. When people come, they expect to see something; they expect to be entertained; somewhere to eat, somewhere to go to the lavatory. If they get all these things, they'll pay. If we want them to pay, we've got to provide them.' (General Manager - Independent Museum)

Arising from the increasingly commercial concerns of all sectors of the museum world, most studies of museum visitors have almost inevitably reflected these concerns. As Fyfe and Ross (1996) point out:

'The post-war history of museum visitor research has been dominated by one-sidedly quantitative methods, by questionnaire surveys and behaviourist methodologies.' (pp.130-31)

My empirical work on museum visitors represents a conscious attempt to move beyond the narrow confines of such quantitative studies. Although my visitor questionnaire was designed to allow for the quantified collection of certain variables, the most revealing aspects of this work - and the elements that I intend to focus my analysis upon - arise instead from the qualitative exploration of themes with my visitor respondents. Indeed, it is fair to say that there remains a pressing need for more qualitative evidence on the experiences of museum visitors. Although just a small piece of exploratory work - and the necessarily tentative nature of my results - my 200 interviews with visitors nonetheless attempts to move the debates here beyond the obsession with crude quantification that characterise many visitor surveys.

A concern which has long underpined much professional interest in museum reception, for obvious reasons, is the vexed question of how visitor perceptions relate to those of museum staff. In particular, in what ways and to what extent are museum visitors receiving and absorbing the messages that museum staff are attempting to convey? Arising from a concern that museum visitors may not interpret exhibitions as

intended, this issue is of such practical importance to museums that it has the potential to fundamentally undermine much of their work and even their very existence. However, if we accept for the moment that visitors do not interpret museum exhibitions in a uniform way - a point increasingly conceded across the museum world - a crucial concern for commentators is to understand more about how and why visitors receive displays and intended messages differently. Although firmly couched in the context of these wider debates, from the inception of my research I was particularly keen to focus upon two issues that appeared to have been somewhat neglected in many existing studies of museum visitors and yet which had potentially profound implications.

Firstly, a specific interest that framed this study from the very start was a concern with the dilemmas presented to museums by the need to deal with relatively recent history. When presentations are engaging with the recent past - particularly when they may be part of the personal heritage and memories of some visitors - the difficulties for museum interpreters and communicators can be pronounced. Yet this also raises a more pertinent question in relation to visitor reception. Namely, what impact does existing familiarity with a particular theme have upon the reception of related museum exhibitions and displays? Specifically, what is the situation when a visitor may have a memory of the issues being presented and where one is faced with the complexities that are brought with the 'constraint of a lived past' (Davis 1979)?

The second theme that I was keen to examine has been woefully neglected in many studies of museum visitors. Namely, are visitors aware that they are seeing the selective organisation and construction of the past, or do they generally view museum exhibitions as somehow objective presentations? The traditional assumption, tacit as it may often be, perceives most museum visitors as inherently unsophisticated consumers of history who almost necessarily view museum representations as objective and neutral. But is this really the case? In this chapter, for instance, I draw on my empirical material to argue that many museum visitors in the 1990s may be far more conscious of

the history-making process than has often been acknowledged. Indeed, when one considers wider shifts in the academic approach to history that have increasingly permeated popular understandings of the past, coupled with the fact that museum visitors disproportionately come from higher social classes and tend to be better educated than the population as a whole, this finding should not be especially revelatory. Yet, for many in the museum world, this finding is exactly that.

The third and final focus of my research on visitors sought to explore an area of considerable practical significance to the museum world, a debate that has intensified dramatically as museums have variously embraced the exhibiting opportunities offered by new technologies. Namely, what is the relative impact of different approaches to presenting the past? What can we conclude, if anything, about the relative effectiveness of different media - such as authentic objects, photographs, videos and reconstructions - in conveying intended messages to visitors? There is an on-going and vigorously contested debate in the museum and heritage worlds about the relative merits of authentic artifacts, particularly as opposed to the use of reconstructions. Of course, many of these debates are framed by much wider agendas, most obviously the real concern felt by many museum professionals and scholars about what is often critically described as the 'Disneyfication' of the past. Yet, putting aside these wider debates, which have often clouded this issue, I remained keen to gather some data on the relative effectiveness of these techniques. Tentative as my conclusions may be, I draw on my empirical data to suggest that the answer to this deep-seated debate is far from straightforward. On the contrary, it appears that the relative effectiveness of different museum media can vary widely between different visitors, and may be heavily mediated by factors such as the familiarity of the visitor with the topic in question.

Why is museum reception so problematic?

An important starting point for the analysis of museum reception is the problem of measuring or assessing the nature and form of the visitor experience. Crucially, it is not necessarily the length of time spent viewing an exhibition, or wondering around a museum which is important. On the contrary, what is of much more interest is the quality and depth of experience, something which can be difficult, if not impossible, to quantify in any meaningful way. Indeed, I return to this fundamental point in chapter nine when I explore the future of Government support for museums and the very real difficulties with quantifying the effectiveness or otherwise of cultural spending.

Attempts to measure and quantify in some way the impact of museum displays upon informal learning have certainly attracted widespread interest, which is unsurprising given the educational focus of most museums. Usually, these studies have concentrated on science museums and have taken the form of asking visitors to watch exhibits in operation and with varying labels, and then asking them to explain what happened. This body of work, although focussing specifically upon the process of learning in museums, is obviously of interest to any investigation of visitor reception, because it similarly examines the ways in which the museum audience may assimilate or not assimilate exhibition messages. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the whole issue of reception is vastly more complex than simply a matter of 'learning'. As Boggs (1977) notes, it is certainly possible to identify a museum visit as a learning experience, while simultaneously acknowledging that the subsequent meanings and interpretation of the visitor may be highly individualised.

Boggs work is particularly interesting because he analysed respondents reports of their visit to a history museum, rather than a science museum, to assess their levels of learning. Somewhat surprisingly, the results appeared to show no significant relationship between learning level and age, education or number of visits. Indeed,

Prince (1982) similarly discovered that although class was a factor influencing attendance at countryside visitor centres, once visitors were there, no significant class differences were apparent in terms of knowledge gained. These findings are intriguing, although I would suggest that their generalisability should perhaps be treated with some caution. In light of the fact that the characteristics of museum visitors can vary dramatically according to the choice of museum, there may be a number of potential problems with the suggestion that factors such as class, age or educational background do not influence museum reception per se. However, it is still interesting that, in some studies at least, these factors appear to have only a minimal impact upon audience reception. If we tentatively accept such findings, the obvious question is what other factors may influence the ways in which museum exhibitions are variously received by visitors?

The first important point to note - and one regularly highlighted by visitor surveys - is that the visitor experience may be influenced by considerably more than simply the exhibits. Central as the displays and labels may be to the perception of museum staff, many of whom may have invested large amounts of time and energy in the production of a particular exhibition, they are ultimately just one part of a more holistic experience for the visitor. It may be, for example, that visitor reception is influenced, albeit in minor ways, by such services as the toilet, catering and retail facilities. However depressing such a scenario may be for committed curators, historians and educationalists, these issues do consistently appear to be crucial in visitor satisfaction with their overall museum visit. Moreover, we must also not forget that the visit itself may be only one element in a more protracted process of assimilation:

> *'The experience is not limited to the time spent at the museum: anticipation and subsequent memories of a visit may extend the period over which the experience is enjoyed. It may sometimes be possible to enjoy some of the experience without physically making a visit (through videos and publications).'* (Johnson and Thomas 1991, p.18)

All of these points can have important consequences for both the overall quality of the visitor experience and for ensuing questions of visitor reception.

Similarly, the number of other visitors can also have an important bearing upon the visitor experience. The atmosphere of the museum is undoubtedly affected by the number of visitors - particularly too many - which can variously leave visitors feeling crowded, rushed and pressured. The quality of the visitor experience and the degree of assimilation can be dramatically affected by such variables. The reading of labels and captions, for instance, is an important determinant of learning and reception more generally, and yet this can certainly be detrimentally affected by the number of visitors. Issues such as this, along with the capacity of different parts of the museum, unquestioningly impacts upon the visitor experience. Indeed, we saw in chapter three that many museum staff remain acutely aware of the dilemmas here, and the potent consequences of space constraints. Yet the implications are profound, implying that - regardless of other variables - visitor reception may be influenced by nothing more significant than the time or date of a visit! Such issues serve only to highlight the inherently vexed nature of visitor reception.

The quality of the experience and subsequent reception must also be influenced in some way by the reasons for why people actually visit museums and specific exhibitions in the first place. Indeed, some of my staff respondents identified the potency of this point, not least for undermining potential communication with visitors:

> *'You have to accept that you are aiming for very different levels and that some people just go to exhibitions to look at pretty objects and, however cleverly you put your message together, it just isn't going to get through because that is not what they go to exhibitions for.'* (Historian - National Museum)

If someone is especially interested in a particular exhibition, for example, it seems

likely that features of their experience and interpretation may differ in significant ways from someone with little or no initial interest. Linked to this, it seems reasonable to suggest that there may be a relationship between enjoyment of a museum presentation and the nature of consequent reception. Although Heady (1984) suggests that intrinsic interest and enjoyment can ostensibly represent the same thing, I would question this. My own visitor data illustrates that many visitors with a well developed interest in the Second World War nonetheless did not enjoy some museum displays.

This brings me to an absolutely crucial point that relates closely to what I discussed in chapter three. Namely, how the many vexed decisions facing museum staff in their construction of a particular exhibition are finally resolved can have a pronounced impact upon the way in which it is received by visitors. On an immediate level, as we have already discussed, it is essential that information is presented in a way which visitors can readily understand and assimilate. If it is not, this clearly affects their interpretation. This point necessarily underpins the production of labels and the choice of exhibiting media, amongst other things. The direct impact upon visitor interpretation is also why some staff, particularly educationalists, seem to imbue accompanying labels and text with an importance not always shared by colleagues. The perceived significance of these issues for communicating with visitors may also help to explain why some educationalists were so forthright and angry in their criticisms of colleagues and what they considered to be profoundly inept attempts at labelling:

> *'The labelling was shocking. Absolutely hideous. Just unintelligible. It was written by experts for experts, which means nothing to the general public. The displays have got to be accessible and easily understandable'*.(Education Officer - Local Museum)

Crucially, however, it is important not to forget that the suitability of text and the most appropriate choice of display techniques can differ widely between museums and even between exhibitions. The dilemmas faced by museum staff in trying to

successfully predict the characteristics of potential and necessarily hypothetical visitors, coupled with the need to simultaneously cater for a diversity of visitor interests and aptitudes, can only compound this problem.

Yet the impact of exhibition construction upon reception can be more complex than simply establishing an appropriate level of visitor understanding and assimilation. Hodge and D'Souza (1979), for instance, in a study of an aboriginal gallery in an Australian museum, note that whilst the underlying message of the exhibition was undoubtedly one of sympathy for the Aborigine in the context of European migration, the way in which the exhibition was constructed seriously jeopardised the degree to which the message was actually received. In this context, they point out that the overall message pervading the exhibition became almost subservient to the interest value of the artifacts in themselves. Somewhat ironically, museum professionals themselves are not immune from being similarly blinded by the lure of authentic objects when visiting exhibitions other than their own :

> *'There was really no point trying to work out what the correlation between one room and another was, the best thing was just to enjoy the objects for what they were. So there I was - somebody who, in a sense, is trained to look for that message and that structure, and yet I was missing it!'* (Historian - National Museum)

It is therefore important to recognise that exhibitions are not necessarily interpreted holistically, as their initiators may hope and expect. On the contrary, it may often be isolated facts in an exhibition which tend to be retained, rather than the overall story or message (see Griggs 1983). In fact, a consistent finding of many attempts to evaluate the visiting experience has been the discovery that some visitors may fail to absorb even the most explicit intended ideas and messages. Depressing as this may be for many committed museum professionals, the implications for visitor reception are pertinent. Perhaps the most important explanation for why this is the case is the fact that visitors

do not come to museums with empty minds. On the contrary:

> *'Different groups as well as different individuals take with them a whole series of expectations and attitudes to exhibitions that will condition how they respond'*
> (Historical Consultant - National Museum)

For instance, visitors may arrive with existing preconceptions, in the context of which they interpret a particular exhibition. Diamond (1986), for example, notes the use of prior knowledge to explain situations in preference to actually reading the information provided. There is also a tendency for people to reject evidence which may be contrary to their existing world view, so that misinterpretation becomes likely. Jarrett (1986), for instance, was forced to re-order a display on evolution in an attempt to overcome the popular misconception of mutation as harmful. There is certainly much evidence from the field of media studies which supports the idea that the assimilation of cultural messages depends, at least in part, on the degree to which they resonate or otherwise with the existing views of the audience. As Morley (1986) famously points out, audiences tend only to adopt those messages which support or confirm their existing thoughts and beliefs.

In summary, this section has sought to briefly highlight just a few of the difficulties and complexities faced by any attempt to explore the nature of visitor reception in museums. Despite the range and increasing necessity of visitor surveys for the work of many museums, coupled with the growth of academic interest in this area, the processes by which visitors interpret and make sense of museum exhibitions can be best described as a Pandora's Box. What initially appear to be relatively straightforward issues are, almost invariably, anything but. The question of cultural reception in the context of museums transcend a daunting array of issues, areas and concerns. It is a research topic that has the potential to present researchers with a plethora of methodological and theoretical conundrums. Yet despite the assorted complexities that I

have briefly touched upon here, and the sense of inconclusiveness that can pervade this whole area, we should not underestimate the importance of museum visitors and how they make sense of the products that museums construct. The needs and preferences of visitors are certainly taking more of a centre stage in the work of many museums, for the various reasons that I outlined in chapter three. The need for research data on museums visitors and their interaction with exhibitions, however exploratory and tentative, is as pressing as ever. After all:

> *'How different social groups and subjects 'read' museums, according to the range of cultural experiences, needs and desires they bring with them is an aspect of cultural representation and reproduction that is under-developed in museum visitor research.'* (Fyfe and Ross 1996, p.131)

Although these issues remain difficult - if not impossible - to conclusively unpack, it is still possible to make some informed observations. With this in mind, let us turn to a consideration of my empirical data on museum visitors.

The impact of 'familiarity', experience and memory upon reception

My findings initially appear to be quite encouraging from the perspective of museums. They seem to indicate that even visitors who have read little of the information pick up the main messages that the museum is trying to convey in their galleries. For instance, people were generally able to discern the accuracy of the statements that they were given, even if they claimed that they were fairly unfamiliar with the Blitz or the war in the Far East. However, these findings are tempered by the fact that, even when visitors claimed to be fairly unfamiliar with these topics, many still conceded an acquisition of relevant knowledge through relatives, books, TV and films, as we shall see.

This point can be indicated by the fact that whilst visitors to the National Army

Museum were all able to tell that the statement *'Prisoners of War were generally well treated by the Japanese'* was false, only a very limited knowledge of the subject from films or television would enable one to answer this correctly. Interestingly, the statements which visitors were considerably less clear about, such as *'The British Army was initially well trained for jungle warfare'* and *'Very few Commonwealth soldiers fought in the Far East with the British Army'* were topics which would have been equally apparent from the exhibition, but which are much less likely to have been absorbed from other sources.

Similarly, it is evident that many museum visitors had already assimilated a number of potent images and messages about the Blitz, some of which were cliched and stereotypical. For instance, one of the questions that I asked my visitor respondents was *'Do you think that there are any respects in which the Second World War was a good time to live in Britain?'* The 150 responses to this question were fascinating, not least because a significant proportion of respondents suggested that camaraderie was an important respect in which the Second World War was a good time to live in Britain. In the process of analysis, I took these qualitative responses and noted those which specifically raised the issue of camaraderie or communal spirit. The pervasion of this theme was striking in the three museums where this question was asked of visitors, as Table 1 illustrates:

Table 1 - Percentage of visitors mentioning camaraderie

Eden Camp..... **50 %** (25 from 50 visitors)

Imperial War Museum..... **42%** (21 from 50 visitors)

White Cliffs Experience..... **52%** (26 from 50 visitors)

Of course, we must be cautious about reading too much into these figures, not least because the question was designed to encourage visitors to raise any issues that came to mind. Nonetheless, the pervasion of the theme of camaraderie was particularly notable and appeared to transcend what visitors had to say in each of the three museums, as the following examples illustrate:

Eden Camp

E1 *'It drew people together. Although there is nothing good about war, it did engender the spirit of cooperation and friendship, which is missing today.'*

E34 *'It brought people closer together and there was more of a community.'*

E38 *'A lot of community spirit and people worked with each other and helped each other out more than they do now.'*

E47 *'The best time of my life - people were closer together and people worked together better.*

Imperial War Museum

I14 *'Camaraderie and support for each other and the attitude of support and interest; friendliness and helpfulness.'*

I33 *'Some think it brought people together, there was camaraderie. ... The monarchy was also quite popular.'*

I42 *'The only good thing to come from the Second World War was camaraderie and comradeship - helping people out, something which has been lacking since the Second World War .'*

White Cliffs Experience

W4 *'It created a sense of community which wasn't there before and has disappeared since.'*

W25 *'People got together and there was more community spirit than today.'*

W31 *'Everyone had so much in common and there was more camaraderie then. People were more friendly then.'*

W48 *'More camaraderie - people were sticking together and were united in wartime.'*

These comments are especially interesting, because although the notion of camaraderie has traditionally pervaded much coverage of the Home Front in books and on TV, the historical evidence questions this notion (see Ponting 1990). It is certainly interesting that this 'myth of the Blitz', as Calder (1991) describes it, appears to have been adopted wholesale by many museum visitors, particularly given that many museums claim to be quite hesitant to raise the issue and this point was not especially evident from my four sampled museums. On the contrary, some staff felt that it was part of their job to challenge these myths:

'If we are following the Blitz theme, there are a number of myths in the Blitz ... That gentle deflation of the myth is what you should be doing and you should also avoid stoking up the old myths. ... Your job is not to let nostalgia create a kind of Disneyland of the Second World War, in which the myths are perpetuated for their own sake because they fit in with the nostalgia.' (Historian - National Museum)

Despite this rhetoric, however, not all museum professionals agreed with this perception, and the designer on the same exhibition as the above historian viewed the final product very differently:

'We're very much involved in portraying and recreating the myths of war. To

perpetuate the myths of togetherness and we were all chums in it together. We weren't allowed to challenge that because it would have destroyed the illusion for the tourists.'

These findings can be interpreted in a number of ways, but they do seem to imply that visitors do not come to exhibitions with empty minds. Rather, the knowledge and ideas that they have previously assimilated from a variety of sources prior to their visit can affect, often in a very major way, the manner in which they appropriate museum objects, displays and exhibitions. Some respondents, for instance, were quite explicit in crediting their parents and relatives with conveying this sense of camaraderie:

E24 *'I don't know because I didn't live through it. I'm sure there were. I am told that there was a marvellous atmosphere in London after air raids and the determination not to be beaten. Certainly, talking to my mother, I wish that I had lived through it.'*

W28 *'Parents all say so, talking about the good old days, but I don't know why - I suppose the communities were closer.'*

W48 *'I've heard all about it from relatives...'*

The implication is not especially revelatory, but is nonetheless important. Namely, we have to acknowledge that history museums are ultimately only one agent in the processes by which society understands its past and heritage, a crucial point made by other commentators on museums, such as Kavanagh:

'It plays its part alongside a host of other agencies and social activities. The family, history books, television drama and documentaries, historic buildings and sites, and formal education collectively contribute to social awareness of the past.' (1990, p.5)

Indeed, one can go further and suggest that the museum is ultimately the

embodiment of the formal and public past - the way in which individuals publicly come to terms with the past. Yet, as I have already argued, it is important to realise that many of the ways in which individuals come to know, understand and appreciate historical issues, particularly historical issues within the confines of a lived memory such as the Blitz, can be much more informal and private, involving the reminiscences and recollections of family and friends.

Merriman (1989) makes the important point that in order to fully comprehend museum visiting, it is essential not to consider museum visiting in isolation. On the contrary, the meanings which visitors bring to exhibitions are often mediated by their experiences and knowledge drawn from the wider society in which they live. This is a crucial point, because it would seem to support my suggestion that the existing knowledge and experience of museum visitors could be an important determinant of the manner in which they make sense of museum messages and images. The growing body of work on cultural audiences and the mass media similarly suggests that cultural reception can be heavily mediated by a range of other influences:

> '... *men and women live in second-hand worlds ... The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others. Everyone lives in a world of such meanings.*' (C. Wright Mills, cited in Negrine 1989, p.4)

This issue has been most fully explored in the context of television viewing, where the consensus seems to be that audience reception is far from straightforward and is mediated by a range of additional factors. It may be helpful to briefly summarise the main issues here, because I will argue that this work has considerable relevance for understanding more about audience reception in museums.

Few would disagree that, with the advent of television, the public are exposed to the mass media more than ever before. What has been far more contentious, however,

is the precise manner in which cultural audiences interpret and receive the myriad of messages and images that they receive. This is an issue which has long concerned academic commentators, although there have been marked shifts in how they have approached the issue (see Barrat 1986; Curran and Seaton 1991). One view - the so called 'hypodermic syringe' model - perceives television content as having a direct and inherently straightforward impact upon the viewing audience. This perspective claims that mass media messages are adopted in a straightforward and wholesale manner by the audience. Certainly, this direct-effect model has had some impact upon studies of television, such as the effect of media violence, particularly on young audiences (Belson 1978), and the effect of media images of women and sexuality (Ferguson 1983; Tuchman 1981). However, this model is now largely discredited because of the way in which it simplistically assumes that the audience passively and uniformly absorb whatever media messages are presented to them.

Researchers have instead shown that the impact of the media upon the public is more complex than the simple hypodermic syringe model assumes and is actually mediated by a number of factors. For example, the influence of neighbours and particularly 'opinion leaders' has been shown to be important in determining how media messages should be interpreted (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1956). Similarly, Trenaman and McQuail (1961) showed that the public select and interpret the media according to their existing viewpoints. Negrine (1989) speaks of the press *resonating with* rather than *affecting* the public. In this way, the same media item can be interpreted differently by different categories of people. Cumberbatch et al. (1986), for example, found that after wide media coverage of the 1984-85 miners' strike in Britain, audience views as to what the strike was about varied considerably. The authors conclude that:'*While the public may have all watched the same news, they didn't all see it in the same way.*' (p.5)

Although briefly summarised here, these observations have direct relevance for

understanding more about museum audiences. It is clear from my interviews with museum visitors that they do not necessarily absorb wholesale exhibition messages, nor do they interpret exhibitions, displays or artifacts in a uniform way. On the contrary, we will see later in this chapter that some of my respondents actively challenged some of what they were presented with. In other words, far from being simply passive consumers, museum visitors are actually far more active in their interpretation and reception of messages and images in museums. Moreover, I want to suggest that the existing knowledge and experiences of the visitor can be important determinants of their reception.

Ultimately, knowledge of an important historical event such as the Blitz or the war in the Far East could arise from a variety of sources - personal experience; that of friends; relatives; formal and informal education; television; books and even from other museums. My research on museum visitors asked them if they had come to be familiar with the Second World War through any of these sources. The results are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 - Sources of familiarity with the Second World War

Personal Experience..... 25.5%
Experience of a Friend..... 8.5%
Experience of a Relative..... 39%
Television / films..... 65%
Books..... 44.5%
Education..... 32%
Other Museums..... 22.5%

These findings clearly illustrate that the museum is not the only source of historical understanding for many visitors - personal experience, the experience of relatives and

particularly television and film are all important sources of understanding. Indeed, it is interesting that Merriman's research indicated that museums were in fact relatively unpopular as a source of information about the past of a local area or site. As the following table indicates, museums only came equal seventh from eight choices offered in a question concerning the most enjoyable way of finding out about the past:

Table 3 - The most enjoyable way of finding out about the past

	Frequencies (%)
Visiting the site/area	20
Guided tour of site/area	19
Watching a TV programme	16
Reading a book about it	13
Listening to a talk by an expert	12
Enquiring in a library	7
Visiting a museum	7
Going to evening classes	6
	[number=942]

(Merriman 1989, p. 162)

If Merriman's work is important because of the way in which it questions the centrality of museums as a source of historical understanding, it is of further significance because of the importance it attaches to the role of family history.

My own empirical data, particularly the qualitative exploration of this issue, similarly highlighted the importance of family recollections as a source of information about topics such as the Blitz. Many of my respondents who were too young to have had direct experience of the Blitz, nonetheless appeared to have gained much of their existing knowledge from the recollections of friends, relatives and family, which in turn appeared to frame their subsequent interpretations.

I have already suggested that museum visitors tend to absorb those messages which reflect their existing beliefs and it may be that this is particularly acute amongst visitors who have some personal experience of the subject matter in question. It was certainly interesting that the responses of some individuals who had direct experience of the Second World War sometimes appeared to indicate almost an obliviousness to some of the messages in the exhibition. The implications for the reception of museum messages are intriguing and suggest that, however carefully museum interpreters and communicators may construct their exhibitions, their content can sometimes be superfluous to the existing knowledge of many visitors, particularly if these visitors have some experience of the topic. By implication, this presents some particular problems for the treatment by museums of the recent past when, at least for some visitors, the issues concerned may be a part of an individual's memories or personal heritage.

In short, it does appear that memory and the constraint of a 'lived past' - whether direct memory or indirect from one's family or relatives - may be an important influence upon visitor reception. It certainly seems to have a bearing upon the way that visitors rate the effectiveness or otherwise of different museum media, as we shall see.

The effectiveness of different museum media?

Many museums are now exploring the use of new media and new technologies in the manner in which they present their displays and exhibitions, with the notable rise in interactive displays which often parallel alternative media, such as funfairs (see Hooper-Greenhill 1995). The use of actors and reconstructions is now firmly established in many heritage representations, as are the use of sound effects and even smells, all seeking to make the museum experience more dramatic and to

impart a stronger feeling of awareness, seeking to make the experience as real as possible. The manner in which historical representations have now arguably become more real than the reality of the past that they seek to represent has become a particular source of debate and contention, particularly within the context of postmodernity, which is discussed more fully in chapter seven.

The debate about the relative effectiveness of different museum media is undoubtedly a difficult one to resolve, and different media have a differential impact upon different visitors. As Barwise and Ehrenberg (1988) note in relation to television:

> *'Television scores over radio and print in its "viewability", vividness, and immediate impact. The other media cannot compete with moving pictures and sound in bringing the "world" into our living rooms at little effort or cost to us. We actually see a flood, an earthquake, a moon landing. ... Although appealing the effect is nevertheless often superficial. We do not actually know these people. We are able to see what the fighting is like in Lebanon, say, but our viewing experience does not make us feel as if we actually lived there and we would not choose to watch it if it did.' (p.128)*

Other commentators have taken these points further and have actually argued that television, far from sensitising society, has actually served to trivialise modern society (see Postman 1986). There is evidently a sense in which television may not be the all-important museum medium that some have claimed it to be. Certainly, it does have an important role to play in the presentation of certain images and information, but there is nonetheless a sense in which it is an inherently limited medium.

It may be the case that television, and the role of moving pictures, has a greater impact than the written word, although as a means of communicating some

information, it may be slower and less effective than reading. Similarly, it is a fairly inflexible medium - both television and audio coverage are limited in their flexibility. The audience often has little choice about the pace or sequence of delivery, although many museums now adopt systems for the selection of specific film coverage. Nonetheless, once a film extract is running, the opportunities for pausing and skipping through sections is inherently limited. In contrast, the printed word allows for far greater flexibility and more audience control over the speed with which material is absorbed or read. In this sense, it may be the case that print is actually a superior means of conveying information. However, it is important to recognise that the conveyance of large amounts of detailed information is not necessarily the objective of film coverage in museum displays. On the contrary, as Barwise and Ehrenberg (1988, p.130) note, *'television predominantly creates rather than deepens awareness'* - a point which would certainly appear to be endorsed by my research findings.

Interestingly, from the point of considering the relative effectiveness of different museum media, Merriman's findings appear to have some relevance, suggesting as they do that both the TV medium and actual physical contact with the historical site are important means of conveying understandable messages about the past. It remains difficult to judge in any meaningful way the relative effectiveness of both these approaches, and the museum field is still riven with debate about the various merits of technological aids, such as TV screens, for aiding the conveyance of historical information and messages, as against the inherent power of authenticity and authentic sites and artifacts for conveying a sense of the past.

The data on the relative effectiveness of different museum media proved to be some of the most interesting visitor data that I collected. What visitors had to say about the relative merits of objects, particularly as opposed to historical

reconstructions, raised a number of important issues, as we shall see. Let us begin, however, with a consideration of the effectiveness of objects.

The effectiveness of objects?

Museums have traditionally relied heavily upon authentic objects. The potency of the authentic is viewed by many in the museum world as one of the keys to conveying a sense of history. This sense of authenticity was certainly a dominant feature in visitor accounts of why they found objects to be so effective:

> N47 '*Because they were actual objects and you felt that someone had held onto them to think of home, even if it was just a small soap dish. So you get a feeling of contact and this comes across if they're actual things.*'
>
> N26 '*Because they were there at the time, and it is always interesting to see actual objects.*'

The potency of authentic objects appeared to be particularly pronounced amongst those visitors who had personal experience of the war. These respondents often rated objects as being more effective than other media. Among those visitors with personal experience of the Second World War, for instance, some 54.9 per cent rated objects in display cases as 'Very effective'. This is in contrast to just 42.3 per cent of those visitors who did not have direct experience of the war. Indeed, when one compares the views of those visitors aged 66-75 with those aged 26-35, the results are even more pronounced. Namely, just 31.6 per cent of visitors aged 26-35 rated objects in display cases as 'Very effective', which contrasts markedly with those visitors aged 66-75 who, by implication, are old enough to remember the Second World War. Some 69.2 per cent of these visitors rated objects in display cases as 'Very

effective' (see Appendix Two). Although there may be an age issue here in terms of the medium that visitors are use to - older visitors may be more use to interpreting objects in glass cases than children perhaps - the key point here nonetheless appears to be memory and reminiscence:

I24 '*From my point of view, they refresh memories and bring memories back from when I was young.*'

I40 '*They're quite effective. They bring back a lot of memories. You look at things and think 'I remember that!*"

E5 '*They were good, because it takes you back because you could see things which you had and which you had used!*'

Indeed, such was the importance of reminiscence for these visitors that some wondered how effective authentic objects would be for visitors without these memories:

I29 '*If you've got a memory of it, it brings it all back, but with young people with no memory, it's different.*'

W25 '*They wouldn't mean much to people who weren't there - it's difficult to judge, but they do something for me, but maybe not a lot for someone who hasn't experienced it.*'

Reflecting what I said in the last section, it was clear that, at least for some visitors, the perception of authentic objects was mediated by relatives and family:

W46 '*You can actually see some of the things that relatives spoke about and described. You can see them and understand what they mean.*'

I14 '*You're seeing objects that recall memories and relate to things that*

you've heard about from parents and relatives.'

Even for those visitors without personal experience, however, the sheer authenticity of original objects remained part of their appeal:

W15 *'Because they are real and with a modest amount of imagination, you can see that they're many steps ahead of mere photos.'*

This last comment is intriguing, not least because many historians acknowledge that the potency of authentic objects is, at least in part, dependent upon some degree of imagination, a point which some visitors found frustrating:

N18 *'Why are photos and objects less effective? Because they are just things that are left and you have to use your imagination to put them into action.'*

Of course, there are wider debates about the impact of technology, such as television or films, upon our ability to independently employ our imagination. In any event, it does seem clear that the treatment of objects in many museums is not necessarily conducive to grasp this sense of authenticity and historical richness. One issue, of course, is the fact that many objects are in glass cases, and so it is not possible to even touch them. In fact, this point was felt to be crucial by some museum staff for conveying a sense of history:

'It should be much more hands on. Our techniques and video screens work well but that is really why I have developed the handling talks with a collection of artifacts. That is very important because they actually get to touch it. And children thinking that they have touched something that is 1800 years old - they love it. And it means much more than seeing it behind glass. So I would like to see more of that, but the problem is security.'
(Education Officer - Local Museum)

As we shall see when we consider the merits of reconstructions for many visitors, the ability to touch objects can be crucial for imparting a appreciation of authenticity. Yet this was often absent:

W38 '*I really wanted to pick them up and feel them. I know you can't have everyone picking things up and fingering it, but I would have liked people being able to pick them up.*'

I23 '*They're out of context. They're not being used and you're not allowed to touch them physically - so they're effective for adults, but not really for children.*'

This second quote raises an issue which we considered in the first chapter - namely, objects require contextualisation in order to be interpreted. Yet, as a number of visitors noted, they are often devoid of context:

N39 '*They're just things in isolation.*'

W17 '*You're not seeing them being used or in their natural surroundings.*'

W21 '*They're relics. They're static and taken out of context in static cases and so, firstly, you can't get a feel of what they were used for and, secondly, I suppose you can look at them and walk away and forget them, whereas a moving show would leave an impression.*'

The implication is that, whilst objects undoubtedly do have real potency in terms of their authenticity, they are nonetheless limited in terms of what they can impart to some visitors:

N40 '*You can only tell so much from objects. It is interesting to see what was there, but you can't read much into it.*'

W30 *'They're not very effective. You can look at them and enjoy them, but I can't get a lot of understanding, especially if you never lived through that time.'*

It is interesting that, for some visitors, photos were seen to combine the power of the real and authentic, while simultaneously allowing for much more contextual understanding. Let us turn to photos.

The effectiveness of photos?

Like objects, the value and effectiveness of photos for many visitors was based on their inherent authenticity:

W39 *'They're authentic - they were taken at the time. We don't know what it was like because we weren't there and so we rely on photos.'*

N21 *'They're impressive because they were really there - they're actual photos of what was actually happening.'*

N28 *'Because they're an image of the actual time - the next step from reality if you like, or the next step back from reality. ... A photograph is so effective because it is a moment in time frozen.'*

In contrast to objects, however, there was also a tangible sense in which the effectiveness of photographs was not as heavily dependent upon the application of the visitor's imagination:

E35 *'Because they showed what life was really like - you don't need to use a lot of your imagination.'*

The reason for this would appear to reflect both the innate power of visual images, but also the fact that photographs are often not as devoid of context and

meaning as objects may be:

E38 *'Items do give you a feel, but you can't actually see them being used or whatever. ... whereas with the photos you can actually see the real thing.'*

The real potency of visual images was certainly an issue that pervaded visitor discussions about photos:

I15 *'Because a picture is worth 1000 words - you don't have time to read all of it, but you can look at the faces and see what is in their eyes.'*

W47 *'They are capturing the actions of a moment - they show an instant during a shelling raid and you get the reactions on their faces, although it does come down to the quality of the photo.'*

The power of photographs was summarised by one of my staff respondents, a photograph curator at a national museum:

'I think photos can be very powerful. They can be used in different ways and they do more than provide visual information, or can do more - they can provide emotional impact or they can provide the environment.'

The sense in which a photograph has the potential to convey a sense of the time and the human experiences of those involved was felt strongly by some visitors, although there was also some corresponding acknowledgement that they were weak as a source of information:

W27 *'Photos are very good in themselves. They give a first hand impression of life at the time, but it is difficult to read in things. You can just get a limited source of information from photos.'*

Moreover, the sense in which photos engage with just one sense - sight -

was seen by some as a criticism:

E20 *'Photos are less effective because they are only one-dimensional.'*

I13 *'They're less effective than the experience of sound. The Blitz Experience is more effective because it incorporates many senses, whereas photos only involve one sense.'*

This issue - the way in which museum displays and exhibits employ various senses - came to the fore in the context of reconstructions. It was also an element in the debates surrounding the effectiveness of videos.

The effectiveness of videos?

Like objects and photographs, there was an evident recognition of the power of authenticity when discussing the use of videos in museum displays to convey original film footage:

I31 *'There isn't anything like actual moving pictures taken at the time to convey it. You can't experience it if you weren't there, but it does convey it better than fixed exhibits.'*

Similarly, like photographs, the potential of visual imagery - particularly moving visual imagery - was widely acknowledged:

W36 *'I think a picture is worth 1000 words, but a video is worth more. It's a good way to learn for kids.'*

I26 *'It's the closest you're ever going to get to what it was like with newsreels. It's the next best thing to actually being there. Film footage is the most powerful image you can get.'*

A good part of their attraction seemed to be their combination of visual imagery and commentary:

N21 *'It is to do with the narrative, explaining what is going on, together with the impact of what is in front of you visually. So it is a visual and an oral thing.'*

In this sense, videos have a potential for communication that may be missing from both objects and photographs. Their potential for encouraging learning and the assimilation of lots of information quickly was certainly felt to be an asset by visitors:

I39 *'The ultimate really as far as communication goes - because they can be absorbed very quickly.'*

W31 *'For explaining things, they're very good. They're much better than reading about things. Like programmes on TV are much easier to follow.'*

This last point is interesting, not least because it touches upon the use of similar technology elsewhere and the fact that we increasingly live in a world of mass media. This point was also made by some of my staff respondents:

'We live in a video age. You have got to interest children and it is what kids are into these days. Their world is so full of moving images that you have got to give them moving images for them to identify with you.' (Marketing Manager - Local Museum)

'People don't read anymore do they. We're not a word related society; we're an image related society.' (Designer - National Museum)

Certainly, these points was reflected by the comments of visitors about the use of such techniques to convey information and imagery:

I23 *'It is a technique of learning that children are used to. I prefer photos but it's a generational thing, because children are used to videos.'*

I31 *'We're all familiar with TV these days and can relate to newsreels. So it's like being 50 years removed and that's why we can relate to it.'*

W32 *'I always think that film material is effective, because 90% of people grasp them best - they relate to videos and TV. Many people can't be bothered to read the literature.'*

The debate about the use of videos, therefore, brings us to the application of modern technology in the medium of the museum. Nowhere is this debate more marked than in the context of reconstructions.

The effectiveness of reconstructions?

The use of historical reconstructions is an issue which has pervaded recent debates about museums and the heritage industry in the UK and elsewhere, as we have already seen. My discussions with visitors about reconstructions raised some very interesting points. Certainly they were very popular with some visitors

E45 *'Because they had everything there - sound; smells; smoke - everything of how it was, or how you imagine it was. It gives the impression of what it was like.'*

There appeared to be two distinct yet related issues which pervaded many of the encouraging comments made about reconstructions - their provision of a more 'contextual' experience and their related use of all the senses. The question of 'context' is one which was regularly raised in relation to the use of objects - in particular, the fact that they were effectively devoid of context.

Indeed, the contrast between objects and reconstructions in their provision of context was noted by several visitors:

W15 *'They give a holistic experience of it, as opposed to showcases, which museumify and detach objects from their contexts. You have to use more imagination to put showcases into context, whereas when the contextual reality is already there, it is easier.'*

W41 *'The surrounds are trying to create atmosphere, whereas this (glass case) is a more sterile environment. It's giving a feel for the experience, rather than objects in glass boxes. Gives a feeling of living through it.'*

In large part, the success of reconstructions in creating an historical context and providing a sense of atmosphere stemmed from their attempts to engage with all the visitors' senses, again in some contrast to both objects and photos:

E46 *'They were realistic and they worked on the senses - touch; sound; taste - seeing and hearing.'*

I39 *'They're so realistic in the way they've done it - the noise; smells; and the overall experience.'*

I14 *'It's a total experience - sight; sound; hearing - using all of the senses.'*

The application of these techniques certainly seemed to be instrumental in helping to convey an impression of what the Blitz was like:

I16 *'It's such a confined space and hearing all the noise and not having experienced that, it gives a different insight into it. You can imagine how people would try and cheer themselves up when they were terrified.'*

I5 *'I never experienced it, but you get an idea of what it must have been like in the shelters and how terrifying it must have been.'*

I13 *'The sounds and the smells and the claustrophobia experienced - you get the atmosphere of what people went through.'*

These points appear to be an important strength of reconstructions, particularly for those visitors with no previous knowledge:

N35 *'Because if someone knew nothing, it gave a good feel of the atmosphere and an idea of what it was actually like.'*

N41 *'They were very good. If you knew nothing, they were very good indeed.'*

E15 *'Because when you haven't experienced that, it brings it home just what it was really like.'*

However, these techniques - particularly the use of smells - also appeared to be helpful for invoking a sense of atmosphere for some visitors with personal experience of the Blitz:

W16 *'It brought back memories to us and so it must make people think. The post office was something that we remembered and so was the bakery - I remember that smell. Of course, it won't be effective for everyone, because you really have to live through them.'*

W37 *'From my point of view - all from memory - it's exactly how I remember it - the raids and gunfire and it all. You took a step back in time to that time.'*

W11 *'Brought home a lot of memories and showed just how it was for people who know nothing about it.'*

E48 *'The sights and sounds are incredible. My mother is with us and she went through the war and she feels that she's been taken back.'*

The commercial potential of reminiscence and nostalgia for museums is very

considerable and there is no-doubt that some museum exhibitions draw heavily upon this, particularly with reconstructions and the use of appropriate sounds and smells. It is interesting, for instance, to examine the relative effectiveness of reconstructions for those old enough to remember the Second World War. Among those visitors aged 26-35, for instance, some 47.4 per cent rated the reconstructions as 'Very effective'. In contrast, among those visitors aged 66-75, some 65.4 per cent rated the reconstructions as 'Very effective'. The use of smells and other techniques to encourage reminiscence may be part of this, as may be the use of objects within such reconstructions, which we have already seen are more popular amongst those visitors with personal experience of the Second World War. Further details are provided in Appendix Two. In any event, it is not unfair to suggest that many museums draw heavily upon notions of nostalgia and some visitors appear to be well aware of this:

> W36 '*It's all about nostalgia - some of the things mean nothing to youngsters. Nostalgia is nice - that's what sells the place.*'

Indeed, some of my staff respondents were explicit about the importance of pitching exhibitions towards nostalgia, and the importance of nostalgia for drawing visitors into the museum and, in turn, increasing your revenue:

> '*There is strong element of nostalgia - nostalgia brings a lot of people in. Your choice of exhibitions has something to do with it. Ideally, you pick an exhibition subject or a theme for an exhibition which catches the public imagination. ... Your first point of contact with the public is partly nostalgia for those who remember it and it's partly second hand nostalgia for those who have heard their parents or grandparents talk about it. I think your most common denominator is in fact on that sort of level. ... eventually, even the Blitz nostalgia will evaporate, so in a sense you have to adjust your attitudes.*' (Historian - National Museum)

> '*Because of the content we've got, it jars a lot of memories and brings it*

back. So it's a very important aspect. The presentation we have must be right to stir these memories.' (Director - Independent Museum)

While there was an acknowledgement throughout the museum sectors that nostalgia was an important theme in deciding on appropriate topics for exhibitions and had real potential for drawing visitors into the museum, there was nonetheless an acute awareness, certainly amongst historians, that the construction of exhibitions must still be dependent upon historical ideals:

'*Nostalgia will bring the punters in but it shouldn't affect the way you do the display. The icing on the cake, if you like, will contain an element of deliberate nostalgia, but the actual core of the thing should always ideally be based on consistent historical ideals.*'(Historian - National Museum)

There are, however, wider issues here, not least the appropriateness of museums exploiting reminiscences about something as disturbing as the Second World War. This concern was touched upon by some of the museum professionals that I spoke to:

'*I think it is wrong conceptually as a subject or theme, but they're very personal views ... The more we try to replicate it using cinema, video, the sort of limited technology that we have got in the museum, the more people think they know about it, but actually the less they know about it. It may be entertainment, but it doesn't really inform them. War is about suffering. It is about the loss of life. It is about maiming. And none of that comes over. ... I question my own motives for doing it. It's there, but whether it should be there for entertainment is I think very questionable.*' (Designer - National Museum)

Certainly, echoing these thoughts, some of my visitor interviews left me with a very real concern about the degree to which museums may consciously exploit reminiscence for purely commercial reasons, while simultaneously being

almost oblivious to how their exhibitions may detrimentally affect such visitors. Some of my respondents had clearly been upset by the memories that had been raised:

W3 *'It made me want to cry! The noise to sum it up. It was very realistic. I imagined being back in the shelter again, waiting for the doodlebugs to stop.'*

I29 *'Sitting in the shelter with explosions going on really brought it back, because we had mines a few houses down. That sort of thing brought back some very nasty memories.'*

E37 *'I didn't like it much - I got plenty of it when it was for real...'*

E50 *'My mother wouldn't come today, because she thought that it would be stirring memories that would make her feel awful. Basically, I don't suppose we can have any idea of what it was like unless we lived through it.'*

E16 *'To me, a lot of it is very emotional, because it seems to be the most vivid time of our lives that we remember. It lives in your memory and being bombed and going through air raids - it is still very vivid. It took me years to get over the noise of planes, and sirens still affect me even after all this time.'*

These exploratory findings are tentative but nonetheless add an important perspective to the heated debate in the museum field between those who argue that museums should maintain their traditional approach, which involves simply conveying messages through traditional media, such as authentic objects and photos, and those who argue that museums should be employing new technology and media to expand the means by which they convey their messages. Given that most museums attract visitors with a variety of experience or familiarity with the subject matter, one can tentatively suggest that museum visitors would generally benefit from a mixture of media. Indeed, the relative effectiveness of both

reconstructions and authentic objects, albeit for different reasons, implies that a mix of media could be the way forward for museums. Indeed, this point was even acknowledged by more traditional staff in national museums, such as the following historian:

> *'I've been in museums for 30 years, so I have seen a fair transition from what I call traditional museum displays to the Universal Studios type thing. Although I am by nature slightly conservative, the mixed media now is the ideal. Talking purely personally, I believe that there is no substitute for the real thing. What distinguishes us from Universal Studios is that we have got real things, whereas they haven't. If you have got any sense of history, then your number one buzz should come from contact with, for example, the tank that Monty used at El Alamien. The fact that you can touch that tank, to me if you don't get a buzz from that, you've got no sense of history. So that is number one priority - display the real thing. After that, you use every device possible to get over your point, and that can be multi-media.'*

These points have further significance because talking in general terms about the consumption of museum messages, irrespective of the medium through which these messages are being conveyed, is somewhat simplistic. Clearly, although different museum media can be and often are used to present the same broad messages, the form of museum media adopted implies, or at least may imply, very different forms of reception.

How sophisticated are museum visitors?

My research findings - as expected - appear to dramatically question the traditional view of museum visitors as a passive audience, rather than active participants in the construction of meaning. It is often assumed that museum visitors unquestioningly adopt and absorb whatever messages are presented to them. However, my

empirical evidence suggests that museum visitors can actually be far more discerning than museum professionals often give them credit for. Indeed, this point has been made before by other commentators on museums:

> *'When we go to a museum, all of us are negotiating meanings and those are the meanings that that museum has for us. And we are all of us, however ill-educated or highly educated, critics of existence and, as such, we approach a museum not on the terms of the museum, but on our terms.'* (Horne 1992, p.63)

We have therefore already seen that museum visitors are not simply passive consumers of museum images and messages, but can interpret museum presentations in a myriad of diverse ways. Following the large body of work that has explored cultural reception in the wider context of television, this conclusion is not surprising. This finding does, however, raise a related issue that I want to consider in a little more detail - namely, just how sophisticated are museum visitors in their consumption of exhibitions? Are they aware, for instance, that they are witnessing the selective organisation of the past? The traditional assumption - and one that still pervades the view of some museum professionals - has been that visitors are often remarkably undiscerning in their perception of exhibitions, and largely unaware of the history-making process. After all, the professional codes and day-to-day practice of many museum staff have traditionally been built on the premise of objectivity and neutrality. The manifestation of these themes in exhibitions is hardly conducive to encouraging challenge from visitors. After all:

> *'Museums claim to show the past as it really was - to re-present history. In this simple claim, the medium of the museum and the process of making collections and displays are rendered invisible in a relationship of authenticity and truth.'* (Porter 1996, p.108)

In any event, drawing upon my interview data with professionals, it is not unfair to

suggest that some staff - particularly those in more traditional national museums - have very low opinions of the abilities of their visitors, as this comment illustrates:

> *'I suspect for the most part that people go to exhibitions simply to look at objects and the majority of people really miss any kind of over-arching message that exhibitions are trying to do.'* (Historian - National Museum)

But is this dismissive perception of unsophisticated museum audiences really justified? We must not lose sight of the fact that although this view may be a pervasive one amongst some sections of the museum community, it does not mean that it is correct. After all, the relative immunity of some national museums to the commercial pressures that increasingly dominate other museum sectors, suggests that they are still able to enjoy the traditional luxury of treating visitor issues as largely peripheral to their work. Other commentators have already noted the way in which museum visitors are often perceived as an aggravating nuisance by staff in national museums. In this sense, the profusion of dismissive and contemptuous attitudes towards the abilities of visitors may have less to do with visitor reception as such, and much more to do with other, more deep-seated, agendas. After all, the consensus that museums often know little or nothing about the qualitative experiences of visitors appears to rest rather incongruously with the confident dismissiveness of some museum professionals when discussing visitor abilities.

One of the issues that I was interested in was how aware visitors are of the museum decision-making process and whether they simply accept as somehow objectively neutral whatever is presented to them. With this in mind, all visitors were asked the following question, which was a qualitative attempt to explore whether or not visitors had any sense that there were some issues or themes which, for whatever reason, had been excluded.

> *'Do you think that there was anything that this museum did not want to*

display?'

The results were intriguing, and it was frankly surprising how many visitors felt that there was something that the museum had, for whatever reason, decided not to display. The qualitative responses were analysed and the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 - Was there anything that the museum did not want to display?

	IWM	NAM	WCE	EC	*Average*
Yes	44%	56%	46%	64%	*52.5%*
No	30%	32%	38%	24%	*31%*
Don't know	26%	12%	16%	12%	*16.5%*

This table is very interesting, given that a mean average of 52.5 per cent of the 200 visitors interviewed suggested that there was something that the museum did not want to display. These findings would certainly appear to challenge the notion of the visitor as an unquestioning dupe. It was interesting to consider the nature of these comments and so I looked in detail at my responses from Eden Camp, where 64 per cent of the 50 visitors interviewed suggested that there was something that the museum did not want to display. I then looked carefully at these responses to gain some sense of what topics and issues were felt to be missing. Although I would be hesitant to give too much value to any statistical analysis based upon just 27 visitors, they nonetheless do give a sense of the sheer variety of issues raised by my respondents, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 - Topics felt to be excluded from Eden Camp

(Visitors could raise more than one issue - **N = 27**)

True horror of war / death / blood	**9 (33.3%)**
Holocaust / Concentration Camps	**9 (33.3%)**
Prisoners of War	**7 (25.9%)**
The Japanese	**3 (8.1%)**
Women	**2 (7.4%)**
Conscientious Objectors	**2 (7.4%)**
War in Desert	**1 (3.7%)**
Evacuees	**1 (3.7%)**
Anti-German feeling	**1 (3.7%)**

Interesting as these figures may be, it is really only through the qualitative data that one gets a true sense of how some visitors felt that they were seeing only a partial representation of the past. As these figures suggest, significant numbers of visitors in all of the museums were acutely aware that the displays were invariably excluding the full horror of war. In fact, this tended to be the most consistent observation throughout the interviews:

W1 *'There was no blood and gore, but the film did say about the casualties, although it didn't really show them, but then it wasn't necessary.'*

W9 *'A lot of the dying part is left out, rightly so. They could have done with several bodies, but that would have been too realistic.'*

W41 *'Possibly the physical injuries and the human suffering during the war. It's a fairly superficial look at the war, although it did mention in the Pathe film, it did indicate that people died in Air Raids - but that was*

the only thing that looked at the more serious side of it.'

I41 *'War is a brutal thing - there would be things that people would not like to see and I would expect them not to put in any in an exhibition.'*

These quotes are particularly revealing, not least because it does indicate that an acknowledgement of something being excluded is not necessarily a criticism of what the museum has done. On the contrary, it is perhaps more indicative of an appreciation of the difficulties that face museums in dealing with sensitive subjects like warfare.

A number of respondents, however, went far beyond this in terms of what they felt was not being displayed and how the museum was displaying only a partial representation of the past:

N7 *'You never see the enemy! It is always the same. You never show the enemy and by this the enemy then becomes an evil. I would also say that the war is shown a little bit too clean, in a sense of having a structure.'*

I28 *'There seems to be a slant on the stuff portrayed. ... It seemed there wasn't anything about dissenting movements in England, and not much discussion about organised resistance to Churchill, saying enough of the bombing. I didn't see anything with photos saying "We've had enough and we're not fighting any more".'*

E46 *'It is always losing sides which become the criminals. It may have been better to make it more equal.'*

W3 *'We all know that there are a lot of secrets from the war that are never going to be told. The thing with history is that you only really look back on the good things!'*

W50 *'There's always something left out. There's always something that someone doesn't want you to see!'*

I5 *'They may not want to show failures. It would be natural to be reluctant to show failures - they showed the glory of the Dambusters, but they didn't say that it didn't make a lot of difference. That's not a criticism, just an observation.'*

E16 *'I don't think that they ever tell the full story to the public - it's hidden from us. I think that it is a form of propaganda myself.'*

Although these findings are evidently open to interpretation, what this data may indicate is that many museum visitors are actually far more conscious and discerning than many writers on museums often give them credit for. Although there is a sense in which these findings may be particularly pronounced in the context of this research, given the specific concern with museum presentations of the 'lived past', where visitors may come with personal experience, the implications are nonetheless intriguing and appear to challenge the traditional assumptions of many museum commentators. However, these assumptions are by no means held by all museum professionals. For instance, one of my staff respondents - an historical consultant for a large exhibition in a national museum - felt strongly that many museum visitors are more discerning than they are often given credit for:

'There is a more sophisticated public out there who will look for something different and who will get a kick out of thinking that they are getting different messages out of their visit'.

Similarly, the following respondent felt that the attacks on museums and heritage in the late 1980s by individuals like Hewison (1987) were inherently flawed by their simplistic perception of visitors:

'The visitor is much more critical than many commentators would allow. ... So some of the arguments of people like Hewison were poorly formed. In fact, some of them were quite insulting to members of the general public. They saw the general

public as being taken in by all this, which was absolute nonsense.' (Curator - Local Museum)

The primary focus of Merriman's work is a concern with why some people readily visit museums, while others do not. His work has attracted considerable interest, because he does go some way towards unravelling the various reasons for why people do and do not visit museums. Interesting as this issue is, it remains somewhat marginal to the concerns of this research. Nonetheless, some of Merriman's findings do seem to have particular relevance for interpreting my own empirical work on museums. One of his key points, for instance, is that it is largely the better educated and more affluent elements of society who most regularly engage in museum visiting, not least because of the manner in which they have been socialised into museum participation. This is certainly the pattern reflected in the data on my own visitors shown in Appendix Two.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu is certainly relevant here. To briefly summarise, Bourdieu focuses upon the process of socialisation for understanding more about the manner in which cultural audiences receive - or indeed do not receive - cultural messages and images. In particular, he argues that the family and in turn school culture are both important for conveying a sense of understanding, and allowing audiences to interpret the coded language and messages of culture:

'A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded.' (Bourdieu 1984, P.2)

Bourdieu has described the possession or otherwise of such codes in terms of *'cultural capital.'* This is an intriguing argument, which has attracted some attention, and subsequent writers have employed this idea to try and throw some light on the experience of museum visitors and non-visitors. Merriman (1989), for instance, suggests that those who do not visit museums may lack the appropriate cultural capital

to enable them to decode museum displays and exhibitions. I would suggest, however, that there is further potential in these arguments for understanding more about the experiences of those who do visit museums. In particular, the fact that museum visitors tend to be more highly educated than their non-visiting contemporaries could be taken as somehow indicative of the fact that they are more likely posses the cultural capital necessary to 'read' museum presentations. I want further to suggest that this could have important implications for exploring the sophistication of museum visitors and their interpretations. As we have already seen, there is often an assumption - certainly amongst more traditional museum professionals - that visitor consumption of museum products is necessarily crude and simplistic. There is certainly little acknowledgement of even the possibility that visitors could be quite sophisticated in their understanding and interpretation of exhibition messages and images. Yet the empirical data from my visitor interviews appears to challenge, or at least question, this common perception of museum audiences.

These ideas may even help to explain the preferences of those visitors with memory of these topics for authentic objects as opposed to reconstructions. To return to the work of Bourdieu, those museum visitors with the least knowledge of historical events such as the Blitz may also be those most likely to be lacking the cultural capital necessary to understand and fully appreciate the significance of authenticity, as a medium for the transmission of ideas about historical importance. To some extent, this may be exemplified by Table 6.

Table 6 - The most enjoyable way of finding out about the past cross-tabulated with heritage visiting

	Visit museum %	*Read book* %	*Visit area* %	*Tour site* %	*Ask in library* %	*Evening classes* %	*Watch TV* %	*Talk by expert* %	[number]
Visits nothing	5	16	16	14	12	2	25	12	[222]
Visits one attraction	8	18	13	15	6	8	16	16	[187]
Visits two attractions	7	12	23	22	6	3	16	10	[232]
Visits three attractions	9	9	25	25	4	10	8	11	[236]

(Merriman 1989, p.163)

This table is of very considerable interest, not least because it appears to confirm the supposition that those visitors with the cultural capital to understand and appreciate museums and heritage, are those most likely to enjoy viewing the authentic remains of the past in their actual context.

A key finding of this work on museum visitors has therefore been the suggestion, supported by empirical evidence, that museum audiences are both more informed and more sophisticated than museum professionals often give them credit for. In many respects, this somewhat contemptuous view of visitors has long been something of a misapprehension - cultural audiences in museums, as in other environments, are necessarily active in their interpretations. However, it may be that museum visitors are becoming increasingly discerning in their perception and interpretation of museum products, in part because of the sheer pervasiveness of the new social history that was described in chapter three. In particular, the possibility for multiple readings of the past is now firmly established in many aspects of contemporary culture, from challenging television programmes on subjects as diverse as the history of sexuality (see chapter eight), to heated debates surrounding

historical commerations, such as the visit of the Queen to Dresden. Some academics have already been quick to identify the issues here and their implications. Samuel (1994), for instance, similarly notes that history has never been the sole perogative of the historian or the museum and goes on to argue that, at the end of the twentieth century, television must have *'pride of place'* (p.13) as the medium through which we remember and understand the past. Moreover, he goes on to note the very real significance of images of the past in contemporary television programming, not least because of the potential impact upon popular perceptions of history and its treatment by museums:

> *'Memory-keeping is a function increasingly assigned to the electronic media, while a new awareness of the artifice of representation casts a cloud of suspicion over the documentation of the past.'* (Samuel 1994, p.25)

Of course, museums themselves have also contributed in their own way to this growing acceptance of an interpretivist perception of history and some commentators have firmly welcomed this development. As Horne (1992) points out, contemporary museums necessarily have *'the responsibility of reminding the people who visit them that the contents of a museum can be read in a number of different ways.'* (p.72). Indeed, as I suggested in chapter four, many in the museum world increasingly see the medium as a vehicle through which to encourage alternative and progressive understandings of the past. Coupled with the fact that cultural audiences at the end of the twentieth century are showing themselves capable of making sense of an increasingly sophisticated array of images and messages, these findings should not be especially surprising.

CHAPTER SIX

IDEOLOGY AND RECEIVING THE PAST

Introduction

We have already discussed the manner in which museum exhibitions and some of the implications for the various debates that surround ideological production. In the last chapter, we considered the empirical material arising from my 200 interviews with museum visitors and briefly considered some of the issues raised by this data. In this chapter, we move on to consider the implications of my empirical work on the reception of museum exhibitions for debates surrounding ideological reception more generally.

Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (1980) point out that the dominant ideology thesis rests on a number of questionable assumptions - firstly, that there is a coherent dominant ideology and, secondly, through the apparatus of transmission, this ideology is able to exert an cohesive influence. In terms of the reception of ideology, for example, there is an assumption that dominant ideologies are necessarily absorbed wholesale by the public:

> *'The production system is seen as coherently and smoothly generating the text, which is itself relatively homogeneous and invariant. Most important of all, the audience is presented as relatively uncreative in its responses to an ideological text.'*
> (Abercrombie 1990, p.201)

This interpretation of ideological transmission has come to pervade much work on museums, both explicitly and implicitly. For instance, writers such as Rosenberg (1985) and Hewison (1987) assume that presentations of history and heritage can somehow only be interpreted in certain ways and that meanings are unambiguously transferred to visitors. Rosenberg, for instance, claims that museums are clearly purveyors of dominant images and he sees the key to this as the process of exhibition production:

> '*... the history is constructed solely in the present and is dependent upon a process of production before it is transformed into the past. The museum, no less than the film, is a constructed process of representation, dependent on comprehension in the present.*' (1985, p.186).

This may be relatively uncontentious, as we saw in chapters three and four, and Rosenberg (1985, p.201) attempts to illustrate the use of 'dominant images' in museum displays, compounded by the use of '*ceremonial agendas*' (1985, p.191) which direct visitors to view the exhibits in a certain way. What Rosenberg does not adequately consider, however, is the way in which museums are received. This is crucial to the whole debate surrounding ideological transmission, and the simplistic approach of such writers has been criticised before:

> '*There is no sense of the complexity by which different visitors can gaze upon the same set of objects and read them in a quite different way.*' (Urry 1990, p.111)

A similar point is made by Wright (1985, p.5) and Hodder, who suggests that '*... the extent to which people are duped by the ideas of the dominant class is remarkable in these accounts*' (1984, p.349). Certainly, museum studies largely based upon the dominant ideology thesis often fail to comprehend that the same museum displays can simultaneously be interpreted in quite different ways. Of course, it goes without saying that, as Samuel (1994) notes, within any society there are different '*theatres of*

memory'. It is certainly clear that the meanings visitors attach to the same display or exhibition are highly ambiguous. This is well illustrated by war monuments, such as the recent controversy surrounding the memorial to 'Bomber' Harris, the British commander who supervised the bombing of Germany in the Second World War (see Gedye 1991). It largely goes without saying that the meaning attached to this monument differs dramatically according to, amongst other things, the nationality of the visitor. A similar point can be made about a museum exhibit such as the *Enola Gay* - the bomber which dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima in 1945 - and in many respects one of the most potent symbols of the Second World War:

> *'The denotation of the term "memorialise" is to commemorate - exactly what the museum has been doing. But, in another sense, "memorialise" connotes the remembrance of tragedy. As a single object, the Enola Gay powerfully embodies both of these meanings. It represents not only the heroes who created and flew the plane and hastened the end of World War Two but also the victims of Hiroshima and the beginning of the atomic age.'* (Batzli 1990, p.837)

The meanings which can be attached to museum exhibitions are thus highly ambiguous. Different people can simultaneously interpret the same display in quite contradictory ways. Even if museums are transmitting a coherent ideology, therefore, its reception by those who use museums is neither coherent or cohesive. Clearly the public, as creative social actors, are free to endorse, modify or even reject completely the presentations of the past which are offered to them. Merriman (1988, p.295) illustrates, for instance, that despite the way in which museums frequently present the past in terms of a unilinear progression or evolution, this interpretation is actually rejected by significant numbers of museum visitors. Merriman's work (1988; 1989a and b) is very interesting here. He claims, for instance, that the dominant ideology thesis is unfounded in terms of ideological reception because 'the dominated' do not visit museums. However, this does not properly explore or question the notion of a dominant ideology. Indeed, this observation may be less valid than it once was, as

museums find themselves in an increasingly commercial arena, where the need to maximise visitor numbers and revenue have become increasingly important. In fact, Merriman (1988) suggests that the notion of a dominant ideology can be accepted, at least in terms of the construction of museum displays and the production of the past, despite the fact that the whole dominant ideology thesis has been subjected to considerable criticism. The problem for Merriman is that theories of the *production* and dissemination of the past have been transferred to its *consumption.* He does not necessarily dispute that the dominant ideology thesis is appropriate to the production of the past, he simply questions how closely it refers to its reception and consumption:

> '*... people use the materials that are provided them in museum displays and from other sources to construct their own interpretations of the past. ... museum personnel may be able to control the production of the past, and it may be possible to analyse these productions as agents of the dominant ideology. They cannot however control the way in which the past is consumed, which is in much more creative ways than is usually given credit for.*' (1988, p.302)

In light of the fact that museum visitors do not perceive museum exhibitions in a uniform manner, the subsequent question is thus how and why do museum visitors receive ideological messages differently? This raises a number of interesting issues.

The reception of ideology

Methodologically, examining the ways in which ideology may be received is laden with difficulties. Even on a basic level, the problem is at least two-fold: firstly, accurately identifying what beliefs and attitudes are held by people and, secondly, then eliciting some kind of relationship between their beliefs or attitudes and the transmission of ideology. Indeed, there is also an argument which suggests that because ideology is embedded in practices, investigating the reception of ideology by examining attitudes is

somewhat misplaced. For the moment, however, it is enough to recognise that it has certainly not precluded a considerable body of work looking at the reception of ideology, through the examination of attitudes.

Acknowledging that, in theory at least, an empirical investigation of ideology and its reception is possible, does not deny that there are a number of difficulties which need to be overcome. In any examination of ideology as it is embodied in cultural forms, it is possible to identify three stages - production, text and appropriation - each of which need to be considered. As Stuart Hall (1980) points out, it is the manner in which the three elements all fit together that is the issue of interest. It is subsequently possible to identify three corresponding forms of ideology: *'textual ideology'*, or the ideology embodied in the text of the cultural form, such as a museum exhibit; *'ideological setting'*, or the mechanisms by which the textual ideology is constructed and, finally, *'ideological effect'* or the way in which the textual ideology is received by an audience.

Usually, an analysis of ideology and how it is embodied in cultural forms begins with an examination of the text, in an attempt to elicit the dominant themes or discourses - a process often difficult and controversial:

> *'In so coding, a sociological problem is established, since the sociologist wants to know, on the one hand, why the text carries a particular discourse and, on the other hand, what an audience will do with the text. Therefore, a complete account has to start from the text but it should move on from there to consider the means of production and appropriation.'* (Abercrombie 1990, p.203).

It may be argued, therefore, that it is actually impossible to look at ideology as it is embodied in a text without looking at audience reaction. Central to this notion is the manner in which textual decoding has been criticised. Namely, there is often an implicit assumption that the way in which social scientists read and interpret text is in some way

more objective than anyone else's reading of the same material. Clearly, there are problems with this notion. In a sense, therefore, one cannot read and interpret an ideological text without being drawn into the realm of reception - even if it is one's own reception! Nevertheless, because of the way in which it is possible to compare ideology in a text and how it is received, and even identify disparities, it does seems possible - theoretically at least - to differentiate textual ideology from ideological effect.

We have already seen that the concept of ideological reception inherent in the dominant ideology thesis is simply inadequate. This suggests considerable 'audience passivity' in which the audience is perceived as passively absorbing wholesale whatever ideological models are implicit in such cultural forms as museum exhibitions. A more useful way of considering audiences is in terms of 'audience activity' - a point which now has some prominence in much work on the media. This notion of audience activity - in all its various forms - is an important one in the context of museum visiting, and also in terms of other forms of cultural appropriation. As Urry (1996, p.56) points out:

> *'cultural participants do not simply, straightforwardly and unambiguously adopt a culture as such. Knowing a culture involves work, of memory, interpretation and reconstruction.'*

Ironically, however, this concept of 'audience activity', whilst it is absolutely crucial for examining the reception of ideology, also makes it far more difficult to:

> '... *establish a coherent theory of ideology in popular culture; textual ideology and ideological effect now vary independently, necessitating an involved account of the way in which they may be related.*' (Abercrombie 1990, p.216)

In other words, assessing how people interpret museum displays is made much more complex by the fact that they may view the same exhibit in a myriad of different

ways. Moreover, one must also consider that audience reception is highly fluid - people interpret the same ideological message in quite different ways over time and in different settings. For example, in the context of television, someone may interpret a particular programme in one way at home and another at work. This is an important methodological point, because it necessarily influences where a study is conducted:

> *'Ideological effect, if it exists at all, is not a solid nut that is carried around from context to context. It will only have any permanence to the extent that discursive rules producing particular discursive outcomes overlap between different social groups and social settings.'* (Abercrombie 1990, p.221)

Another important methodological point has been raised by Morley (1986), in the context of television. He shows that the meanings of cultural events are often negotiated by talk about them. The importance of this observation is that it implies that talk and group interaction may be an important component in how museum audiences negotiate the meanings of certain displays. Urry's work, for example, is influential here, and is important because of the manner in which he focuses upon the process by which societies remember. Like Connerton (1989), he makes the important point that *'people remember together as much as they remember individually'* (1990, p.49)

The work of Raphael Samuel has been enlightening for examining the process of social remembering. As we saw in the last chapter, he makes the obvious but nonetheless crucial point that historians and museums have never been the sole purveyors of history. On the contrary, he argues that social memories are the collective product of a myriad of sources - most important of which in the postmodern world that we inhabit is television. History and popular memory undoubtedly pervades much television coverage, of different kinds, and is evidently an important source of historical detail and understanding in modern society. However, television is also a pervasive source of historical misrepresentation, and is a key player in the representation of historical myths, as we have already touched upon.

This issue of societal remembrance is clearly important and influential in terms of the wider debate about the reception of ideology in the context of museums, and it invariably raises a diversity of intriguing issues. For example, it is important to acknowledge that the process of *forgetting* may be as socially constructed as the process of *remembering*! In the context of this research, for instance, the perpetuation of the myth of the Blitz, and the subsequent emphasis upon the camaraderie, may be indicative of the social process of selective memory and in turn selective forgetting. Similarly, Radley (1990) makes some very interesting points in relation to the importance of artifacts for enhancing social remembrance, when he notes the importance of artifactual memory:

> *'artifacts play a central role in the memories of cultures and individuals ... In the very variability of objects, in the ordinariness of their consumption and in the sensory richness of relationships people enjoy through them, they are fitted to be later re-framed as material images for reflection and recall.'* (pp.57-58)

Importantly, one must consider that memory is not necessarily personal and individual. On the contrary, one's memory:

> *'consists in reshaping or 'refashioning' in light of new information received, and of ongoing or new emotional states. In this light, individual memory has two aspects: on the one hand as archivist, and on the other as shaper of the personal myth. Myth does not necessarily entail falsehood, but emphasises a 'truth' incorporating symbolic and metaphorical reconstructions.'* (Zolberg 1996, p. 70)

In other words, we should also be interested in the notion of a 'social memory', and acknowledge that how we remember and the nature of our remembrance is socially mediated and influenced. This is important in the context of museums, because they are significant arenas in which *'the collective memories of nations are created'*. The work of Anderson (1991), for instance, is explicit in seeking to attribute to museums an

important role in the construction of a national narrative. This is an element of particular significance in the context of warfare. Warfare is invariably a highly charged topic, provoking a diversity of distinct views and opinions, about warfare itself and more particularly, the national psyche. In this sense, museum representations of warfare are almost inherently contested, or at least carry the potential for contestation. With such a powerful and value-laden potential, it is not surprising that museum representations of warfare often provoke heated debate and disagreement. Indeed, as Zolberg (1996, p.76) points out, the potential role of history museums for informing and presenting narratives of the nation state is reflected in the fact that in the US, where the reliance of museums upon private donors is particularly pronounced, history museums are likely to obtain tax support of different kinds. After all:

> *'Museums reveal their importance as bearers of national identity through their direct association with national political issues.'* (Zolberg 1996, p. 79)

The issues surrounding social memory are, however, complex and profound. In particular, as Urry (1996, p.51) wonders, an evident question concerns the degree to which societal memories are hegemonic, and to what degree are they contested. The traditional assumption has been that societal memories, of which museums and heritage are an important part, are somehow hegemonic, promoting social consensus and the absorption of dominant ideologies by the dominated. It is certainly very interesting that this research has indicated that memories in a society may actually be highly contested, in some contrast to the degree of consensus found in many accounts of museums and the transmission of ideology.

It is imperative to remember that contested remembrance of historical issues or circumstances is surprisingly common, and may reflect far more than simply disputes between museum professionals. Indeed, it may create national disputes, as became evident in the context of the statue to Bomber Harris, the British commander who

supervised the blanket bombing of German cities in the Second World War - most infamously that of Dresden. The unveiling of the statue of Bomber Harris in London by the Queen Mother, and the subsequent acrimonious visit of the Queen to Germany, highlighted clearly the strong feelings that historical commemoration can provoke. This was similarly highlighted by the debates surrounding the Vietnam Memorial in the US (see Wagner-Pacifici and Schwarts 1991) and by the controversy surrounding the commemoration of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which was effectively personified by the vigorous debate which surrounded the display of the *Enola Gay*, the bomber which actually dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, a debate discussed in some detail by Zolberg (1996). Museums are an important part of this phenomena of contested memory:

> *'No less than other media, their displays create and reinforce a version of the past that constitutes a part of collective memory.'* (Zolberg 1996, p.70)

It is, of course, a key point that heritage can be read and interpreted in a variety of different ways. Yet some writers, particularly those who exhibit a barely disguised disdain for the heritage industry, regularly suggest that heritage sites in particular are necessarily read in only a uniform and monodimensional way. This is undoubtedly too simplistic, implying a simplistic dichotomy between *'real history and false heritage'* (Urry 1996, p.54)

> *'Indeed, it can be presumed that even the most apparently unambiguous of museums or heritage centres will be 'read' in different ways by different visitors. There is no evidence that sites are uniformly read and passively accepted by visitors.'* (Urry 1996, p.54)

There are certainly a small body of studies - of which this research is a part - which do seem to indicate problems with this notion of a uniform reading of heritage (see Macdonald 1995). Despite the insidious nature of this belief in much work on

museums, this is hardly congruent with the evidence suggesting that museum staff may themselves be well aware that many visitors to their exhibitions do *not* interpret them in the manner in which they were intended or expected.

One aspect of social memory which clearly does impinge - often in a very dramatic manner - upon the process of heritage consumption, and which in turn influences the reception of ideologies within the museum environment, is the issue of reminiscence. This research, and particularly its focus upon a topic within the lived memory of many of the respondents that I interviewed, indicated the clear and evident importance of reminiscence. Certainly, a number of writers have identified the issue of 'reminiscence' as being important (see Mellor 1991; Kershaw 1993 and Urry 1996). Urry, in particular, advocates developing a theory of reminiscence in order to fully comprehend the processes by which museum visitors interpret and absorb the various messages with which they are presented.

The issue of 'reminiscence' is most pronounced in terms of older groups, who may not only enjoy a more enhanced longer term memory, but who have also become increasingly influential as a group in society as they have grown in numbers and influence. This may be particularly significant in terms of museums and the heritage industry which, in light of their strong commercial rationale, have become increasingly aware of the potential of reminiscence, as we discussed in the last chapter. Importantly, however, Urry cites the work of Kershaw (1993), who makes a number of interesting observations about the phenomena of reminiscence, most notably the concept of activity. In short, the practise of reminiscing involves activity, not simply on the part of the performers who often pervade heritage sites, engaged in heritage activities, and who are seeking to induce, amongst other things, reminiscences amongst their visitors, but also amongst visitors themselves. In other words, the inducement of reminiscence on the part of museum or heritage visitors involves activity on their part, in the process of producing and invoking memories. This was certainly quite pronounced amongst the

visitors that I interviewed, as I illustrated in the last chapter. This is an important point, because it implies, as Urry notes, that the process of reminiscence is far from being a *'passive process of consumption'* (1996, pp.54-5).

This activity takes a variety of forms - not least colluding in the process of performance. For example, it is evident that many visitors are much more aware of the images that they are being presented with than has often been acknowledged. As such, it does seem to be the case that visitors, particularly at various heritage centres, may be quite aware that the performances, spatial context and even objects with which they are presented may be 'stimulated'. In the words of Urry:

> *'So while visiting museums and heritage sites is to experience an essentially artifactual history, it is not one which is necessarily received passively. To reminisce is collectively to effect a performance. There is no single or simple history conveyed through the performances of heritage.'* (Urry 1996, p.55)

Importantly, although there are evident links between them, reminiscence is not the same as nostalgia - nostalgia may imply a yearning for a somehow sterilised and cosy past, while reminiscence may imply much more than this.

Of course, it is easy to over-emphasise the role of present agendas and concerns in terms of the construction and manipulation of historical accounts. A number of commentators have certainly argued that the the past is essentially a product of the present and, in large part, this is the perspective to which I have alluded throughout this thesis. Nonetheless, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that the past has actually happened and this, to some degree, mediates the boundaries within which its present interpretation takes place. Ultimately, the historical foundation of the past limits, at least to some extent, its construction, or more precisely reconstruction, in the present, and this is particularly the case with 'lived memory', of which reminiscence is an important part. Although each generation may rewrite history, it is evident that they do not do so

upon a blank page. Nonetheless, as history and museums come to acknowledge that much history and historical accounts are open to manifold interpretation, so the diversity of different perspectives and viewpoints means that a unified version of history becomes even more transient and unobtainable.

To conclude, even if we acknowledge - and it is a problematic acknowledgement - that museums are portraying a coherent dominant ideology, the issue of reception is far more vexed:

> *'a nation's 'official history' conventionally highlights its glories. But this idea is increasingly being subjected to 'readers' who wish to know what really happened.'* (Zolberg 1996, p.79)

For Zolberg, the lessons to be learnt from the *Enola Gay* controversy are manifold. Certainly, she acknowledges that one of the positive outcomes from this scenario is that it will become more difficult for museums to simply view the '*public*' as *'the passive recipient of constructed memory.'* (p.80). The more negative potential outcome, however, is that museums may simply become more conscious of the need to avoid any controversy, a development made increasingly likely by the commercial importance that has pervaded the work of so many museums in the past decade or so. The potential outcome of this is that museum exhibitions may simply become safe and insipid, an approach which *'takes us to the Museum as Disneyland; in which the past is sanitised, made unthreatening, albeit rather entertaining.'* (Zolberg 1996, p.80).

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST?

Introduction

Previous chapters have considered my empirical data on both the construction and reception of museum exhibitions, and the wider implications for debates about ideological production and reception. Some of this data, particularly the work on exhibition construction, appears to suggest that the form and direction of museums are undergoing some change. The rise of commercialism as a framing agent for the work of museums has now largely permeated the entire sector, whilst the significance being attached to visitor preferences and demands is increasingly uncontentious, with museum audiences now regularly being described as 'consumers'. At the same time it is clear that many museum visitors are actually far more aware of the vagaries of historical construction and the exhibition process than is often assumed. The wider public familiarity with reflexive history and social history, albeit through other routes like books and television, is certainly encouraging museums to engage with areas once deemed peripheral to their work, such as women's history. This chapter seeks to develop further some of these empirical findings to tentatively consider the future for museums as we enter the twenty first century.

The starting point, of course, must be the observation made throughout earlier chapters. Namely, museums and their exhibitions are necessarily contextual, and reflect the social, economic and political contexts in which they exist. This is not an especially

revelatory point, but it is nonetheless a crucial one - museums do not exist in isolation. On the contrary, museums necessarily reflect the temporal location in which they exist in a variety of different ways. In recent years, this observation has led to an interest in the broad concept of postmodernity, with a number of writers arguing that some of the key features of postmodernity are increasingly manifested in the work of museums. Moreover, postmodernity remains important on a theoretical level because of the sense in which it appears to undermine any concept of a coherent dominant ideology. Let us begin, then, with a brief exploration of postmodernity.

What is 'postmodernism'?

Since the Second World War, Britain and many other industrial countries have experienced cultural change of a previously unprecedented kind or scale. This has found itself being identified as a movement towards '*postmodernism*'. The concept of postmodernism is important in the context of this thesis for two main reasons. Firstly, it is possible to identify a number of contemporary museum developments which can be closely related to postmodernism, such as the increasing importance of commercial issues and the implications of this for museum practice. Secondly, and linked to this, it is possible to suggest that moves towards postmodernism may significantly affect the potential importance and influence of a dominant ideology. In order to fully comprehend the impact of postmodernism on museums, it is first necessary to be familiar with postmodernism as a concept.

'*Postmodernism*' is a highly fluid sociological term which can mean a number of different things, although it is broadly concerned with the field of culture and cultural change. Postmodernism as a theory of cultural change embodies a number of themes, although Abercrombie (1990) particularly identifies five main elements, all of which are closely related. It may be helpful to briefly summarise these issues. The first theme,

and one particularly emphasised by Lash (1990), suggests that postmodernism is signified by a movement towards cultural de-differentiation. In other words, the traditional boundaries between 'high culture', such as the fine arts; theatre and opera, and 'popular culture', such as television and pop music, are breaking down. Popular culture is no-longer frowned upon as being culturally arid. This is particularly illustrated by the music of 'The Beatles' - the embodiment of popular culture, specifically popular youth culture, in the 1960s. Yet their songs are now accorded the status of musical classics, performed by national orchestras and often firmly established in the school curriculum.

The second point is something of a paradoxical one. Namely, whilst there has been a movement towards *de-differentiation* in cultural forms, postmodernism has also seen a corresponding *differentiation* of the cultural audience:

> *'Whereas in the fairly recent past, audiences might have had a degree of homogeneity, perhaps structured by social class, other social divisions, those of age and gender, have become more important, producing an audience cross-cut by different experiences and allegiances.'* (Abercrombie 1990, p.224)

Staying with the musical analogy, this development can be identified in the way in which popular music's audience has become highly differentiated. No-longer is it simply enough to be a fan of pop music or rock music. One now sees the categorisation of the audience into a myriad of more fragmented groupings.

Thirdly, postmodernism suggests that it is possible to identify the development of a *consumer* culture, as opposed to a *producer* culture. In other words, the consumer now has significantly more power to determine the nature and quality of the goods and services they receive. The escalating importance of ratings figures in the medium of television is a good illustration of this. Ratings figures are ostensibly dependent on the

consumer and yet, in many cases, they ultimately determine the nature of the programmes that are produced.

The fourth point suggests that it is possible to identify a change in contemporary cultural texts. No-longer are cultural texts, such as television programmes, overwhelmingly concerned with a coherent narrative. Instead, they are more interested in *'spectacle, style and special effects'* (Abercrombie 1990, p.225). This point may be especially apparent in the context of some contemporary television 'youth programmes', where the actual content is often superseded by the spectacle of the performance.

Linked to this is the final theme - that as the nature of the cultural text has changed, so too has the way in which the audience appropriates this text, which has now become possible in a range of diverse and flexible ways. In the past, for example, one could read a book and there were realistically only a very limited number of ways in which one could appropriate its content - most obviously, by reading it from beginning to end. With the medium of television, however, the situation is very different and people tend to appropriate its meanings in a number of ways. They may watch a programme from beginning to end; they may focus only on points of interest whilst doing something else or they may switch incessantly between channels.

These represent just five of the main themes inherent in the concept of postmodernity, although I have clearly simplified them. For the moment, however, it is enough to understand postmodernism as a term used to denote a cultural paradigm in modern society. Postmodernism as a theory of cultural change embodies a number of themes, but it is particularly signified by a movement towards cultural de-differentiation. In the words of Lash *'modernisation is a process of cultural differentiation while postmodernisation is a process of cultural "de-differentiation"'* (1990, p.ix). According to Lash, postmodernism implies a change in the cultural realm

from 'the *modern*', where the cultural field is highly differentiated, towards 'the *postmodern*', where the cultural field becomes dramatically less differentiated and less hierarchical. This, in very simple terms, is one of the main themes of postmodernism and can be seen on a practical level in the general breakdown of the boundaries and distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture and the dissipation of hierarchies between different cultural forms. This tendency is illustrated by the blurring of the distinction between contemporary museums and other leisure pursuits. Hewison (1990, p.132), for example, has developed these ideas and has suggested that the uncertain nature of contemporary society has contributed to a 'postmodern culture', where retrospection and revivalism, whether in the fashion or leisure industry, have become vogue. Indeed, a range of other changes linked to postmodernism can be identified, many of which arguably have a direct relationship with recent changes in museums. For example, the distinction between reality and what is actually a representation of reality have contentiously become increasingly blurred, which closely parallels the way in which many contemporary museum exhibits and reconstructions - and particularly those within heritage centres - are somehow *'too real'*. This whole dilemma is summed up by Lash when he says that: '*modernism conceives of representations as being problematic whereas postmodernism problematises reality.*' (1990, p.13)

This represents only a very preliminary introduction to the concept of postmodernism. For the moment, however, it is sufficient to simply acknowledge that the notion of 'postmodernism' and the whole concept of cultural change appears to affect the nature of the contemporary museum. The museum, after all, is widely held to reflect contemporary society and it is clearly impossible to separate the development of museums from broader societal changes. If society itself is experiencing dramatic and significant cultural change, then the fact that this is also taking place in museums should not particularly surprise us.

Postmodernism and museums

Museums, of course, are socially and historically located, and as such they inevitably reflect, in a variety of different and distinct ways, the wider context in which they exist. Of this point, there can surely be little debate or contention. However, this is important because one consequently needs to acknowledge that museums are actually products of modernity. As such, it should be unsurprising that they have in turn been subjected to many of the attacks that have been reserved for modernity, such that many museums have moved towards more critical scrutiny of the work that they do and the messages that they portray, with the result that:

> *'Exhibitions, like monographs, have been given over to the representation of multiple perspectives, to voices of the previously 'spoken for' or ignored, to the acknowledgement of ambivalence, uncertainty and objectivity, to irony and the disruption of established form, and to self-reflection.'* (Macdonald 1996, pp.7-8)

I have already noted the significance of these developments in the form and nature of museum displays and exhibitions and, indeed, a central concern of this research has been seeking to fully understand these developments. Indeed, the next section explores further some of the implications here. Interestingly, however, I would suggest that some of these changes can undoubtedly be attributed to the wider developments which have occurred under the broad label of postmodernity.

Certainly, the movement towards a consumer culture, as opposed to a producer culture, can be identified in the context of museums and was an important feature of my empirical work on exhibition construction. This suggests that the consumer now has significantly more power to determine the nature and quality of the goods and services that they now receive. In fact, we saw in chapter three that one of the more interesting developments in the museum field has been a significant change in the nature of museums and their relationship with their visitors. There has, for instance, been a

significant increase in museums' awareness of their visitors - in theory at least. Museum visitors are now treated more as consumers, with interaction between the visitor and the exhibition process often being highly encouraged. In light of the fact that museums have been drawn heavily into the commercial arena, the preferences of visitors and potential visitors have begun to take precedence in determining the content of exhibitions, certainly more than ever before. Recent years have undoubtedly seen more attention being paid towards the needs and preferences of the visitor and an increase in the number and range of visitor surveys, a development which has a potentially significant impact upon exhibition policies, as museums increasingly adapt their exhibitions to what they believe visitors want to see:

> *'Gradually, over the years, our displays have evolved and are becoming much more visitor led and we know from visitor surveys what people want to see and we know what they like and what they don't like.'* (Marketing Officer - National Museum)

There has also been an increase in visitor *participation* in museums, rather than simply *observation.* No-longer are museum visitors simply expected to observe displays from behind glass cases. On the contrary, the emphasis is now often on participation in exhibitions, with some notion of interaction with exhibits. We certainly saw in the last two chapters that many museums are moving towards more interactive exhibits and widening the range of media through which museum topics are portrayed. To date, however, these developments have been most pronounced in the US and in Canada, where museums such as the Ontario Science Centre are so highly interactive that the term 'museum' has been deemed an inadequate label. It has been suggested that this increase in the interaction between museum exhibits and museum visitors is linked to postmodernity, which involves:

> *'... the breakdown of some at least of the differences between the cultural object and the audience so that there is an active encouragement of audience participation.'* (Urry 1990, p.85)

Linked to these developments is the decline in the aura attached to museum exhibits, which in turn can be connected to one of the central notions of postmodernism - cultural de-differentiation - which suggests that the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture are breaking down. In light of the postmodern tendency towards de-differentiation, it evidently becomes difficult for a cultural phenomena to maintain its aura. Postmodern culture is, almost inevitably, anti-auratic. Let me expand.

The emphasis that museums have traditionally placed on 'objects' or 'relics' embodies two themes. Firstly, it is clear that the only material remains from previous historical epochs are usually 'objects' and, secondly, a certain importance or 'aura' is then attached to these objects because of their 'authenticity'. Sociologically, the issue is a fairly straightforward one:

> '*... they are objects removed from their social context. In being confronted by aristocratic objects without aristocrats, we are presented with an aesthetic view of the aristocratic past that is as false as if we judged modern capitalists by looking at a Mies van der Rohe building or a boardroom Picasso.*' (Horne 1984, p. 43)

These objects or relics are thus detached from the context in which they had their initial meaning and, as such, they are relatively open to interpretation, which can occur in a number of different ways. The use of 'relics', therefore, like memory and history, is essential to how we 'know' the past, but of course requires interpretation. The key debate, on which this research has concentrated, centres around exactly how these relics and objects are interpreted and just what these interpretations reflect. However, the treatment of these objects has been dramatically affected in recent years by a number of major changes to museums.

On the one hand, there has been an evident expansion in the scope of objects deemed by museums to be worthy of presentation - something illustrated by the recent

'Collection of the Twentieth Century', on display at the British Museum, London, which was an exhibition of everyday artifacts from the twentieth century:

> *'No longer are people only interested in seeing either great works of art or artifacts from very distant historical periods. People increasingly seem attracted by representations of the 'ordinary', of modest houses and of mundane forms of work.'* (Urry 1990, p.130)

Of course, this observation is closely linked to the fact that the nature of the history presented in museum exhibitions has itself broadened considerably, to include feminist, popularist and ethnic accounts, the background to which I discussed more thoroughly in chapters three and four.

Moreover, closely linked to the growing importance of nostalgia and reminiscence, the past is also getting closer - as an exhibition such as the *'Collection of the Twentieth Century'* implies. The gap between what is treated by museums as the 'past' and the 'present' has been narrowed. The Museum of Childhood in London, for instance, is exhibiting many toys which are barely more than twenty years old. Given the nature of these developments - with their images of increasingly recent popularist life - it is clear that many museums are now displaying images which are within both the experience and lived memories of many visitors, something Davis (1979) discusses in relation to nostalgia. Indeed, this was one reason why my research focussed upon a topic - the Blitz - within the lived memories of some visitors. However, it is for these reasons that this development in museums is often described in terms of a shift from '*aura*' to '*nostalgia*'. Certainly, there is often considerably less stress on the 'aura' and subsequent value of the object or exhibit in museums than there may once have been, although this may in part be linked to the increasing mundaneness of exhibits. If an object has little status or symbolic value whilst in initial use, this may well affect the degree to which it is treated with reverence as a relic.

The issue of nostalgia seems important here, for a variety of reasons. There is certainly no doubt that nostalgia has become a prominent theme in modern British society, with what Lowenthal (1985) describes as a *'growing rebellion against the present, and an increased longing for the past'* (p.11). In terms of museums and heritage this has been manifested in a number of different ways, such as the effective simplification of the past into a number of stereotyped and somewhat pastiched images, and the creation of a safe and secure view of the past, in which struggles and social relations are largely obscured by the emphasis upon objects and artifacts. Urry (1996) and McCrone, Morris and Keily (1995) talk in some detail about these developments in the world of heritage and museums, and make some perceptive comments. In particular, a commodification of history and heritage can be identified, in which history and the past experiences a loss of authority, coupled with a decline in the traditional auratic power of the past and history, being replaced instead by a highly visual heritage, presenting a well-scrubbed view of the past. The implications of this development are obvious and striking - not least the idea that they promote a view of the past which is necessarily conservative and cosy and warm. Moreover, it has been suggested by a number of well-known authors on postmodernism (see Eco 1987; Baudrillard 1988) that heritage in this form then fits well into a broader development of contexts which are actually *'hyper-real'*. This concept of *'hyper-reality'*"is a very interesting one, in which scenes and contexts, be they in terms of television or in terms of heritage, appear to be real and reflective of reality, when in actual fact they may bear little or no relationship to reality.

Linked to these themes, a number of authors have argued that the centrality of history and memory to modern society is highly representative of the nature of the present and, most particularly, the process of very rapid change that seems to pervade so much of modern society. Huyssen (1995), for instance, is explicit in arguing that the central position of history and social memory in modern society reflects concern with the rapidly changing present, and an attempt to slow the frenetic pace of time in

contemporary postmodern society. In this sense, museums clearly have a very significant role to play - allowing people to cling to and develop their own identity and collective memory in the context of an increasingly fragmented and fast-moving world. In summary, Featherstone suggests that a general process is occurring, closely linked to postmodernism, by which:

> '... *more traditional forms of high cultural consumption (such as museums, galleries) become revamped to cater for wider audiences through trading-in the canonical, auratic art and educative-formative pretensions for an emphasis upon the spectacular, the popular, the pleasurable and the immediately accessible.*' (1991, pp.96-97)

Perhaps the most contentious change to the museum field has been what some have described as the declining importance of the '*authentic*' (see Featherstone 1991). It has been argued, for instance, that the importance of 'authenticity' in museum exhibits has declined dramatically. In the words of Urry:

> '*The new-style heritage centres, such as the Jorvik Viking Centre in York or the Pilgrim's Way in Canterbury, are competitors with existing museums and challenge given notions of authenticity. In such centres there is a curious mixing of the museum and the theatre. Everything is meant to be authentic, even down to the smells, but nothing actually is authentic.*'(1990, p.132)

In a sense, however, Featherstone and Urry have perhaps overstated the decline of the 'authentic'. Closer examination of the two examples Urry cites reveal that their very success is dependent on a simultaneous element of the authentic. The Jorvik Viking Centre, for example, is so popular perhaps only because it presents a theatrical and inauthentic presentation of the past on the wholly authentic remains of a Viking settlement. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the ambiguities attached to the concept of 'authenticity'. As this example illustrates, the notion of authenticity can operate at many different levels.

Indeed, recent developments have raised a number of questions about just what the notion of 'authenticity' actually implies. Ehrentraut (1991, p.49) points out, for instance, that many museum professionals object to the 'postmodern museum' and heritage centres because they represent *'the falsification and trivialisation of history'* as part of the entertainment industry, to the point whereby Hewison (1987, p.10) claims that *'heritage is not history'* and, ultimately *'If we really are interested in our history, then we may have to preserve it from the conservationists.'* (p.98). Walsh (1992) is similarly critical of these museum developments when he suggests that:

> *'... the selection of a few unrepresentative images of the past, neutralised by dazzling media, exacerbates the feeling of placelessness which is common in the (post-)modern world'* (p.4)

Evidently, there is a sense in which some of the debates surrounding authenticity may have less to do with authenticity per se and more to do with an innate professional hostility towards the heritage industry and the postmodern museum. The fact remains, however, that recent museum developments have begun to raise a number of acute questions not just about 'authenticity' but, more broadly, about the various interpretations of the past that museums in general can adopt and the manner in which museums are changing.

These developments have been quite profound in nature and have affected museums not just in Britain, as Porter (1989, p.39) and others imply, but internationally. Yet as I mentioned, they have not been unanimously popular:

> *'I get frightened most, however, when I hear from colleagues elsewhere in America, Europe, and Australasia that similar challenges to the survival of museum scholarship are happening everywhere.'* (Terrell 1991, p.149)

The basis of this distaste for the postmodern museum on the part of museum professionals is often because they are bringing into question the traditional role of professional scholarship in museums. In particular, this rests uneasily with a developing role of popular entertainment that ultimately rests on the importance of commercialism and which has - or at least is perceived as having - an increasingly tenuous relationship to the past. Yet there are also deeper objections to the current renaissance of museums:

> *'When museums become one of Britain's new growth industries, they are not signs of vitality, but symbols of national decline.'*(Hewison 1987, p.84)

It is of interest to consider just why this change in museums has come about, for it is clear that such developments have profound implications for any study of museums. Hewison (1987), like several other authors, cites the rise in enthusiasm for the past as a consequence of a desire to escape the present - particularly in times of difficulty and discontent - and replace it with an improved, albeit well scrubbed, past. Indeed, this theme of escape from modernity has also been used to explain the rise of museums in the nineteenth century. According to this viewpoint, museums and heritage represent a mechanism which:

> *' ... constitutes an adaptive societal response to the structural strains engendered by the process of modernisation.'* (Ehrentraut 1991, p.50)

Certainly, this notion is compatible with the highly simplified and idealised conceptions of the past found in many contemporary museums and the general move from *'aura'* to *'nostalgia'*. As Neil Cossons said in 1987, referring to Beamish and similar museums:

'These museums are highly consumer-orientated, wildly popular with the public and capable of presenting a nostalgic, warm and cosy picture of a past which was really bloody awful.' (cited in Lumley 1988, p.22).

We have discussed, albeit briefly and in fairly simple terms, the main changes in the contemporary museum which relate to this notion of postmodernism. Yet understanding the nature of museum changes is crucial, because they closely relate to how museums are constructed and the kind of reception they attract from visitors. Indeed, as we discussed in relation to the issue of 'authenticity', the rise of the postmodern museum has also raised the question of exactly what museum displays are representing:

'... truth in an exhibition is not just a question of the accuracy of label copy. Truth is also found in what gets put out for display versus what doesn't. It is found in what object is juxtaposed with what, in whether something is upside-down or right-side-up, in what you see first and what you see next.' (Terrell 1991, p.152)

Contemporary museum developments have made it evident that the past is open to interpretation and representation, by the way in which museum exhibitions are increasingly constructed. The obvious question, as we have just discussed, relates to just what meanings these representations embody and how these messages are received. In other words, what these themes imply is a concern with the potential transmission of ideology in museums

Postmodernism and the transmission of ideology

We have already seen that there are empirical problems with applying the dominant ideology thesis to museums. Yet postmodernism, as is probably apparent by now, implies that there are a number of problems with the concept of a dominant ideology

thesis irrespective of the empirical evidence. Even if a coherent ideological message does exist, postmodernism means that its cultural transmission is likely to be increasingly diffuse, whilst the audience is progressively differentiated - and not simply along class lines - and appropriating the same messages in an increasingly diverse manner. There are, of course, a number of problems surrounding the concept of postmodernism - not least, the problem of definition. However, it is fair to suggest that if one defines '*postmodernism*' as:

> '*... the fragmentation and diversification of modern cultures by the forces of consumerism and global markets, then postmodernism means that it is impossible to have a dominant ideology in an advanced capitalist system. ... In summary, the existence of a postmodern culture means that by definition there cannot be a single, dominant, or coherent ideology.*' (Turner 1990, p.250)

We noted in the introduction, for instance, that historical representation in museums and in the heritage field has traditionally excluded large sections of society from the mainstream of historical representation. Recent years, however, have seen something of a redress to this. The development of heritage as a commercial enterprise, coupled with the professional and intellectual development that has fuelled this, has led to a myriad of different areas being exposed to historical examination and critique (see Humphries 1988; Kavanagh 1996 and Liddiard 1996). When museums become purveyors of alternative - and invariably previously hidden - historical perspectives, so they have moved into new difficulties. On the one hand, whilst it has been largely acknowledged that these moves within historical scholarship have undoubtedly served to liberate and empower many groups with a sense of their own heritage and history, these developments have not been universally applauded. Certainly, these moves have raised a number of vexed questions about the role of museums themselves, and just what their position in the contemporary world should be. Undoubtedly, there has been some longstanding opposition to these moves from the more traditional areas of museum scholarship, who have been opposed in different ways to many of the

developments which have enveloped museums and their work. However, museums and museum professionals have been faced with a more deep-rooted issue, which reflects the problems surrounding the concept of relativism. Namely, by implication, the new approaches to history and heritage have been underpined by the notion that all histories have value and merit. Certainly, this has been the concept which lies - implicitly or otherwise - beneath many of the new approaches to history in museums. Yet, of course, this causes difficulties in the context of some contested histories - most notably those of Nazi and Fascist heritage. Should, for example, the revisionist interpretations of a writer such as David Irving - who has argued that the Holocaust did not occur - be given credence of any kind in the new museum world, with its emphasis upon interpretivism and relativism?

Regardless of these difficulties, however, what this argument suggests is that the various postmodern moves towards a more fragmented cultural framework and narrative have been variously imparted into museums and heritage in a number of ways, but most notably in terms of the dramatic broadening of the themes and approaches deemed to be appropriate for museums to represent. Furthermore, it is evident that some of this development is related to the growing power and importance of these marginalised groups themselves, who have been keen to reveal the nature of their own history and heritage. In particular, Urry talks of the process of '*de-traditionalisation*' (1996, pp.58-59), which he claims refers to the process by which individuals and groups are somehow 'forced' to establish their own separate institutions, which are somehow distinct and detached from wider society. In effect, one is witnessing the development and establishment of what Hetherington (1990) describes as '*new sociations*'. Their nature - by which membership is derived from choice - and the manner in which they provide an important arena through which people can explore and develop their identity, evidently has a significant bearing upon the development of the heritage industry, and the broadening of the themes and approaches deemed appropriate for museums to deal with and display. This point certainly

underlines the importance of conservational groups in the development of the heritage boom. After all, as Urry points out, of the many conservation groups in the UK, more than half have been established since 1970, and by the early 1990s, it was estimated that approximately 1 in 10 people were members of an environmental or conservation organisation.

In short, it is evident that museums are experiencing important changes in their work and direction, for a wealth of different reasons, some of which reflect wider debates about postmodernity. There are, of course, a variety of implications of this, and in the next section I want to draw these points out to tentatively suggest that museums seem set to undergo further change and are likely to engage with new themes and areas that, until recently, may have been viewed as beyond the remit of museums. One such theme is the history of sexuality, to which the next part of this chapter turns.

Making histories of sexuality?

I have suggested elsewhere that the assorted developments in museum practice that I have uncovered and explored in this research have potentially profound implications for the future work of museums and their exhibiting policies (see Liddiard 1996). Indeed, I am not alone is suggesting that, as we enter the twenty first century, the work and role of museums is set to undergo significant change (see Kavanagh 1996). Similarly, Porter (1996), in her examination of the treatment of gender relations by museums, describes how exhibitions in Britain and northern Europe are increasingly:

'... *breaking new ground in museum exhibition-making, developing new methods, forms of expression and themes.*' (p.105)

I intend to further illustrate some of the arguments suggesting that museum exhibitions are set to undergo significant change, not least as a consequence of the

developments explored in earlier chapters. Indeed, I am currently in the process of exploring the implications of these research findings for future museum exhibitions in a book about the treatment of sexuality and gender by museums (see Liddiard forthcoming - 2001). The next part of this chapter therefore focuses upon the topic of sexuality as a pertinent illustration of how some of the issues arising from this research seem set to have a profound impact upon future museum exhibitions.

Sexuality is a topic which has come to pervade almost every cultural media in contemporary society - newspapers; magazines; TV; films; adverts - and yet it has been almost ubiquitously ignored by museums. This is particularly intriguing when one considers that the history of sexuality has simultaneously become an area attracting widespread interest and, in many respects, museums are an obvious forum for examining the issue. This section therefore seeks to examine two issues central to the treatment of sexuality by museums. Firstly, how can one account for the general exclusion of sexuality from museum displays? As part of this discussion, I suggest that there are a number of potential reasons for this exclusion which exert varying degrees of influence. However, understanding more about the nature of museum decision-making is the key to considering both the current lack of exhibitions on the topic of sexuality, and also to contemplating the future of sexuality in museums. This represents the second main issue that I want to focus upon - namely, is the the topic of sexuality one which museums are likely to become more amenable to in the foreseeable future?

Current museum presentations of sexuality

On an immediate level, it is extremely difficult to make general observations about the ways in which museums present sexuality, given that they are so heterogeneous. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that in spite of the wide variety of museum forms, with their highly diverse collecting and exhibiting policies, the theme of sexuality is almost

uniformily ignored in museum displays and exhibitions. Indeed, there is good evidence to suggest that many museums actively seek to censor any explicit allusion to the topic. For example, the manner in which the British Museum has traditionally excluded their extensive collection of thousands of erotic and sexological books from public access, never mind display, has been well documented (see Fryer 1966; Kearney 1981), as have similar exclusions in other museums (see Kendrick 1987). In a sense, however, this exclusion is intriguing given that sexuality has come to pervade our culture so thoroughly in almost every other media, such as newspapers and magazines, the radio and of course TV and film. Simultaneously, recent years have also seen the history of sexuality develop as an area of public interest and fascination, best signified perhaps by the BBC TV series 'A Secret World of Sex' (see Humphries 1988) and the 'safe sex' TV commercial involving 'Mr. Brewer' recounting tales of sexual liaisons in the 1920s with his reusable condom 'Geronimo'. Yet despite the way in which sexuality has saturated so much of our contemporary culture, it is intriguing that it should remain such a neglected topic in the museum world.

Clearly, there are a number of potential reasons for why museums have been traditionally hesitant to mount exhibitions on sexuality. In sheer practical terms, one issue may be that of historical resources. In light of the traditionally veiled nature of much sexual behaviour, the extensive historical material which forms the basis for many museum exhibitions may be largely lacking in the context of sexuality:

> '*... the generations brought up earlier this century, and in fact right up to the early 1950s, did not discuss sex in public. There were very few studies of their sexual behaviour by medical researchers and sociologists. The Victorian legacy was one of public inhibition and silence.*' (Humphries 1988, p.9)

Subsequently, it may be that the dearth of historical resources on the theme of sexuality represents a very considerable obstacle to mounting a well informed exhibition on the topic. After all, the historian and the museum:

'... *investigates or reconstructs not the past, but the residues of the past which have survived into the present.*' (Stedman Jones 1976, p.296)

Understanding museums and their representation of topics such as sexuality lies in comprehending the way in which they have traditionally focussed on these 'residues' of the past. Relics or objects represent the focus of many museums, because they are frequently the only remains from previous historical periods. It may be for this reason that exhibitions on sexuality are highly unusual - because the subterranean nature of the topic may mean that it is lacking in the kinds of resources which many museums, and certainly more traditional museums, perceive as essential to mounting historically valid displays. We have already seen that museums are often constrained in terms what they can display by what objects they have available. Given the apparent dearth of historical material relating to sexuality, it may be little wonder that museum presentations have struggled to deal with the topic.

However, it would clearly be erroneous to attach too much importance to this issue in accounting for the widespread absence of exhibitions on sexuality. I have already alluded to the large collection of material on the topic held by the British Museum (see Fryer 1966; Kearney 1981), while the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and many university libraries have erotica collections of some sort (see Kearney 1982). Yet this has not generally resulted in an exhibition on the theme of sexuality. Moreover, in the current technological climate, museums are not necessarily obliged to produce an object-centred exhibition anyway. Instead, they can adopt a variety of alternative media to address a topic, without necessarily having recourse to objects and relics. Indeed, the use of oral history is now becoming widespread in many museums and would be an obvious means of collecting the kinds of data necessary to mount such an exhibition. In fact, this was the technique predominantly used by the BBC series 'A Secret World of Sex' (see Humphries 1988). Of course, this technique also has its limitations - by

implication, it can only be profitably used for collecting data on sexual behaviour from the turn of the twentieth century. Museums wishing to examine sexuality in the period before 1900 must rely on more traditional historical material. Yet the field of sexuality is perhaps not as barren of historical resources as it may initially appear. The use of love letters, for example, is a particularly important resource. Indeed, love letters were recently used, to quite poignant effect, in the Imperial War Museum's exhibition '*Forces Sweethearts*' and have long been used by historians. Similarly, various artworks - whether defined as erotica or pornography - can also give some interesting information on sexuality and sexual behaviour (see Faust 1980; Curtis 1990). Indeed, even hardcore pornography can be a valuable historical resource:

> '*Since practically all hard-core pornography is written by men for men to read, its subject-matter provides a fairly reliable index of the predominant themes in male sexual fantasy at any given period*'. (Fryer 1966, p.97)

Furthermore, it is easy to forget the work of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis, Krafft-Ebing, van de Velde, Kinsey and Masters and Johnson to name a few, all of which provide an important source of data on sexual behaviour, at least since the turn of the century (see Brecher 1969), whilst the Mass Observation Archive contains a wealth of material on sex, particularly between the late 1930s and the early 1950s. Certainly, there have been a range of historical studies which have focussed upon the issue of sexuality in a wide variety of historical contexts - Gillis (1979) on the sexual relations of servants in the nineteenth century; Engel (1979) on Victorian prostitution; Blaikie (1987) on illegitimacy in the nineteenth century; Costello (1979) on love and sex between 1939 and 1945 and Farraday (1985) on lesbianism between 1914 and 1939. Similarly, there have also been a number of books addressing the history of sexuality in more general terms (see Parrinder 1980; Gilbert and Roche 1987; Mort 1987). In short, despite the traditionally veiled nature of sexual behaviour, museums are not in fact faced with as dramatic a shortage of historical resources as it may initially

appear. If this is the case, how might one account for the widespread exclusion of sexuality from museum exhibitions?

Probably the most important influence on the production of museum exhibitions and the inclusion or exclusion of particular topics is the museum staff who, as we saw in chapter three, ultimately make many of the crucial decisions about particular exhibitions and displays. In many respects, this holds the key to understanding the way in which certain topics are incorporated into museum exhibitions. Namely, most museums employ a diverse range of staff, who each have particular roles in the museum and ultimately decide which topics will be addressed in exhibitions and precisely how these topics will be dealt with. We have already seen that much museum decision-making is often highly pragmatic. A number of different museum staff are usually involved in the development of any specific exhibition and eliciting just why they made the decisions they did is difficult when one considers that so much is the result of personal compromise and agreement. However, it is interesting that whilst different museum staff may adhere to very different perspectives, there nevertheless seems to be almost an implicit agreement that issues relating to sexuality will not be covered. Reflecting my earlier discussion about the exclusion of women's history from museums, I would suggest that the exclusion of sexuality may in fact relate to the professional culture and training of museum staff.

On an obvious level, the exclusion of some topics can be explained by reference to specific staff personalities. Some museum staff are particularly amenable to innovative displays and are highly progressive in their approach to constructing exhibitions, while other museum staff are quite the opposite. The question, of course, is why some individuals are so much more open to presentations of such issues than others? I raised a number of points in relation to this in chapters three and four, not least the manner in which museum staff may be formally or informally trained, and the related fact that new approaches towards history have increasingly come to permeate all museum sectors,

albeit through different routes and in different ways. The result has been somewhat profound as the museum profession as a whole has begun to adopt these ideas, with a subsequent impact upon the manner in which many museum exhibitions are constructed and the kinds of topics which are included. In light of these developments, and the evidence which suggests that museums are increasingly mounting exhibitions on topics such as women's history, which just a few years ago would have been deemed almost unthinkable in many museums, can we expect to see the issue of sexuality begin to pervade, however peripherally, the work of museums?

The future for museum presentations of sexuality?

Of course, it would be folly to predict in any concrete manner the future for museum presentations of sexuality. Ultimately, the topic is laden with potential problems. Museums considering an exhibition on the theme of sexuality would have to consider a number of salient issues, such as ensuring that the public were not offended; resolving any potential legal problems and of course securing support from the higher levels of the museum hierarchy. Nevertheless, these difficulties are far from intractable and many museums have certainly overcome similar problems to mount successful exhibitions on other sensitive themes. Indeed, I would suggest that it is increasingly likely that museums will come to consider the issue of sexuality in their work for two main reasons, both of which closely reflect my emprical findings. Firstly, the professional culture of museums has experienced and is continuing to experience something of a shift towards topics which would once have been considered inappropriate for museums to display. This is linked to the second main point. Namely, the increasing influence of commercial considerations on the production of museum exhibitions has a number of very important implications for the topic of sexuality.

Evidently, the decisions reached by museum staff about the manner in which they produce exhibitions and the kinds of topics they will address, are not straightforward. Far from it. Instead, many exhibitions are the result of a complex interplay of factors. For example, we have already seen that the resultant exhibition is usually the consequence of widespread negotiation and compromise between various museum staff, each with their own personal and professional agendas. Even if there is staff agreement that the museum should be dealing with topics such as sexuality, implementing this to the point of actually mounting an exhibition may be far from easy. Nevertheless, I would suggest that a number of changes to the museum world in general are such that they make the appearance of museum displays on sexuality in the near future not simply a possibility, but actually a probability. Of particular importance is the issue of commercialism.

The issue of commercialism has had a dramatic and profound impact upon the development of museum displays, as we have already discussed, not least because it is an issue which has - rightly or wrongly - come to pervade almost every aspect of museum work. In light of the fact that museums have been drawn heavily into the commercial arena, the preferences of visitors and potential visitors have also begun to take precedence, certainly more so than ever before. Recent years have undoubtedly seen more attention being paid towards the needs and preferences of the visitor and an increase in the number and range of visitor surveys. This development has a potentially significant impact upon exhibition policies, as museums increasingly adopt their exhibitions to what they believe visitors want to see, which in turn has dramatically influenced the kinds of topics which museums now seek to address. I have already suggested that the manner in which museums are increasingly displaying exhibitions concerned with women's history may be related to both greater visitor demand for coverage of such themes and, related to this, the commercial potential of meeting this demand. In short, museums have been experiencing pressure from a number of directions to develop more balanced and progressive displays which include women.

However, these pressures have long existed, to a degree at least, and yet many museums have still been hesitant to include such displays. In part, this shift has resulted from the gradual replacement of older, more traditional, staff with younger staff that are more in tune with recent ideas about the interpretation of history. But this is only part of the reason for these changes. Instead, and this is an important point, these various pressures are evidently compatible with the commercial rationale increasingly being adopted by museums, as they attempt to expand their visitor base and their income. In other words, there is a sense in which topics such as women's history, which have long been neglected by museums, are now beginning to receive substantial coverage at least in part because of their commercial potential. Whilst these developments raise highly disturbing questions about the future of museum displays on topics which may not be highly popular and commercially viable, the implications for sexuality are clear.

There is no-doubt that sex as a topic has enormous commercial potential. This can be witnessed both in the manner in which sex is manipulated by mainstream media to sell their products and also in terms of pornography. From this point alone - that sexuality has very considerable commercial potential - it seems quite possible that museum displays on sexuality will find favour in the near future. This point can be illustrated by the development of a brothel museum in the Australian outback, with the full support of the local MP and tourist board. As May (1993) notes:

> *'The museum idea started off as a bit of a joke, she admits, but she soon came to realise its commercial potential'* (p.18)

Indeed, highly successful displays such as the recent *'Forces Sweethearts'* exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, consisting of a variety of displays from graphic love letters to pornographic magazines issued to troops, may actually herald the arrival of sexuality as a valid and appropriate topic for museum coverage.

Of course, whether or not more museums mount exhibitions relating to sexuality and the history of sexuality remains to be seen. To an extent, of course, this may be dependent on a broadening of attitudes towards sexuality in Britain, although one could also speculate that with the growing educative role of museums in the context of the school curriculum, and the increasing attention being devoted to sex education in schools, museums may be identified as a possible medium through which some of these issues could be fruitfully addressed. Whatever the actuality, it is nevertheless imperative that museums at least begin to consider the importance of sexuality as a topic for exhibitions, because if they continue to ignore the issue, as they have traditionally done, then the implications are disturbing. The commercial potential of displays on the history of sexuality is hardly a source of contention. Subsequently, it is possible, even probable, that it will begin to attract the attention of the sex industry, which is notoriously good at exploiting such commercial possibilities (see Hebditch and Anning 1988; Skordaki 1991). Indeed, this has already been the case in the Netherlands, with the establishment of a number of 'Sex Museums' run by the sex industry. In light of the void left by the traditional neglect of sexuality by museums, and the possibility that this may be exploited by the sex industry, it is imperative that museums begin to address the topic of sexuality and contest this ground, in what feminists such as Cole (1989) have described as a cultural offensive, as the feminist movement has sought to define sexuality and the representation of sexuality in their own terms.

In short, it is clear that museums have traditionally excluded almost all reference to sexuality in their displays and exhibitions and there are a number of potential reasons for this exclusion, such as the traditional nature of the professional culture in museums and, to a lesser degree, a lack of historical resources on which to base exhibitions. However, it is possible to suggest that the near future is likely to witness a growing acceptance by museums that sexuality and the history of sexuality are valid topics for museum consideration and one can already identify moves in this direction. In part, this

can be linked to the shifting nature of the professional culture in museums. However, of particular importance for encouraging the development of museum exhibitions on sexuality is the growing influence of commercialism. Of course, whether or not museums do make significant moves in this direction remains to be seen, but it is nevertheless imperative that museums at least begin to consider sexuality as a valid topic for display. It is certainly too important an issue to allow the sex industry to set the agenda.

Ultimately, however, the future direction of museums remains to be seen. There certainly appear to be compelling reasons for suggesting that museums are set to undergo further transformation in both their approach and their work. Nonetheless, the various influences upon the work of museums are manifold and much can change over time. Yet one theme that has been consistently important for the work and even existence of many museums is the wider debate about the appropriateness of state intervention and subsidy in the museum sector. This is an interesting debate with a long and protracted history, but which nonetheless continues to dominate many discussions in the museum field. We saw in previous chapters, for instance, that the issue of commercialism has now come to thoroughly dominate almost every museum in the UK, to greater or lesser degrees. This was easily the most consistent theme to arise from my empirical work on museum staff and exhibition construction, and the various implications of this development have pervaded every chapter since. Ultimately, however, the primacy of this issue rests not simply with museums per se. On the contrary, it is a theme which has transcended all of the arts world over the past twenty years, as the UK has witnessed the growing marketisation of culture. I have made the point previously that museums are necessarily contextual - they reflect the wider social, economic and political context in which they exist. The reality, however, is that museums in the UK at the end of the 1990s existed in a climate that appeared content to leave cultural access almost entirely to the market. In this final section, therefore, I seek to temporarily move beyond the specifics of museums to consider the wider debates

that have taken place in the UK about the role of the state in meeting cultural need, the outcome of which stands to have a potentially major impact upon the future work of museums.

State support for museums and the arts

Government spending on the arts and culture account for less than 1.5 per cent of total state expenditure, which is just a tiny fraction of Government spending. Nevertheless, state support for the arts is a highly contentious issue and has attracted vocal and vociferous comment from a variety of sources. The launch of the National Lottery in November 1994, and the expressed commitment to using the proceeds to subsidise and support areas otherwise receiving scant state assistance, has ensured that the issue of state support for the arts remains firmly on the popular agenda. But concern about state involvement in the arts has been a recurring issue for some time. For example, the closure of many provincial theatres and cinemas has precipitated a wide-ranging debate about whether or not local authorities have an obligation to provide cultural amenities, such as theatres, or whether their provision must depend wholly on the free market. Simultaneously, concern about the current level of library funding and provision continues to attract heated argument and debate.

These issues are somewhat disparate, but they nevertheless raise common concerns and questions, many of which directly affect museums. For example, just how appropriate is it for the state to contribute financially to the arts? If one can establish an argument for state support, how does one then decide which cultural endeavours are worthy of financial support and which are not? What should be the level of financial support? How does one assess the effectiveness or otherwise of Government spending? In short, the question of state support for the arts is an inherently vexed one. Even if one establishes the legitimacy of the principle of support, financial pragmatism

means that one is still faced with the matter of whether or not scarce resources would be better employed on more concrete needs, such as housing or health services. Certainly, the notion that Government and the state should be employing tax revenues in the support of cultural endeavour is by no means universally held and a number of pertinent points are often made against state support for the arts and culture. It may be useful to briefly consider some of these arguments.

Arguments about state support for museums and the arts

One long-standing argument about the state's financial involvement in the arts suggests that state contributions simply displace private contributions . This is an interesting notion, not least because one could argue that the relatively low levels of private sponsorship in the UK are indicative of the impact of state subsidies in discouraging private funds. However, it is equally possible to argue that the general paucity of private finance is the very reason for state subsidies. Historically, it is certainly true that philanthropy has tended to focus upon areas of unmet social need, and when these areas of need are actually recognised and addressed by society, so philanthropy has tended to move to other areas. Yet it is difficult to see how these arguments could be credible in the context of museums and the arts - where demand for financial support is potentially infinite and the scale of state support is tiny, such that the need for private donors is as pronounced as ever. It is difficult to envisage state support ever being on a scale sufficient to negate the need for private support. In fact, the evidence suggests that private support is more likely to be forthcoming when an element of state support has already been committed. A recognition of the potential for partnerships between the state and private finance and for 'plural funding', by way of local and central government, turnstiles and box offices, business sponsors and patrons seems to be central to current arts policy in the UK and elsewhere (see Rolfe 1992; Arts Council 1994).

A further concern about the state's financial involvement in the arts and culture is the question of control, an issue touched on in chapter three. This is not an altogether groundless point. The notion that a body funding museums and cultural projects will seek some form of control over the content and nature of these projects is far from unlikely. It is certainly important to recognise that in the context of legislation such as the 1968 Theatres Act and, most contentiously, Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which prevents a local authority from promoting homosexuality, censorship and control of various art forms is a very real issue, even if it takes the form of self-restraint and self-censorship (see Burgess 1991). Nevertheless, the evidence from museums and the arts suggest that the problem of control and interference is perhaps not as pronounced as it may initially appear. The Arts Council, for instance, provides large amounts of money to the arts and yet is scrupulous in its avoidance of interference in the projects it funds. Interestingly, the issue of unwelcome interference appears to be a far more pronounced problem with private sponsors, seeking corporate advertising for instance, than it is with state sponsorship.

Perhaps the most potent argument against state support for the arts is the one given such prominence by Sawers (1993). Namely, state support is simply not necessary for the artistic and cultural enrichment of society. Good art will prosper regardless of whether or not the state is offering support. This is an interesting point, which introduces some of the many difficulties with measuring and quantifying the impact and effectiveness of the money which is spent on museums and the arts. In short, how does one, if indeed one can, quantify something as nebulous as 'cultural enrichment'? While he was Secretary of State for National Heritage, Peter Brooke declared that a good test of the state's financial involvement in the arts was the extent to which the arts *'flourish'*. Yet just what does this mean? Does it refer to the attainment of critical acclaim? Does it refer to commercial recognition and success? Does it refer to an expansion in the number of artistic and cultural endeavours? In the context of

museums, for example, the efficient use of funds is frequently assessed simply in terms of the number of visitors that a particular museum attracts. Yet such a measure can be highly unsatisfactory in terms of assessing the effectiveness of subsidies - is a museum exhibition which attracts a large number of visitors who do not find the exhibition to be particularly rewarding a more efficient use of funds than an exhibition attracting considerably fewer visitors who found the exhibition to be quite inspirational?

A related concern suggests that state support may actually impact detrimentally upon cultural endeavours in a number of ways. Government funding may mean that cultural organisations and institutions may become complacent, immune to market and commercial pressure, and may subsequently err towards financial irresponsibility. This perspective underpins much of what I have already said in relation to the growing primacy of commercial considerations in museums. There are a number of vexed issues and implications here, many of which I have discussed in more detail in chapter three. Certainly, the increasing demand for financial self-sufficiency and accountability has now been accepted by many in the museum world, albeit often reluctantly. However, it would be wrong to suggest a uniform reluctance for museums to embrace the vagaries of the market. Many independent museums and heritage centres have necessarily had to be financially self-sufficient from their inception. As we have already seen, they often fail to see why national and local museums should be exempted from the demands of economic reality:

> *'I think museums really have got to get their fingers out - the conventional museum, its days are numbered. I mean they might get Government money in grants, but they won't survive on that and the money from the Government is going to get less and less. It's got to get less. Local councils are being questioned more and more about why tax payers money should go to museums. Yes, we should preserve our past, but if the attitude of the museums was more business like, we could probably preserve the past and not need as much of the ratepayers money.'* (Director - Independent Museum)

However, aside from wider concerns about the inappropriateness of using a 'market test' in the context of museums and culture - concerns which will be examined shortly - many museum professionals and commentators, including myself, remain deeply concerned about the potential long-term implications of this development. Most obviously, the choice of exhibition topics is increasingly commercially-driven. The innate value and importance of possible exhibition topics is now secondary to the question of how many visitors it might attract and, in turn, how much revenue will it raise? Important as commercial considerations may be, the sense in which they are now superseding all other considerations worries many in the museum world. Ultimately, a disturbing but not unrealistic scenario is a future where issues of fundamental historical importance may be systematically ignored by museums as exhibition potential, simply because they are less likely to provide a 'blockbuster' audience, than a safe, staid and even stereotypical alternative. Whilst this perspective has certainly been a dominant theme in previous Governments' attitudes towards the arts, the financial uncertainty resulting from the vagaries of the Treasury's annual public spending round, which has now come thoroughly to permeate the arts world, means that notions of financial complacency and irresponsibility are somewhat misguided.

A more potent suggestion is that art subsidies can be detrimental by effectively stifling innovation. The way in which financial support is often directed at the well established bodies and organisations is such that it is possible that artistic projects may come to lack originality and become somewhat staid, because established projects are seen to be a 'safe bet' for support. One could even go so far as to suggest that *'like a life-support system, subsidy keeps alive clinically dead art'* (Everitt 1994). The result is that the dynamism and innovation on which art and cultural projects so clearly rests can become somewhat stifled - a point which has often been raised about the Arts Council and similar bodies abroad. This is a difficult point. Inevitably, because the finance available for cultural projects is so restricted, decisions - very difficult and vexed decisions - have to be made about which projects are worthy of support and which are

not. Yet these issues rest heavily upon assessments of quality, which by their very nature are notoriously subjective and to which there are no agreed answers. Indeed, these debates about artistic quality lie at the very heart of recent concerns about the partisan approach of certain art critics, such as Brian Sewell (see Ellison 1994; Sweeney 1994). Nevertheless, there are ways around such problems. For example, because the Arts Council has to encourage new sources of activity, it earmarks developmental money for that very purpose. This is not to deny, of course, the quite valid accusation that the arts funding system as a whole is too narrow in its focus and has largely ignored 20th century art forms, such as the moving image and pop music. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that these concerns are not questioning the appropriateness of art subsidy, simply questioning the way in which the financial cake is divided and the criteria by which it is divided.

What does seem to be a far more potent argument about the appropriateness of state support for museums and the arts relates to the importance of relieving cultural need, compared to the relief of other forms of social need. While it may be quite possible to build and defend a convincing argument in favour of state support for museums and the arts, this must ultimately be subservient to questions of financial priority. In principle, and with largely unlimited funds, museums may indeed have a strong claim upon government resources. However, government funds are limited and so it may be difficult to justify financial support for museums when other areas of more concrete social need present themselves. This is a cogent argument, particularly at a time when most areas of public expenditure are under financial pressure.

When one considers the moves made by the last Government to minimise the state's role in meeting pressing social need, such as housing (see Liddiard 1998), it is hardly surprising that the issue of cultural need has been seen to be outside the state's remit. The preference instead has been to leave cultural provision, as with many other forms

of provision, to the vagaries of the market. For example, the previous National Heritage minister, Stephen Dorrell, said that the Department of National Heritage was:

> '*...unwilling to act as the guarantor of projects for which there is inadequate support ... real public support is measured in the contributions which each of us makes as a matter of choice.*' (Mellor 1994)

This notion, that those who enjoy and appreciate the arts and culture should bear the cost - the full market cost - is a problematic one, not least because one can argue that this perspective does not acknowledge that culture has any wider value or contribution to make to society. Certainly, this so-called 'market test' is a very contentious issue in the context of the arts and culture and one can adopt a number of different perspectives on it, such as the issue of widening opportunity. For instance, the widening of opportunity and allowing all to appreciate their past and heritage, irrespective of their financial power, lies at the heart of arguments in favour of state subsidy. Indeed, this is why the Victorians were such avid supporters of cultural endeavours such as museums, and is why the widespread introduction of museum charges was met with such disdain and disapproval throughout the museum profession. One of the core functions of the Arts Council of England, for example, is to '*increase the accessibility of the arts to the public throughout England*' (see Arts Council 1994) and yet it is difficult to see how this role can be compatible with a crude market test. It may be true that opera or ballet only have a limited audience, but this is not necessarily indicative of a lack of interest. Instead, it may reflect the fact that much of the population have never had the opportunity to appreciate opera or ballet. As Baumol and Bowen succinctly note: '*How can people learn to enjoy the living arts if no plays, no concert performers and no dancers are available to them?*' (1966, p.379). In this sense, financial support is necessary in order to nurture the audiences of tomorrow. Similarly, neither is the potential educative role of the arts amenable to the notion of a crude market test, nor the imprecise and ultimately very broad notion of '*cultural enrichment*'. There is no doubt

that Britain has considerable international prestige courtesy of its performing arts - indeed, this is a point that the Government are very fond of reiterating - and yet it is difficult to see how this can possibly be compatible with Dorrell's market test. All of these points make Stephen Dorrell's criterion disturbingly naive. Indeed, his argument even provoked a sharp response from David Mellor, a former National Heritage minister himself, who accused Dorrell of lacking a *'sophisticated understanding of the delicate ecology of the arts world'* and said of his market test:

> *'Taken to its logical conclusion, that gets near to denying the need for public subsidy at all. It is of the essence of public subsidy that it allows things to be put before the public that are not popular, but are challenging and necessary for a healthy society. Even a popular art form usually needs public funds to achieve its full potential'* (Mellor 1994)

This question of whether or not the state should be addressing cultural need, particularly in the face of other pressing social need, raises very real social policy issues. Not least the debates about the question of 'need' and how one delineates the state's role in meeting need. There are a number of important points to be made. For example, it is important to recognise that cultural need is not unrelated to other forms of need which are often unquestionably seen to be the responsibility of the state. The arts and culture clearly have a very significant role to play in the provision of employment opportunities. Similarly, the advent of the National Curriculum has seen a widespread acknowledgement of the important educative role of museums. In a number of respects, therefore, state support for the arts closely impinges upon areas of social need which are more widely acknowledged as appropriate recipients of state intervention, such as employment and education.

We have already discussed one of the problems with cultural need - namely, it is such a nebulous notion that it can be difficult, if not impossible, to assess the impact of state expenditure upon it. Nonetheless, the meeting of other areas of need are also beset

with problems in terms of quantifying the impact of state intervention, although this does seem to be particularly pronounced in the field of culture, where *'cultural enrichment'* can be quantified and measured in a myriad of different ways. However, I would argue that access to the arts and culture is an important element of citizenship and, as such, is a valid recipient of state support, particularly in terms of addressing some of the inequalities currently permeating access to museums and the arts. The notion of 'citizenship', like that of 'need', has a long history in social policy and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. In particular, a number of authors have argued that the notion of citizenship can be seen to include a variety of social rights, which in turn may be the responsibility of the state. Of course, there is considerable debate about the limits of these rights and whether or not the state should be obligated to meet them. However, it is interesting that even Marshall's original notion of social citizenship could be interpreted to include the right to culture:

> *'By the social element I mean the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in society'* (Marshall 1963, p.74)

The problem, of course, is that access to culture and indeed access to many elements of social life, is generally determined not by citizenship, but instead by consumerism with its emphasis upon the workings of the market. The result is a predictable one as economically weak individuals have experienced varying degrees of exclusion. This is particularly the case in the context of the arts and culture, where access has increasingly been left largely to the vagaries of the market. Yet, in the words of Cahill:

> *'... it is difficult to see how a concern to safeguard the position of those who suffer from the inequalities generated by the market can be protected without recourse to the state in some form or another.'* (1994, p.186)

I would argue therefore that not only is access to museums an important even fundamental element of a citizens rights, but that the exclusion and inequalities in access which result from the move towards consumption and the operation of the market necessitates state intervention and support. In some respects, the Labour government appears to have at least acknowledged this issue, in a way which various Conservative administrations simply failed to do, and many in the arts and museum worlds were very optimistic when Labour came to power. Certainly, there have been some interesting developments in the Labour government's approach to museums, not least an engagement with the potent issue of museum charges. Most notably, there was delight amongst many museum professionals in July 1998 when the Labour government guaranteed universal free entry to national galleries by 2001 with an injection of £290 million - a policy change that many had long campaigned for. However, I would suggest that any celebration of a new Government committed to addressing the necessary cultural exclusion that marketisation entails, is perhaps a little premature. Entry to the Millennium Dome, at £20 a head, hardly seems to reflect a Government troubled by economic exclusion in the world of culture and heritage.

What remains far from clear is whether or not it is necessary to view cultural need in terms of a hierarchy of need. This is a crucial point. Is it really possible, for instance, to view the need for cultural enlightenment and fulfilment as being on a par with the need for health care, which may be a question of life or death? Plant (1985) suggests that there are two basic needs - survival and freedom - and he then extends survival to mean health, so that one needs a health service, and freedom to mean intelligent choice, so that one needs education and social security. This implies a hierarchy of welfare services, where the meeting of some needs and the provision of some services have more legitimacy than others. What is far from clear, however, is just how one establishes the position of different needs within this hierarchy and particularly the position of cultural need within this. Plant typically suggests that these decisions are

political questions. Space precludes a more detailed examination of this question of 'need' which is discussed in more detail elsewhere (see Plant 1985; Doyal and Gough 1991). However, several points are important for considering the importance of cultural need. Namely, it may be difficult, and even inappropriate, to view cultural need as being on a par with other forms of social need, such as health. However, this does not necessarily deny or belittle the need for state intervention in the cultural sphere. It simply concedes that health care may be more of a priority. If one accepts, for example, that meeting health need is the most important priority for state intervention, this does not deny that other forms of social need, such as education and housing, are also appropriate recipients of state intervention and this is similarly the case with cultural need. As recent arguments about the rationing of health care suggest, the fact that more money should be spent by the state on meeting limitless social need, such as health, does not necessarily imply that less should be spent on the meeting of other social needs, such as the arts and culture. In short, I am not suggesting that cultural need should necessarily be viewed on a par with other forms of social need, such as health. However, this does not question the legitimacy of the state's involvement in meeting cultural need, particularly in terms of broadening access to museums and the arts.

It is interesting that the available evidence suggests that the public generally view the state's involvement in the meeting of cultural need, through financial support for the arts, as considerably less legitimate than the meeting of other social needs. The 11th British Social Attitudes report, for example, found that for every person who wants more money spent on the arts and culture, more than four people want less spent (Jowell et al, 1994). Interestingly, there is a considerable class influence upon this figure - amongst the salariat, one in seven want more public money spent on the arts and culture, which compares to just one in twenty amongst the working class. There may be a number of reasons for this disparity, not least the fact that the higher social classes are generally more familiar with the arts and as such are more likely to appreciate their potential (and of course are more likely to benefit directly from an

increase in spending!) However, one could also conjecture that this finding is linked to the perceived inequity of financial support for the arts, a point which has been especially highlighted by the advent of the National Lottery. Namely, why should the many fund and subsidise the entertainment of the few? As Anthony Everitt said about the Royal Opera House's annual grant of some £20 million: *'Never in the history of British culture has so much been given by so many for so few'* (Everitt 1994). By the logic of supply and demand, if audience demand for the arts is insufficient to cover the costs of supplying opera or ballet through admission charges, why should society and taxpayers as a whole subsidise them? After all, art subsidies involve the application of resources which are supplied involuntarily by all the public in the form of taxes, and yet these resources are almost inevitably distributed inequitably. This is not to deny that the public's concern with the inequity of state support for the arts has some basis to it. On the contrary, there is good evidence to support concern about disparities in terms of the beneficiaries of art subsidies. Throsby and Withers (1979), for instance, suggest that in the UK the top 20 per cent of households received some 40 per cent of public expenditure on the arts, while in contrast the bottom 25 per cent received just 4 per cent. For example, opera and ballet are regular recipients of very considerable financial support from the Arts Council and yet the audiences for these activities are disproportionately distributed between social classes. However, it is nonetheless difficult to see just why this inequity should imply that addressing cultural need should be subservient to meeting other social need. After all, it is now widely acknowledged that the workings of the welfare state in general are thoroughly permeated by inequity (see Le Grand 1982). Indeed, one could argue that because access to museums and the arts does appear to be so inequitable, this is all the more reason for targeted state intervention.

In conclusion, I want to simply make a few observations. Firstly, museums and the arts are not large consumers of Government revenue. On the contrary, the proportion of Government expenditure spent on museums and the arts is, by any criteria, tiny. This

makes it even more frustrating that successive Governments seem unable to acknowledge that the contribution of museums to society is potentially far broader than crude financial considerations. In a sense, of course, this is understandable - the contribution that museums make to society is largely impossible to quantify, whether or not one is talking about their educative role or the even more vague notion of cultural enrichment. However, the fact that one cannot easily quantify this, does not mean that museums do not have a quite profound and far-reaching impact upon society as a whole. It is time for this to be more widely acknowledged. Linked to this, I have not suggested that cultural need is necessarily on a par with other forms of social need, such as health. However, this does not deny that museums and the arts are appropriate recipients of state intervention and I would suggest that the need for targeted support of museums is even more pressing when one considers the impact of consumerism, where access has been increasingly left to the vagaries of the market and the economically weak have been effectively excluded from their own cultural heritage.

Somewhat depressingly, it seems that museums are set to enter the new Millennium in the context of an insidious marketisation of culture, where cultural access is largely left to the vagaries of the market, and the economically weak are excluded. While the Labour government has made some encouraging moves towards at least acknowledging the importance of 'cultural need', as we shall explore further in the next section, it seems unlikely that we are going to witness a sea change in the approach that leaves access to museums and the arts in the hands of the market. If anything, museums and other cultural endeavours in the twenty first century are likely to be faced with an even more intense 'market-led' ethos, as the primacy of the market is increasingly applied to almost every feature of contemporary society.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Where does this empirical data and the ensuing discussion leave us? What can we surmise about the processes by which museum exhibitions are initiated, constructed and consumed? Crucially, what light do these insights into the construction and reception of the past throw upon wider debates upon ideological transmission through cultural media such as museums? Similarly, what can we surmise about the future of museums? How are policy debates about state intervention in the museum and heritage sectors likely to proceed? How should they proceed? Like most research, this thesis inevitably raises more questions than it answers. Nonetheless, it is possible to make a number of key observations and to tentatively air some of the possible implications of this empirical work for understanding museums.

Empirical Implications

Let us begin at the beginning, with a brief synopsis of the empirical research and some of the main ideas and observations aired in the analysis of this data. The initial focus for this work was really an interest in the production and consequent consumption of the past. The research was germinated by a long-standing interest in the purveyance of historical issues, themes and accounts in museums, and their reception by museum audiences. In addition, this whole debate was underpined by an interest in the assorted

theoretical commentary concerned with the transmission of ideology which, in the context of academic and professional writing on museums, I felt was often crude, simplistic and ill-considered. The thesis was therefore initially concerned with three tangible themes - collecting empirical material on exhibition construction; collecting data on visitor reception and, finally, considering the implications of this work for wider theoretical debates about the transmission of ideology.

The empirical data on the construction of museum exhibitions ostensibly took the form of some 49 exploratory interviews with a variety of involved staff in a wide variety of museum settings, although I predominantly focussed upon my sample of four museums and their respective exhibitions. The starting premise was the widely accepted idea that history, as an open-ended experience, is necessarily organised and constructed in certain ways in museums. On this, there is some consensus. Yet just how is history constructed in museums?

In light of the sheer heterogeneity of museums and their very diverse subject matter, organisation and approaches, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to establish the significance of different issues and concerns in the exhibition process. After all, a broad plethora of themes variously influence the shape and form of different museum exhibitions and what topics, approaches and artifacts are included or excluded. Nonetheless, a number of issues arose fairly consistently from my interviews, although there were sometimes important differences between museums in the relative importance attached to each issue.

Museums are necessarily a contextual cultural product, influenced and moulded by the wider socio-economic and political context in which they exist. In light of the predominantly market-led ethos that has come to pervade almost every aspect of British society and increasingly the cultural realm, it is perhaps not surprising that commercial considerations were such an important influence upon the initiation and development of

museum exhibitions. In the context of cuts in grants, the withdrawal of subsidy and a culture of financial self-sufficiency, increasing visitor numbers and, in turn, raising valuable revenue has become a priority for many museums and heritage centres, which in turn has an important influence upon almost every aspect of their work. Although the significance and precise impact of commercialism can vary between the different museum sectors, with national museums often being less susceptible to the vagaries of finance than either local museums or the independent sector, the fact remains that this factor increasingly determines almost everything else in the work of many museums.

In a sense, of course, this relates to vexed debates about the manner in which museums could and should be financed in a climate of limited resources, debates which in turn raise important questions about the appropriateness of state financial intervention. This point also raises profound questions about the appropriateness of leaving museum representations to the vagaries of market forces. These are all important issues, which are explored in more detail when considering some of the policy implications of this work. However, the pervasiveness and growing significance of commercial considerations in the work of museums is so important because it has initiated and encouraged other changes, such as the growing importance attached to marketing.

The financial environment within which museums are existing at the start of the 21st century necessarily encourages an interest in marketing. For museums, marketing has become an important tool in their quest for survival in a tight fiscal climate. The significance of marketing is not simply in terms of publicising what the museum has to offer the public but, more crucially, it also holds the promise of helping to inform the museum of what the public wants and expects from them (see McLean 1997). If the fiscal climate surrounding museums demands that they maximise their revenue by optimising visitor numbers, marketing promises the identification of potentially popular and successful exhibitions at the point of planning and inception.

Of course, there are wider issues here about the relative importance attached to marketing and visitor surveys in many museums. Some museum professionals, for instance, feel highly ambivalent about the attempt to match public demand to museum practice. After all, market research can often be highly misleading and, ultimately, the significance of such data is necessarily mediated by the assorted staff and personalities involved in the development of any exhibition, as we shall see. Nonetheless, it is fair to suggest that visitor preferences are increasingly being accorded far more significance than they once were. There are a number of reasons for this, not least the promise of being able to accurately match museum products to their market. Nowhere is this more stark than in the context of National Curriculum.

The sheer size of the educational market is simply too large for museum to realistically ignore. There is no question that museums are increasingly recognising the potential of the educational market for increasing visitors and revenue, both directly and indirectly. Indeed, as we shall shortly see, the Government was recently explicit in promoting the educational importance of museums. Given the very real significance attached to the educational market, it is perhaps not surprising that many museums are increasingly seeking to match their product to this market. The fact that relevance to the National Curriculum almost guarantees a potential audience has meant that the contents of the National Curriculum are having a powerful influence upon the selection of themes, topics and objects for display.

This also raises important questions about the relative significance of visitor preferences in determining the content of museum exhibitions. Traditionally, it is fair to suggest that some museum professionals have had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with visitors - a point reflected in some of my interview material. Yet, increasingly, visitor demands and preferences are being accorded much greater significance. In part, at least, this may be an inevitable consequence of the widespread introduction of entry charges, a point discussed in more detail later in this section. Namely, if visitors are

having to pay for access, so they are theoretically empowered as consumers and are likely to be more demanding than if admission was free. Yet, more crucially, visitor numbers are increasingly viewed by the museum world and the Government alike as an important measure of health and success. Most obviously, the more visitors an exhibition attracts, so in turn the more revenue it raises. In light of the commercial arena within which most museums now find themselves, it is not surprising that museums increasingly claim to be adapting their exhibitions to what they believe visitors want to see. Interestingly, despite the rhetoric adopted by many museums in relation to visitor preferences, some of my interviewees felt strongly that this was often little more than lip-service. The reality of the situation was often one where decisions were being made about the inception and development of displays in the context of little or no systematic knowledge about a potential market. Ultimately, therefore, many of the decisions made about the development of displays and new exhibitions continue to rest heavily upon the different museum staff involved and the outcome of their negotiations.

Although a number of more practical influences upon the nature and form of exhibitions were also considered, such as the assorted constraints of time, space and existing collections, the main focus of the empirical work on decision-making necessarily focussed upon the different museum staff involved. In many museums, particularly, the larger national museums, it is clear that a variety of individuals, such as designers, curators and educationalists, all have a significant input into the ultimate form, flavour and direction of a particular exhibition. The fact that many of these individuals were bringing diverse and sometimes contradictory perspectives to the process of developing exhibitions indicates, if nothing else, that museum exhibitions are almost always the result of protracted and complex negotiation. Sometimes, of course, this negotiation can be both heated and divisive, perhaps implying the need for mediation in order to resolve particular disagreements. The resolution of serious disagreement was often the perogative of overseers of a particular project, be they an Exhibitions Officer, or even the Director of the museum. In this sense, the hierarchical

nature of some museums meant that single individuals could be accorded very significant power over the shape and direction of particular exhibitions. However, what was so interesting about the process of negotiation amongst museum staff was not the incidence of irresolvable conflict. On the contrary, it was interesting that the process of informal negotiation was generally highly successful and characterised by compromise and eventual consensus.

Why was this the case? There may be a number of reasons for this, not least issues of representativeness in terms of my sampled museums. Nonetheless, this did appear to be a feature of all of my sampled museums and additionally appeared to be a feature of the decision-making discussed by my respondents from other museums and museum sectors. Namely, whilst disagreement is an inevitable feature of the exhibition construction process, given the very different professional agendas and interests that may be reflected by the different personnel involved in the process, protracted conflict was perhaps more notable by its paucity. Of course, there may be a number of reasons for this. Methodologically, for instance, my exploratory interviews with museum professionals about the decision-making process were inherently retrospective, in order to allow an overview of the exhibition construction process in its entirety. Nonetheless, the problem of post-hoc rationalisation remains, as it inevitably does with all such retrospective techniques. Yet I remain confident that the picture of conflict gathered in my empirical work was a fairly accurate one. Certainly, any conflicts and disagreements that had occurred were consistently mentioned by different respondents and, in some cases, disagreements over content, form and direction were still notable in discussions about the final product.

The implication is that whilst different museum staff may adhere to very different professional agendas and perspectives, they may nonetheless still share a common occupational culture. I go on to suggest that this notion of an occupational culture may help to account for why perspectives concerned with women's history have

traditionally been excluded from museum displays and yet are now increasingly being included. There are a number of themes here, some of which I explore in the next section. Nonetheless, at its simplest, the inclusion or exclusion of particular themes, topics and approaches can best be explained by reference to particular staff personalities. Of course, this is not a particularly revelatory point. After all, Karp and Levine have already made the point that every exhibition necessarily *'draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it.'* (1991, p.1)

Yet what this empirical enquiry did uncover and reflect upon was the fact that, in the context of contemporary museum exhibitions, some museum professionals appeared to be highly progressive, increasingly employing new and innovative approaches to examine and explore new and innovative themes and topics. Indeed, a variety of recent work on museums has similarly acknowledged the broadening of topics considered to be legitimate recipients of museum coverage (see Kavanagh 1996, Porter 1996). Whilst there has long been entrenched opposition in some quarters to such new approaches, the reality is that these innovative perspectives are coming to find both a receptive audience and an increasingly receptive professional body.

There is no doubt that, since the 1970s, there has been a radical sea change in professional approaches to history and the past. Linked to a growing recognition of the inherent impossibility of neutral and objective museum presentations and the value laden nature of history, so we have witnessed a dramatic broadening of the themes and areas deemed to be appropriate for museum examination, and a related awareness of the reflexive nature of history. In large part, this shift has come from changes in the discipline of history, which has seen the growing academic and public acceptance of social history, oral history, community history and, of course, women's history as legitimate areas of interest:

'Many history museums in the United States are altering the messages they present to the public through their exhibits. ... Topics involving the lives of women, blacks, and immigrants are now being recognised as important. In part, these changes reflect trends in historical scholarship that place an increased emphasis on social and cultural history.' (Batzli 1990, p.830)

These shifts in the discipline of history have been absorbed into museum practice through a number of different routes. The professional training of museum staff has readily engaged with these new approaches, which has undoubtedly been instrumental in some of the innovative approaches adopted by the contemporary history museum in the UK. Nonetheless, whilst the scale, form and uptake of formal professional training is certainly greater in museums than it has ever been previously, the fact remains that informal training within museums - learning 'on the job' - remains the main route for developing professional expertise. Yet this has in turn helped to dissipate these ideas throughout the profession and encouraged, along with books and journals on museum practice, the adoption of contemporary approaches towards history in the work of museums. Indeed, these developments in museum history may then become self-perpetuating. The encouragement of new approaches towards history and the past in museum displays and exhibitions in turn encourages individuals with similar interests to enter the museum field in some capacity. Certainly, these new approaches to the past have increasingly permeated the entire museum hierarchy, the full implications of which will be considered in the next section. Before we move on to consider the more theoretical implications of these empirical findings, however, let us move on to consider the second focus of my empirical, the reception of museum exhibitions.

Whilst museum visitors and their preferences are becoming much more important, at least in theory, in the inception and development of museum exhibitions, it is nonetheless intriguing how little we know about visitor reception in museums. Perhaps the first and most significant point to make is the fact that museum visitors do not

receive and interpret museum exhibitions in a uniform way. On the contrary, visitors to any exhibition will interpret them in a myriad of different ways and for a variety of diverse reasons. Indeed, the complex nuances of audience reception of cultural products has been well explored in other areas, most notably television. Although I draw on this varied work in my interpretation of my visitor data, my empirical focus was really three-fold.

The first theme that I was interested in was an exploration of the dilemmas and conundrums raised by the treatment of recent history in museums, and the constraints of a 'lived past'. What are the implications when museums are covering themes within the personal heritage and memories of some visitors? How does personal familiarity with an historical issue influence the reception of related museum displays? One thing appeared to be clear from my interviews with museum visitors. Namely, many museum visitors had already assimilated an array of potent images and messages about the Blitz, not least the pervasiveness of camaraderie. I suggest that the regularity with which this theme was raised in my interviews with visitors may be a reflection of the pervasiveness of the topic in other historical coverage, such as in books and on television. However, it would be erroneous to suggest that the notion of camaraderie was necessarily a 'myth', as writers such as Ponting (1990) and Calder (1991) suggest. On the contrary, it was clear from my interviews that for many individuals with first-hand experience of the Blitz, this was very much a reality.

I proceed from this point to argue that visitors clearly do not come to museum exhibitions with empty minds. On the contrary, their interpretations are necessarily influenced and affected by the plethora of knowledge and ideas that they may have already previously assimilated from other sources prior to their visit. Ultimately, the museum is the embodiment of the formal and public past, which is necessarily only one feature of how individuals come to terms with the past. The importance of informal and private reflection upon the past, particularly involving the reminiscences and

recollections of friends and relatives, is equally significant in the negotiation of the past. Family recollection is particularly important as a source of information about the topics such as the Blitz. Moreover, my findings also suggest that, in the context of presentations of the Blitz, television in particular is an important influence upon the existing knowledge of museums visitors and, in turn, can frame subsequent interpretations of museum products.

The second area explored in the context of museum reception has been a long-standing debate in the field, and in turn has been framed by much wider agendas concerned with what is often critically described as the *'Disneyfication'* of the past. Namely, what is relative effectiveness of different museum media in conveying intended messages to visitors? What are the relative merits of authentic artifacts, for example, as opposed to the use of historical reconstructions? Similarly, how helpful are photographs and videos deemed to be?

There is no question that the advent of new technology and new media offer endless opportunities for museums and there is good evidence to suggest that this area is becoming more significant in the work of museums. Indeed, this point is examined in more detail later in this chapter, when I consider the governments encouragement of technological innovation in museums. However, many elements of this development have proved to be hotly contested. The use of reconstructions, together with actors, sound effects and smells, is now firmly established in many heritage representations, and yet for many is viewed with suspicion, as being somehow synonymous with the 'Disneyfication' of the past. My empirical work was ostensibly an attempt to examine the relative effectiveness of different media objectively and detached from the wider debates that often surround this issue. Indeed, what visitors had to say about the relative merits of objects, photos, videos and reconstructions proved to be highly revealing.

The potency of authentic objects - notwithstanding the debates about the very meaning of 'authenticity' - has long been the focus of interest in museums and a central element of their existence and justification. Museums have certainly relied heavily upon objects and relics. Indeed, this continues to characterise their work. In the face of demands for more multi-media presentations, of which some museum professionals are simply dismissive, it is interesting to note that many visitors would concur with the importance and significance attached to authentic objects by their proponents in the museum profession.

Moreover, amongst those visitors with a personal experience of the war, the potency of authentic objects was particularly pronounced. Of course, we must take care to acknowledge that this may simply reflect an age issue, in terms of the medium that visitors are used to. For instance, older visitors may be more used to interpreting traditional objects in glass cases than children or young people may be. There did seem to be some empirical evidence to suggest that visitor respondents with children rated videos and interactive displays more highly precisely because of their appeal to young people, who are much more au fait with the use and effectiveness of such media.

Nonetheless, a key issue in the significance attached to objects appeared to be reminiscence. Indeed, the significance of reminiscence here was such that some respondents with a lived memory of the Blitz actually wondered how effective authentic objects would actually be for visitors without such memories. Similarly, for some visitors, their perception of authentic objects was heavily mediated by the experiences of relatives and family members. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, even for those visitors with little experience or knowledge of the Blitz, the sheer authenticity of original objects remained an integral part of their power and value in the context of a museum display. In this sense, these findings are highly supportive of the more traditional stance of museum curators, which emphasises the over-riding significance of real and authentic objects in any museum display. The power of authenticity, and the

tangible connection with the past implied by authentic objects, has long been, and indeed remains, an integral feature of museum presentations. In many respects, it continues to represent an inherent feature of the unique attraction of museums, and continues to distinguish museum accounts from those found in books and television. In this sense, these findings are highly supportive of the traditional emphasis upon relevant historical objects. However, this position incorporates a wealth of different approaches, unified only by a shared acknowledgement that museum accounts should draw upon the potency of 'authenticity'.

There is certainly no reason why this acknowledgement should preclude other approaches and the use of different media. After all, it is evident that the potency of authentic objects rests, at least in part, upon some element of imagination. In many respects, objects in glass cases demand a high degree of imagination, not least because visitors almost invariably cannot touch them. The implication is a need for some degree of contextualisation. In part, of course, this may be provided by accompanying labelling, but increasingly it may also be promoted by the use of other media, such as photographs.

My empirical findings here showed clearly that one of the key attractions of photographs is their offer of a direct glimpse of the past in all its contextual form. Their ability to provide at least some contextual information, linked to the accessibility of visual images, implies that the effectiveness of photos is not so heavily dependent upon the application of the visitor's imagination. Indeed, the potency of visual imagery is a large part of their attraction to museum staff in the development of exhibitions. Nonetheless, this is also one of the weaknesses of the medium. Their singular reliance on just one sense - sight - implies limits to the value of the photograph in conveying both information and context. Indeed, this is part of the attraction of using moving film footage to enhance visitors understanding and contextualisation. The combination of visual imagery with narrative, in particular, offers a tangible potential for

communication, more notable by its absence from objects and photographs. Indeed, the contemporary pervasiveness of mass media and the demands for more interactive displays employing the latest technology, are increasingly seen to be a feature of the work of museums, as we shall shortly see in the context of recent policy announcements. In many respects, however, this debate about the use and application of the latest technology has been most explicitly reflected in the debates surrounding museum reconstructions.

The use by museums and the heritage industry of historical reconstructions has traditionally been viewed with some suspicion by many museum professionals, not least because they have been seen as synonymous with what has rather disparaging been described as the '*Disneyfication of the past*'. The fact remains, however, that they appear to be very popular with some people. Their provision of a more 'contextual' experience was appreciated by some visitors, particularly those with little existing knowledge of the topic. Of course, contextualisation in such a setting is necessarily mediated by the needs and demands of the museum and its staff but, as we shall shortly see, this is an issue that many visitors remain acutely aware of. The provision of a more 'holistic' experience is certainly an innate part of the attraction of historical reconstructions in museums.

A central feature of this holistic approach is the attempt within many reconstructions to engage with all the visitors' senses and with the attempt to provide not simply visual stimuli, but also accompanying sounds and smells. Smell, in particular, is a highly evocative sense and my interviews with visitors appeared to show clearly that the application of relevant smells was very useful for invoking a sense of atmosphere for some visitors with personal experience of the Blitz. It does seem clear that one of the reasons why the reconstructions were so popular with those visitors with a personal memory of the Blitz was the fact that they provoked memories.

The application of different techniques to encourage reminiscence is no accident. On the contrary, some museum exhibitions draw heavily upon both reminiscence and nostalgia, not least because of their very real commercial potential. Indeed, the heavy reliance upon nostalgia was a point which some visitors were acutely aware of, and a theme which some staff respondents were explicit in acknowledging. Nonetheless, this point is far from uncontentious. The conscious exploitation - even manipulation - of reminiscence for predominantly commercial reasons is very much open to debate and criticism. My empirical findings showed that some visitors were clearly upset by the memories invoked by my sampled exhibitions, and there is undoubtedly an ethical issue here which some museum professionals remain acutely aware of, but which is often neglected in debates.

These empirical findings on the relative effectiveness of different museum media are clearly open to different interpretations. Nonetheless, they do add a crucial perspective to the heated debate about the relative effectiveness of authentic objects and historical reconstructions. Putting to one side the wider debates within which these arguments are couched, it does seem evident that there are advantages and disadvantages in both approaches. After all, museums generally attract a diverse array of visitors, with a host of different experiences and diverse knowledge and familiarity with the topics in question. Given the relative advantages of each of the media examined - from objects or relics, to photographs and videos, to reconstructions - the implication seems to be that museum visitors would generally benefit from a mix of different media. Indeed, this is a point acknowledged by even the most object-focussed museum professionals:

> *'So that is the number one priority - display the real thing. After that, you use every device possible to get over your point, and that can be multi-media.'* (Historian - National Museum)

One theme that arose consistently from my research data on visitors was a tangible sense in which museum visitors were a more active and discerning audience than some authors have acknowledged. Indeed, this represented the third focus for my empirical work with visitors. Somewhat as expected, it was immediately evident that the notion of museum visitors as a somehow passive audience was misplaced. On the contrary, my research findings showed that museum visitors were active participants in the construction of meaning. In many respects, this finding was unsurprising, reflecting as it does some of the work on other cultural products, such as television, which show that audience reception is laden with complexity and nuance.

One area that I examined in some depth, however, was the extent to which museum visitors were aware of the fact that museum accounts, like all historical accounts, are necessarily constructed in the present and reflect a wealth of agendas. It may then be asked were my visitors aware that they were actually witnessing the selective organisation of the past? The more traditional assumption - and one still prevalent amongst some of my staff respondents - suggests that visitors are remarkably unaware of the history-making process. Indeed, this perspective is understandable. After all, as Macdonald (1998) points out:

> *'Exhibitions tend to be presented to the public rather as do scientific facts: as unequivocal statements rather than as the outcome of particular processes and contexts.' (p.2)*

My empirical findings challenge this view. Of course, these findings are tentative and exploratory, but nonetheless rest incongruously with the confident dismissiveness exhibited by some museum professionals when considering the relative abilities of their visitors. After all, more than 50 per cent of my 200 visitors felt that there was something that the museum did not want to display. When explored further, the sheer variety of issues and themes identified as having been excluded from museum accounts

was striking. Moreover, whilst this point was not necessarily reflecting criticism of the museum, some respondents were nonetheless highly loquacious in arguing that the museum exhibitions had presented only a partial representation of the past. Of course, we must not forget the specifics of this piece of research, which was in part concerned with museum presentations of the 'lived past'. In this context, many visitors are clearly coming with existing knowledge, familiarity and experience, which in turn may have important implications for what we can infer about the complexities and activity of audience reception in museums. Similarly, the focus upon warfare, and the sensitivity of the topic, necessitates sensitive treatment and the relative exclusion of some themes, such as the true nature of conflict and death, and the Holocaust - both of which dominated visitor identifications of excluded themes. Regardless of these caveats, however, we can be confident that museum visitors are far more sophisticated than writers such as Hewison (1987) have traditionally assumed. Indeed, to draw upon Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' (1984) and the research of Merriman (1988), further supports this assertion that museum visitors are an active audience. After all, the fact that museum visitors tend to be more highly educated than their non-visiting contemporaries can be taken as somehow indicative of the fact that they are more likely to possess the cultural capital necessary to 'read' museum presentations. In addition, the new social history explored in the context of museum construction has now thoroughly permeated not only museums but other cultural forms. Samuel (1994), for instance, explicitly cites the importance of television as a medium through which we remember and understand the past. There is no doubt that the possibility of multiple readings of the past is now firmly established in many elements of contemporary culture, which in turn help to frame public perception of the necessarily selective nature of the past and the acceptance of diverse interpretativist perceptions of history in museums.

This issue - the importance of social remembering - and the fact that social memories are necessarily the collective product of a variety of sources, of which

museums are just one, is important. Indeed, the process of forgetting may be as socially constructed as the process of remembering. I suggest, for example, that the emphasis upon camaraderie by many of my respondents may be indicative of the process of societal remembrance. Yet, of course, it is difficult to distinguish individual memories from the wider process and subtle nuances of societal remembrance. Nonetheless, we should acknowledge that how societies remember and the nature of personal remembrance is socially mediated and influenced in a myriad of different ways.

Methodological Implications

Clearly, these various findings have a number of important implications, not simply for the practical work of museums and related policy, but also for considering the nature of ideological transmission and in turn surmising about the future for museums. Before moving on to discuss the wider implications of these findings for museums, however, it is important to be aware of the methodological limitations of this study, which in turn impose real constraints upon the generalisation of these findings to the museum world as a whole. Ultimately, no piece of research can ever be perfect. The point, however, is be keenly aware of the potential limitations of any particular study, not least because this must invariably frame and constrain consequent analysis.

This study was, and remains, a predominantly qualitative study. It arose from a concern with the paucity of qualitative research in the context of museums and a perceived need for more exploratory work to begin to unravel the complex nuances that surround exhibition construction and reception. The qualitative approach is, in essence, one of the strengths of this exploratory study. Yet this is simultaneously also a weakness. After all, the work shares many of the limitations of qualitative research, not

least the difficulties with making valid generalisations from what are often small samples.

Similarly, the empirical focus of the study imposes constraints upon this work which any analysis would be unwise to ignore. The focus upon the topic of warfare, more specifically the museum treatment of warfare in the context of the UK, and particularly the interest in the production and reception of museum constructs concerned with a 'lived past', all impose limits to the extent to which these findings may be applied to the museum world in general. It is with these limitations in mind that we turn to the wider implications of this work.

Theoretical Implications

Although this was a predominanty empirical piece of work, it was also underpined by an interest in ideological transmission. From the beginning, I was interested in the implications of my research findings for the wider issues of ideological production and reception and the thesis began with a fairly clear theoretical premise - that the processes of ideological transmission in museums were much more complex than work in this field had traditionally acknowledgeed. The pervasiveness of crude ideas surrounding the dominant ideology thesis in museums necessitated challenge, not least because it tended to underestimate the complexities of decision-making in exhibition construction, while simultaneously attributing a degree of passivity to museum visitors in their interpretation of cultural forms which hardly seemed congruent with the findings on cultural audiences in other contexts.

I am not alone in seeking to establish the need for revision of the dominant ideology thesis as it is regularly applied to museums. Macdonald (1996), for instance, similarly bemoans the crude simplicity of many attempts to examine ideological production and

consumption in the context of museums. This research sought to examine the debates about ideological transmission in museums on a number of different levels, particularly employing my empirical work to try and throw more light upon the process of ideological production in museums.

The first point to consider is the necessarily contextual nature of museums and the implications of this for any consideration of history - namely, that the past is necessarily mediated by the requirements of the present. In this respect, history and the past is a resource to be used and employed to suit the needs of the present. Yet, as with all resources, power is a very important determinant in the distribution of resources. The implication is that currently powerful groups and sections of society have more influence over the interpretation of the past. This is a simple yet pervasive idea. Namely, the traditional exclusion of some groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, from historical representation in museums may clearly be linked to their relative powerlessness in society. Yet what is so interesting about this scenario is the fact that many of these groups are increasingly being included in museum accounts of the past, and museums appear to be broadening the themes and issues that are considered appropriate for coverage. The question is why?

I argue that the answer to this apparent conundrum is still very much about power. As museums are increasingly expected to operate in a market-led commercial arena so, willingly or otherwise, some of these groups have taken on added power - the power of consumers. The manner in which museums have been recognised as a crucial part of the leisure industry and the past has become a commodity, has led to museums being drawn into a process of commodification and commercialisation. The language of marketing and revenue raising has thoroughly pervaded the museum world, which in turn has modified the relationship between museum and their visitors. While the real importance attached to the views and preferences of museum visitors appears to be somewhat contentious, the fact remains that the demands of museum visitors are far

more important than they once were, especially if they are seen to be compatible with increasing visitor numbers and raising revenue.

In many respects, therefore, this research suggests that commercialism has become the dominant ideology underpining the production of the past in museums. Ultimately, most decisions about the inception and development of exhibitions are framed by commercial considerations. However, the forces acting upon the processes of museum production are far from straightforward. On the contrary, decision-making appears to be framed by a number of broad themes and developments, such as recent changes in our approach towards history and the past.

One key issue mentioned in earlier chapters - and which arose directly from my empirical findings on exhibition construction - was the growth of social history. The reasons for the development and acceptance of social history as a legitimate discipline and the assorted influences upon its genesis were manifold. Yet the outcome was clear - the development and growing acceptance of a wider perspective on history and historical coverage, which has had a direct bearing upon the work of museums. The growing recognition that museums had effectively excluded some groups from their own historical heritage was difficult for museums to ignore and has ultimately led to a broadening of museum-mediated perspectives on history and the past.

The manner in which these ideas about historical interpretation came to pervade contemporary museum practice is clearly open to debate. After all, one of the real complexities often sidelined by accounts of ideological transmission in museums is the fact that, ultimately, exhibitions are the consequence of widespread negotiation and compromise between various museum staff, each of whom may have their own personal and professional agendas, and which may sometimes be mutually incompatible. On the face of it, this seems hardly congruent with the production and transmission of a coherent dominant ideology.

There is no question that the past is necessarily subjective and open to interpretation. It is the nature of this interpretation and how negotiation is resolved that lies at the heart of the empirical work on museum construction. What does seem clear is that the inclusion or exclusion of particular themes or issues is often highly charged and can provoke difficult problems for those museum professionals charged with establishing historical representations. The starkest illustrations of this are memorials of different kinds. We have already considered the memorial to *'Bomber Harris'*, who has been simultaneously viewed as both a hero and a war criminal. The debates surrounding the *'Enola Gay'* have been similarly discussed (see Gieryn 1998). A more recent example of this conundrum, however, has been the vexed debates that have surrounded plans for a Berlin Holocaust Memorial. In theory, at least, it was intended to represent a gesture of atonement, but ultimately has been mired in argument about what the memorial should look like and just who it should commemorate. These problems reflect the kinds of dilemmas faced by many museum professionals when negotiating the form and nature of new exhibitions. In short, museum exhibitions are almost invariably the outcome of long and protracted debate and negotiation between museum staff (see Macdonald 1998).

The question is how do we account for the decisions made by assorted museum staff? Despite the sheer diversity of involved staff and their perspectives and agendas, what remains striking was the element of consensus in many of the decisions reached by involved individuals. In part, I suggest that this reflects and is indicative of the socialisation of museum staff into the occupational culture of the museum within which they are working. One issue here, of course, is the formal training of staff in museum techniques, which is turn closely reflects wider debates about history and the dilemmas of interpreting the past. However, the relative paucity of formal training - with some evident exceptions - highlights the parallel importance of informal training, learning from peers and on the job. In short, the construction of museum exhibitions ultimately reflects the professional culture of museum staff.

There is a sense, of course, in which this notion is not incompatible with the idea of a dominant ideology pervading museum displays. Rather, this argument simply suggests that it is first mediated by and negotiated through the professional culture of museum staff. Indeed, this idea is certainly not a new one. On the contrary, there has long been acknowledgement of the fact that professional occupational cultures may embody dominant ideologies, which in turn can operate as a means of ideological transmission. This idea is well established. However, this research has raised a real paradox here. Namely, if we accept the idea that professional cultures within museums simply reflect and promote dominant ideologies, a potent question remains - how do we then account for the increasing inclusion of innovative historical accounts on topics once deemed to be unsuitable or irrelevant to museums, such as women's history? In fact, I argue that the professional culture of museums can also promote subversive beliefs and ideas, in the sense of challenging the established orthodoxy.

It certainly seems clear that museum displays can sometimes be in stark contrast to contemporary mainstream ideas and approaches, most obviously because some exhibitions rest heavily upon decisions made by previous curators and decision-makers, subscribing to different agendas in different time periods. Yet the fact that museums can also offer new, innovative and challenging approaches and orthodoxies seems to demand explanation. An obvious issue is the fact that museums and their representation of the past necessarily reflect the needs and demands of the present. In this sense, it is inevitable that museums and the heritage industry will reflect in different ways changing trends in historical interpretation. The established approach ostensibly views the role of museums as interpreters of the past as a *'reactive'* one - slowly reacting to shifts in historical interpretation. In fact, I would suggest that this notion is misleading. It is clear, for instance, that museums can sometimes come to reflect the latest contemporary thinking and approaches towards the past very quickly and can seek to challenge established orthodoxies in their own right. There may, then, be a sense in which museums can be *'proactive'* in the sense of vigorously promoting new

and challenging interpretations of the past. In other words, a museum may represent a 'creative agency', which can help to shape contemporary thinking about and approaches towards the past. In this sense, museums may have *'a formative as well as a reflective role in social relations'* (Macdonald 1996). There is no doubt that the work of many museums has been enthused with new approaches towards social history and many museums have been active in promoting challenging themes, topics and approaches, a point I return to in due course.

In particular, I would suggest that the adoption by museums of a role of 'cultural entrepreneurs' is highly compatible with the growing importance of commercialism and consumer culture. The greater inclusion of women's history in historical displays and exhibitions can undoubtedly be linked to this observation, at least in part. Military museums, in particular, have come to recognise that women visitors represent a huge potential market, one which has often been neglected. Yet this is not the only point to make in explaining the growing pervasiveness of women's history in museums. After all, my research showed clearly that museum audiences themselves are often acutely aware of excluded themes and approaches, in part because other media, such as television, have helped to acquaint them with contemporary interpretations of history and the past. In this sense, the outcome has been a surge in demands from women to be included in historical accounts. Whilst these demands have long existed, albeit in different degrees, the fact remains that such pressures from an active and discerning audience or potential audience, are evidently compatible with the commercial rationale increasingly pervading the work of museums, as they seek to expand their visitor base and, in turn, their income.

In short, one can suggest that commercialism has become a dominant ideology which has come to increasingly frame the work of museums. Yet the implications of this are intriguing - not least because one paradoxical consequence is a rise in museum displays that are consciously or otherwise seeking to subvert dominant and

conventional ideas and approaches. In this sense, this research is clearly distinct form the work of individuals such as Hewison (1987), who similarly acknowledges the pervasiveness of commercialism in the museum and heritage fields, yet fails to acknowledge the complexity of the consequences of this process. Indeed, one area in which the work of Hewison and others in the museum field has been seriously flawed is in terms of their approach towards visitor reception.

There has long been a misplaced assumption that dominant ideologies are necessarily absorbed wholesale by the public, who unthinkingly absorb whatever cultural messages and images they are presented with. Clearly, this notion is very much open to challenge, not least for failing to recognise that cultural audiences are inherently active in their interpretations. The work of many writers on television have shown clearly that cultural audiences tend to absorb and accept only these messages which are consistent with their existing perspectives. In this sense, museum visitors are more likely to accept accounts and interpretations which resonate with their existing knowledge, experiences and familiarity - a point shown clearly in my empirical data on visitors.

It is interesting, however, that such ideas have taken some time to transcend the museum world, and amongst some museum professionals and commentators there continues to be little acknowledgment of the fact that the same museum displays can simultaneously be interpreted in quite different ways. Yet the diverse meaning that can be attached to different historical accounts or representations is often part of the problem faced by museum staff. After all, the dichotomous interpretation of objects or artifacts such as the *'Enola Gay'*, or individuals like *'Bomber Harris'*, illustrates that the meanings attached to different exhibits and accounts can be highly ambiguous and sometimes contested.

Of course, such ambiguities imply problems with any singular interpretation and in turn problems for any notion of a coherent ideology. Even if museums are transmitting a coherent ideology, its reception by those who use museums may be neither coherent or cohesive. This observation and the concept of *'audience activity'* necessarily makes it far more difficult to establish a coherent theory of ideological transmission. The result, of course, is to challenge the pervasive notion that societal memories are somehow hegemonic, promoting social consensus and the absorption of dominant ideologies by the dominated, which is a pervasive idea underpining much work on museums. On the contrary, social memories may be highly contested. In any event, it is clear that history and the past are not read simply in a uniform and mono-dimensional way. Indeed, this research is firmly located in the growing body of work suggesting that there are pronounced problems with any uniform reading of the past (see Macdonald 1995). In a practical sense, the implications of this are interesting, and appear to be supported by my empirical data from visitors - namely, some museum audiences may be almost oblivious to the intended messages in an exhibition. In particular, this suggests that however carefully museum interpreters and communicators may construct their exhibitions, their content may simply be superfluous to the existing knowledge of many visitors, particularly if these visitors have some personal experience of the topic.

This qualitative piece of research has raised some important questions about the appropriateness of the dominant ideology thesis for comprehending the nuances by which ideological transmission takes place in a cultural context like a museum. In fact, there are a number of theoretical difficulties with the dominant ideology thesis anyway, some of which I explored in detail. One point of particular note is the idea that, in late capitalism, the apparatus for the potential transmission of ideology are highly developed, and yet there is paradoxically no clear or cohesive dominant ideology. This is an argument or approach which lies at the heart of recent debates about postmodernity and which I argue has some important implications for museums.

In light of the fact that museums and their exhibitions necessarily reflect the temporal context in which they exist, the debates about cultural change and postmodernity are particularly important for considering the current and future work and approaches of museums. Postmodernity ostensibly refers to a process of cultural change that arguably characterises many contemporary cultural forms. In simple terms, postmodernity is used to denote a cultural paradigm in modern society. The nature of postmodernity, however, is notoriously open to interpretation, although there does seem to be some consensus that the phenomena is signified by a variety of developments, including a tangible movement towards a consumer culture, as opposed to a producer culture. We have already seen that the various manifestations of consumerism, such as the growing importance of commercial considerations and the related significance of visitors and visitor preferences in initiating new displays and covering new topics, is an increasingly important feature of museum decision-making.

Moreover, postmodernism may also be characterised by a movement towards cultural de-differentiation, whereby the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' culture are breaking down. Part of this development has arguably been a decline in the 'aura' attached to postmodern museum exhibits, which has manifested itself in a number of very interesting ways. On the one hand, for instance, there has been a notable broadening in the scope of objects and themes deemed by museums to be worthy of presentation. Arguably, we have witnessed a move towards more mundane exhibits and an acceptance of new areas and themes as worthy for exhibition, although the debates surrounding the causes of such shifts have been heated and contested. Nonetheless, it does seem clear that these wider shifts under the broad label of postmodernity have some important implications for museums. The notion of a single unitary culture or perspective, for instance, has been under attack in many museums, which have come to accept the legitimacy of a myriad of historical perspectives and interpretations.

These related developments clearly have implications for future museum displays. Indeed, I am not alone in suggesting that the twenty first century is likely to see the work and role of museums undergo significant change. A number of authors have already explicitly suggested that museums are set to break new ground in terms of appropriate topics and approaches. The treatment of women in museum historical accounts was a consistent theme in my empirical work and was instrumental in helping to uncover the subtle nuances in exhibition policy, but I develop further the implications of my work in the context of sexuality, and suggest that museums are increasingly likely to view sexuality as a valid and legitimate topic for coverage.

The pervasiveness of sexuality in almost every cultural media in society is a point of interest in its own right. However, the fact that sexuality is a topic which has simultaneously been almost ubiquitously ignored by museums is clearly incongruous. Certainly, there may be a number of compelling reasons for this exclusion, such as a paucity of historical resources and problems with potential offence to visitors, although the significance of these points can be easily over-played. In fact, these difficulties are far from intractable and many museums have successfully overcome similar problems to mount successful exhibitions on other sensitive themes. Indeed, shifts in the professional culture of museum staff, encouraging a broadening of the themes, topics and interpretations offered by exhibitions, coupled with the growing influence of commercial considerations, make museum coverage of sexuality increasingly likely. After all, there is no doubt that the history of sexuality has enormous commercial potential, which the sex industry has readily recognised and begun to exploit. Linked to this has been the developing importance of the consumer in the museum world, and the growing influence of visitor preferences, which in turn are articulating demands for museum coverage of new themes and issues, like sexuality. The implication seems clear - that for a number of reasons, museums are set to undergo still further change in their work. Ultimately, however, museums are necessarily contextual and in this sense their future success may also rest upon wider policy changes and a recognition of the

importance of cultural inclusion. In any discussion of museums, and particularly their future direction, it is imperative to consider the policy context within which they are operating. It is to the policy implications of this research that the next section turns.

Policy Implications

In a number of ways, many of the themes and issues discussed in this thesis have been reflected in wider policy debates about museums. We have already noted, for instance, the very real importance of the educational audience for the work of many museums. The National Curriculum, in particular, is a highly significant influence upon the shape and direction of exhibitions. If an exhibition can be linked to the National Curriculum, museum professionals can be fairly confident about drawing an audience, with all the implications that this implies for raising revenue and the public profile of the museum and exhibition. This was certainly a tangible feature of museum decision-making from my empirical data, even if the implications were potentially worrying. Ultimately, for instance, this development raises the possibility of important and relevant exhibition issues and topics being sidelined unless some clear relationship with the National Curriculum can be established. Despite these reservations, however, it seems clear that the current Government are keen to expand even further the educative role of museums. The announcement in January 1999, for instance, of a three year £2.5 million initiative to encourage schools to develop closer links with museums and art galleries is indicative of this point. In the words of the Schools Minister, Charles Clarke:

> *'Good museums and galleries provide an invaluable resource for schools. They can inspire children and bring the curriculum to life, developing new ways of thinking and learning. ... Education is a prime function of museums and galleries and central to a great deal of their activity. It is the reason why many of them were established in the first place.'* (6th January 1999)

Similarly, in March 1999, the Culture Secretary - Chris Smith - established free entry into national museums and galleries for children. Operating at a cost of up to £99 million, the scheme operates at 32 museums and galleries. Interestingly, a significant part of this money is to be spent on making museums more *'pupil friendly'* by the introduction of new attractions, with a particular emphasis upon *'interactive'* displays.

The impact of new technology and the advent of the World Wide Web has certainly raised a number of issues for museums and there is no question that such technology has enormous potential. Certainly, those websites already created by museums have proved to be enormously popular. The Imperial War Museum's site, for instance, attracted some 3.3 million visits in its first year, while the Tate Gallery gets 200,000 hits every day. The 1999 report by the National Museum Directors Conference - *'A Netful of Jewels'* - argues that the web has the potential to promote much greater interest in museums from the public, not least because there is some evidence that having museum content online actually encourages people to visit.

The later part of the thesis suggests that museums are likely to witness a transformation of their work and a broadening of the topics and themes deemed worthwhile for museums to engage with. Certainly, I am not alone in suggesting that museums are likely to undergo significant change in this area. However, these observations have come not simply from museum professionals and academics, but have also been raised by policy makers. In January 2000, for instance, Matthew Evans, chairman of the new Museums, Libraries and Archives Commission, said publicly that museums in the UK needed to radically alter their image or face a very uncertain future. His address to the Association of Independent Museums claimed that current displays were regressive, afraid of change and ignorant of technical advance, although some of his points can be seriously questioned. After all, some institutions already employing state-of-the-art technology, such as the National Centre for Popular Music in Sheffield,

are nonetheless facing substantial problems. Nonetheless, his comments are intriguing and appear to support the claim that museums should be broadening dramatically their work:

> *'Those of us involved in managing cultural activities such as museums must fundamentally change what we do and the way we do it, if we are to remain relevant to politicians - and to the millions of ordinary people who not only directly or indirectly fund us but are our customers. ... If we don't, we risk turning into a cultural version of Marks and Spencer - symbols of once great institutions that have failed to move with the times and are suffering as a result.'* (Association of Independent Museums Annual Lecture, 19th January 2000)

The description of museum visitors as 'customers' is revealing, not least because it represents further evidence that the themes discussed earlier are already beginning to find favour with museums, as they realise both their commercial potential and recognise the importance of public demand for new and innovative displays. The recent temporary exhibition at the Museum of London, concerned with *'Gay and Lesbian London'*, was one such example, which was received to some acclaim. Similarly, the significant publicity attracted in May 1999 by the decision of the British Museum to display a rare Roman cup embellished with depictions of gay sex starkly illustrated the very real commercial potential of sexuality as a topic for museums, a theme that ultimately arose from the implications of this empirical work.

One of the main rationales for encouraging museums to be more innovative and to take greater risks in putting on new exhibitions, has been the crucial issue of visitor figures. Indeed, it seems clear that the current Government are heavily influenced by attendance figures as a measure of success, and the related questions of affordability and accessibility in museums. This has been a long standing debate and there has been some concern over the figures from the Museums and Galleries Commission showing

that attendance at displays fell by some 4% between 1997 and 1998. Whatever the vagaries of visitor figures and the problems with using them as a measure of efficiency or success, there is no question that visitor numbers continue to have an enormous policy influence, not least in terms of the debate about museum charging. Part of this debate has been an explicit acknowledgement by the Government that museums are both popular and important to the overall health and cohesiveness of society.

Policy debates surrounding museums have certainly reflected this and the enthusiasm of the New Labour government for museums has, at least in some respects, been notable by it explicitness, even if this has not been uniformily welcomed (see Bennett 2000). The heated debates about museum entry fees and the role of the Government in terms of providing financial support and subsidy has certainly been revealing. Indeed, it has been encouraging that the Government increasingly appear to accept that cultural exclusion is a necessary feature of social exclusion, which in turn may justifiably lay claim to state resources. The Government are surely right to be worried about the impact of museum charging. There has long been concern about the impact of charging upon visitor numbers and there is some evidence to support his perspective. Before introducing admission charges in the late 1980s, for instance, the National History Museum had some 2.5 million visitors annually, which has since dropped to 1.6 million. The Science Museum has experienced an even sharper fall in visitor numbers. In 1987-88, the year before the introduction of admission charges, the Science Museum was attracting some 3.16 million visitors each year. By 1996-97, this figure had dropped to just 1.47 million.

In response to these kinds of concerns, the government have certainly been very vocal in promising to introduce free museum access for some groups. The announcement by Chris Smith in July 1998 of £290 million extra funding for the arts, museum and galleries was widely welcomed in the museum world, particularly when the Government signalled the seriousness with which it viewed widening access to

museums by signifying the desirability of universal free entry to major national collections by 2001. However, all was not quite as it appeared. There have been some concerns on the part of museums and galleries about the depreciation of these funds, given that they are not pegged to inflation. Moreover, it was made very clear that this was *'not something for nothing'*. On the contrary, the promise of these funds was contingent upon their effective use, what Chris Smith described as a *'new contract'* and a *'new partnership'* with obligations on both sides. Moreover, Chris Smith has more recently made it very clear that *'widening access'* was not the same as free access to all and ultimately decisions about charging rest with museum trustees. The suggestion that free admission for all would be possible by April 2001 was dependent upon museums wishing to offer this - and there are clearly competing priorities for spending in any museum. Consequently, some commentators are already suggesting that the promise of universal free admission is *'as good as dead'* (See Gibbons 2000). In fact, it is clear that some museums are ambivalent about the practicalities and economic wisdom of introducing free access. The National History Museum, for instance, has suggested that part of its success has reflected its charging policy, while the whole museum sector is concerned about potential problems with reclaiming VAT if they move to free admission (see Gibbons 2000). Ultimately, only time will tell how encouraging rhetoric is translated into practice.

Conclusion

So, where does this empirical work leave us? Clearly, there are a number of levels on which this research can be considered and a plethora of ways in which it has sought to add to our understanding of museums as mediators of the past. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the work has focussed upon three broad areas.

Firstly, it is clear that the process of exhibition construction is complex and affected by a wealth of influences, from more practical constraints, such as time and space, to more ubiquitous concerns, such as the pervasiveness of commercial concerns. The linked importance of issues such as marketing, the educational audience and the growing significance of visitor demands in planning and executing new exhibitions and displays was similarly tangible, as was the level of consensus in what were often protracted processes of negotiation. This last point, in particular, was revealing. It suggested some degree of occupational culture in museums, which in turn was influenced by recent developments in reflexive and social history. The outcome of these processes, however, could be intriguing, not least because they implied that far from being the purveyors of established historical perspectives, museums may instead represent vehicles for challenging orthodox interpretations of the past. In this sense, the traditional notion of museums as part of the apparatus for the transmission of dominant ideologies demands review and revision.

In the same way, this work has sought to challenge some of the established orthodoxies concerning museum visitors, the second main focus of the empirical work. In particular, the research sought to explore three distinct areas. Perhaps somewhat disparagingly for museums and their staff, I began by highlighting the complexities that surround museum representations of a 'lived past' and the related observation that visitors clearly do not come to exhibitions with empty minds. Rather, in line with other work on cultural reception, the research suggested that museum audiences will tend to accept and absorb predominantly those themes and messages that resonate with their existing knowledge and experience. There were also important differences between visitors in terms of their preferences for different museum media, the second focus of my research. This is an area that has long been clouded by wider debates about the role and direction of museums and the results were perhaps encouraging for both sides of this divide, suggesting as they did that objects, photographs, videos and reconstructions all have respective strengths and weaknesses as exhibition media. The

policy implication here is clear - given the heterogenity of museum visitors, exhibitions can benefit from a combination of media and approaches. The third and final part of my empirical work on museum audiences sought to examine what, in some quarters, is a firmly held belief - that visitors are necessarily unaware of the process of constructing history and the selective nature of museum representations of the past. Whilst my results here are tentative, and indeed this is one obvious area for further research, they nonetheless did appear to show that many visitors are far more discerning than they often given credit for. In light of the fact that museum audiences are often better educated than their non-visiting peers, and the related sense in which new ideas about history have come to influence museum audiences through television, books and other important sources of historical understanding, this point should perhaps not be surprising.

The third and final part of this work ostensibly arose from the preceding chapters analysing my empirical work on both exhibition staff and visitors. In particular, it seemed evident that museums are undergoing some significant change, and indeed this appeared to be highly congruent with some of the theoretical work on postmodernity. I moved on to tentatively suggest that the growing commercialism that has come to pervade the work of museums and the linked importance that is increasingly being attached to visitor preferences, could lead to more exhibitions on topics that could match these criteria. Coupled with the acknowledgement that visitors are increasingly being influenced by other sources of historical understanding, such as books and television, the implications were intriguing. I drew upon the example of sexuality and suggested that this is a topic which clearly fits all of these criteria and is a topic which museums are increasingly likely to view as a valid area for engagement and representation. Indeed, there is already some evidence of this in recent exhibitions. Utimately, however, any discussion about the future of museums in the UK has to acknowledge their contextual nature and the fact that their fortunes are inherently linked to wider policy debates about cultural need, cultural exclusion and the appropriateness

or otherwise of state support. It is certainly encouraging that the New Labour government have so openly engaged with the debates surrounding museum charges and their impact upon affordability and accessibility. What remains to be seen, however, is just how this translates into practice over time. Of one thing, however, there can be no doubt. As we enter the new century, the role of museums as purveyors of the past remains as important as ever. Ultimately, the impact of new technologies, a new political focus, and new developments in museum practice suggest that the future of the past is never likely to be the same again.

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APPENDIX ONE

SAMPLE OF MUSEUM VISITOR

QUESTIONNAIRES

Visitor Questionnaire,

with permission of Imperial War Museum

MARK LIDDIARD

Basic introduction to the research: 'I am a research student from the London School of Economics doing a survey of museum visitors. It should not take longer than about 15 minutes and everything that you say will be treated in total confidence.'

Then elicit 1) whether or not they have visited the exhibition on the Home Front and the Blitz Experience and 2) whether or not they are willing to take part.

BASIC QUESTIONS: 'I would like to begin by just asking you a few questions about yourself' *(Use response cards)*:

1. Sex of visitor: Male
Female

2. Visiting with children? Yes
No

(If answer 'yes', I will need to determine in the probing the degree to which their responses have been influenced by their children).

3. Age of visitor: A - 16-25
B - 26-35
C - 36-45
D - 46-55
E - 56-65

F - 66-75
G - 75+

4. At what age did you finish your full time education?

5. Ethnic Origin: A - White
B - Black Caribbean.
C - Black African
D - Black Other.
E - Indian.
F - Pakistani.
G - Bangladeshi.
H - Chinese.
I - Other.

6. Which one of these work categories do you fall into?
A - Working full time
B - Working part time
C - Unemployed.
D - Student.
E - Retired.
F - Looking after the house.
G - Other.

7. What do you consider to be, or to have been, your main occupation?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: 'I would now like to ask you a few questions about the exhibition on the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War':

8. Can you please rate your familiarity with the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War ***before*** you visited the museum, on a scale between 1 and 5, where 1 means that you are very familiar and 5 means that you are very unfamiliar. *(Give respondent score card).*

9. Did you come to be familiar with the the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War as a result of any of the following?

- Personal experience
- Experience of a friend
- Experience of a relative
- Television / films
- Books
- Education
- Other museums (Clarify)

(Will involve probing to expand, and elicit exactly what people mean by 'familiar').

10. Can you please rate your familiarity with the the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War ***after*** you visited the museum, on a scale between 1 and 5, where 1 means that you are very familiar and 5 means that you are very unfamiliar. *(Give respondent score card).*

---

11. In the exhibitions, approximately how much of the written material or captions would you say you read? *(Use response card).*

A - 10%
B - 20%
C - 30%
D - 40%
E - 50%

F - 60%
G - 70%
H - 80%
I - 90%
J - 100%

(Will involve some probing to try and elicit what they specifically read).

---

12. I am now going to give you a list of statements and I want you to indicate whether or not you feel that they accurately describe the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War, by giving each statement a score between 1 and 5, where 1 is agree strongly and 5 is disagree strongly. *(Give respondent score card).*

1 - 'London was heavily bombed in the Second World War.'

2 - 'Food was the only thing to be rationed during the Second World War.'

3 - 'Only a small number of people were involved in civil defence during the Second World War.'

4 - 'Air raid shelters were widely used during the Second World War.'

---

13. Do you think that there are any respects in which the Second World War was a good time to live in Britain?

'I now want you to think about how effective the exhibitions were in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War' *(Give respondent score card)*

14. I want you to begin by considering the reconstructions in the exhibitions. How effective do you think the **reconstructions** were in helping you to understand what it was

like to be there, in the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

15. I now want you to consider the objects in display cases in the exhibitions. How effective do you think the **objects in display cases** were in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

16. I now want you to consider the video films in the exhibitions. How effective do you think the **videos** were in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

17. I now want you to consider the photographs in the exhibitions. How effective do you think the **photographs** were in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

18. I can see from your answers that you believe that X is more effective at helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the Blitz and the Home Front during the Second World War, than Y. Is this correct? Why do you think that? *(Will involve some considerable probing)*

---

19. Where do you think the museum gets its material and objects from?

20. Do you think that there is anything that the museum does not want to display? *(Likely to involve considerable probing).*

Conclusion: Thank the respondent for their co-operation.

Visitor Questionnaire,

with permission of National Army Museum

MARK LIDDIARD

Basic introduction to the research: 'I am a research student from the London School of Economics doing a survey of museum visitors. It should not take longer than about 15 minutes and everything that you say will be treated in total confidence.'

Then elicit 1) whether or not they have visited the exhibition on the war in the Far East and 2) whether or not they are willing to take part. *(If respondent is unsure of whether or not they have seen the exhibition, it may then be necessary to briefly describe it).*

BASIC QUESTIONS: 'I would like to begin by just asking you a few questions about yourself' *(Use response cards)*:

1. Sex of visitor: Male
Female

2. Visiting with children? Yes
No

(If answer 'yes', I will need to determine in the probing the degree to which their responses have been influenced by their children).

3. Age of visitor: A - 16-25
B - 26-35
C - 36-45
D - 46-55

E - 56-65
F - 66-75
G - 75+

4. At what age did you finish your full time education?

5. Ethnic Origin: A - White
B - Black Caribbean.
C - Black African
D - Black Other.
E - Indian.
F - Pakistani.
G - Bangladeshi.
H - Chinese.
I - Other.

6. Which one of these work categories do you fall into?
A - Working full time
B - Working part time
C - Unemployed.
D - Student.
E - Retired.
F - Looking after the house.
G - Other.

7. What do you consider to be, or to have been, your main occupation?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: 'I would now like to ask you a few questions about the exhibition on the British Army in the Far East during the Second World War':

8. Can you please rate your familiarity with the British Army in the Far East during the Second World War ***before*** you visited the museum, on a scale between 1 and 5, where 1 means that you were very familiar and 5 means that you were very unfamiliar. *(Give respondent score card).*

9. Did you come to be familiar with the British Army in the Far East during the Second World War as a result of any of the following?

- Personal experience
- Experience of a friend
- Experience of a relative
- Television / films
- Books
- Education
- Other museums (Clarify)

(Will involve probing to expand, and elicit exactly what people mean by 'familiar').

10. Can you please rate your familiarity with the British Army in the Far East during the Second World War ***after*** you visited the museum's exhibition, on a scale between 1 and 5, where 1 means that you are very familiar and 5 means that you are very unfamiliar. *(Give respondent score card).*

---

11. In the exhibition, approximately how much of the written material or captions would you say you read? *(Use response card).*

A - 10%
B - 20%
C - 30%
D - 40%
E - 50%

F - 60%
G - 70%
H - 80%
I - 90%
J - 100%

(Will involve some probing to try and elicit what they specifically read).

---

12. I am now going to give you a list of statements and I want you to indicate whether or not you feel that they describe the British Army in the Far East during the Second World War, by giving each statement a score between 1 and 5, where 1 is agree strongly and 5 is disagree strongly. *(Give respondent score card).*

1 - 'The British Army in the Far East fought in extremes of terrain'

2 - 'The British Army was initially well trained for jungle warfare'

3 - 'Transport was difficult in the war in the Far East'

4 - 'Prisoners of War were generally well treated by the Japanese'

5 - 'Very few Commonwealth soldiers fought in the Far East with the British Army'.

6 - 'Sickness and disease was a big problem in the war in the Far East'.

'I now want you to think about how effective the exhibition was in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the British Army in the Far East during the Second World War.' *(Give respondent score card)*

13. I want you to begin by considering the reconstructions in the exhibition *(List the reconstructions).* How effective do you think the **reconstructions** were in helping you to

understand what it was like to be there, in the British Army in the Far East? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

14. I now want you to consider the objects in display cases in the exhibition *(List a range of objects).* How effective do you think the **objects in display cases** were in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the British Army in the Far East? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

15. I now want you to consider the video films in the exhibition *(List the video films)..* How effective do you think the **videos** were in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the British Army in the Far East? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

16. I now want you to consider the photographs in the exhibition *(List the photographs).* How effective do you think the **photographs** were in helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the British Army in the Far East? *(1 = Very effective, 5 = Very ineffective)*

17. I can see from your answers that you believe that X is more effective at helping you to understand what it was like to be there, in the British Army in the Far East, than Y. Is this correct? Why do you think that? *(Will involve some considerable probing)*

---

18. Where do you think the museum got its material and objects from?

19. Do you think that there was anything that the museum did not want to display? *(Likely to involve considerable probing).*

---

20. Where would you find out more about the British Army in the Far East during the Second World War, if you wanted to?

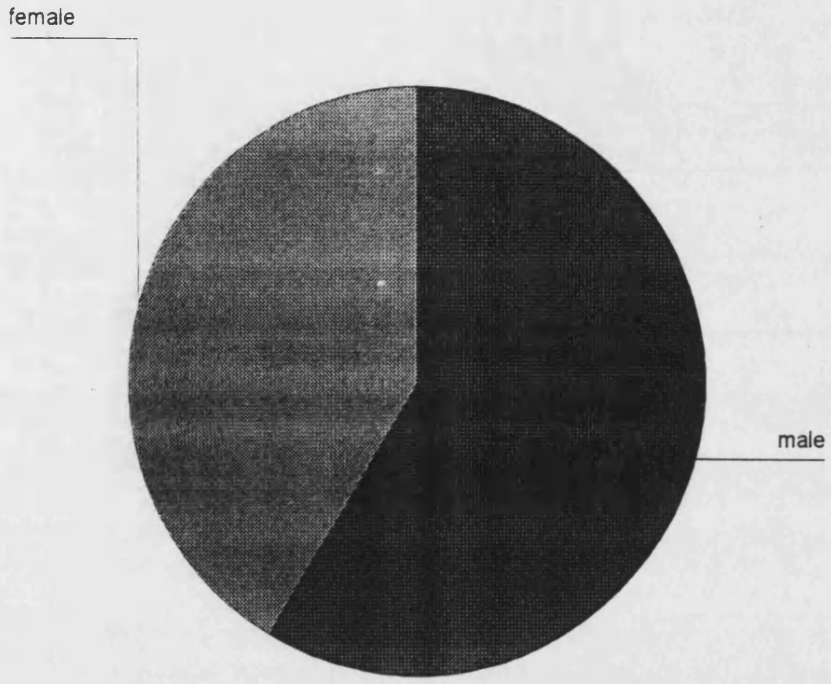
Conclusion: Thank the respondent for their co-operation.

APPENDIX TWO

DATA ON MUSEUM VISITORS

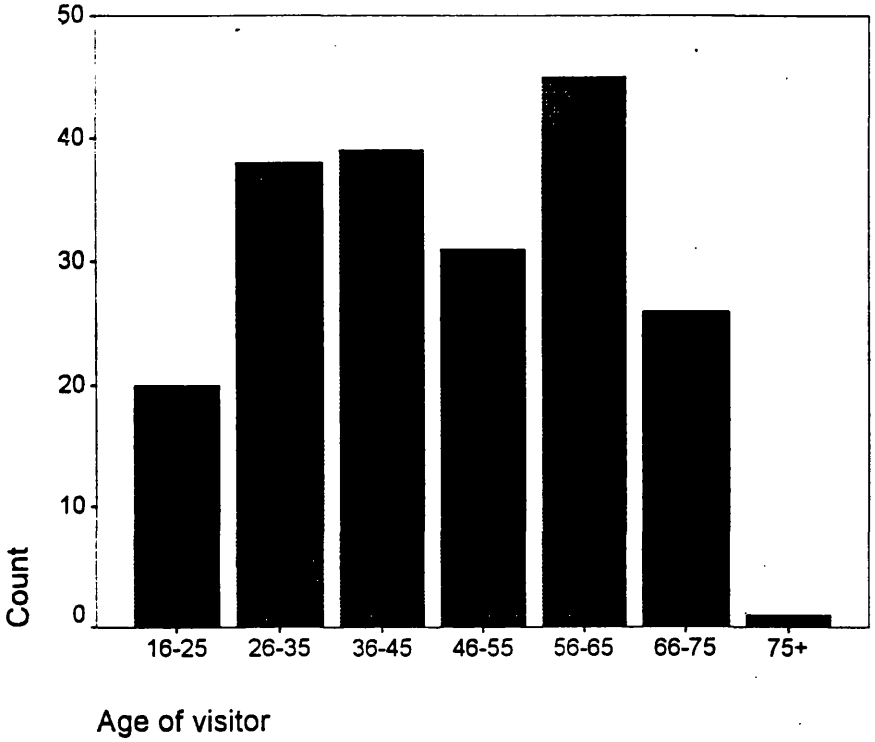
Gender

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	117	58.5	58.5	58.5
	female	83	41.5	41.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



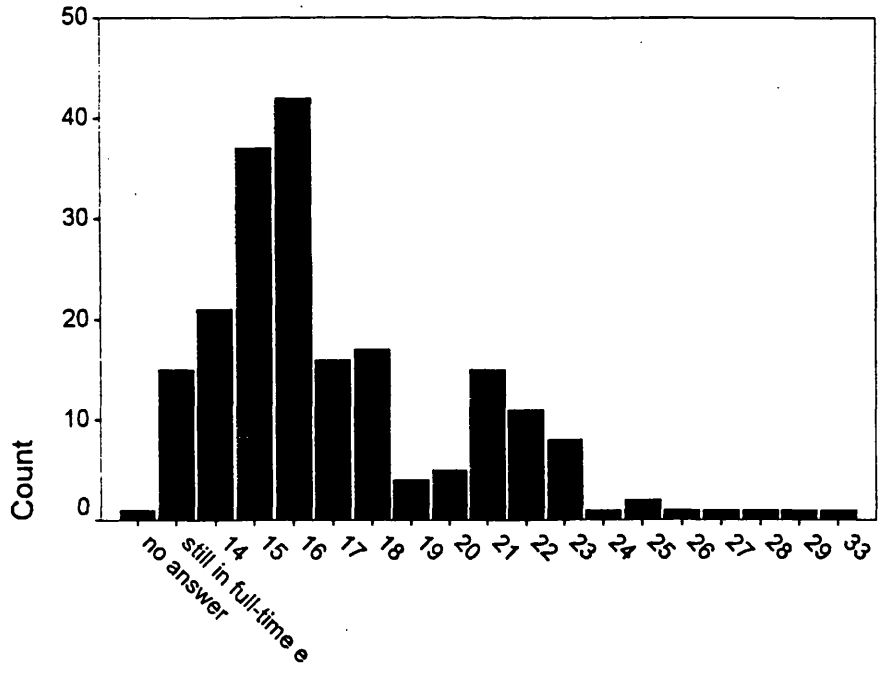
Age of visitor

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	16-25	20	10.0	10.0	10.0
	26-35	38	19.0	19.0	29.0
	36-45	39	19.5	19.5	48.5
	46-55	31	15.5	15.5	64.0
	56-65	45	22.5	22.5	86.5
	66-75	26	13.0	13.0	99.5
	75+	1	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



Age left full-time education

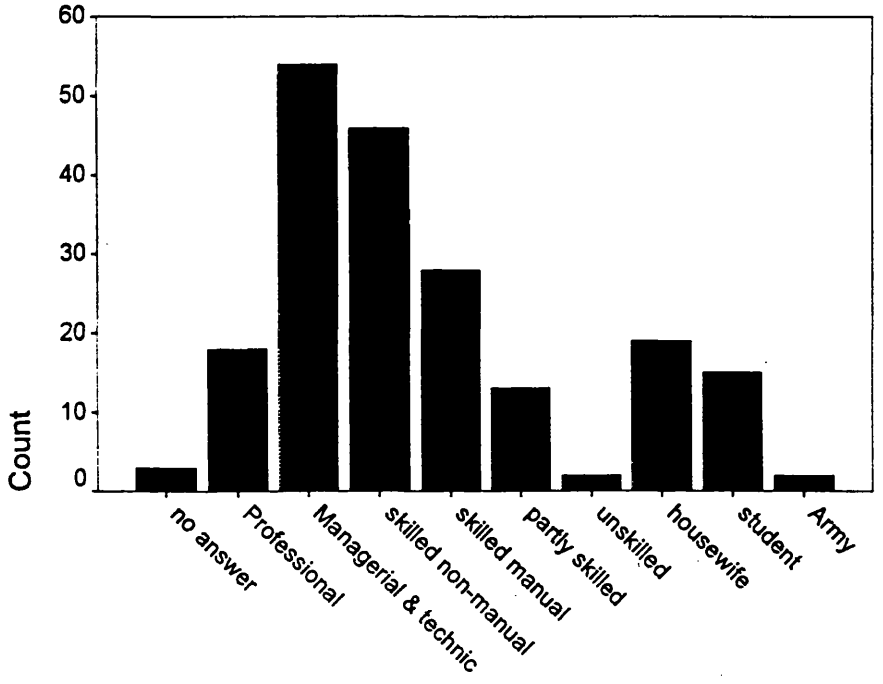
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no answer	1	.5	.5	.5
	still in full-time education	15	7.5	7.5	8.0
	14	21	10.5	10.5	18.5
	15	37	18.5	18.5	37.0
	16	42	21.0	21.0	58.0
	17	16	8.0	8.0	66.0
	18	17	8.5	8.5	74.5
	19	4	2.0	2.0	76.5
	20	5	2.5	2.5	79.0
	21	15	7.5	7.5	86.5
	22	11	5.5	5.5	92.0
	23	8	4.0	4.0	96.0
	24	1	.5	.5	96.5
	25	2	1.0	1.0	97.5
	26	1	.5	.5	98.0
	27	1	.5	.5	98.5
	28	1	.5	.5	99.0
	29	1	.5	.5	99.5
	33	1	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



Age left full-time education

Main occupation

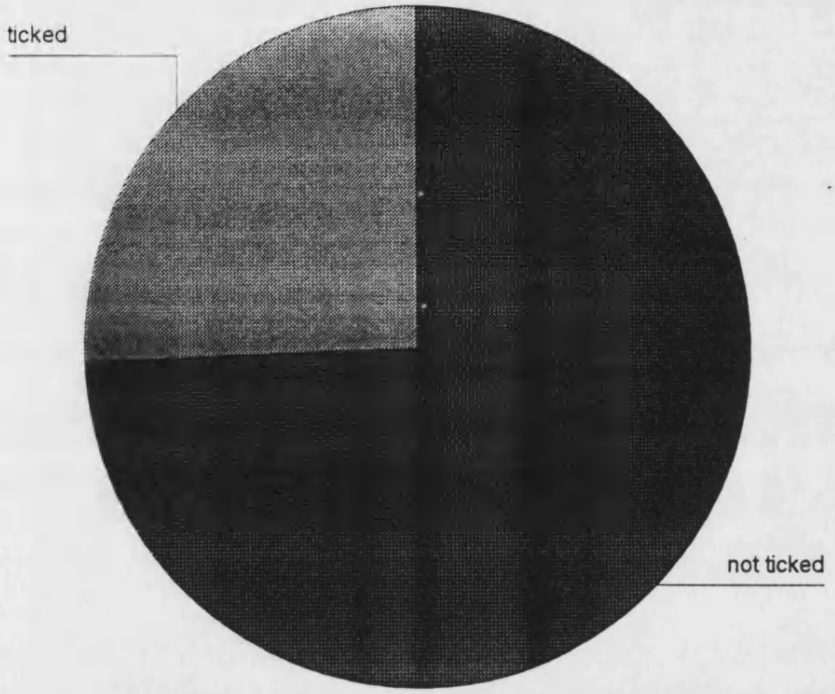
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no answer	3	1.5	1.5	1.5
	Professional	18	9.0	9.0	10.5
	Managerial & technical	54	27.0	27.0	37.5
	skilled non-manual	46	23.0	23.0	60.5
	skilled manual	28	14.0	14.0	74.5
	partly skilled	13	6.5	6.5	81.0
	unskilled	2	1.0	1.0	82.0
	housewife	19	9.5	9.5	91.5
	student	15	7.5	7.5	99.0
	Army	2	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



Main occupation

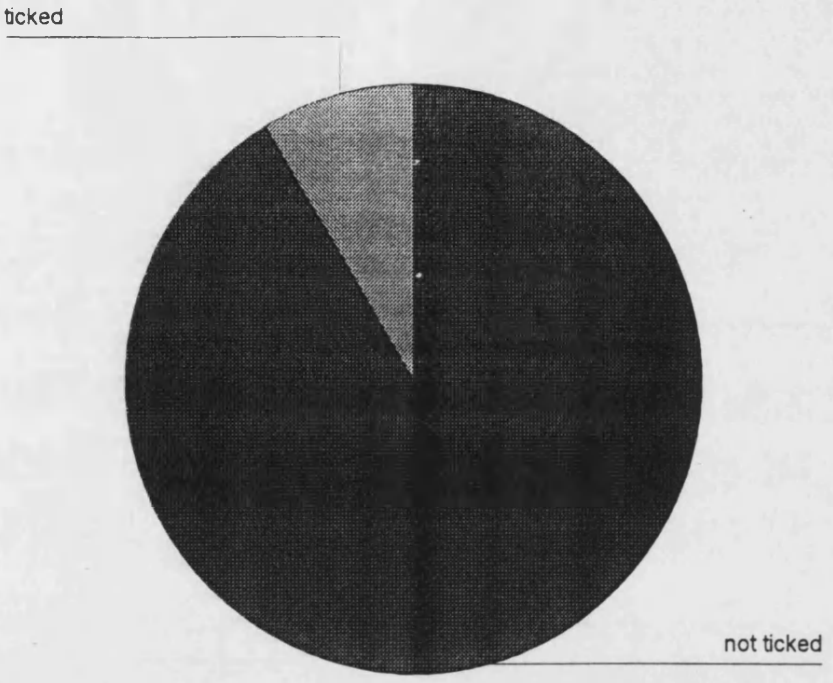
Familiar as a result of personal experience

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not ticked	149	74 5	74 5	74 5
	ticked	51	25 5	25 5	100 0
	Total	200	100 0	100 0	
Total		200	100 0		



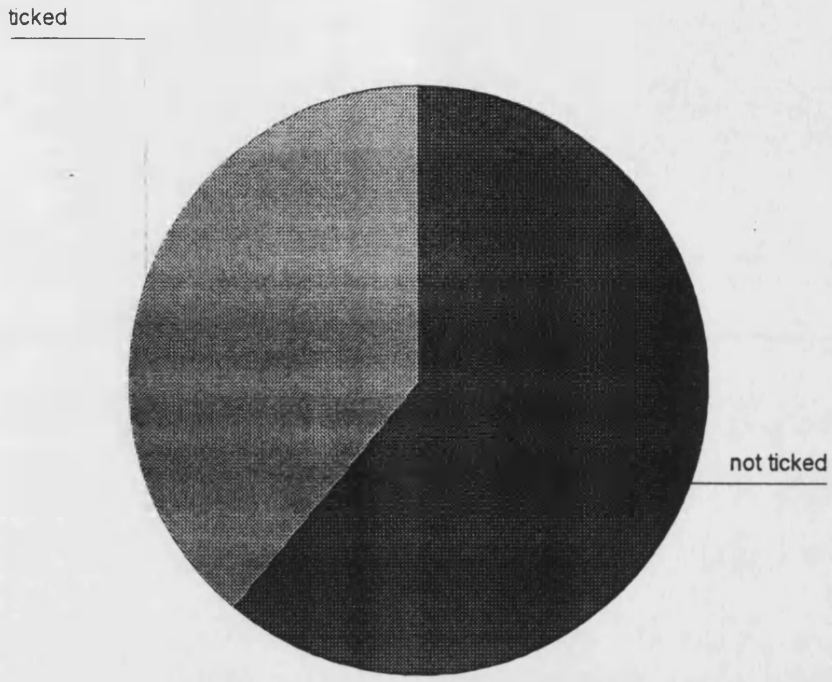
Familiar as a result of experience of a friend

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not ticked	183	91.5	91.5	91.5
	ticked	17	8.5	8.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



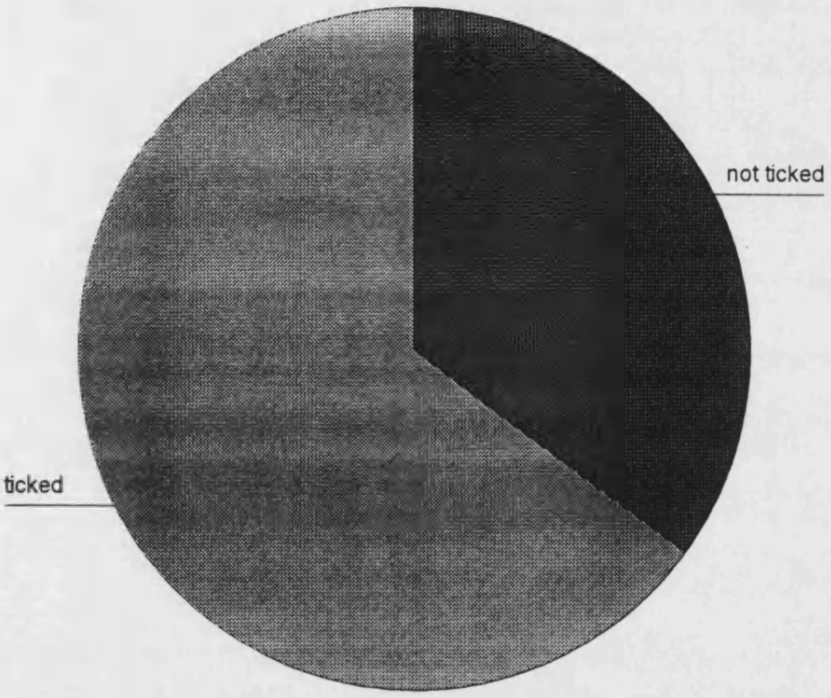
Familiar as a result of experience of a relative

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not ticked	122	61.0	61.0	61.0
	ticked	78	39.0	39.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



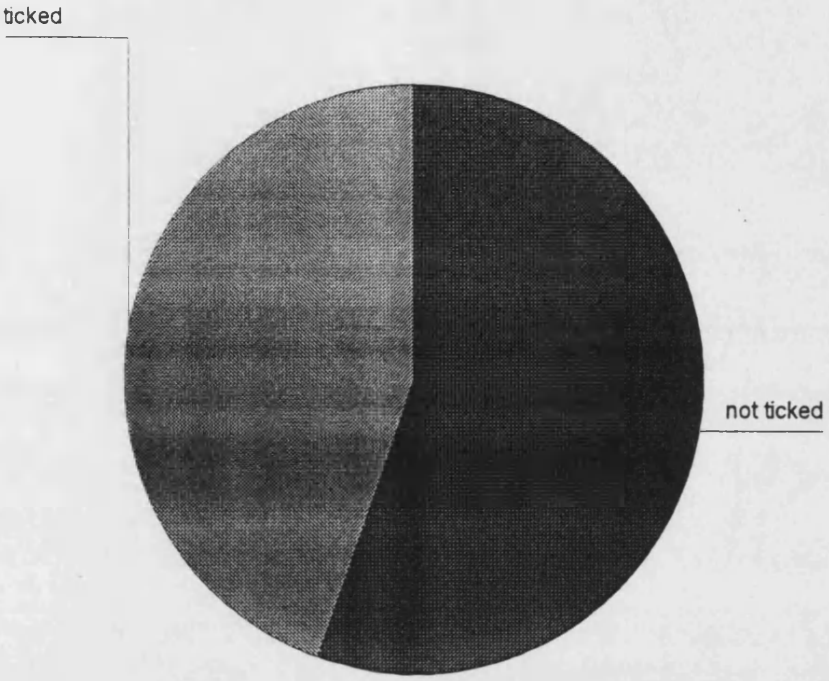
Familiar as a result of television/films

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not ticked	70	35 0	35 0	35 0
	ticked	130	65 0	65 0	100 0
	Total	200	100 0	100 0	
Total		200	100 0		



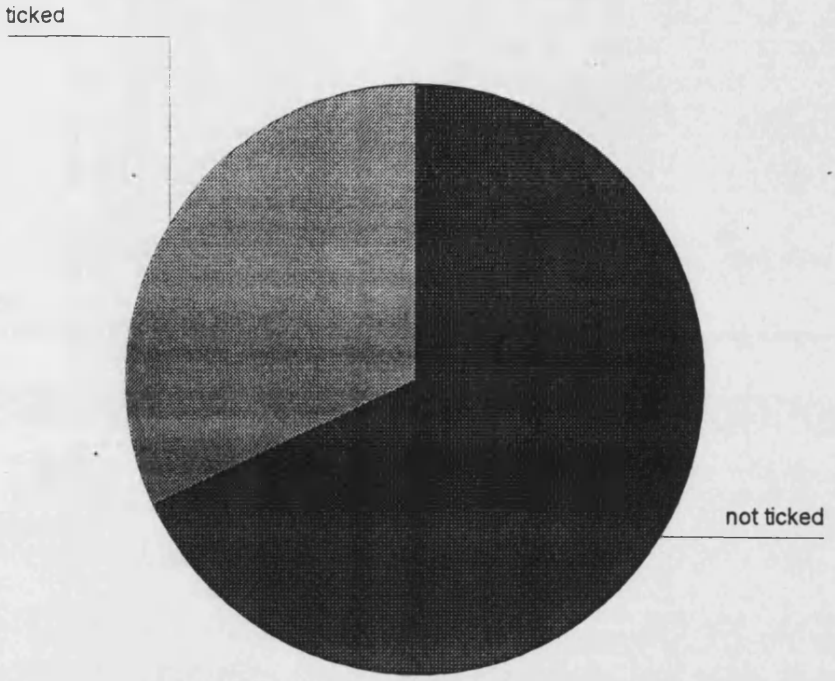
Familiar as a result of books

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not ticked	111	55.5	55.5	55.5
	ticked	89	44.5	44.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



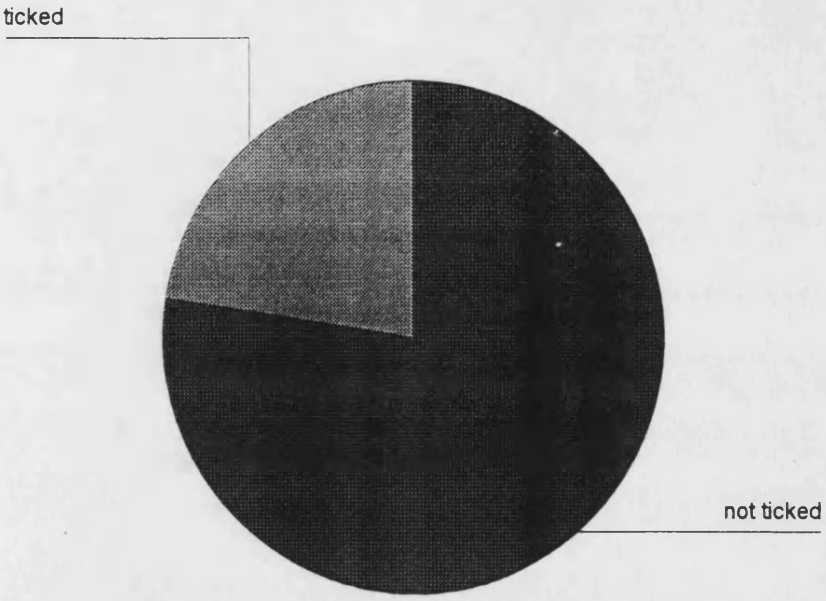
Familiar as a result of education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not ticked	136	68.0	68.0	68.0
	ticked	64	32.0	32.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



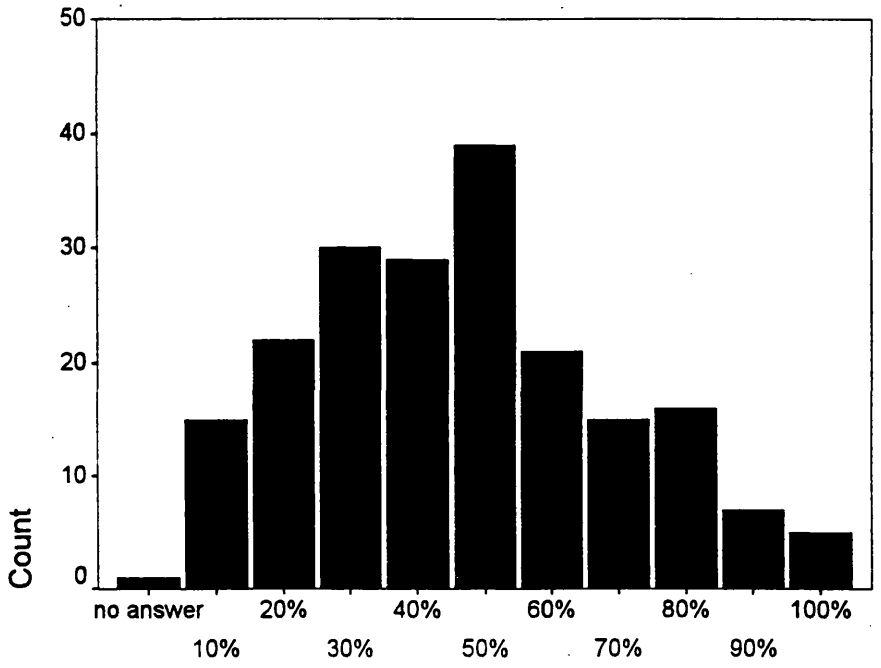
Familiar as a result of other musuems

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not ticked	155	77.5	77.5	77.5
	ticked	45	22.5	22.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



Approx how much written material would you say you read

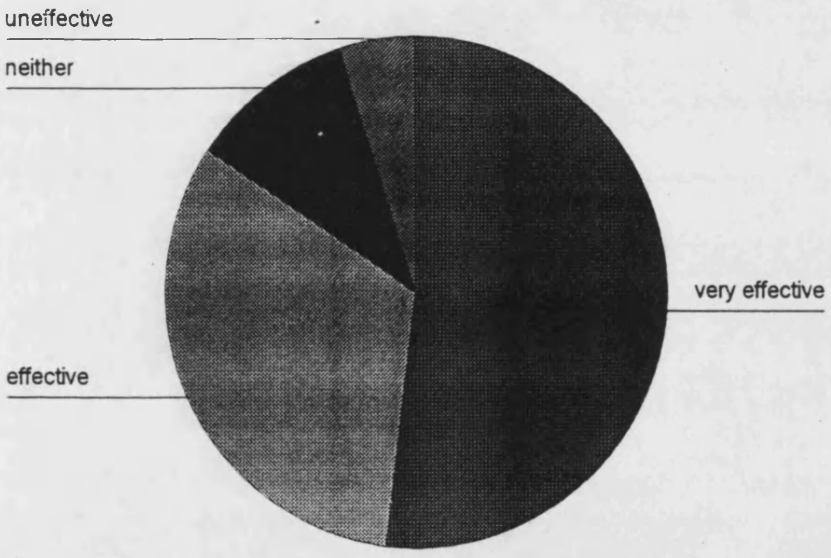
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no answer	1	.5	.5	.5
	10%	15	7.5	7.5	8.0
	20%	22	11.0	11.0	19.0
	30%	30	15.0	15.0	34.0
	40%	29	14.5	14.5	48.5
	50%	39	19.5	19.5	68.0
	60%	21	10.5	10.5	78.5
	70%	15	7.5	7.5	86.0
	80%	16	8.0	8.0	94.0
	90%	7	3.5	3.5	97.5
	100%	5	2.5	2.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



Approx how much written material would you say you read

How effective were the reconstructions

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	very effective	104	52.0	52.0	52.0
	effective	65	32.5	32.5	84.5
	neither	21	10.5	10.5	95.0
	uneffective	10	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		

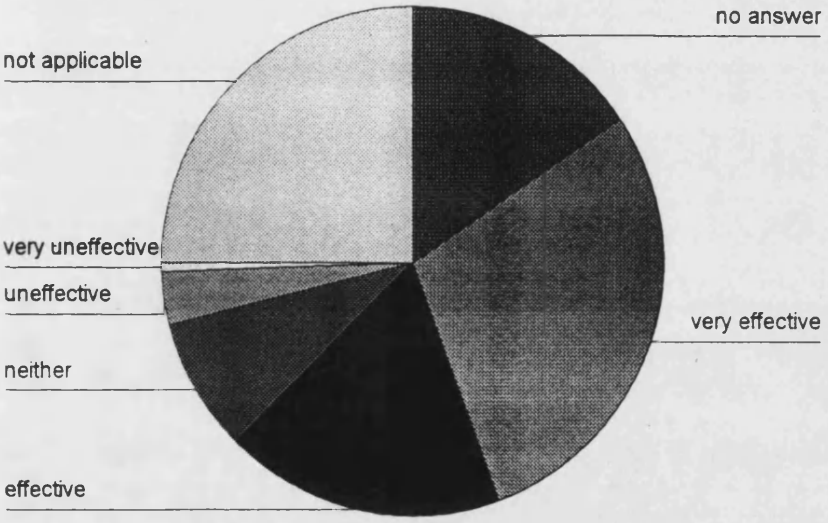


How effective were the objects in display cases

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no answer	2	1.0	1.0	1.0
	very effective	91	45.5	45.5	46.5
	effective	71	35.5	35.5	82.0
	neither	32	16.0	16.0	98.0
	uneffective	4	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		

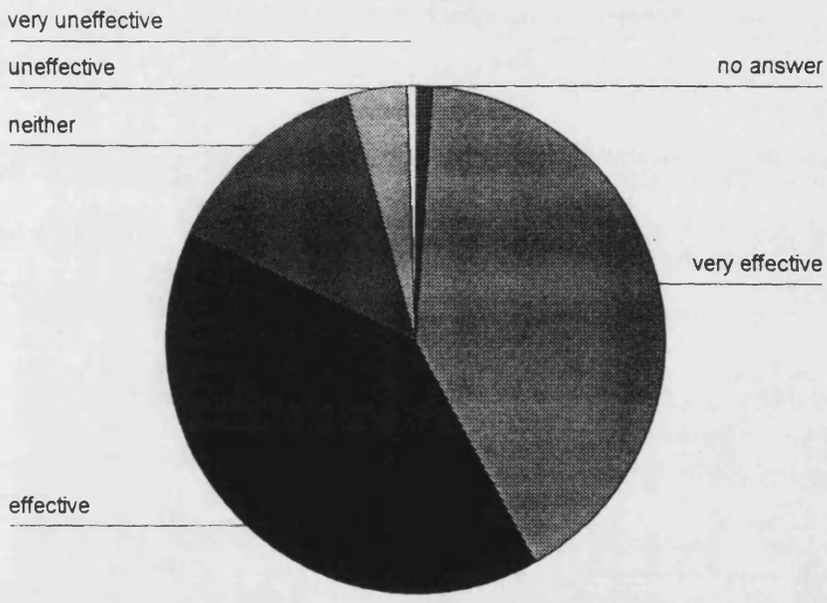
How effective were the videos

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no answer	31	15.5	15.5	15.5
	very effective	58	29.0	29.0	44.5
	effective	36	18.0	18.0	62.5
	neither	17	8.5	8.5	71.0
	uneffective	7	3.5	3.5	74.5
	very uneffective	1	.5	.5	75.0
	not applicable	50	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



How effective were the photographs

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no answer	2	1.0	1.0	1.0
	very effective	82	41.0	41.0	42.0
	effective	80	40.0	40.0	82.0
	neither	27	13.5	13.5	95.5
	uneffective	8	4.0	4.0	99.5
	very uneffective	1	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	200	100.0	100.0	
Total		200	100.0		



Crosstabs

Familiar as a result of personal experience * How effective were the reconstructions Crosstabulation

Count

		How effective were the reconstructions				
		very effective	effective	neither	uneffective	Total
Familiar as a result of personal experience	not ticked	75	51	16	7	149
	ticked	29	14	5	3	51
Total		104	65	21	10	200

Familiar as a result of personal experience * How effective were the objects in display cases Crosstabulation

Count

		How effective were the objects in display cases					
		no answer	very effective	effective	neither	uneffective	Total
Familiar as a result of personal experience	not ticked		63	57	25	4	149
	ticked	2	28	14	7		51
Total		2	91	71	32	4	200

Age of visitor * How effective were the reconstructions Crosstabulation

Count

		How effective were the reconstructions				
		very effective	effective	neither	uneffective	Total
Age of visitor	16-25	9	9	1	1	20
	26-35	18	12	4	4	38
	36-45	19	15	5		39
	46-55	16	10	4	1	31
	56-65	25	12	5	3	45
	66-75	17	6	2	1	26
	75+		1			1
Total		104	65	21	10	200

Age of visitor * How effective were the objects in display cases Crosstabulation

Count

		How effective were the objects in display cases					
		no answer	very effective	effective	neither	uneffective	Total
Age of visitor	16-25		7	7	5	1	20
	26-35		12	19	5	2	38
	36-45		17	14	7	1	39
	46-55		12	14	5		31
	56-65	2	24	11	8		45
	66-75		18	6	2		26
	75+		1				1
Total		2	91	71	32	4	200