Social Dreams of History: Museum, Utopia, Mythology

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The true world – unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable; but the very thought of it – a consolation, an obligation, an imperative.

Friedrich Nietzsche
How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable

The Crypt of Civilization

In August and September 1977, the United States space agency NASA launched its Voyager program by sending two unmanned probes, Voyager I and Voyager II, on an expedition to study Jupiter and Saturn. The probes were also designed to continue their journey through the outer solar system without a final destination. Like the previous shuttles Pioneer 10 and Pioneer 11 (containing the famous metal plaque representing man and woman in a “state of innocence”), the Voyager probes included a sophisticatedly designed artifact: a gold-plated copper disc comprising a phonographic record engraved with symbols explaining how it should be played. The “Voyager Golden Record” contains 115 analog-encoded images, together with audio tracks of greetings in different languages, beginning with ancient Akkadian and ending with a modern Chinese dialect. Also enclosed are ninety minutes of music, including Mozart and Bach as well as Chuck Berry and various samples of ethnographic recordings. The intention, according to NASA, is “to communicate a story of our world to extraterrestrials”.

It will take at least 40,000 years before the Voyager probes enter another planetary system, a timeframe that defies rational speculation.


Fig 4. The Crypt of Civilization. Oglethorpe © Oglethorpe University, 1936.
Currently, a non-profit French organization is preparing the satellite KEO, an interstellar time capsule packed with thousands of individual spoken messages and images representing daily life on earth. This vessel will also contain human blood (selected at random) and samples of air, water, and earth. It is scheduled for launch in 2012, and will return to earth in about 50,000 years.  

In the year 8113, Oglethorpe University (if it still exists) will unlock its time capsule “The Crypt of Civilization”, an airtight chamber which was sealed inside university grounds in 1936. The crypt is an 18 m² room resting on granite bedrock, located in a converted swimming pool with a heavy stone roof. It houses a variety of artifacts and treasures, mainly donated (some of them by King Gustav V of Sweden), including the university’s massive archive of sustainable micro-films, more than 800 classical works of literature (approx. 640,000 pages), and voice and sound recordings ranging from Popeye to Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Franklin D. Roosevelt. “Done on an epic scale never before conceived,” the Crypt of Civilization is regarded as “the first successful attempt to bury a record for any future inhabitants.”

Extraterrestrials and future humans: at a first glance, this would seem to be a question of the future. Nonetheless, this is all about how we represent the past. These are just three examples drawn from an astonishing number of projects that have taken a quite radical approach to history. Far from being communications with a distant future, these are attempts to preserve the present.

If it’s true that the emergence of national museums was a consequence of the French Revolution and the “new” Europe’s “will to identity” (a story that still continues), then it is just as true that this will was born from a revolutionary impulse. The museum was a response to vandalism. The outcome of the revolution (and the many revolutions to follow) created new social reforms, not only for the society as such, it also laid ground for an obsession with the past and the creative elements of cultural memory. In the present essay, I will reflect upon three simultaneous revivals that were initiated during this period and perhaps still are with us: the cult of preservation, the utopian repossession of history, and the prospect of a new mythology.
It is easy to ridicule this kind of future archaeological projects or “intergalactic collections” as being fundamentally naïve in nature; even if their almost desperate attempts to situate history outside of history itself can be quite moving. Launching something into space or burying it deep underground cannot, of course, bring it outside of history as such. Rather, it is an attempt to make it inaccessible and thus outside the horizon of experience, whereupon it enters the realm of desire. Just like the problem of radioactive nuclear waste, burying and hiding something means forgetting it, even if we remain paradoxically aware that it will in no way disappear.

But neither the Voyagers, nor the KEO-satellite, nor the capsule at Oglethorpe University contain any waste of this kind, at least not in a normative sense. It is, rather, the waste of cultural memory: objects. Whatever the physical and degenerative aspects, an object concealed for fifty thousand years has undoubtedly changed ontologically by the time it is recovered. And you don’t even have to wait that long. Our closets, garages, and attics contain boxes of memories of different parts of our lives, items by which you want to be remembered when you are gone, or items you wish kept because they are connected to those now gone. But this desire for connection, the urge to memorialize, offers access to the past by actually obscuring the original object. The object acts as a go-between that mediates between past experiences and the present, and not only on a subjective level: our institutionalized ways of collecting originate in this very desire to make visible the invisible dimension of the in-between. Objects are withdrawn from the world and re-enter it with a new set of meanings; the object is there because of its extra-material qualities and therefore always an object of the present, regardless of its date of origin. As Krzysztof Pomian notes, objects convert into what he calls “semiophores” which reach a metafunctional level where existence depends upon the production of meaning.

In this way, the Oglethorpe crypt corresponds directly to the institutionalized forms of our museums and archives. Consider briefly the following items from its inventory: a typewriter, dental floss, a radio, some plastic toys, an original Hollywood manuscript, a bottle of Bud-
All objects lose their function once the crypt is sealed, in much the same way as a medieval spoon, by the time it winds up in a museum, is no longer a spoon. The relation between history and representation enters this economy of mediation. Preservation becomes an act of production. This is the kernel of the complex relationship between man and objects, and perhaps the reason why we keep generating them by the billion and, eventually, trying to preserve them by the billion.

The emergence of public museums during the nineteenth century is often considered in immediate relation to the formation of the national state and reformist tendencies throughout Europe. The rise of history and archaeology as disciplines contributed considerably to the formation of ‘national identity’, as did of course art and architecture. Modernity, or the birth of the new by negotiating the old, needed its collective memories of partly fabricated past experiences and partly fabricated ruins. The staging of history in a public sphere of shared knowledge was a seminal way of achieving this. Thanks to new technologies, it became possible to resurrect the baroque idea of reassembling the world in one single place and lending it the appearance of a whole by means of carefully selected fragments and exemplars. However, baroque allegory was converted into realism only by erecting the historical within an imaginative space – a space open to the density of a textual narrative as well as the synthesizing strategy of using the interval (the gap) between objects.

As an institution, the museum is a time capsule in itself, one that mixes static time with dynamic in analogy with the relation between memory and forgetting. It is at the same time inclusive and exclusive. What you see are exhibitions or public collections: scenes arranged or reconstructed from its often considerable inventory. The heart of the museum is not its exhibitions but its depository, often located underground in climate controlled rooms where artifacts serve as representatives of different historical concerns. It is a belated version of the crypt, not only in the usual sense of catacombs and relics in Romanesque churches, but as the architectural internalization of its own ideological energy. There is nothing mysterious about this “energy”; it’s like fossil fuel, the accumulation of matter, age-old resources that serve the production of the new. What comes into play is a construc-
Fig. 5. Detail of inventories.
© Oglethorpe University.

Fig 6. Door to the Crypt.
© Oglethorpe University.
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tive tension between the objects “at rest” (in suspension, or repository dwelling) and those on display. The rationality of the disposition is as strange and uncanny as the cemetery: the being there of all that is no longer here. Yet the museum is not necessarily a cemetery of artifacts being exhibited on lit de parade; quite the reverse, it is consumed in the aural gleam of fetishized mediators. By entering, you may feel “closer to history”; but history is not available for revisiting: it is encrypted and reinstalled in an imaginative space.

Other Spaces (Utopia)

Imaginative space is a modeling element that combines the prospective ideas of culture with the material performativity turned into semantics (i.e. archaeological remains, textual propositions, comparative semiophores, etc.). It is this mode of imagination that generates a social dream of history.

The word “dream” should not be taken as the antonym of reality: it is the possibility of making present a world that is other to the world in which it takes place, and to do so without contradiction. History could therefore be viewed as a co-creation of chronologies where the actual is conditioned by the possible. By entering the realm of aesthetics, and integrating history with epistemic representations, the imaginative space submits to the political imagination. This plasticity of ideology, turning conclusions into inceptions, is also recognized in the utopian force of creative imagination as a will to history that stresses the will to future.

The concept of utopia has a long tradition that binds together fiction, history, and philosophy into proposal aspects of imagination. Since Thomas More’s 1516 novel, utopia has primarily been discussed as a literary genre that underwent a sudden inflation in the nineteenth century. Utopian representations are the desire for the world to be otherwise, but also to control it, to create a miniature kingdom so as to escape or to reform. Like the museum, it can make universal claims by using a delimited space in opposition to the outside. However, despite having a literary form, utopia could equally well be considered an individual mode of thought that reaches for the very essence of an imaginary reconstruction of society. It is not exclusively about the
ideal state, the *eutopia* or vision of the best of all worlds. The necessity is the *space* that is not yet historical, not yet actual, but that borrows their conceptual forms.

The utopian as political modeling opens up the space between the actual and the possible while often mistaking it for the neutral. What is common to all varieties of utopian thinking is the placing of a new historical situation within a given one, beyond maps and constitutions (the remote island, the state) or by exceeding temporality (once upon a time…). This is the condition that makes utopias future-oriented by essentially remodeling the present, in other words subjected to a historical condition but contesting it by creating a *non-topos*, a *nowhere*, presented as a *now-here*.

The *nowhere* of the has-been – in other words, history in its most uncorrupted and melancholy sense – is nothing but the other of the present, navigating our concerns and handling our repressions. Moreover, the idea of ‘a world’ as such is always a product of the imagination; you are *in* the world, you grasp it with your senses, yet you own it only as a montage of memories. The utopian is an attempt to overcome this, and more or less in the same way as the museum has to pretend to be outside history looking in. This pseudo-position, reached by intentionally forgetting the initial stance, replaces ‘a world’ with a *non-topos* in order to make it operative; otherwise, it’s just any fiction. Thus all the benefits from reaching this position have to be judged according to the unavoidable weakness that haunts all utopian thinking: whatever the intention, it is forced to be totalizing, since it could never be open-ended; all is there for a reason, and there are no coincidences, no history, no future, only the perpetual present of the ideal.

*The Oldest Program (Mythology)*

German Romanticism knew about this, which is perhaps why they did not settle for constructing utopias in the classical sense. Christian utopianism and messianic speculation about *futurus* and *adventus* is readily observable in the work of Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) and Friedrich Schlegel, where it is repeatedly theorized within an aesthetic-theological context.¹⁴
While the French Revolution was a revolution of the people, idealism and romanticism were a “revolution of the spirit”; a statement made loud and clear with Hegel’s philosophy of the absolute. Initially, however, there were politically radical attempts to confront essential institutions such as the university, the church, the monarchy and the state; a “poetic revolution” which regarded society as needing to move towards a shared imaginary center, “just like mythology was for the classical age”. In a text from 1800, Schlegel suggests a “new mythology” that will remove all distinctions between the productive imagination and the historical, philosophical fact of being in the world. The world is grasped aesthetically, i.e. creatively, yet identified only when broken down into discursive knowledge. But the world is itself a productive and originary force that acts in response to the co-producing power of the subject. Historical time is fundamentally a tension between past and future, and it is the imagination, not reason, that holds the two together. Between past and future, romanticism wanted to leave the door open.

Although Schlegel did not know of its existence, similar ideas were elaborated in an anonymous document of 1796/97 that was more or less written collectively by Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Schelling, and G.W.F Hegel. The document, much later given the title *The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, suggests that the “monotheism of reason” must be combined with the “polytheism of art and imagination”. That the past is recalled by memory and imagination does not mean that it remains past; it is not a virtual container of stagnant impressions or physical remnants in depositories and libraries. It is there endlessly for our desires of recreation. They call for a “new mythology”, a new imaginary center, which should not be mistaken for a demand for a new religion or archetypal narratives in the style of Herodotus or Ovid. Even if romanticism is known for its obsession with antiquity it is not a return of the classical mythology they anticipate. Mythology provided an opportunity to imagine a new society in which all conditioned principles would be superfluous, and to bring the imagined community into a community of imagination.

Today the idea of a new mythology may seem preposterous and ‘romantic’ in the pejorative sense of the word. Nonetheless, some of its central ideas were implemented in administrative forms, and later,
under the spell of science, eventually acquiring institutionalized and even repressive functions. In complete contradiction, history held society hostage and this in terms of an official authority of its heritage. In other words, the very phenomenon of the museum is equally preposterous, not to mention the NASA version of its representation of the distant future. In their pursuit of collecting, classifying, restoring, and narrating, cultural memory and historical representation have perhaps lost track of their common denominator: the imagination and the very ability to make up the past. What if the past is not (and never will be) “there” as something irreversible and finished, but something yet unfinished.

Notes


2. See www.keo.org. The project is an initiative by the French artist-scientist Jean-Marc Philippe.


4. For a sensitive study of this immaterial distribution of the material, see Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, Death, Memory & Material Culture (Oxford: Berg, 2001). On “der Akt der Belebung” and the continuation of living by means of things, see Jan Assmann, Das kulturelle Gedächtnis (München: Beck, 1999), 33 f.


8. For different features of these premises, see Jonathan Crary’s Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) and Barbara M. Stafford’s Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).
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11. I am thinking of the coexistence of the two Romes in what would later be termed Renaissance (rebirth). The resurrection of antiquity within early modernity was also the birth of archaeology itself; see Leonard Barkan, Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); cf. the chapter “Creative Anachronism” in David Loewenthal’s The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 390 ff. On imagination as extra-temporal ordering, see Johan Redin and Gabor Bora, “Fossils and Terrestrial Philosophy: Leibniz’ Protogea and Aesthetics”, in Cardanus: Jahrbuch für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Vol. 6 (Heidelberg: Palatina, 2006), 75–86.


13. The rehabilitation started with Ernst Bloch and has been continued by the British sociologist Ruth Levitas. See her The Concept of Utopia (Hertfordshire: Syracuse University Press, 1990). For utopia across aesthetic borders, see the anthologies edited by Jörn Rüsen and Michael Fehr, Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds (Berghahn 2007) and Die Unruhe der Kultur: Potentiale des Utopischen (Velbrück 2004).


16. For a translation, see The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics, ed. Fredrick Beiser (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–6. The fragment was found by Franz Rosenzweig and first published in 1917. On the long controversy over its authorship and content, see Peter Hansen, Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus: Interpretationen und Rezeptionsgeschichte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989). The title is confusing since it does not in fact represent a systematic approach at all but, rather, outlines prototypical ideas that return in the very different systems of Schelling and Hegel as well as in the mythopoetic notes of Hölderlin.

18. Not to say even frightening in the perspective of the German “longing for a new kingdom” during the era of National Socialism. This lineage is inviting in terms of political rhetoric and has been stressed in several ways; yet it is far more complex than creating equilibrium between these documents and the ridiculous ideas of Alfred Rosenberg. For a thorough analysis of the historical implications, see Manfred Frank, *Der kommende Gott: Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982) and *Gott im Exil: Vorlesungen über die Neue Mythologie II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988).