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I just don't think about it: engaging students with critical heritage discourse through science fiction

Article

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'I just don't think about it': engaging students with critical heritage discourse through science fiction.

Abstract

What does sci fi have to say about and to the people who collect and preserve? Using a scene from Cuarón's *Children of Men*[i] as a starting point the author explores some popular representations of heritage professionals and their spaces in science fiction. These chime with critically engaged museological theory and practice in recognising the role of museums in past and present injustices. The author asks whether popular sci fi representations can be used as a starting point for discussion and debate in professional training. Can sci fi change the way we work and create different futures for museums?

Introduction: Are we all Nigel?

Cuarón's film adaptation[ii] of P.D. James' novel *Children of Men*[iii] offers a view of the future museum. In a dystopia where society is pushed to the edge of collapse, a man tries to help a pregnant asylum seeker escape those who would exploit her child for political gain. In one scene protagonist Theo (Clive Owen) visits his cousin Nigel (Danny Huston) who runs the 'Ark of the Arts'. He drives his car through mass protests into the Tate Modern's now empty Turbine Hall. They enjoy a luxurious meal in a penthouse space. Theo finally asks "A hundred years from now there won't be one sad fuck to look at any of this. What keeps you going?" Nigel answers "*You know what it is, Theo? I just don't think about it*" and gestures with a forced smile to his private view.

I teach an undergraduate Museum Studies programme and I refer to this scene in teaching, asking my students, 'are we all Nigel?' This portrayal of the people who collect

and curate as entitled, remote, and unthinking is one which bears a contemporary resonance. Museums and other heritage organisations are increasingly engaging with their exploitative pasts and exploring their potential social impact[iv] [v] [vi]. Critical Heritage Theory and Practice questions the idea that museums are neutral and promotes an activist approach which seeks to create changes through socially engaged practice[vii]. This paper asks whether the futuristic, counter-factual, speculative, and propositional nature of speculative fiction can allow us to imagine, and potentially create alternative futures for our profession?

The power of propositional thinking

The popular representation of museums is not inclusive[viii]. In discussions with students, I see that the possibility of gaining enhanced access to objects and expertise often drives them towards this discipline. Sometimes it can be challenging to get students who took a course because of their love of museums to question what may seem welcoming *to them*. Thought experiments, playing with temporalities, and inversions of status such as those seen in sci fi can create a lens through which to question our own assumptions and privilege.

Butt's recent experiment[ix] at the Horniman Museum, London used passages regarding museums in science-fiction to provoke interventions. During the workshop, students restaged concepts from three science-fiction novels (H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1979)) within the museum. They moved furniture and themselves into uncanny configurations; for example, covering a radiator and a piece of taxidermy with black cloth

then revealing it to reflect upon the act of displaying and looking. This account made me wonder which texts and techniques I might use with my students to question the museum.

Finding sci-fi museum professionals

Finding speculative examples of museum professionals is harder than one might expect. There are relatively few curators in science fiction, and as this special issue makes clear, little published on the topic more generally. Museum learning specialist and fantasy author Graeme Talboys[x] has highlighted the lack of museums in science fiction and has suggested ways in which authors might engage with museums as spaces for imagined worlds.

With archives and libraries there are more examples. Like museums they collect and preserve but the nature of their holdings and processes differ in some key ways. Brett[xi] identifies the concept of 'information curation' as a common trope in science fiction, and it might be the wealth of information in the libraries and archives which captures the speculative imagination[xii]. The process of 'archivisation' as a source of power encapsulated in Derrida's work also appears to be a key element of this fascination[xiii]. Within science fiction Asimov's 'Encyclopedia Galactica' is an early evocation the drive to capture and thereby control knowledge and inspired subsequent authors such as Arthur C. Clarke and Douglas Adams[xiv].

Shmuland's analysis of fictional archivists highlights some key character traits, citing examples such as Frank Herbert's *Dune* Series, Michael Crichton's *Sphere* and *Star Trek*[xv]. Shmuland found that archivists are usually presented as older, wearing glasses, sloppily or primly dressed, and socially awkward. Another related theme in science fiction and horror is of collections and collectors. In *Doctor Who* and the Marvel Universe there are characters who will go to any lengths to possess rarities, including dangerous items and even people.

The idea of live displays is not purely speculative[xvi] [xvii]. Sci-fi imaginings often involve a flipping of status and loss of power for the protagonist who is collected. For example, in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* the protagonist recounts his experience of being collected and displayed by aliens[xviii].

Such representations of collectors connect with theoretical explorations of this act. In her seminal work on 'the curious human activity which we call collecting', Pearce[xix] argues that the personal experience of collecting can be explored from a psychological perspective as fetishistic. Hence curators and archivists are imagined as cold and dispassionate preserving the past for a greater power (good or ill), while private collectors are depicted as driven to unethical pursuits by their personal obsessions. This offers an interesting space to explore emotional engagement and care within and adjacent to the profession[xx].

Shmuland[xxi] and Brett[xxii] have also discussed the issue of control and 'the truth' in speculative representations of libraries and archives. Invisibility is not benign. In speculative fiction controllers of information often hide their identities to enhance their power. In the act of hiding authorship we make interpretations seem fixed and natural. My students often talk about 'the museum' acting independently as though it were itself an eldritch creature. This idea of '*the* museum' highlights the power of inherited structural inequalities but it also deflects personal responsibility in the here and now. Getting students to think about 'Wizard of Oz'-like hidden controllers can make them question their own role in this process.

Finally, there is the science fiction created to address these various inequalities. Politically engaged speculative fiction has long sought to question traditional power relationships and reflect wider societal debates. There are some examples which take aim at museums,

perhaps due to the increasing profile of repatriation and decolonisation debates in wider culture wars and activism. By following marginalised protagonists through experiences of being collected or resisting collection and display, we are forced to consider the museum as an antagonist and oppressor.

Core texts and models of engagement

Using two recent speculative examples with collecting and curation we can explore themes which might be used to engage future professionals. In both instances the museum is the antagonist and we follow two anti-heroes as they 'steal' back from the museum. The first example is Coogler's *Black Panther*[xxiii] which has had a wider impact regarding inclusive representation in popular science fiction. One scene in a museum has been used to great effect by Hannah Mason-Macklin, whose 2019 TED talk on decolonising museums I use in my teaching[xxiv]. In it the 'villain' Killmonger asks a curator in a museum gallery of African objects '*How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it, like they took everything else?'* Mason-Macklin moves beyond Killmonger's words as he 'steals' a Wakandan African object to examine how the two 'experts' play off against each other to control and disrupt the power of space. She highlights details such as the white curator's ability to flaunt food and drink policies by holding a coffee while a security guard monitors Killmonger closely. My students referred to this as part of an assignment looking at the work of activist Mwazulu Diyabanza who has been 'stealing back' items from French museums[xxv].

Questioning the idea of ownership, power, and knowledge this scene disrupts norms regarding right and wrong, expert and subject. In another example we move from a counter-factual contemporary scene to a post-earth solar system. The author Rebecca Roanhorse

(who identifies as African American and Native American) is one of a new wave of authors who explore racialised identity through their writing. In Roanhorse's 'heist' a young protagonist orphaned by colonial expansion is adopted by space pirates only to be orphaned again. She seeks her revenge by stealing from 'The Museum of the Conquered' and we see the museum through her eyes. The dispassionate and perfunctory labels disgust her, while the skull of a baby stops her in her tracks. It is not only the theft, but the display practice which dehumanises, distances and disgusts.

In these examples being simultaneously displayed and erased (through deliberate omission) is depicted as an act of cultural violence upon the marginalised by the dominant. Both texts also suggest transgressing laws which protect these structures. This raises a final ethical challenge regarding whether the museum can be dismantled or recreated from the inside with current structures and systems still in place[xxvi].

These texts have the potential to be powerful for my students in several ways. Firstly, they address issues of inclusivity and representation by turning traditional relationships of power and knowledge on their head. Their status as genre fiction written by those who are marginalised from the canon also gives them the power to disrupt accepted narratives. Finally, for disabled and neurodiverse students it allows ways to explore these ideas through diverse media.

The multi-media nature of these iterations also offers up opportunities to move beyond the pressure of a seminar on a set text into performance and embodied engagement. Mason-Macklin's[xxvii] talk on Black Panther utilises freeze frames and circles elements of the scene to highlight the performed and spatial elements of the power play. Butt's[xxviii] approach in terms of creating responses within the museum also shows the power of theatre and performance

as a museum is a 3D space which is experienced in embodied ways. Over the next year I plan to run a series of experiments with these and other texts as a means of engaging students with these issues.

Who writes our future?

In conclusion, there is great potential for activist work in sci fi writing and museums to speak to each other. As Butt[xxix] has demonstrated, science fiction is a particularly useful way to allow future professionals to engage in propositional thinking and imagine other modes of being. While representations of speculative museums are relatively sparse, they do exist, and creative writing residencies with museums may offer up interesting opportunities to further question the taken-for-granted through speculative fiction. Yet we cannot put the onus purely on creators when lamenting the lack of inclusive representations. As museum professionals and as educators we must engage with these issues and try to make change happen. If we are to imagine a future which does not involve staff sitting alone like Nigel surrounded only by artefacts while the world burns, we *must* 'think about it', and fully engage with the dystopian and antagonistic aspects of the contemporary museum. Through imagining and proposing other worlds, we might move some way towards building a different future.

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