

# Museums, Ethics and Truth: Why Museums' Collecting Policies Must Face up to the Problem of Testimony

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## Abstract

This paper argues that any museum's collecting policy must face up to the problem of vulnerability. Taking as a starting point an item in the collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I argue that the basic responsibility of museums to collect 'things', and to communicate information about them in a truthful way brings their collecting practice into the epistemological domain of testimony and into the normative domain of ethics. Museums are public spaces of memory, testimony, representation and interpretation that at once enable humanity to hold to account those who transgress while at the same time holding to account those who witness these transgressions. By virtue of this, museums can be considered spaces of ethics wherein testimonial and hermeneutic injustice can be confronted and challenged.

## 1. An Artefact of Atrocity?

The starting point for my discussion is the claim that a central normative concern of any museum's collecting policy must be a certain confrontation with the epistemological problem of vulnerability; which, in the context discussed here, is the 'problem' surrounding the conditions when an institutional body, like a museum, bestows authority on a 'speaker', be that an individual or an object. The basic responsibility of museums to collect 'things' and to communicate in a truthful way about them brings their practice into the epistemological domain of testimony and into the normative domain of ethics. While I will not suggest here a full-blown 'ethics of testimony' I would like to make this connection between testimony and collecting explicit. I would like to do so by way of a discussion of a seemingly insignificant item of every day material culture the like of which you might very well come across in a gallery, in a museum, somewhere around the world. It is a plain gold wedding ring. The ring I'm thinking of belonged to a survivor of the Holocaust. It was donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum by Flora and Louis Pearl in 2006.

Louis Pearl met Flora Stark in the SS kitchen of the Kaufering concentration camp in 1944. The smaller camp at Kaufering was a subsidiary of the more well-known Dachau camp in Bavaria, Germany. Getting to know each other via smuggled letters, Louis would later, in 1945, barter for two gold rings that had been secretly brought into the camp by prisoners arriving from the liquidated Lodz Ghetto. Flora's ring was confiscated following a failed attempt to get it to her in the women's camp but Louis managed to keep hold of his. In 1945 the women's camp at Kaufering was expunged and the inmates were sent on a Death March. Despite this, Flora survived and upon being liberated Louis and Flora were re-united. Louis proposed: they were married in Prague on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1945.

Now in the collections of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, Louis's wedding ring shares many of the features of other objects that comprise collections (particularly of social history) around the world: it is an *object of bestowed significance*.<sup>1</sup> We might think of this bestowing of significance in terms of a process of sedimentation. Anthropologist David Miller describes the process like this: people lay their possessions 'down as foundations, material walls mortared with memory'.<sup>2</sup> These objects then become 'strong supports that come into their own when times are difficult', and when 'the people who laid them down face experiences of loss'.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, people, having 'banked their possessions in the vaults of internal memory and external possession [,]...cash them in at times of need'.<sup>4</sup> At such times the significance bestowed upon the object comes back, it repeats its supporting function, for the sake of the individual's future.

Undoubtedly, as a wedding ring, many of the narrative connections of significance that surround this object are particular to the story of Louis and Flora. They are personal and they might very well bestow the ring with the 'value and emotional tone...[of a]...souvenir: [something that is] nostalgic, backward-looking and bitter sweet'.<sup>5</sup> The function of the souvenir is 'to remember', to provide a memorial

<sup>1</sup> Susan Pearce makes the point that objects like this populate social history collections but also collections of applied art and ethnography. See S. Pearce, 'Objects as meaning; or narrating the past', in S. Pearce (ed), *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 20.

<sup>2</sup> D. Millar, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>5</sup> Pearce, 'Objects as meaning; or narrating the past', op. cit., 20.

return of sedimented significance, and souvenirs can lend authenticity to a particular past as markers, evidencing a particular set of experiences, in this case Louis and Flora's, which we would never have heard of were it not for their gift to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the reference to the particular narrative of Louis and Flora, Louis's ring is of course also a tangible aspect of the cultural heritage of a group being implicated in the wider story of victims of the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> This ring is a token of a very intimate personal event, but it has taken on a wider significance. We could go so far as to say that it represents a 'minor' narrative within the 'major' narrative of European culture together with the events of the Second World War. Minority and majority status are not determined by the numbers of individuals countable in a group. Instead, being 'minoritarian' or 'majoritarian' is something that is reciprocally determined by virtue of the position of any group within a set of power relationships. Minorities are determined by an asymmetrical power relation to the majority.<sup>8</sup> The minor narrative surrounding Louis's ring has the capacity to challenge assumptions

<sup>6</sup> Susan Stewart argues that souvenirs function by 'lending authenticity' to the past. Collections, by contrast, are loaned authenticity by the past itself. In fact, collections are ahistoric and self-enclosed precisely because they have replaced history with a form of classification beyond the temporal. If there is a time to be reckoned with in a collection then it is temporal simultaneity. See S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 151.

<sup>7</sup> According to UNESCO, tangible cultural heritage includes artefacts such as Louis's ring but also monuments and historically significant places that are deemed valuable enough to preserve for the sake of future generations. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/cairo/culture/tangible-cultural-heritage/>.

<sup>8</sup> The terminology of 'majoritarian' and 'minoritarian' was developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. According to Deleuze and Guattari, unlike 'major writers' who seek the development of an expressive authorial voice, 'minor writers' are self-effacing: their aim is to give voice to the minorities who are determined by virtue of their reduced position of power in relation to a more powerful majority. Kafka was a minor writer because he created an alien 'minor' voice within the 'major' German language that it was necessary to write in even while it remained detached from the indigenous Czech Jewish population. See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, translated by D. Polan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16. For a discussion see Ronald Bogue, 'The Minor', in C. J. Stivale (ed), *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts* (Bucks: Acumen, 2005), 110–120.

surrounding marriage, masculinity and ethnicity dominant in Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Louis was, after all, at once suitor, prisoner and Jew.

For Louis the public availability of his wedding ring in the collection of the Holocaust Memorial Museum might serve to 'validate' his and Flora's description of the Concentration Camp, a narrative that would no doubt be multifaceted. Louis's wedding ring might, as Pearce has put it, 'bear out the truth of [his testimony while helping him to convey] the particular moments which he wished to recall'.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Louis was the first person to cherish this object and perhaps the ring connotes a time when 'life seemed...more meaningful' to him:<sup>10</sup> a time when all his decisions carried with them the possibility of devastating consequences. Yet any nostalgic or sentimental effect that the ring might have is at once disarticulated or 'de-territorialized'<sup>11</sup> by virtue of its other connections both in the museum and beyond. Nevertheless, it is within the context of a museum that we encounter this ring. Museums do many things.

<sup>9</sup> Pearce, 'Objects as meaning; or narrating the past', op. cit., 20. Pearce is drawing on Stewart, *On Longing*, op. cit. in this regard.

<sup>10</sup> Pearce, 'Objects as meaning; or narrating the past', op. cit., 20.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, op. cit., 86. Deleuze and Guattari depict the notion of deterritorialization as follows: 'But we must declare...that an assemblage has points of deterritorialization; or that it always has a line of escape by which it escapes itself and makes its enunciations or its expressions take flight and disarticulate...'. Ibid., 86.. In Deleuze and Guattari's social ontology an 'assemblage' (*agencement*) denotes the primary formation within social reality. (See R. Due, *Deleuze* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 132.) An assemblage is a collection of different elements. J. Macgregor Wise draws on an archaeological example in order to describe this notion (archaeology being the discipline where the notion of assemblage is perhaps deployed most and where it functions to denote a collection of artefacts considered as an analytical unit). The remains of everyday life (cutlery, tools, animal and human remains, portable art. etc.) discovered in a particular site together with their relations express a particular character, 'Romanness', for example. The assemblage 'Romanness' includes qualities (refined, small, large) and affects/effects: that is, assemblages, for Deleuze and Guattari, function in particular ways, in our example the assemblage might affect or revise our notion of what it meant to be a cultural group within the Classical World. Assemblages are selective and create 'territories' (my office, their hotel, his car). Territories are not fixed: the notions of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation refer to the events when territories are made and disarticulated. For a discussion see J. Macgregor Wise, 'Assemblage', in Stivale (ed), *Gilles Deleuze*, op cit., 77-87.

Here we emphasize two of their possible functions: museums are, at once, a place of testimony and a place of memory (*lieux de mémoire*).<sup>12</sup> And while the notion of ‘memory’ brings together a range of cognitive abilities or capacities by which information is retained and reconstructed, often, memory is put to work (psychologically and socially) for pragmatic reasons in the present.<sup>13</sup> As testimony machines, museums are agents of this ‘memorial pragmatism’ and for this reason, in one way or another, they affect all of our lives.<sup>14</sup>

### 2. Memory, Testimony and Living after Auschwitz

Memory is concerned with what we believe to be true and with what we believe to have happened; we remember events that are not now occurring but that did occur at some point in the past. Memory is not imagination or perception but it has a close relationship to these other faculties. Memory may be imbued with emotion and it is involved in extended affective states like grief or love; it is socially important in acts of commemoration and it is ethically significant in acts of promising and bearing witness. It is through memory that history affects our actions and experiences in the present.<sup>15</sup> Memory is also, notoriously, prone to error. Memorial errors can be trivial or catastrophic and so, as memory machines, it is necessary that museums come to terms with memory as a process of distortion: it is their task to articulate this memorial process of distortion to individuals, visitors and the public in general, who have a personal rather than a professional interest in history.<sup>16</sup> This problem of the

<sup>12</sup> S. A. Crane, ‘Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum’, in B. M. Carbonell (ed), *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 319. Article first published 1997.

<sup>13</sup> John Sutton, ‘Memory’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012), Edward N. Zalta (ed). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/memory/>.

<sup>14</sup> Thinking of museums as machines allows us to approach them non-teleologically. Museums, approached mechanistically, are taken to be nothing more than their ‘connections and productions’. See C. Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 55–56. Goodchild understands a machine in Deleuze and Guattari to be ‘an assemblage of parts that works and produces’. P. Goodchild, *Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire* (London: Sage, 1996), 218.

<sup>15</sup> Sutton, ‘Memory’, op. cit., 1.

<sup>16</sup> Crane, ‘Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum’, op. cit., 332.

status of memory as it impacts upon the museum is at once epistemological and ethical.

Returning to our example of the Pearls' gift, in one respect, Louis's ring might be taken to be an example of an artefact of atrocity.<sup>17</sup> Museums face difficult choices regarding whether and how such artefacts should be displayed. Should, for example, a museum display the shoes or hair of victims of an extermination camp? Holocaust Memorial Museum curators in Washington DC faced just this dilemma over the display of human hair: would visitors avoid the museum, or visit the museum but for the wrong reasons, just to see this exhibit?<sup>18</sup>

The curators worked with representatives of concerned public groups in the process of shaping their displays and they faced the challenge of reconciling and displaying the memories and testimonies of survivors, together with historical interpretations of the events of the Holocaust itself.<sup>19</sup> In general, there is a tendency toward commemorating 'suffering experienced' rather than 'suffering caused' in Holocaust memorials, and the curators of the Holocaust Memorial Museum sought to limit the amount of space dedicated to evidence of the 'suffering caused' by its perpetrators. So, visitors to the museum will not find much in the way of Nazi memorabilia together with accounts of the Third Reich. Rather, they will find displays that seek to honour the victims of the Holocaust by bearing witness to their 'suffering experienced'.<sup>20</sup>

Coming to terms with the fact of this suffering has plagued, and continues to plague, every commentator on the horrors of the Holocaust. One example of a philosopher who attempted to do so may prove instructive here. In a lecture delivered on the 15<sup>th</sup> July 1965, Theodor Adorno commented that his earlier statement that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'<sup>21</sup> actually carried for him a dual signification. He writes:

Just as I said that after Auschwitz one *could not* write poems – by which I meant to point to the hollowness of the resurrected culture of that time – it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one *must* write poems...[since]...as long as there is

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 329.

<sup>21</sup> T. Adorno, *Prisms*, translated by S. Weber and S. Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967), 34.

an awareness of suffering among human beings there must also be art as the objective form of that awareness.<sup>22</sup>

'Auschwitz' now has a dual significance. Here it stands as Adorno's short-hand for the horror of the Holocaust as a whole, and for his part he stated that he was on the side of art in the antinomy that he had identified when it came to the representation of suffering.<sup>23</sup> Art is essential to humanity as the objective form of the awareness of suffering. But 'Auschwitz' is also a place, a camp, that has become synonymous with the Holocaust. Auschwitz was built on the order of Heinrich Himmler. It was an industrial complex that comprised three camps: the first, Auschwitz I, was a concentration camp. It was opened on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1940. Auschwitz II-Birkenau, both a concentration and extermination camp, followed on the 8<sup>th</sup> October 1941 and Auschwitz III, the labour camp, was opened on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1942. Something in the region of 50 more small camps in the surrounding area came under the same administration as the three main camps. In just five years 1.3 million men, women and children were sent to Auschwitz; 1.1 million of them were killed; 90% of them were Jewish.<sup>24</sup>

'Auschwitz' and the Holocaust as a whole was new and terrible: the members of the International Nuremberg Tribunal were lost for words when trying to come to terms with it: just what was this horrendous event? What was its meaning? In the end they adopted Raphael Lemkin's (1944) neologism 'genocide' (Greek *genos*, birth, genus, species; Latin *caedere*, to kill) in order to describe this atrocity, an atrocity that actually comprised four distinct types of crime identified by the Tribunal. These were crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of participation in planning to commit all of these crimes. The Nuremberg Trial concluded that the Nazi genocide was the prototype for any other such crime: it represented the actual and total destruction of a population that was declared undesirable because it 'belonged to some species, genus or group', and not because of the ideas or of the opinions of the individuals who made up that population.<sup>25</sup>

For historian Elizabeth Roudinesco, Auschwitz perverted not only the *raison d'état* (national interest) but also the criminal impulse

<sup>22</sup> T. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems*, edited by R. Tiedemann, translated by E. Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 110.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>24</sup> E. Roudinesco, *Our Dark Side: A History of Perversion*, translated by D. Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 90.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

itself; there and then, criminality was not conducted as the result of some terrible unconstrained impulse or out of a perverse desire for transgression. Rather, the criminality of Auschwitz, embodied in the figure of Adolf Eichmann, who was in charge of the logistics of the Final Solution and who chillingly claimed to have lived by Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, was an inversion of the Law: it resulted from a 'perverse rationalisation' that made crime the norm.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the question of poetry, Adorno asked a further question, which he believed was necessitated by Auschwitz: 'whether one can *live* after [it]?'<sup>27</sup> Adorno confides in us, his listeners and readers, that he is haunted by the recurring dream that he is no longer really alive but instead exists just as the 'emanation of a wish' of a victim of Auschwitz. Anyone approaching the mantle of 'thinker' in Adorno's estimation *must* face up to this question. It is the question that was put so starkly by Sartre's Resistance fighter who asked 'whether or why one should live in a world in which one is beaten

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 91–94. The violence done to Kant by Eichmann might be intelligible in terms of the disclaimer that, regarding the order that takes the form of an (categorical) imperative, 'it doesn't matter what I think or feel about an order since, by virtue of its issue, the order *must* be carried out!'. For Roudinesco, it is the 'imperative force of the order itself' that is primary for understanding Eichmann (and others like him) rather than the specific content of the order itself (ibid., 91–92). It is the fact that Eichmann was an agent of an inverted Law that made him so 'terrifyingly normal'. Eichmann claimed that he was just 'following orders' and went so far as to deny that he was anti-Semitic (despite reportedly having said that he would 'jump into [his] grave laughing' due to his 'extraordinary satisfaction' at having the death of five million Jews on his conscience. See H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 460. A chilling echo of the deadly imperative force of an order can be heard in a report issued by the state news agency and published by Roman newspapers on 25<sup>th</sup> March, 1944. It reported the shooting of ten prisoners (who were un-connected to the event) for every German killed by a bomb attack on a German Police Column that was purportedly intended to sabotage Italo-German cooperation during the Second World War. For the thirty three German casualties three hundred and thirty five prisoners were killed in an abandoned quarry. The report ends with the simple statement that 'This order has already been carried out'. A. Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, *Metaphysics*, op. cit., 110.



until one's bones are smashed'.<sup>28</sup> This is a basic philosophical question for Adorno since it concerns the very possibility of 'any affirmation of life' whatsoever when confronted by the realisation that, as Hannah Arendt put it, we do not *owe our existence solely to ourselves* but are instead radically limited and insignificant, mired in the contingencies of history and the aleatoric.<sup>29</sup>

In light of this we should not be surprised that any museological representation of the Holocaust or of any other atrocity for that matter should be at once challenging and problematic. Discussing the 'demands of holocaust representation',<sup>30</sup> the critic Michael Rothberg emphasizes that a central feature of Adorno's view is that a 'new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen'<sup>31</sup> and he adds that this in fact necessitates a 'new relationship to the future' for human beings.<sup>32</sup> This relationship is related to the problem of memory and is at once ethical and epistemological. It is ethical in the Kantian sense of issuing a categorical imperative that bears upon us regardless of our desires and it is epistemological in terms of the problematic of testimony and truth. It was this new relationship to the future that was taken up as the mission of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. Its primary aim is to:

advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the[se] events...[as]...well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.<sup>33</sup>

By virtue of this mission the Holocaust Memorial Museum (at least in Washington DC and perhaps also in other Holocaust Museums, in so far as they share this mission) establishes its candidacy to be 'a', if not

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>29</sup> A. Parr, *Deleuze and Memorial Culture: Desire, Singular Memory and the Politics of Trauma* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>30</sup> T. Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). For a discussion see R. Wilson, *Theodor Adorno* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 110.

<sup>31</sup> T. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London and New York: Routledge, 1973), 365.

<sup>32</sup> Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism*, op. cit., 32.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/mission/>.

‘the’, site where this new relationship to the future ‘takes place’. By preserving the memories of those who suffered and by presenting these memories to its visitors the Museum aims to inspire in their visitors reflection on their moral and political responsibilities as these moral and political responsibilities are already unfolding into our shared future, perhaps provoking them to take an ethical stand in line with this categorical imperative that would foster the creation of a non-fascist kingdom of ends. This museum’s ‘present’, if I can put it this way, occurs by making the past present, and it is normatively effective in terms of how that past comes to affect our future. It is in just these terms that such a museum might understand the possibility of becoming an agent of a renewed affirmation of life, bearing witness to the past for the sake of our future.

### **3. Material Testimony and the Epistemological Problem of Vulnerability**

If we are to grant this possibility, that a museum may take part in creating this new relationship with the future, then this should prompt a re-reading of that place where Adorno’s thought – and, by extension, critical theory – has done the most to shape the theoretical discussion that has unfolded surrounding the museum. Adorno shared Valéry’s worry about the ‘shock’ of the museum, a shock that brings to historical-philosophical insight the fact that works of art are dying by our hands. In the museum, Adorno says, we ‘put the art of the past to death’.<sup>34</sup> The German word *museal* carries this association: it ‘describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying’.<sup>35</sup> Because of this, such objects ‘owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present’.<sup>36</sup> Yet, as we have seen, this cannot be the whole story. Reading the Adorno who challenges humanity to face up to the question of the possibility of a new affirmation of life after Auschwitz against an Adorno who sees in museums a ‘neutralisation of culture’ and the poverty of ‘cultural traditions’, should prompt us to re-read his closing remarks in ‘Valéry Proust Museum’ (1955), since it is there that he intimates the coming of a new meaning to dead works that will affect our future.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, op. cit., 177.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 175.

Despite the museum's association with the death and entombment of art and artefacts 'the natural history collections of the spirit have actually transformed works of art [and, by extension, other kinds of artefacts] into the hieroglyphics of history. [They have] brought [to] them a new content while the old one shrivelled up'.<sup>37</sup> As hieroglyph (Greek for 'sacred carving'), the artefact combines within itself a double materiality of pictograph (pictures) and phonemic (vocal sounds).<sup>38</sup> The image of the *museal* artefact as hieroglyph of history implicates Adorno in later discussions of materiality that have developed an analogy between material culture and language.<sup>39</sup> In these terms an artefact that was produced by human hands bids a response, an account, to be given of it that would elucidate its meaning, its historical significance, what it marks out *as* a hieroglyph. As hieroglyph, the artefact is essentially related to speech: it requires a response, an account, from 'us' in order to be understood. Let me call this the artefact's 'material testimony'.

Even though the medium of the artefact's testimony is the speaker, the agent, the artefact's 'truth' is ultimately independent of the truth of the speaker's testimony (we can, after all, read an artefact incorrectly). In other words, just like Egyptian hieroglyphs, the content of an artefact's material testimony can be (more or less) epistemologically inaccessible in the absence of a Rosetta Stone. Artefactual material testimony will always require articulation and appropriation by speakers, be they individuals or institutions. Adorno has opened the door to seeing in artefacts the possibility of their renewed appropriation in speech from which a new affirmation might follow. This new affirmation (that perhaps indicates a certain utopian optimism) would bear witness to certain artefacts as hieroglyphs of human suffering and would ultimately seek to deploy them (after the fashion of the Holocaust Museum's mission statement) for the sake of 'our' future as an example of how not to live and of what not to accept.

Granted these considerations, we might suggest that underlying a certain number of the gifts of artefacts to certain museums by

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>38</sup> B. M. Fagan, *People of the Earth: An Introduction to World Prehistory* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2010), 349.

<sup>39</sup> See C. Tilley, 'Interpreting Material Culture', in S. M. Pearce (ed), *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 67–75. Tilley points out that since the advent of structuralism in European thought it has been possible to view material culture symbolically as a signifying system and to develop an account of it that draws on Saussure's linguistics.

individuals and groups is the desire that they become hieroglyphs of collective memory. If so, then gifts are given so that ‘we’ remember and attempt to make sense of a singular past whose articulation is prompted by the object, for the sake of our collective future; and this constitutes an ethical undercurrent to aspects of contemporary collecting. Given this context it would make sense to say that a museum’s function is, to many collectors, benefactors and visitors, to act as a material custodian of our memories and as such its ethical burden is responsibility not only to collect, conserve and to communicate, but to do so *truthfully*.<sup>40</sup>

In collections the use-value of objects is aestheticized.<sup>41</sup> Collections reframe objects ‘within a world of attention and manipulation of context’.<sup>42</sup> Because of this (as Stewart has argued), the function of the collection is to create a new context. This context will stand in a metaphorical relationship to everyday life and will present the possibility of ‘starting again’<sup>43</sup> with, potentially, a renewed and enhanced moral awareness. It is within such new contexts that any validation or otherwise of personal narratives will take place. Part of this new context is epistemological. Within any new context an epistemological connection must be established between the object and the speaker if the artefact is to bear any relationship with what the speaker is attempting to establish. In other words, the object becomes the material marker evidencing the individual’s (or group’s, for that matter, although this would present additional challenges) testimony. I suggest that there is an epistemological parallelism between material and linguistic testimony such that both might be false or true. Material and linguistic testimony are both truth apt.

Testimony is a central plank in how we come to know the world and it is a ‘crucial source for history’.<sup>44</sup> David Hume put it this way: ‘there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even more necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the

<sup>40</sup> S. Okita, ‘Community, Country, and Commonwealth: The Ethical Responsibility of Museums’, in G. Edson (ed), *Museum Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 139. Such an aspiration to truthfulness is reflected in the Museums Association’s definition of a museum. <http://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions>.

<sup>41</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, op. cit., 151.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>44</sup> D. LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 11.

testimony of men, and the reports of eyewitnesses and spectators'.<sup>45</sup> But, testimony poses significant issues for philosophers and museum professionals alike. Testimony is a speech-act wherein a speaker 'says', 'tells' or 'asserts' *something*.<sup>46</sup> As an assertion, a testimony offers a proposition that is depicted as true. As Michael Dummett puts it, testimony, as an informative utterance of a sentence, 'serves not only to express a thought, and to refer to a truth-value, but also to assert something, namely that the thought expressed is true, or that the truth-value referred to is truth'.<sup>47</sup> In cases where a speaker's utterance is to be taken literally (as opposed to playfully, or fictionally, and so on) testifying that 'X' is or was the case, is equivalent to speaker 'S' inviting hearer 'P' to understand and to believe that 'X' is or was the case.<sup>48</sup>

Following Adler, by taking a broadly Kantian line, we can suggest that in ordinary cases hearer 'P' has a duty of fidelity to trust speaker 'S' since a stance of active distrust or active suspicion would impose a higher standard of acceptance than would be 'socially, conversationally, or epistemologically appropriate'.<sup>49</sup> However, speakers are capable of deception and error, exaggeration and ambiguity and such factors generate an epistemological problem when hearers only have the word of an individual speaker as the source of their belief (that 'X'). Trusting a speaker involves the ascription of authority to them and the epistemological problem of testimonial vulnerability (does the listener, in our case the institutional body of the museum, have good reason to bestow authority on a 'speaker', individual or object) enters into the problematic of (institutional) collecting. Given this, a central normative concern of any museum's Collecting Policy must be to face up to the epistemological problem of vulnerability.

<sup>45</sup> D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by E. Steinberg (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), 74.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Adler, 'Epistemological Problems of Testimony', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013), Edward N. Zalta (ed). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/testimony-episprob>.

<sup>47</sup> M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), 298.

<sup>48</sup> Adler, 'Epistemological Problems of Testimony', op. cit., 2.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 3.

#### 4. Vulnerability, Collecting Policies, Display and the Assurance View

It is a fundamental and basic responsibility of museums to ‘collect, conserve and communicate’<sup>50</sup> in such a way that they ensure that the information gathered, conserved and communicated about collections – and by extension, human history – is ‘accurate and true within the limitations of current human knowledge’.<sup>51</sup> But not only that, museums must, in the manner of their presentation, be willing to, as D. K. Dean puts it, ‘acknowledge the inherent fallibility of any ideas expressed *due to their source*’.<sup>52</sup> That is, museums must not only face up to epistemological vulnerability; they must make explicit reference to it somewhere. One might almost imagine a sign bearing these words ‘Beware! Our exhibits may be lying, or at least not telling the full story’ hanging in galleries in museums (but also art galleries and other exhibition spaces) around the world. Fundamentally, museums *qua* institution have a (perfect) duty to be honest.<sup>53</sup> After all, museum visitors trust exhibitions as a reliable source of truth and their expectation is that the information presented by them is accurate and, ultimately, ‘true’.<sup>54</sup> In no small part exhibitions that challenge visitor’s expectations both with regard to the information on display and with regard to a museum’s claim to be an authoritative source of truth are the cause of much public frustration over modern minimalist exhibition and display approaches.<sup>55</sup>

A museum is a site where subjectivities and objectivities collide.<sup>56</sup> It is a space of memory and testimony but it is also a space of representation and interpretation. Indeed, interpretation is an expression of what museums ‘do’: a museum is a space of (the generation of and mutual influence and conflict of) plural views and self-reflection.<sup>57</sup> Experience in museums is not ordinary experience: it is experience that might contest representation and truth. This disruption of the

<sup>50</sup> Okita, ‘Community, Country, and Commonwealth’, *op. cit.*, 139.

<sup>51</sup> D. K. Dean, ‘Ethics and Museum Exhibitions’, in G. Edson (ed), *Museum Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 218.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 218. Italics: my emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>55</sup> Crane, ‘Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum’, *op. cit.*, 319. See also B. Lord, ‘Philosophy and the Museum: An introduction to the special issue’, *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21 (2006), 79–87.

<sup>56</sup> Crane, ‘Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum’, *op. cit.*, 319.

<sup>57</sup> B. Lord, ‘Philosophy and the Museum’, *op. cit.*, 83.

ordinary is, no doubt, a source of frustration for some visitors.<sup>58</sup> As Beth Lord suggests, the lack of substantial, or, indeed, of any, explanatory panels in some modern galleries is due to a contestation of the value of (institutional or authoritative) interpretation by the museum itself: minimal interpretation reflects the museum's self-awareness as both a postmodern space of pluralism and self-reflection, as well as an Enlightenment space that contests the interpretation of things in terms of the very adequacy of conceptual schemes to the objects that they are intended to 'fit'.<sup>59</sup> What is at stake in much of the discussion surrounding modern museums, especially those that challenge visitors' expectations by asking them to consider how knowledge is constructed while at the same time offering only minimal interpretation to guide visitors, is the very status and trustworthiness of the 'museum as a memory institution' or memory machine.<sup>60</sup> Epistemology and ethics overlap. Together, any attempt to confront epistemological vulnerability, combined with a challenge to interpret an object or display (perhaps only minimally by the institution), not only highlights the overlap of epistemology and ethics within the institutional context of the museum it does so in a potentially explosive manner.

The museum may opt for a version of the 'Assurance View' of testimony: this might be an appealing way to deal with Dean's imperative that museums note the fallibility of any exhibit due to their source, since on this view it is the speaker that 'constitutes [their] utterance as a reason for belief'.<sup>61</sup> In such a case the museum's trust in the speaker and their communication of their story is based on their acceptance of the speaker's invitation to them to trust him or her. The speaker stands behind their word and asks the hearer to believe them. This performative dimension to the assurance view is significant since trusting someone on this view of testimony amounts to 'rely[ing] on [an individual's] assurance, [while] not...assum[ing] responsibility for the truth of' their assertion oneself.<sup>62</sup>

Trust, on the assurance view, amounts to dismissing (within limits) counter-evidence to a speaker's claim.<sup>63</sup> In spite of this, adopting a

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>60</sup> Crane, 'Memory, Distortion and History in the Museum', op. cit., 319.

<sup>61</sup> Adler, 'Epistemological Problems of Testimony', op. cit., 26.

<sup>62</sup> See C. R. Green, 'Epistemology of Testimony', *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ep-testi/#SSH2c.v>.

<sup>63</sup> Adler, 'Epistemological Problems of Testimony', op. cit., 26.

version of this view of testimony should not serve as a 'get-out clause' for museums when it comes to the veracity of their records and displays. Instead, it should be taken as a basis for museums to face up to their responsibility to inform visitors about testimonial and interpretive fallibility or, in other words, to erect their 'beware signs'. Given this, adoption of the assurance view becomes the vehicle for stating the epistemological problem of testimony and memory within the context of modern museums.

Further to this, a museum as an institution might also become a *public sphere of ethics* since, operating on the basis of a Kantian 'good will', any museum could provide a public space for witnesses to historical events of injustice to counteract any forces that would seek to neutralize their individual or group testimony.<sup>64</sup> For this reason an important ethical function for museums, within their adoption of an assurance view of testimony, could be to address problems associated with testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. For Miranda Fricker, testimonial injustice occurs when 'prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word' while hermeneutic injustice occurs at a more basic level 'when a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences'.<sup>65</sup> By providing a space to let a diverse series of testimonies be heard, museum space could challenge and seek redress at both these levels of injustice. On the level of testimonial injustice any deflated level of credibility ascribed to a speaker's word could be held up for collective scrutiny in terms of the material evidence while, at the level of hermeneutic injustice, collections and displays could problematize the lack of collective interpretative resources needed to make sense of the social experiences of a group.

<sup>64</sup> In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant describes the good will as being the only unqualified good. For Kant, a good will is 'not good because of what it effects or accomplishes...but only because of its volition...it is good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued'. I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, translated by M. J. Gregor and A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4:394/50. It may prove salutary for the ethical *museal* imagination that, even if the museum fails in its self-appointed ethical aims, after Kant, we might position ethical appraisal to evaluate the founding volition for the museum and not on its ultimate successes.

<sup>65</sup> M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.



## 5. Holocaust Museums and the 'Real Order' of Nazism

Given this, Holocaust Museums prove to be a case in point, as they constitute by their establishment the first step of a possible hermeneutic redress. It has been suggested that the goal of Nazism was to totally destroy the Jews, to eliminate them from 'memory itself'.<sup>66</sup> Roudinesco has suggested that the real order of the Holocaust was actually 'Kill the Jew and then kill anyone who witnessed the murder'.<sup>67</sup> This is compatible with the perverse aspiration of the Nazis that the Jewish Museum in Prague should serve as a 'museum to an extinct race'. Extinction is, after all, not murder and erecting a monument to an extinct race would dissolve any guilt associated with the demise of the race in question: such a museum could maintain a perverse aspiration to natural history. It is chilling to note that the *Sonderkommandos*, the Jewish prisoners who were forced to empty the Gas Chambers, were to share the same fate as the victims whose remains they were tasked with disposing: they too were to be silenced. There were to be no witnesses to hold the perpetrators of the Holocaust to account. There was to be no hope of redress at either the testimonial or hermeneutic levels. The value and power of the witness's testimony is as the assurance view has established. Its power resides in the ability of a witness to performatively constitute an utterance as a reason for belief. Witnesses to a crime do so by standing beside what they say and by letting their gaze be cast over the figure of the accused, be this an individual or humanity itself.

Setting the stage for subsequent Holocaust Deniers, all of the Nazis involved in the genocide disavowed their participation in the acts that they were charged with committing.<sup>68</sup> This fact is well known. The paranoia and neurosis associated with the desire to keep the truth hidden from view by those still at liberty after the war is well represented by the character Klaus in Cavani's (1974) *The Night Porter (il portiere di notte)*. Klaus is one of the leading members of a fictitious Nazi psychoanalytical group whose members are attempting to cure themselves of their guilt complexes. He says: 'Even if it says a thousand [names] on paper, ten thousand, it

<sup>66</sup> D. LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 64.

<sup>67</sup> Roudinesco, *Our Dark Side*, op. cit., 97.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

still makes less impression than one witness, in flesh and blood, staring at you. That is why they are so dangerous, Max.’<sup>69</sup>

The witness’s testimony and the hope of redress, at once pressing and poignant, are more powerful than the ‘objective’ inanimate evidence (the names on a page) because of the constitutive act of declaring a testimony to be true: ‘you may deny that you were there, that you did what you did, but I saw you do it!’. This is the force of witness testimony and as a public space that confronts the effects of trauma, that is, of suffering experienced, a museum may provide a public forum for testimony and its collections may validate such claims.<sup>70</sup>

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

The evidence of suffering experienced that is displayed in museums implores us to face up to Adorno’s questions: how are *you* going to live with this knowledge? and what are *you* going to do about it? From this *museal gaze* there is nowhere to hide. If denial of their murderous acts amounted to a further act of violence toward the victims of the Holocaust by its perpetrators then the establishment of a Holocaust Museum, as a public act of memory, constitutes an important act of contemporary resistance.<sup>71</sup> The museum, as a public space of memory, testimony, representation and interpretation at once enables humanity to hold to account those charged with transgression while at the same time holding to account those who witness these transgressions: both the victims and the bystanders. The museum is the materialized gaze of humanity turned upon itself: it is at once a space of ethics and truth. Museums are places where society might attempt to begin to redress past testimonial and hermeneutic injustices by bearing witness to the material

<sup>69</sup> Liliana Cavani (dir.), *The Night Porter* (USA: Anchor Bay, 1974), 44:03. See also, G. Marrone, *The Gaze and the Labyrinth: The Cinema of Liliana Cavani* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> This applies not just to Holocaust museums since other museums might have displays dealing with other atrocities. Sadly, museums have plenty of examples to choose from. In other words, it is not necessary that the entire museum be given over to trauma or injustice (as with Holocaust museums) in order to perform this function.

<sup>71</sup> LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust*, op. cit., 68. LaCapra explores the notion of a public act of memory constituting an act of resistance.

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testimony of the artefacts of atrocity associated with these acts, the Gas Chambers themselves, the remains of the victims that have been discovered and even Louis Pearl's wedding ring. Through this, these lost testimonies can be intimated in the present.<sup>72</sup>

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