

The Present as Past: Science Fiction and the Museum

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I would like to use the next half an hour to develop our consideration of the speculative, to consider it in terms of the abstract, perhaps even the imaginary; something unsafe, unpredictable, and uncertain. And where better to contemplate that tension between the hypothetical and the fantastic than the worlds of science fiction. So, I'll ask you to join me in dwelling in the role of the museum in science fiction, before we direct our gaze back to the present to consider how these speculative spaces might serve as provocation for museum engagement, looking specifically at a recent workshop run by myself and Dan Byrne-Smith at the Horniman Museum.

Dunne and Raby (2013) talk about the speculative in terms of the existence of a set of events which might lead us 'from here to there.' But, perhaps more importantly, they call for the speculative to perform a critical function, and it's on those terms that I intend to talk about science fiction; as a critical tool which allows us to reflect on the world we inhabit. This critical function can be considered as a defining characteristic of science fiction. As described by Darko Suvin (1979), science fiction can be considered "the literature of cognitive estrangement". But, while in literary fiction this can be achieved by holding up a mirror to the world, building on Brechtian notions of alienation and estrangement as processes by which literature is able to prompt a reconsideration of reality, in science fiction the mirror is a crucible. It doesn't just reflect the light of reality into the darker corners, it warps its very fabric to confront us with the scope of the imaginary.¹ For Suvin, this is a process undertaken with intent; to entertain certainly, but also to interpret and to prompt a critical re-examination of reality. In an echo of Dunne and Raby, these fictions provide "not factual imitations of a better world but illuminations of the way we imagine this one" (Williams, 2014). The question this talk and the workshop set out to explore then is whether this science fictional way of thinking, distancing the observer in a world made strange in order to establish a point of meaningful reflection, could act as a prompt for engagement with museum exhibits.

In the first instance these fictions have the potential to support the museum in efforts to encourage critical engagement with objects on display. Within the worlds of science fiction the impossibility of fully describing the entirety of an imagined world means that the objects, artefacts, and spaces cannot afford to be inconsequential.² Each is subject to the scrutiny of a reader trying to piece together an entire universe, requiring them to develop a mode of critical observation. Once read in the context of a science fiction or text a similar artefact presented as an exhibit might be approached more critically as a dialectical object which provides a complex commentary on its own mode of production and use. This level of cognitive estrangement can be found across science fiction and fantasy and I would highly recommend Glyn Morgan's work on the role of the object as a conductor of memory in alternate history.³

¹ "significant fictional re-presentations of relations among people that present the reader with the possibility of rearticulating our political relationships." (Suvin, 2010)

² "The props of good sf, however, denied the protection of custom and habit have to be built more solidly than the shadows with which we lazily surround ourselves in real life." (Jones, 1999)

³See: (Morgan, 2020; Morgan and Palmer-Patel, 2019)

But given our collective interest in museums I would like to narrow our focus to future fictions. In *Archaeologies of The Future* Frederic Jameson (2005) discusses the science fictional in utopian texts in terms of its ability to function as a memory trace; an ability to communicate “messages of otherness but transmitted in the past.” These fictions present us with the not-yet or the may-not-yet-ever-be, allowing us to inhabit imagined worlds and then carry these experiences of possible futures with us as memories alongside the memories of our own lived past. This ability of science fiction to provide us with a memory of a life as-yet un-lived is perhaps most evident in narratives set in an imagined future. In these future worlds the objects which survive us take on a poignant role, standing as symbols of the values and the preoccupations of the present, material remnants of both our accomplishments and our shortcomings.⁴ They can provide a connection to the past which offers a source of hope or resistance against totalitarianism (*Fahrenheit 451*) or stand as testament to our collective folly (*Planet of the Apes*). Through the tangible presence of these objects the potential and the repercussions of our actions in the present are held accountable. They provide the physical evidence against which we imagine we will be judged. This act of imagination has been rightfully critiqued by scholars such as Kate Marshall (2015) as symptomatic of our persistent anthropocentric view, “a rampant if frustrated desire for ubiquitous consciousness” evidenced by our inability to depict a future where we are not recognized and known.

However, these imagined features also provide a vital ground to consider the material conditions of the Anthropocene. In the construction of these entire worlds these fictions are vast enough in scope to acknowledge complex global issues which operate across scales of space and time simply not available to other forms of fiction, while the fact that they are entertainment reliant on empathetic engagement with characters, places us in a position to relate to these otherwise vast and incomprehensible changes.⁵ The act of bringing the narratives of science fiction into the museum space has the potential to extend the temporal scope of an object by engaging the viewer in imaginaries of a future which could allow them to be subsequently situated within a broader context of urgent challenges, such as climate catastrophe. This temporal estrangement allows us to consider the present recast in the guise of a ruin or a relic, a common theme in science fiction. As discussed by Brian Dillon this can be a productive space, a site of radical potential for consideration of the future.⁶

But to narrow our focus even further, in the narratives to the future which also feature museums, archives and libraries there is the opportunity to confront both the shock of the object out of time and out of place, but also the shock of the object invested with new meaning recontextualized by a society or a time different to our own. Rather than the recovery of fragments which have survived a disaster, the imagined museum of the future is the result of a sustained effort to protect selected objects from decay. The selection of materials and moments of our present which require or deserve preservation. We are driven to question not just the meaning of the objects themselves but how these objects have been chosen and by whom, providing a critical reflection on both the collection and the nature of the museum itself.⁷

⁴ “The temporality of past potential futurity.” (Power, 2010)

⁵ See: (Clark, 2015; Craps and Crownshaw, 2018; Crownshaw, 2017; Dimock, 2013; Garrard, 2014; McGurl, 2012)

⁶ “the ruin is a site not of melancholy or mourning, but of radical potential – its fragmentary, unfinished nature is an invitation to fulfil the as yet unexplored temporality that it contains” (Dillon, 2011)

⁷ “what will the future make of us when we have become its past” (Lupton, 2005)

In these fictions the descriptions in the architecture and the design of the museum can act as a spatial shorthand which evocatively expresses the imagined cultural attitude towards these material signifiers of our present. As in lived reality, the museum acts as an architectural site where our present can be encountered and most importantly where this encounter has been expected, anticipated, and designed. As discussed by Jones and MacLeod the architectural design of a museum is a product of social cultural economic and political systems in which it was developed.⁸ As such it provides a critical focal point for the consideration of our relationship with material culture reflected both in the socially constructed assemblage and display of objects, and in the design and construction of the museum itself. The nature of this design can add meaning to the objects it can it contains establishing new narratives built around spatial associations as we move through the museum space. It can have an emotionally affecting or symbolic quality, shifting the terms of encounter. But all of this relies on the individual visitor's interpretation and response to these experiences. As with all architectural design the museum can be considered a social practice made through our performance within that moment.

So, by exploring the museum of future fiction we have the chance to reflect on the material culture of our present expressed in both the exhibited object held at an estranging distance by its position in the future, and by its framing within a society other than our own. We are also granted the chance to reflect on how our own attitudes are expressed in the design of our museums by witnessing how the materials of our present are exhibited and presented back to us.

To reiterate, by exploring the relationship between the museum and science fiction and the museum in science fiction we have the chance to reflect on three different levels of estrangement; that of the object subject to scrutiny because it belongs to a world other than our own - which might allow us to look back at the materials and present, that of the contemporary object projected into the future which allows us to reflect on the implications of our material culture within an extended frame of planetary time, and that of the contemporary object projected into the future and housed within a museum - which allows us to reflect on what it means to select, preserve, and attach value to an object, and provides a critical distance to consider how museum design reflects our attitudes towards the notions of history, progress, alterity and connection.

The workshop I ran at the Horniman museum with Dan Byrne-Smith was our initial attempt to grapple with some of these complex ideas of fictional objects of spaces, of imagined futures and the reconsidered present. Because I'm an architect I work through ideas like this by making them spatial. So the workshop stemmed from a seemingly simple question: what might come from an encounter with a museum object once it was recontextualized within a museum of science fiction? Over the course of just one hour, 15 students and practitioners of Art and Design were invited to construct a temporary installation or series of installations which attempted to restage some quality of museum space as described in a science fiction novel. As well as using speculative fiction as a source material and a critical methodology, this was a deeply speculative proposition. We were asking participants to construct something without a refined idea about how it would be received, to undertake a very swift almost instinctual form of design improvisation in response to a prompt. So, at the very heart of this workshop is a celebration of uncertainty, of the potential for discovery and delight

⁸"Museum architecture is not an object floating free of the social world, or a passive silo in which this assembling happens" (Jones and MacLeod, 2016)

which is possible when engagement is not entirely predetermined but is open to the possibility of failure.

The larger group was subdivided into three and each selected an object from the wonderful handling collection at the Horniman museum to use as the focus of their installation. In doing so they removed these objects from pre-existing framing narratives; the categories and histories implied by their previous location, as well as detaching them from the helpful accompanying information and notes. Although I doubt it needs to be stated in this context, I do want to note at this moment that this workshop relied extensively on the curatorial expertise which enabled us to engage with these objects in the first place and which allowed these objects to be subsequently understood within wider and more specialist frameworks of knowledge once the workshop had concluded. As well as the object, each group was presented with the descriptive extract of a museum space which would be used the source material for their design. A starting point for construction or a shared point of departure into a space which was unfamiliar and estranging. The three science-fictional museums we explored were, in order of our engagement rather than chronological order, the Ancient House in Zamyatin's *We*, the Remember Rooms in Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*, and the Palace of Green Porcelain from H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*.

Then a slight, involuntary sinking of the heart- down, down, down, like descending a steep hill - and we were at the Ancient House. The whole, strange, fragile, blind structure is wrapped in a glass shell: otherwise, of course, it would have collapsed long ago. I opened the heavy, creaky, opaque door and we were in a dark disorderly space. All the lines created by the furniture all mangled by that epilepsy, not adhering to any sort of equation. I bore this chaos with great strain.

We

Zamyatin's *We*, written in 1924 presents a dystopian future of totalitarian control. The presence of the ancient house is incongruous to the systemic and homogeneous architecture of surveillance which is presented throughout the rest of the novel. Rather than a museum structure, here an innocuous domestic dwelling is preserved under glass. The glass cases of the museum scaled up to contain a singular exhibit. Other buildings are not necessary, as the ancient house makes no attempt to assist the visitor in understanding this other way of living. Instead it exists to present it as incomprehensible, as overwhelming and mystifying, it's only intended message the superiority of the One State which has superseded it. In its preservation of a single dwelling complete with interior furnishings the Ancient House share something with contemporary museums of domestic life, of folk museums, and architectural museums which attempt to provide a glimpse into the everyday life of a specific place at a distinct moment of time.⁹ But rather than a multitude of dwellings each speaking to the complex subjectivity of daily life, the singular isolation of the Ancient House suggests that this is all that this society needs to know about our time of the present.

The group responding to this extract chose a bird's nest as their object to evoke the sense of complexity and chaos maintained in the text. Its form is intimate and familiar but when you look more closely it's detail is overwhelming. The bird's nest was already a protected object cushioned on tissue paper and encased in a box with the transparent lid. It already enacted some of the spatial enclosure of the text a complex object held in stasis within a protective environment. The group described wanting to create another layer around this chaotic object

⁹For example: St Fagan's National Museum of History, Highland Folk Museum, Dennis Severs' House

which evokes the atmosphere of complexity found within. They decided to use chairs to construct this, opening up the possibility for the rest of the group to be involved in the act of construction. As we stacked them around the bird's nest one person stepped forward to shelter it, an active protectiveness in response to the risk that we were creating. It felt like an instinctual response which laid bare the collective responsibility we held for the object in the centre. Earlier in the day someone had asked 'who the collection belonged to' and who was responsible for its care, and it felt like we had inadvertently performed our own response to that question. In the act of protecting this object the installation inadvertently directed our discussion outwards, to question why it required protecting. It made the object to seem all the more fragile and precious once it was presented as something at risk.

"You associate the nest with safety, this creates a sense of danger... the need to protect this object. The way the chairs are balanced it seems precious"
(workshop participant)

We began to hypothesize about the nature of the world outside which would make such an action necessary, placing this object within the wider temporal and global context of species extinction and climate change.

"It makes you question: Why is it being protected? What are we trying to keep out? Why is this object so special? What has happened to the world around it that this is so valued?" (workshop participant)

In the subsequent discussion one participant said that the bird's nest reminded them of their childhood but the framing ran counter to this pleasant nostalgic connotation, disturbing it and transforming it into something unsettling.

"It reminds me of my childhood, climbing trees, to look for bird's nests... its disturbing seeing the nest here... it's not where it should be. ... The idea of the nest is comforting, it is a place of refuge and rest, surrounded by chairs which are also a space which provides rest, but it has been unsettled." (workshop participant)

For me, this was a wonderful moment of unexpected discovery. The improvised use of chairs coupled with the discussion of childhood provided scope to discuss human and non-human relationships all framed within the broader context of discussions about the Anthropocene and climate change.

She scrunched into the niche she had built for herself: a large heap of small pebbles which made a backrest and a mound of pebbles and coarse sand that curved around to rest each of her arms. Around her in the windowless chamber were nearly a dozen other girl-children who were digging out and settling into their places amid giggles and chattering. "Once upon a time." It was Alaka's rememberings today which drew Clana and her sisters into the past. "Once upon a time." Clana whispered with all the others.

The Wanderground

The Wanderground which was written in 1979 portrays the separatist feminist future where groups of women have established communities in the hills, an alternative society parallel to that within the cities. The Remember Rooms of the hill women act as a museum space containing artefacts from the cities they left behind, but they also provide space to share

stories. In the description of the museum the communality of the experience, the presence of other people, and the fact that this act of remembering is aimed at children, speaks to some idea of social necessity and suggests an act of collective memory which is being performed with some pedagogical intent. For me as an architect this reminded me of the work of Wang Shu at the Ningbo museum where the fragments of a previously destroyed village were incorporated into the cultural institution to purposefully unsettle this prospective project of cultural regeneration. Amid this communality there's also a sense of autonomy and spatial agency within the text with each individual able to carve out a site from which they can engage with the material being shared. The necessity of comfort, being in the presence of others and filling the support of the space at your back, becomes evident once the acts of remembering within the text begin all of which focus on recollections and violence and oppression. So, this museum functions primarily as an affective storytelling space - in its isolation of the visitor from the world outside, its creation of a space to encounter individual recollections and be emotionally affected by the experience. In this it reflects or echoes contemporary design of museums for a similar purpose, spaces where the memory of trauma is acknowledged and held.

The group responding to this extract decided to stage a performance. They huddled together under a rug which had been draped over the chairs, and sat in a circle and began to pass an object between them. Their discussion developed without ever revealing what the object was. As they passed it around, they hypothesized about what it might have been, gradually building an origin story which held the echoes at the beginning of a religion. We didn't have the opportunity to discuss at the time whether this was a conscious reference to some common science-fiction tropes of the post-apocalyptic group huddled together cradling the last remnants of civilization, or the many texts which feature the reinterpretation of a contemporary object and the subsequent establishment of a religion or cult around it - such as *The Book of Dave* or *A Canticle for Leibowitz* or the very many episodes of Star Trek the Original Series which have this as a plot device. But the very familiarity of these tropes meant that even without it being explicitly stated, we immediately placed this performance in a moment of futurity, expanding the scope of our discussions beyond what the object currently meant to us, to discuss what it could mean in some speculative future.

“A different context of no context.” (workshop participant)

After the performance the group involved described wanting to perform the act of storytelling in the extract a moment which they had read as post-apocalyptic. They had chosen a calculator as a symbol of the technological and scientific progress emblematic of our age, and were attempting to tell stories as if it had been discovered with no previous idea about its function. In the subsequent discussion they touched upon how the inhabiting of a character or an alternative narrative perspective made them more aware of their own understanding of this object. Not that it added any new knowledge, but that it made them aware of how little of that understanding was innately conveyed by the object itself and how incomprehensible it could be.

“We tried to hold it, to talk about it, without knowing what it is. But it is hard to imagine ignorance, to imagine not having seen it before. It's difficult to drop what we know.” (workshop participant)

This led into a discussion about how difficult it is to imagine not knowing and the impact that these pre-existing frameworks of knowledge or experience have on how we approach objects within a museum setting. It was interesting to me as well how this act of storytelling which was intimate and personal for those huddled together under the fabric, engaged with the rest of the group. Some of us were required to hold the blankets in place that they didn't fall down onto the performers, and our involvement in the staging meant that we weren't able to crouch down and peer in. The fabric muffled their voices so that it was difficult to hear what was being said, and the scale of the space meant that it wasn't possible for anyone else to join them. As a consequence, although we were literally holding this performance and space together as a group, we were also outside of it, unable to physically or intellectually engage with the discussion. While the performers were enacting a temporal distance from our present moment were all further removed, all the more uncertain and adrift.

I found the Palace of Green Porcelain, when we approached it about noon, deserted and falling into ruin. Only ragged vestiges of glass remained in its windows, and great sheets of the green facing had fallen away from the corroded metallic framework. Going towards the side I found what appeared to be sloping shelves, and clearing away the thick dust, I found the old familiar glass cases of our own time.
The Time Machine

The final text *The Time Machine* written in 1895 and features a museum which stands in ruins. A building which represented the height of scientific progress and civic mindedness, neglected and decaying. Its exhibits no longer of interest to the peaceful Eloi people who have seemingly evolved beyond the need to strive or want. The museum it describes is explicitly a direct descendant of the recently completed museums of South Kensington. Its metal framework would serve for the contemporary reader as a signifier of technological advancement, covered with delicate porcelain and glass whose fragility speaks of an aesthetic refinement and a sense of self-assurance, built for celebration and not for defence. But over all of this lies the weight of dust.

So the design of this museum tells us something of a grand flourishing of artistry and technology developed in accordance to ideals of scientific progress which had at some point been abandoned. Not because it befell some great calamity, but simply because the world had moved on. It presents us with an idea of progress surpassed, and with that the grand striving for the mastery of nature, the achievement of ages are cast into irrelevance.

The final group of the workshop decided to focus in on this moment of discovery in this extract. The idea of uncovering a knowledge which might have been lost. They placed their object, a stuffed bird, in the corner of the room up against a radiator (much to the dismay of the curator who was present) and then they draped a cloth over it. All of this was done while the other groups are planning their approaches so when we came to enact this extract, we were initially quite disconcerted by the fact that it was already in place and none of us had noticed. It had been made deliberately easy to overlook.

“You don’t know, but not knowing is different from being invited to discover”
(workshop participant)

The group described wanting the cloth to echo the dust in the text, something which needed to be swept aside to reveal the object beneath. Building on this moment of discovery we explored how the act of revealing something; subjecting it to a heightened level of scrutiny

might change is seemingly mundane object. We surreptitiously placed sunglasses, watches, sweets and coins under pieces of fabric and enacted a dramatic reveal of everyday objects. A camera lens was uncovered which was discussed as a highly technological object and in the process critiqued for its refined specificity of use, devoid a function without the exact model of camera it corresponded to, a product of planned obsolescence. This led us to reflect on the material history of the Anthropocene, notions of scientific progress which are evident in a highly refined technological object built for such a short period of utility, out of a plastic which will take centuries to degrade.

Throughout this workshop the act of revealing, the sense of discovery, the reframing of these objects all worked as a tangible acting out of some of the processes of cognitive estrangement present in the science-fiction texts. As we negotiated the complexity of our own readings of familiar objects in an unfamiliar setting it created an opportunity to reflect on our own pre-existing knowledge and experience of that specific object and material culture. It was also an opportunity to reflect on the subjectivity of this experience in a forum which could value emotional or personal associations as much as empirical knowledge.

“For it is the story told, the message given, and the ability of social groups to experience it together that provide the essential ingredients of making a museum important” (Gurian, 1999)

While this has obvious limitations in as a pedagogical method to gain greater understanding of the object being displayed, it provided a vital space to discuss our own cultural assumptions, biases and methods of interpretation while also acknowledging the processes of selection, preservation, and display which had brought that object and this group together.

Regardless of the installations produced, or the discussions which arose from them, I also believe there is a value inherent in the act of collective construction itself. These installations were the result of a haphazard throwing together of people and materials, and as such they project a sense of impermanence and fragility in each configuration. This quality of throwntogetherness is described by Doreen Massey in relation to urban environments where it can be found in the unlikely juxtapositions of buildings or the uncoordinated being together of neighbours. As Massey (2005) describes it is a vital part of the productiveness of spatiality, which opens up spaces of possibility through encounters with diversity and difference. This temporary act of construction might have been fleeting and somewhat inconsequential, but it is still a critical part of design within a museum. A small opportunity to engage with an object through speculative thinking and design. If, as one of the prompts for this symposium asks we're interested in how interpretive tools can be applied to collections, or how we can use these tools as prompts for discussion and dialogue, I stand as an unabashed advocate for the strange and unexpected encounters which are possible with and within the worlds of science fiction.

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