

**The Reliquary in the Ruin: Museums in Science Fiction**  
**Amy Butt**

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“I felt trapped, imprisoned in that primitive cage, caught by the savage whirlwind of the ancient life.”  
Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*

I had a different talk planned before our venue change.

I was going to talk about the museum in science fiction as a place which resisted ruination, about the architecture of grand lobbies and glass cases which are imagined to create pockets of time, our collective attempt to deny entropy.

But, I realized in discussing the boycott of Senate house with Francis and the other organizers of this event, that I was failing to acknowledge the complexity of the museum as an institution.

Like the university, the space of the museum is only able to present an illusion of continuity because of the unremitting dedication of curatorial and custodial staff, because of the labour of care performed by the cleaners, security officers, catering staff, AV workers, porters, gardeners and maintenance workers. Henri Lefebvre talks about architecture as a social product, something that we collectively and continually make through our actions and interactions. While apparently static, it is renewed and maintained by our acts of engagement. In this light, the architecture of the museum is more than a framing device for an individual encounter with an object, it is also the locus and celebration of the ongoing performance of myriad acts of maintenance.

So this talk will, as advertised, look at the architecture of the museum in sf, in particular at the museum in four future fictions, *The Drowned World*, *The Time Machine*, *The Wanderground*, and *We*, but it will also ask how these texts offer us a space to consider the perception of maintenance, both as an act of reproduction and an act of resistance, through the cultural or societal performance of care made manifest in the museums of science fiction.

Maintenance is a fundamentally conservative act. To maintain is to allow an existing state to perpetuate, to sustain it against decay, to preserve it from failure. It has similarly conservative social connotations, sustaining the systems it operates within, patching over shortcomings and filling in the cracks.

But maintenance is also a radical act. It exists in what Lisa Baraitser calls suspended time, creating moments of impasse. It resists narratives of linear progress, it deals with vulnerable and fragile states, and demands an understanding of the vital role of labours of care.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argues that one of the ways in which totalitarian regimes ensure the continued domination of their subjects is by the manipulation of their relation to time itself, through the denial and destruction of the materials and moments which served as evidence of a time outside of that system, in this context the preservation of memory, of culture, and the care implicit in the labour of sustaining and maintaining an alternative are utopian acts.

Maintenance holds the potential to be both an act of reproduction and an act of resistance.

Within science fiction narratives, Susan Sontag has noted the appeal of the aesthetics of destruction, the way we are drawn to imagining futures which decimate the built present leaving only an alluring ruin, in a catastrophic failure to maintain our contemporary moment. But for Vivian Sobchack the wonder of science fiction comes not from the act of destruction, but from the subversion of the familiar. For her, part of the appeal of the ruin is in the estranging presence of the familiar within the landscape of a far future, or the object whose narrative connection to our present is maintained, despite the destruction which surrounds it.

In these future worlds, the objects which survive us take on a poignant role, standing as symbols of the values and preoccupations of our present, material remnants of both our accomplishments and our shortcomings. They can provide a connection to the past which acts as a source of hope or resistance, (Fahrenheit 451) or stand as testament to our collective folly (Planet of the Apes). In these fictions the objects which survive us make tangible the potential and the repercussions of our actions in the present, they provide the physical evidence against which we imagine we will be judged. This act of imagination has been critiqued by scholars such as Kate Marshall, as symptomatic of our persistent anthropocentric view, evidenced by our inability to depict a future where the materials of our present, as proxy for our contemporary selves, are not recognized and known.

However, these imagined futures also provide a vital ground to consider the material conditions of the Anthropocene. As noted by Richard Crowshaw, in the construction of 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. But while the studies of the imagined future and the Anthropocene focus on the materials which are imagined to survive us, whether we want them to or not, I am more interested in narratives where objects have been continuously maintained, either rescued from the rubble or conscientiously conserved. In these imaginary museums there has been a process of selection, the discerning distillation of materials and moments of our present, to determine which require or deserve preservation, and which can be deployed to support the new future we find ourselves in.

Here, we are driven to question how these objects have been chosen and by whom, providing a point of critical reflection on both the collection, and the nature of the museum itself as a narrative constructed from fragments. As in lived reality, it is an architectural site where our present can be encountered, and most importantly where this encounter has been expected, anticipated and designed.

There are of course, a number of sf texts which feature museums, from the repurposed churches in *1984* where St. Martin's in-the-Fields is converted by the party into "a museum... of propaganda," and *Last and First Men* where "Nearly all the churches were destroyed or turned into temporary factories or industrial museums", to the fictional history which place itself in the museum, in *Doctor Who* or *Battlestar Galactica*, and I know that Colin Sterling is doing some fascinating work on the museum in sf as a space of both refuge and chaos. In these narratives the descriptions of the architecture and design of the museum act as a spatial shorthand which evocatively expresses the imagined cultural attitude towards these material signifiers of our present or the fictional past.

In its choice of objects, the museum collection imparts a sense of social or cultural value, while its architecture serves to inform the visitor how these objects should be understood; whether they are to be revered, or reviled, to be approached with admiration or regret.

But as discussed by Jones and MacLeod the architectural design of a museum is also a product of the social, cultural, economic and political systems in which it was developed. So, the museum is a doubled act of preservation, it preserves the curated object, and, through its architectural framing, it re-performs the social system within which it was constructed.

As an architecture enmeshed in these performances of preservation, the museum is a site of maintenance made manifest. Here our habitual disregard of curatorial and custodial labour is disrupted: far from being hidden work done in the service of another use, maintenance work is the

primary function of the museum. It is undeniably present in every brightly polished glass case and every painstakingly labelled specimen.

So, while the museum building provides insight into political and social structures, conceptions of history, and questions of value, when considered as a manifestation of collective acts of maintenance, it also provides a glimpse into imagined attitudes towards change, decay, and acts of care. And it is with these notions of the museum as a site of maintenance and care made concrete, that I want to turn to four novels which feature museums of an imagined future.

In JG Ballard's *The Drowned World*, written in 1962, the grand museums of our present have been submerged beneath the flood waters. They have been stripped of their most valuable artefacts, which were swiftly removed and are now safely stored beyond the climbing temperatures and rising tides. Into the torpid lagoon which was once London, drifts Strangman, a collector whose team of men dive for treasures that have been left behind in this rush to relocate.

While the British Museum and National Gallery gently decay beneath the water's surface, Strangman's boat, a repurposed casino cruiser becomes a temporary museum for recovered artefacts. There have been nominal attempts to convert the boat into a sufficiently suitable space for antiquities, but the tattered remains of grandeur which adorn the boat, its gaudy and tasteless decoration, remain as evidence of its transitory and temporary nature. The process of recovery appears to be based on the individual whim of the collector without discernment for aesthetic quality or even monetary value. They are being gathered with the intention of preserving their physical presence but are displayed only as an act self-aggrandisement. Rather than being a site of maintenance, the boat is the site of a saviour narrative, each object losing value once it has served it has had its dramatic moment of recovery.

The physical structure of the boat is not a suitable site for the sustained maintenance of the objects it houses, and they are packaged and stacked against the funnels and hatches. Their precarious storage on the boat creates the impression that they somehow are at greater risk in the hands of Strangman who does not revere them 'properly', than they were rotting in quiet dignity.

The museum boat might offer preservation of physical objects, but its narrative of recovery and storage is too enmeshed in notions of progress and conquest to be an act of maintenance. These objects are not cherished or cared for, just as the boat which houses them is allowed to rot and splinter away. Through the failing fabric of the museum boat, we are able to read the wider decay of the forms of civilisation which had created both the casino cruiser and the works of art it contains, on the deck the rescued relics suggest that while it maybe be possible to take radical action to shore up and recover fragments, the seamless cycles of maintenance have been abruptly disrupted.

### **The Time Machine**

*The Time Machine* was written in 1895, and the museum it depicts is described as a direct descendant of the museums of South Kensington which had been recently completed at the time of writing. Its metal framework would serve as evidence of technological advancement to the reader at the time, covered with a delicate porcelain and glass whose fragility and delicacy speaks of aesthetic refinement and assurance, built for celebration not defence. In the novel, the museum 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. So, the design of this museum tells us of some 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 that the world moved on.

The museum has fallen into disrepair, and the dust which settles over the cases carries the weight of intellectual apathy. But beneath the dust the exhibits remain preserved, undamaged by the passage of

time due to the perfect air-tightness of the glass cases. Their conservation implies that the knowledge they represent or contain remains in-tact, accessible to anyone who cares to visit.

The change in social structure outside the museum has rendered its contents irrelevant, and the performed acts of maintenance on both the cases and the building have gradually ceased. Most critically, the lack of maintenance serves to signal the loss of care, there is no value, no delight, being found in the museum space which would merit this labour. The dust which settles over the cases serves as a reminder that it is not enough to maintain the material of the past, if the performance of maintenance, if the act of care has ceased.

### **The Wanderground**

The next text, *The Wanderground* written in 1979, portrays a separatist feminist future where groups of women have established communities in the hills, an alternative society in 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 also providing space to share personal histories.

In this 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. Amid this communality, there is also a sense of autotomy and spatial agency with each individual able to carve out a site from which they are able to engage with the material being shared. The necessity of this emphasis on comfort: being in the presence of others and feeling the support of the space at your back, becomes evident once the acts of remembering begin; focusing on recollections of oppression and violence.

Here, memories are performed, enacted by specific members of the community. So, the physical presence of the custodians and curators of the collection are integral to the function of the museum, they generate and disseminate knowledge and experience through the items and recollections they are granted. But it is not done with the intention that the objects themselves be preserved, rather they are put to work, roughly handled by children in the service of community identity and an awareness of trauma.

Here then, the museum enacts a form of radical maintenance, holding the memory of trauma as an act of resistance against future oppression. It is an act of social care which does not look to preserve the physical materials of the past, but the stories they contain. It is an iterative and repeated act, done with the hope that the systems of oppression which created these objects can be resisted through attentive holding.

### **We**

Finally, Zamyatin's *We* written in 1924 presents a dystopian future of totalitarian control. The presence of the Ancient House is incongruous to the systematic and homogenous architecture of surveillance which is present throughout the rest of the novel. Rather than a museum structure, here an innocuous domestic dwelling is preserved under glass. The Ancient House has been selected to be preserved by the One State as evidence of the chaos of the past, it 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 is a planned act of architectural maintenance to support the continuation of its totalitarian systems of power and control. The only intended message the superiority of the one state which has superseded it. This is reflected in the architecture of the glass dome, the case of the museum scaled up to contain a singular exhibit, flawless and crystal sharp. The dome is sealed against the ravages of heat, moisture, dust, or weather, a perfected enclosure which denies the possibility of time and change. In the architecture of *We* there are no window cleaners, no rain stained patches which would

impede the ability to observe and be observed. Its flawless perfection refutes failure or frailty, and implicitly dismisses any need for care. Here then, is an architecture of preservation, a perfect system of maintenance utterly devoid of labour, and of care.

But under the dome the material of the past, the presence of time made manifest in the Ancient House cannot be denied. It persists as a site of alterity, a fragment of history which maintains the possibility of difference. As such it becomes a site of radical potential a site for illicit and unexpected acts of humanity, a passage into other worlds, a utopian enclave. The old woman who stands at the door offers wry support to the activities within and her performed acts of care for both the house and its occupants mean that under the dome the act of maintenance is able to take on its radical aspect

### **Conclusion:**

It is such a small thing, to shift the topic of an academic presentation, and I am well aware that to take an issue which has such tangible impact on people's lives and apply it to the theoretical spaces of sf might well be seen as a trivializing of critical concerns. But here I would argue that this would be to create false divisions, to deny that the production of knowledge is a collective endeavour, and deny my own indebtedness to the labour of those around me. My work should be changed by encounter with the work of others, whatever form that work takes. So, this shift in focus is done in acknowledgment of the acts of care and support we are able to provide one another, an act of recognition in service of the more vital and tangible acts of solidarity and political action.

In producing this talk, acknowledging the act of maintenance required me to question what it is that is worth preserving, and demanded that I recognise the deployment of the labour of care. As manifest in Strangman's boat, the moment of radical production or recovery is rendered meaningless when done without concern for maintenance, while the crumbling ruins of the palace of green porcelain point to the implications of the maintenance of an object bereft of the maintenance of the systems which enable it to be understood. These are narratives which speak to the wider social construct of acts of maintenance, its role in reproducing and sustaining the systems it operates within, made visible in their absence. But these fictions also speak to maintenance as an act of care, deployed as a form of resistance, in the wander ground, the storytelling spaces collectively hold traumatic memory as a defence against violence, while the seamless preservation of the ancient house beneath the dome allows it to exist as a space outside of the totalitarian control of the One State. By exploring maintenance in future fiction, I believe we have the chance to understand the museum as more than a static site of conservation, rather it is a performed social construct, reliant on the continual acts of maintenance which both support the curated objects and enable meaningful engagement.

I would argue that the timescales of science fiction also allow us to imaginatively inhabit the implications of maintenance withheld, to see the effects of a lack of care. It provides us with a site to ask what it is that we want to preserve, both in terms of knowledge, art, culture and that which we hope will outlast us, and in terms of the social, economic and political systems our acts of maintenance help to perpetuate. It challenges us to choose where we apply maintenance as reproduction, to sustain and support, and where instead, we deploy maintenance as a form of resistance, through the radical labour of care.