

I am going to try and unpack the question of ‘publics’ through critically reworking the themes of migration, diversity and territory. Hopefully this will produce a conceptual landscape with a different agenda with which to engage with understandings of the modern European museum.



- Obviously, the primary territory evoked by the modern public museum is that of the nation-state. The artefacts and artworks it archives, catalogues, and describes present us with a machine for narrating the past through the coordinates of the nation, while at the same time pretending universal validity. As part of a public pedagogy the museum is very much a product of the European Enlightenment. It plays a central part in the narration of the nation, coordinating ideas about historical time, progress and identity in a manner that tends towards the confirmation of national prestige – for example, in the displayed power of its science and knowledge – where an implied nationalism passes through the presumed neutrality of its premises and protocols. If it is the site of the accumulation of time in the objects displayed and explained, it also inadvertently reveals its own historical place and power in the modern world.

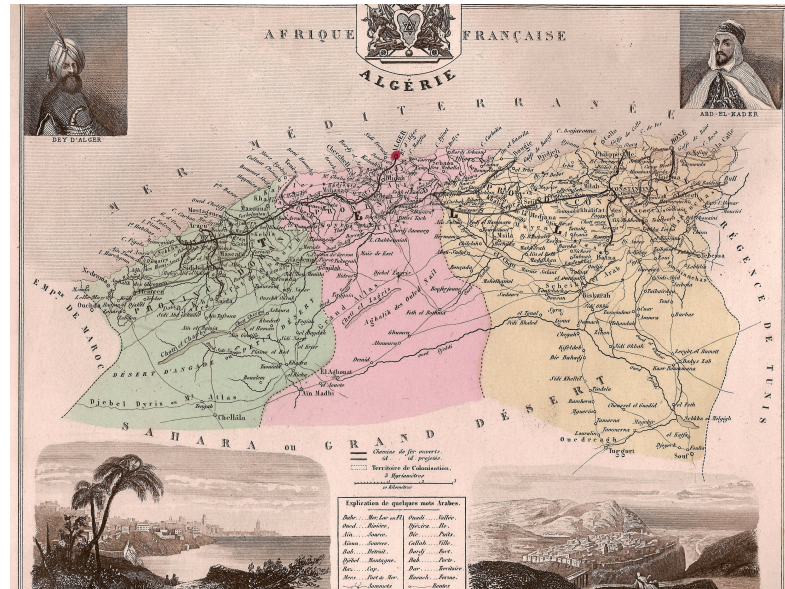


- In many ways, the museum is a mirror of the nation where the public tends to expect a certain reconfirmation of itself in the visit. The first point here, of course, is that neither the nation nor the public is homogenous. Sex, gender, race, class – all the classical categories are involved. But beyond some sort of statistical differentiation, questions of power and authority immediately emerge. Put simply: whose history is on display, who has the authority to narrate? Who feels represented and who marginalised and excluded? The museum narrative tends to offer a single institutional version of the world, leaving the publics to negotiate their own versions and interpretations. At this point the concept of territory becomes an altogether more turbulent proposal, potentially crossed by other histories and cultures that are often not authorised by the official version.



- Most obviously and immediately this introduces the theme of migration. Again, it would be important to unpack this argument and pull it away from its contemporary framing in terms of crisis and emergency. For if modernity – from voyages of discovery, foreign conquest, global trade and planetary financial flows – is all about mobility and the perpetual movement of goods and capital, it is equally, and inevitably, also about the migration of bodies, lives, cultures and histories. One comes with the other. The time-space communality of modernity has been in place for 500 years. Earlier periods also experienced such mobilities (and I will return to this point in the context of

colonisation in the ancient world), but it is only when the whole world can be conceptually charted by the compass of capital resourcing its accumulation across the globe that we register the brutal specificity of modernity sustained between the charged poles of capitalism and colonialism juridically transforming the world into property and profit.



- If mass migration is modernity, then the movement back and forth across Mediterranean waters, both south to north and north to south, is part of a common hubris motored by a trans-national political economy and the worlding of the world by capital. At the beginning of the Twentieth century the European population of Algeria (the Ottoman province militarily occupied by Paris in 1830) was close to one million, the majority French, alongside sizeable components of Spanish and Italians. Tunisia next door had an Italian population of 100,000, while in Libya (another Ottoman territory invaded by Italy in 1911) had an Italian population that peaked in the 1930s at around 13% of the population.
- What is occurring today with migrations towards the over-developed north of the planet is the latest episode in a long narrative. From the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary migrations there are clearly differences but also deep, underlying continuities that would permit us to write the social history of

modernity, from its colonial inception down to the present, as essentially the history of migration and diasporas.

- Today, with ports closed, walls raised, legal apparatuses creating illegality, the contemporary migrant becomes the cypher of our time. She involuntarily decodes the asymmetrical relations of power that reveal the deadly restrictions and necro-politics of Occidental democracy, and all the limits of its vaunted humanism, liberty and rights. If we look at a map of the Mediterranean everything is laid out flat. Borders are clearly defined. All is seemingly captured by the eye, rendered measurable and knowable. This is the basis for the geopolitical chessboard where everything is put on the dissecting table. It apparently provides a neutral and disinterested (or scientific) rendering of reality. It appeals to a liberal organization of the world where all the actors are treated as though equal, permitting the analysis to remain ‘balanced’ and ‘impartial’ – something that is patently impossible to sustain when considering present-day relations between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, or, the dramatically unequal relations of power that sustain the colonial violence in Palestine-Israel.
- This is not merely a ‘political’ matter; it reveals the same epistemological hubris that configures the social and human sciences. They, too, in their scientific ‘neutrality’ and purported ‘objectivity’, are part of the complex and differentiated apparatus that produces that type of politics and that form of knowledge which also charges the practices of cataloguing, curating and conserving the materials and histories stored and represented in the museum. This is not a blanket critique, but rather a registering of limits that might permit other perspectives and other possibilities to emerge.
- Arriving at this point – and rendering migration and museum critically proximate, even entangled in each other’s trajectories – permits us to distance ourselves from a manner of reasoning that continually divides understanding

into enclosures of competence. The aesthetical and the juridical, the historical and the humanitarian, are rarely permitted to cross and pollinate each other's paths. The connections are resisted and refused. Yet, saving lives at sea, or abandoning them to the abyss, opening borders or establishing camps, are questions and decisions that criss-cross our lives in multiple directions: from everyday encounters in the street and the evening news of more drownings and deaths, to political elections, art galleries and museums. Migration as death: these images are the traces, echoes and ghosts of this implacable scenario where the meshing of migration and modernity is drawn so tight as to be necessarily evaluated together.



- To contest the oblivion and cancellation of the unrequited history and necessary political culture the migrant proposes, is to cut conservative moorings tied to an unquestioned faith in homogeneous identities, cultures and histories and their political securing of the status quo. The centrality and possibilities of the modern museum in this historical and cultural arrangement is clear.
- This also means to insist that the museum is itself a site of migration. Its objects always come from elsewhere (as do frequently their explanation). The history of the objects explained and on display, not simply their ‘origins’, but also their transit and travel to the museum, are intrinsic to the collection whose apparent stability veils an altogether more dynamic and mutable arrangement of material and language. The objects on display are never naked, empirical facts. In their description they are constructed, they support a certain narrative about the past and the present (and their claims on the future). To disturb and query that particular framing and representation is to propose another museum
- Every night borders are crossed and confuted. The seemingly external world – Africa, Asia, Latin America – insists on its constitutive role in the making of Europe and the West. If the contact zones are invariably conflict zones they are also internal to a planetary modernity that is never simply ours to manage and define. The hegemonic narrative is interrupted and ghosted by what it seeks to expel. The borders crack in the complexity of what is ultimately uncontainable. The algorithms of power that track the movements of migration are shadowed and interrogated by a multiplying modernity that exceeds its grasp. The daily ordinariness of physical and symbolic brutality that seeks to ‘take back control of our borders’ – law and order betrayed as racism and white supremacy – operates in a world it can never fully own. Here the museum as an experimental and pedagogical space, as a laboratory of modernity, can promote a revaluation. There we encounter traces and testimonies that tear the previous maps of understanding. Both in the visual arts and the archived objects on

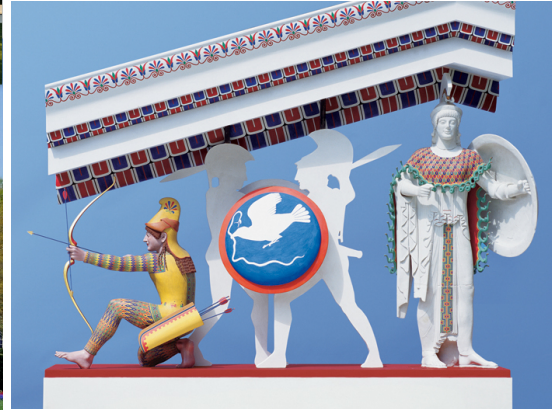
display, aesthetics is also rendered in ethical terms. Such art is not only the exclusive object of an aesthetic discourse or an art history. It also promotes a critical disposition. It exceeds a narrow scholarly frame: the history or sociology of art becomes art as history, as sociology. This, as Georges Didi-Huberman has so brilliantly argued, is true of all art, but it is particularly evident in the present conjuncture of postcolonial and decolonial criticism.

- So, the modern migrant, her life and death, not only challenges juridical definitions of rights and citizenship, national framings of cultural belonging and identity, but also opens up the complex constitution of what makes the West the West. This operates a hole in time, rendering the past proximate to contemporary concerns. To reassemble the fragments of the past in this manner is to construct an alternative sense of the present. It is to operate a cut on the body of modernity in order to produce a further critical montage. This permits us to engage with the entanglements of the represented and repressed in an emergent and dissonant constellation.



Here we have a distinctly dark male body that befuddles C.19 Hellenism and the transformation of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and Greek gods and heroes

into white Aryans; a body that some two thousand five hundred years ago descends gracefully through the air. This famous painting on the inside of the lid of a sarcophagus was destined to invisibility. Now seen by us since being dug up and opened half a century ago, it is a configuration of the past that also intercedes our present. It comes from the Greek settlement of Poseidonia, better known by its Roman name of Paestum, which lies on the Tyrrhenian coast south of Salerno near the mouth of the river Sele. As a Greek colony, Paestum was part of the expansion of the Peloponnesian city states that stretched over Homer's 'wine-dark sea' into Asia Minor, northwards to the steppes bordering the Black Sea, and westwards through Sicily and southern Italy to the coastlines of modern France and Spain. Like all colonialisms, it invariably involved conquest, together with the subjugation and enslavement of indigenous populations. The land, as always, was never empty. Control had to be wrested from local authority. Blood would have been spilt, lives arbitrarily terminated. It involved the brutal imposition on someone's soil, memory and territory of an imported culture and its political management. This is the violence that accompanies what more recently has come to be identified in the specificities of settler colonialism. Today, much of this detail falls away, lost in the myths of a European nostalgia for the presumed purity and nobility of its origins. Such classical resonances, directly inscribed in the pomp of the architectural grammar of all modern Occidental capitals – from imperial London, Paris, Washington and Berlin – to fascist Rome, is a white-washing of the past that jars with the historical and archaeological evidence. The temples, columns and statues of the ancient world were painted in what today would be considered garish colours.



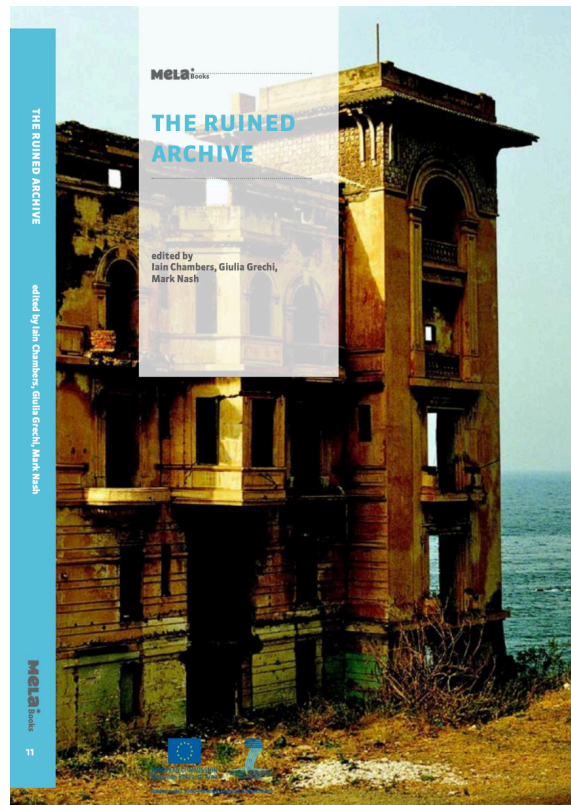
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- All of this means to adopt a more ironic relationship to origins and to draw out of the very heartland of European civilization, its Greek and Mediterranean ‘origins’, another set of questions. Here we encounter further geographies of understanding, other axes of interpretation that renders that seemingly distant past both proximate and potentially disruptive. The flat taxonomy of time, everything in its assigned chronological and cultural place, is abruptly interrupted and cut up, ready for another collage of comprehension. Like the painting of the diver, executed for unseeing eyes, but now recovered and exposed, we, too, can consider hidden and sedimented matters that propose other memories. This is to raise questions of property and ownership: who has the right to narrate and why? Under what sort of genealogy is memory owned and authorised? Seeking to reply brings us to propose a shift in the existing premises of the human and social sciences and their actual legislation on such questions and prospects. Breaking apart the philological imperative of linearity and reassembling its elements in another configuration invites us to take a deeper responsibility for our language; it is to recognize its transitory precariousness and its perpetual vulnerability to investment by a past we can never fully recover nor own. A past, which in still being assembled and recognised, comes to us from the future.

- This means to return objects to the density of both their cultural lineage, their resonance in the echo chambers of historical memories and their archival connection to the future. Of course, this is to return history itself to another history and to cut the cord with the ideological security of presumed scientific neutrality as the guarantee of our language and knowledge. It is to take responsibility both for language and memory as themselves integral to historical becoming. To recognise in Greek colonisation around the Mediterranean not simply a seaborne empire or thalassocracy, but also the violent evidence of diaspora and exile from the Greek cities that inaugurated the colonial undertaking, again opens a hole in time, rendering that past proximate to contemporary concerns. Establishing an emporium, practicing colonisation, disciplining the territory according to a determined cultural order, experiencing, contesting and absorbing hybridisation, were as central to the experience of Paestum some two and a half thousand years ago as they are today. This is to establish an archipelago that is not simply spatial and geographical, but also temporal, and which allows us to island hop across time seeking through the undeniable singularities we encounter the communalities of a constellation that renders the past comprehensible to future endeavours.
- All of this means dismantling the assumptions of the knowledge and languages that have brought us here; not to delete them, but to expose them in another, unauthorised, configuration.
- To insist that modernity is itself a migratory apparatus, evidenced in the Atlantic slave trade, the mass migrations from rural poverty in the European peripheries of the Nineteenth century, and the movements from the souths of the planet today, is radically to challenge our coordinates of comprehension. It is to register most acutely the limits of our rational grasp of the world. Here the levelling mechanisms of Occidental reason that ‘remain the productive weapons of global subjection’ sink in deeper waters (Denise Ferreira da Silva, 2007). Here the ‘hegemony of the Kantian subject’, that objectifies and then

obliterates the specificities of the lives whose very presence and persistence implicitly disturb our order of knowledge, is cast adrift. It is precisely the history of that manner of reasoning, apparently rendering the world fully knowable and transparent to a particular will to power, that today explain the 'disregard for lives lost in the streets of the US and the Mediterranean Sea' (Denise Ferreira da Silva, 2007).

- At this point, in today's mutable and mobile world, we can once again ask where does a territory conclude and the extra-territorial commence. The populisms of fierce identities and sovereignty politics has a very clear idea about this. But perhaps they are better considered as the vicious symptoms of the impossibility of drawing that line. A territory, however we go about defining it, involves an interlacing of stratified and sedimented practices and objects. In other words, it is not simply given as a physical, geographical place, but is culturally constructed and historically configured. Despite the stability it pretends to offer, as a historical assemblage, is a mobile, ultimately open-ended figure, suspended between tradition and transit. And where tradition itself turns out to be sustained by the movement of translation so as to engage with the history that sustains it. So, in the territory, in its traditions, customs and languages there exists a continual interplay between continuity and discontinuity. The culinary tradition of Italian food – so essential for local and national identity – is the result of discontinuity represented by the radical ingression of a colonial modernity that brought tomatoes, coffee and chili to the table. Its seemingly timelessness, and identity credentials, are of a recent historical construction. Opening up such archives to look again and re-conceptualise the world, allows us to set the question of territory and tradition, identity and belonging, in a series of networks that carry us far from the immediacy of the local, both cracking and reframing that mode of representation.

- So, the museum not simply as a depository of objects and explanations to be catalogued in a chronology, but also as an experimental space. Another sense of history and its configuration. (cf. political geography). A deliberate de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation of the museum, suspended and sustained in connections and currents the precede and exceed its localised immediacies.



- In fact, thinking at this point with Walter Benjamin's noted theses on the philosophy of history, the museum implicitly shifts the historiographical axis 180° to subvert established chronologies through presenting a contemporary constellation where the past does not simply pass but rather accumulates as a set of archives, explanations and narratives that potential pose questions and possibilities to the present.
- What I have briefly sketched out is obviously not about providing simple and immediate answers to the question of territory, identity and belonging. It is rather about seeking to propose understandings that keep questions open; underlining their embeddedness in historical processes that exceed a conclusive academic or political will. The museum is then a possible

laboratory of modernity where the historiographical operation that authorises its language and logic need also be rethought and reconfigured; that is, de-territorialised and re-territorialised to propose an emerging measure not of the West, but of the world to come.