

**THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE: THE DISCOURSE OF HISTORY AND THE AMERICAN
MUSEUM INSTITUTION**

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By

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ABSTRACT

Due to recent changes in research and scholarship in the academic discipline of history, the displays currently found at the national museum are moving away from the referential and towards the pedagogical as they embraces the new “bottom up” history that has become prevalent in the university. Because of its new role as an originator of public narrative, as well as its prominent position, the museum institution is poised to supersede the university in terms of publicizing research and scholarship and in presenting a public narrative of history. However, because of the structure of museum display, with its reliance on material culture and its emphasis on the visual rather than the textual, as well as the museum’s ties to the nation-state, the narrative that the museum is advancing might actually be contradictory to the non-teleological, inclusive history that is characteristic of the academic discipline.

Using two case studies, the “America on the Move” exhibition at the National Museum of American History, as well as the controversy over the *Enola Gay* display at the National Air and Space Museum, this thesis examines the new model of

museum exhibition, and explores its relationships with the academic discipline of history, the nation-state, and finally, its own narrative. In addition, recommendations are made towards the reconciliation of museum exhibition and academic history.

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INTRODUCTION: THE NATIONAL MUSEUM

The museums of the Smithsonian Institution have long been considered the foremost museums in the United States. Founded in 1846, the Smithsonian was signed into legislation by Congress as a national museum. Since that time, the Institution has grown to include sixteen museums, as well as libraries, research centers, archives, and the National Zoo. For over one hundred and fifty years, the Smithsonian has been growing and changing, and the decisions that are made by its administrators and curators set precedents for museums all over the world. At the present time, the realities of globalization are causing drastic changes in our perceptions of national identity, ideology, and history. The Smithsonian, as a leading source of public history, is also changing.

For all of these reasons, an analysis of the Smithsonian at this particular historical moment becomes extremely important. Just over twenty years ago, the exhibitions found at the museums of the Institution, particularly the National Museum of American History (then called the National Museum of History and Technology) and the Air and Space Museum, were markedly different from those evident today. For example, the centerpiece of the old National Museum of American History was the Hall of Transportation, a large room filled with selections from the history of transportation technology. Because the United States is a nation characterized by

movement and by physical space, this exhibition was especially important to public memory and to the understanding of the national ideology. Wagons, locomotives, automobiles, and sundry other vehicles populated the Hall, placed next to each other and roped off like statues in a cathedral.

The old Hall of Transportation is gone, replaced by a recently-installed exhibition called “America on the Move.” Instead of focusing on the technological implements of transportation (*This is the Model T...it was the first affordable, mass produced vehicle....it was created on an assembly line...*), “America on the Move” looks at the social, cultural and economic impacts of technology (*How did the car come to dominate the American transportation landscape? America adapts to the automobile with new laws, new roads, and new businesses like gas stations and repair shops...*) The differences between these two exhibitions are drastic, and typical of other changes at the Smithsonian Institution. Older displays are being slowly replaced by new ones. Instead of narratives of progress and development, these new exhibitions examine the social impact of historical events and take into account the fact that different populations may have been affected in different ways. What can account for these changes in the exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution? How are they tied to the academic discipline of History? Because the Smithsonian is a federal institution,

and because the space of the museum, as a physical location, is tied to national ideology, how do these changes reflect the nation-state?

This thesis project examines the recent shifts in museum exhibition, and its ties to changes in the academic discipline of American History, namely a shift from traditional “top down” History to a focus on social history influenced by developments in cultural studies. While the question of audience reception is certainly important to the understanding of many of these changes, this project reflects on the production of meaning from the side of the academic and museum institutions, since this is where the changes that are discussed originate.

The first chapter consists of a review of analytic literature discussing changes that have taken place in the academic discipline of American History. Because of the close relationship between the museum and the university, these shifts are eventually reflected in decisions made by the museum institution. Further review of literature indicates that the museum, as a physical space and locus of historical account, is moving towards the university model of research, scholarship, and discursive interpretation and presentation. The arguments reflected in existing literature will construct a framework for the understanding of the specific museum exhibitions discussed in later chapters.

The following chapters present two case studies: the “America on the Move” exhibit which replaced the Hall of Transportation at the National Museum of American History, and an examination of the controversy over the display of the *Enola Gay* bomber plane that, in 1945, dropped the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan. Because both “America on the Move” and the *Enola Gay* are exhibitions that rely on the material culture of technological development as their main artifacts, because each deals with fairly recent history, the implications of which are still being debated, because both exhibitions were popular and enjoyed extensive media coverage, and because both exhibitions were presented under the auspices of the Smithsonian Institution, the largest national museum institution in the United States, the two provide fitting and interesting examples. While analysis of the “America on the Move” exhibition shows the structural elements of museum display that prevent a multinarrative perspective, examination of the *Enola Gay* controversy demonstrates the contradictory relationship between current museum scholarship and its connections to the nation-state.

A close analysis of these two displays, the process of their production, the artifacts which they use, and the narratives that they present, underscores how the museum institution, in adapting facets of the university and the academic discipline, as well as by using its ownership of the material culture that has become primary

evidence in current historical inquiry, is attempting to assert itself as an institution of new research and original scholarship on par with the university. Because new scholarship tends to deemphasize the older, more teleological narrative of progress, this new museum is somewhat at odds with the Smithsonian's other role of "national museum" as defined by its long association with the nation-state.

These case studies show that because of the inherent properties of material culture, the structural nature of the museum exhibit (which is visual rather than textual), as well as because of the museum institution's ties to the nation state, the public narrative that is presented by the museum is one that is actually at odds with the current academic discourse, and more closely resembles the "grand narrative" that the academic discipline is steering itself away from. Because of the museum institution's high public visibility, this might be dangerous, as it informs a nationalistic narrative that is at odds with the features of globalization that characterize the current cultural, economic and political climate.

The last portion of this paper suggests strategies that the museum institution can use in order to reorient itself towards a scholarship that is more representative of current academic trends. This is especially important, as the museum continues to be a major source of public education, a resource that is extremely viable and effective in teaching citizens about the history of their nation. This analysis represents an attempt

to locate the role of the museum institution within current historical debate, and to illustrate the importance of this institution to the public narrative. As will be shown, the implications of this range far beyond the museum, and such an investigation is important to the understanding of our changing national identity.

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW: THE MUSEUM INSTITUTION AND THE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE OF HISTORY

Much has been written about the ways that the museum institution has been shifting towards a more academic model. However, in order to understand the cause of this shift, it is first necessary to examine the academic discipline of history, and the recent transformations in the university institution. While both of these subjects have been examined by scholars in some depth, very little has been said about the interactions between these two institutions, and how, in turn, these interactions affect both structural and thematic shifts in each. A review and comparison of existing literature on these two subjects will serve to shed light on the complicated ways in which they are now intertwined.

The museum institution and the university institution, as loci of structural power and agency have several aspects in common. The analysis by Michel Foucault examines how various institutions work to stratify and confine the subject within society. Foucault's study finds similarities between several types of institutions: the ways in which their organizational structures, discourses and texts work to constrain the subject (Foucault, 1972). The examples of the university and the museum have many similarities: both are institutions where primary evidence is used and scholarly work is done, and presented by curators and academics, both with credentials from the

academic history institution. Because of the similarities in these features, both the museum and the academic history institution can lay claim to the setting of the public history narrative. While the two seem to work in tandem, there are places in which the museum and the university are found in contradiction to one another.

Changes in the Academic History Discipline: Political to Cultural History

In the past thirty years, the academic discipline of history has been undergoing many changes. Traditionally, the study of history has been focused on History “with a capital H”-on notable personages such as Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Jefferson and on specific major events such as the Civil War or the Depression. This traditional history was called ideological or political history: its emphasis lay on the description and outcome of political decisions and occurrences and the individuals who brought them about, such as those noted above. These narratives were already well-established within popular consciousness: the discipline’s focus was to provide new details or interpretations of historical occurrence (Jenkins, 1997).

Starting in the 1970’s, a new type of history has emerged within the academic discipline. Michael Kammen describes how the discourse of history as been moving towards a greater interest in historical popular experience. He states that “a revolution in methodological awareness occurred” with new attention being paid to the theoretical

constructs, methodological orientations, and frames of reference that historians were using. (Kammen, 1980, p.31) Along with (and perhaps partly because of) this new awareness, focus has been cast upon an ethnographic-style study of the “common man.” This new consideration, called by the academic discipline, “social history”, is a result of the dramatic social changes that were seen in the 1960’s. Ideologies that manifested with the rise of the political New Left emphasized a wider variety of experiences, as the historical monopoly of investigation into the experiences of wealthy and influential white males was replaced with inquiry into the lives of a greater cross-section of individuals. While the life and accomplishments of Thomas Jefferson might have been a popular subject of inquiry in the past, attention has now shifted to study of his slaves, or his less prosperous or well-known neighbors. Moreover, the historical discipline now attempts not only to place these demographics into its narrative, but also to examine how they affect and are affected by events in history.

Looking at this new feature, the theorist Joan Scott states that this new history “has produced a wealth of new evidence previously ignored about these others...it has also occasioned a crisis for orthodox history by multiplying not only stories but subjects, and by insisting that histories are written from fundamentally different—indeed, irreconcilable—perspectives or standpoints, not one of which is complete or

completely ‘true.’” (Scott, 1992, p.24) Echoing the ideas of Scott, in his essay, “Textual Agents at ‘The End of History’”, Mark Poster states that because of a new understanding of multiple social realities, it is now necessary to examine manifold and sometimes contradictory or competing narratives in order to achieve a better understanding of events and ideologies. Because of this attribute, the old style of historiography is no longer appropriate (Poster, 2000) This is reiterated by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, who state that the new type of academic history “rejects the exclusive equation of culture with high culture and argues that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures.” (Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler, 2001, p.4) Academic history has moved towards a more complex and contradictory narrative, one that takes into account not only manifold experience, but also the structures of inquiry themselves.

These shifts, with their rejection of the seamless narrative of progress, seem reminiscent of ideas that are found in postmodern theory. Postmodernism, as defined by Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, rejects the teleological metanarrative that is the hallmark of modernist tradition. In postmodernistic thought, the idea that history is composed of a series of progressive events is rejected in favor of inquiry to the specific nature of that narrative (Lyotard,

1984). The old paradigm of the discipline of history, with its great events and noble figures, is very much within the rubric of the grand narrative. In the postmodern tradition, the new style of history, with its attention to the previously disenfranchised, and to the contradictions that abound a more teleological reading of history (i.e. one that focuses on progression, and on the perceived “transcendental truth” within the American experience) is much more acceptable. In this way, the changes that have been occurring within the historical discipline are in line with academic trends that exemplify characteristics of postmodernism.

The New Museum Institution: Development

The transformation of the academic discipline of history has been mirrored by shifts within the museum institution. Since its inception and formalization in the late nineteenth century, the physical location of the museum, as well as the museum institution have been moving towards a more academic and pedagogical standpoint. In the words of Stephen E. Weil, museums are “no longer archives or depositories.” Instead, they are meant to “preserve, study and communicate” culture and history (Weil, 2004, 9.75). Traditionally, the museum has been a culture institution that has acted as a source of reference materials for the already-known narratives of established History. Using the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu, the museum represented cultural

capital within the habitus of the educated, upper class museumgoer (Bourdieu, 1984). The material culture held by museums, in this model, acted as supplementary evidence for these known narratives. Museum exhibition would then look something like this: Abraham Lincoln's stovepipe hat, track from the first transcontinental railroad, debris from Mars, and so forth. All of these artifacts represented an established narrative and were shown in, as characterized by Michael Firsch, a "traditional collect and display function." (Firsch, 1989, p.55) They did not tell new stories, merely reinforced old ones. The museum in this model was secondary to the university discipline in history, as popular accounts were established by academics rather than curators. Museum exhibition reiterated an already present and uncontested understanding of history.

However, with the shift towards a history more centered on the disjunctions of historical everyday experience, the role of history museums has changed. Because the new focus in the academic discipline of history is the everyday experience of the "common man", material culture becomes the primary evidence in this investigation. Thomas J. Schlereth states that "material culture has gained growing currency among research", as it becomes analyzed and explained within the context of historical existence (Schlereth, 1989, p.294). As the subjects of contemporary historical study did not leave behind published accounts or visual evidence in the form of paintings or architecture, material culture becomes extremely important in providing the clues to

historical existence. Scholars in the Marxist tradition have long seen material culture as an important focus of study. Arjun Appadurai states that “commodities have social lives, gender, name, ethnicity, religion and nationality”, from which one can infer important facts about its makers, purchasers and owners (Appadurai, 1986, p.23). Michael Brian Schiffer, writing about the issue within the context of explicit academic inquiry, states that artifacts contribute to information one obtains about others (Schiffer, 1999). Material culture becomes more important, as artifacts from daily usage give insight into historical everyday life. As the theorist Tim Dant states, “Things are appropriated into human culture in such a way that they represent the social relations of culture, standing in for other human beings, carrying values, ideas, and emotions.” (Dant, 1999) Material culture, thus, becomes invaluable evidence for the type of historic inquiry that is done within the academic discipline.

As material culture becomes the primary evidence for studies of everyday life, the museum institution, as the legitimized holder of this primary evidence, becomes more prominent with respect to the creation of the historical dialogue around material culture. Instead of a dusty “curio cabinet” (a favorite characterization of the traditional museum), the museum becomes a cultural institution and the “playing field upon which social, political, and moral issues are contested.” (Ames, 2004, p.81) As the popular discourse of history moves towards the museum, the museum finds itself, as an

authority of popular understanding of the historical narrative, in a position of equality with the university.

Gary Kulik states, “The research agenda of curators and academics has been parallel since the rise of the New Left in the 1960’s.” (Kulik, 1989, p.27) As history within the academic discipline has become more focused on “social history”, the museum institution, having founds itself equipped with the tools and evidence for this new type of inquiry, has in and of itself begun to generate historical narrative. The new agenda of the museum is to *create* rather than reinforce a popular understanding of historical events and ideologies. As Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig state, the current museum model has the power to “affect perception of literally millions of Americans in shaping the public perception of the past.” (Leon & Rosenzweig, 1989, p.16) As museum going as a leisure activity moves beyond its previous habitus to a more pluralistic public with a variety of experiences, ideologies, and expectations, and as museum content shifts from the already-established account, the museum’s role as an educational organ becomes more pronounced.

The New Museum Institution: From Reference to Narrative

This new mission of the museum, as well as the nature of the exhibitions within, shift the museum discourse from the referential to the pedagogical. In recent

times, museum exhibitions as well as supplementary materials and educational programs around these exhibitions have become the foremost “interpreters” of popular history. Rather than providing supplemental evidence for an uncontested and already-known story, museum exhibits are oriented around the *telling* of the story. There has been much written about these new goals of the museum, as it moves further away from the more traditional “collect and display” model. Edmund Barry Gaither, noting that “the understanding of different cultures has proliferated academia,” further states that the role of the American museum should be a contributor to discussions relating to discipline and to culture.” (Gaither, 2004, pp.110-12) This statement illustrates the manner in which the American museum has now moved into the dialogue that sets the narrative for public history. Museum audiences come to exhibitions for the purpose of learning new things, rather than cementing an already-learned understanding. The new disciplinary focus on “social history” relocates museum content into previously uncharted territory, and allows the institution to use its ownership of material culture to push new accounts into the public historical discourse.

Writings about this new educational role of museum place emphasis on the non-traditional audience of the new museum and the way in which this audience can be engaged into education. Harold Skramstad states that the museum should be the “designer and deliverer of experiences rich in engagement”, rather than being

collection based (Skramstad, 2004, p.124). In the view of Skramstad and others, the museum should switch from collection to exhibition as its primary and most important function. A large part of this new function is the role of the museum as a socially responsible builder of community.

These recommendations reflect new concerns that have been voiced within the academic discipline of history, which place importance on the relationships of complex and contradictory ideologies and experiences. Duncan F. Cameron states that the “museum needs to be a multifaceted institution that is accountable to the public but also educational and interactional.” (Cameron, 2004, p.61) This idea is reiterated by Moira G. Simpson, who notes that the museum-built community is “A way to mediate political issues that arise from museum interpretation.” (Simpson, 1996, p.75) As the academic discipline of history has shifted to a focus that enables the museum to assert its authority in matters of material culture, the museum as an institution has become more visible as an arbiter of the predominant historical narrative and its focus has shifted from the taxonomic to the interpretive. In addition, the museum institution has taken the lead in the introduction of history into the public forum. It would seem that the institutions of the museum and of the academic discipline of history are now working in tandem to one another. Both share responsibility in the creation and

presentation of a public historic narrative, and both make use of similar evidence to present a discourse on topics that are relevant in the new face of history.

Academic and Museum History: Relationships and Contradictions

While there are many similarities between the nature of museum and academic historical inquiry, there are also many emerging differences between these two institutions. While the audience for the museum presentation of history is heterogeneous and is made up from many different types of individuals, the academic audience is specialized: texts that are generated within the academic discipline of history are intended for those who have previous background and education in the subject. Joseph J. Corn comments on this, stating that the academic audience is highly educated and specialized (Corn, 1989, p.255). They are also familiar with referential texts, as well as the process of creating a narrative in and of itself. However, the museum audience is significantly larger than that of academic work. Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig make the observation that while a scholarly monograph sells around 36,000 copies, a museum has upwards of one million visitors yearly (Leon & Rosenzweig, 1989, p.13). The fact that the museum public is much larger, as well as more diverse significantly alters how a narrative is presented within this context.

In addition, while the presentation of academic history is primarily textual, the museum institution shows its findings in a visual and more visceral medium: the museum exhibition. Judy Attfield reflects on how artifacts, as opposed to text, as the primary sources and references for a narrative facilitates the viewer's identification with the presentation. Engagement with artifacts on display, especially since museum display is increasingly more vivid and able to place the audience *inside* the narrative, is very different from the reading of a narrative text (Attfield, 2000, p.225). Museums also supplement display of artifacts with dramatic imagery, sound effects, and lighting. The multimedia aspect of museum exhibition is drastically different from the way that academic history is typically presented.

Finally, while academic history usually has a single, identifiable author, whose name appears on the work, and who takes sole responsibility for the legitimacy and nature of his findings, the museum exhibition is worked on by a committee of researchers, curators, designers and decorators, none of whom are explicitly named as an author. Richard Kurin reflects on this fact, stating that the source of the museum-oriented narrative is an "anonymous, disembodied authority". While the credentials, as well as research method and sources of academic history are on display, the museum exhibition is presented standing alone, without the benefit of either credit or accountability for its creators. Kurin further states that the danger in this is that exhibit

scripts “distinguish little between fact, narrative, frame, and speculation.” (Kurin, 1997, p.75) While historical narrative generated by both academic and museum institution is presented in a format defined by the academic discipline, the museum provides a discourse without an author.

As can be seen from a review of the literature about both academic and museum history, the two are linked in ways that are alternately complementary and contradictory. These similarities and differences are compelling in the way that they present a wider set of questions and implications about the production of national narrative. As the model of historical thought in the museum moves closer towards academic history, a comparison of the types of narratives that are produced by the two becomes fundamental to our understanding of the account of history that is available to the greater public. Because of the close ties between these two institutions, a close examination of the evolution and interaction between the two is valuable in the discussion of the public historical narrative in general.

CHAPTER II: “AMERICA ON THE MOVE” AND THE PROBLEM OF MATERIAL CULTURE

Greatly different from its predecessor, the Hall of Transportation, the “America on the Move” exhibition which is now the permanent transportation display at the National Museum of American History is an example of a new type of museum exhibition. In line with developments in the discipline of American history, attempts to create a historical narrative through the examination of a wide variety of experiences and ideologies, rather than through the more traditional model of a progressive “top down” narrative. The exhibit traces transportation in America since 1876, placing it within the socioeconomic and political context of larger occurrences such as industrialization, urbanization, waves of immigration, Civil Rights, and the two World Wars. Using developments in transportation as a thematic touchstone, “America on the Move” presents an account of everyday life in the United States, and shows how larger social, political and economic currents affected the experience of diverse populations of Americans. The subject matter for this exhibition, with its focus on history from the “bottom up” initially seems reflective of the new type of history that has been defined within academia. However, because of the structural nature of museum display, which places emphasis on visual interpretation, the exhibition ultimately falls short of presenting a narrative that takes into account all of the new concerns of experience, as

defined by recent academic inquiry. It can be argued that because of the innate nature of material culture, especially that which is associated with technological development, as well as the way in which artifacts are used in museum presentation, the account which is produced is ultimately one of progress and victory, hallmarks of the type of history from which both the museum and academic institutions are attempting to distance themselves.

The National Museum of American History: Evolution of Change

“America on the Move” was first conceived in 1999, when the curators of the National Museum of American History realized a need to replace the earlier transportation exhibits that had been in place since 1964. The older display had opened at the same time as the museum, which was at that time called the Museum of History and Technology. It consisted of transportation artifacts presented in a straightforward manner that underscored their importance as technological innovations (Lubar, 2004). The mission statement of “America on the Move” explains the older exhibition as “displays of artifacts chosen for their technological interest. Their labels described technological change. They were mostly devoid of human stories.” (Smithsonian Institution, 2004) The need for a new display reflects the museum institution’s shift

towards an orientation of history in line with current academic practice, one which includes socio-cultural factors as well as technological and economic ones.

In her history of technology display at the Smithsonian Institution, Pamela Henson describes how, in 1980, the National Museum of History and Technology was renamed the National Museum of American History. She states, “more emphasis was placed on cultural context and broader meanings of every artifact.” (Hensen, 1999, p.267) The new name that was given to the museum represents the growing influence of academia in museum ideology and practice. At the same time, curators were hired from top universities, and fellowships and research plans were set into place. Older, straightforward exhibitions that were presented in the style of the traditional “glass cabinet” have been slowly replaced by exhibitions that focus on individual experience (Post & Molella, 1997). For example, the museum’s collection of sports artifacts is now called “Sports: Breaking Records, Breaking Barriers”, and includes an examination of the roles of gender, ethnicity, culture and even politics in American sports (Smithsonian Institution, 2004). Likewise, even the Museum’s staple display, the *Star Spangled Banner* is now an examination of the practices of artifact restoration. The National Museum of American History today is drastically different from the museum that, in 1964, erected the original Hall of Transportation. The planning and implementation of the “America on the Move” exhibition demonstrates this change.

The new exhibition was intended to provide a comprehensive history of transportation and of the social change wrought by its various innovations, and would focus on the type of social history that had become characteristic of both the academic discipline and the museum institution. In the words of Steven Lubar, the project director of the exhibition, and the curator and chair of the Division of History and Technology at the Museum, “Our stories would be about people.” (Lubar, 2004, p.5) This difference between the planned exhibition and its more traditional predecessor once again illustrates the differences that had of late occurred in the museum. As described by Michael Firsch, the new style of museum exhibition is a “symbiosis between modern interpretation and the traditional collecting and display function of museums.” (Firsch, 1989, p.55) The personal becomes historical and artifacts are used to engage audiences in the communicative process itself. As the direct replacement for an older display which no longer met the needs of the museum, “America on the Move”, with its focus on personal vignettes would be just such an exhibition, in many ways epitomizing shifts in the larger museum institution.

America on the Move: Background

After four years of work and planning, “America on the Move” finally opened to the public as a permanent exhibition in November of 2003. The exhibition covers an

area of nearly 26,000 square feet, and cost over twenty five million dollars to produce. The money to fund “America on the Move” was raised not only from federal grants (the traditional funder of the Smithsonian) but also from private donors such as General Motors. While the involvement of a corporation initially caused controversy for the curators of the exhibit and for the Smithsonian Institution, the corporate sponsors of “America on the Move” had no say in the decisions made in exhibition planning (Thompson, 2003). However, the participation of non government organizations in the planning and execution of Smithsonian exhibits is in and of itself an interesting new development, as it illustrates the fact that the museum institution is, like the academic institution, moving towards a model that closer to that of a for-profit business organization. In both cases, corporate sponsorship is used to raise money for scholarship, but is questioned by scholars worried about the integrity and objectivity of research. The public outcry over the involvement General Motors is significant because it indicates the how, in the eyes of the public and the media, the museum institution resembles the university, and is expected to adhere to the same academic standards of scholarly objectivity and nonbiased research.

The display traces the history of American transportation from 1876 to the present, ending with the promised future of a globalized city. “America on the Move” begins with a survey of transportation before 1876, mixing artifacts such as

advertisements for steamboats from the 1830's with an 1850 railroad lantern. Continuing through and beyond the next century, the exhibition is presented as a loosely chronological series of temporal and thematic vignettes placed within the context of localities across the continental United States. Each exhibition portion highlights a different mode of transportation, as well as how it has affected the individuals in its community, and how it was influenced by, and influenced larger issues and movements. A visitor to "America on the Move" can see a 1900 trolley from Washington DC, and learn how streetcars brought together disparate neighborhoods into a cohesive urban whole. Likewise, there is a section that recreates the 1949 suburban strip of Sandy Boulevard in Portland, Oregon, as well as Interstate I-10, which was built in 1956 and crosses the southern States from Florida to California, connecting the United States in ways which had social, political and economic implications. Each display represents a different facet of transportation, and indicates how it fits into a larger history of the United States.

The exhibit is explicit in its aims to address a larger set of ideologies and contexts than an older and more traditional museum display. In the words of the curators, "We decided to examine four areas in which transportation shaped American history: communities, commerce, landscapes, and lives. And we focused on big themes of American history: urbanization and industrialization, immigration and migration,

race relations, work and business.” (Smithsonian Institution, 2004) This statement is important because it illustrates the academic history-based influence that is present in the layout and script of the exhibition. Rather than focus on the narratives of progress or development that were underscored in the original Hall of Transportation, “America on the Move” examines not the technologies of transportation, but instead, the experiences of the individuals whose lives were affected by changes and developments in transportation. This reflexive and introspective approach to telling history again shows how the museum institution has closely followed the changes that have occurred in the discipline of history.

Despite the scholarly work and meticulous research that was clearly put into the script and the exhibition, the credits for “America on the Move” are bereft of any reference to specific academic works. The exhibition was put together by a team of curators and designers, all whom have academic backgrounds and who researched the display using disciplinary models of work. Because of this criteria, “America on the Move” can perhaps be considered an original scholarly work, however one without specific authors that are responsible for its authenticity and claims. Another difference in the presentation is that the statements that the museum exhibition makes are less textual and more visual. Despite the fact that in topic, form and approach, “America on

the Move” may be said to be modeled on the academic discipline of history, there are certain dissimilarities which render it in a very different mode.

The idea of curatorship is one that is examined in some depth in the works of Jean Baudrillard. Using the idea of the “bricoleur,” Baudrillard examines how “man the producer” is able to put together what is available to create an “atmosphere,” and with it, a set of specific and original ideas that are conveyed through the construction and arrangement of material culture. For Baudrillard, this quality of idea production through a set of visual signs is a feature of modernity, and one that is tied up with ideas of power and domination. Objects are arranged, and thus, controlled, in order to present a series of ideas (Baudrillard, 1968) . In this way, the arrangement of the visual becomes, as an original statement, more powerful than the textual. Under these auspices, “America on the Move” is a work of original scholarship, one that makes use of the subject matter and references of academic scholarship, while presenting it in a very different way. This combination of academic work and visual presentation yields a narrative that, while seeming to follow standards that are indicated by the academic discipline of history, at the same time, contradicts them. The specifics of these complexities may be shown through a close analysis of the “America on the Move” display as a scholarly work, one which presents an original account and interpretation of history.

Museum Exhibition in Multiple Perspectives

Because of its emphasis on the perspective of multiple populations, it is easy to see the way that “America on the Move” has been influenced by the new ways of doing history. The traditional story of transportation innovations would have focused on its creators and financiers: on the politicians who initiated legislation that made the building of train tracks and highways possible, and on the inventors and businessmen who introduced locomotives, automobiles and airplane travel to the public. The original Hall of Transportation followed this model. The exhibition script was based on industrial history, with a slant towards development and production of transportation technologies. In contrast, “America on the Move” concentrates on the experience of the Americans who used and whose lives were affected by these new innovations. Moreover, the exhibition takes care to examine the position of diverse groups within the American population: from the middle-class suburbanites who rushed to buy automobiles in the 1950s, to the urban African-Americans who were required to ride in the backs of buses before the Civil Rights movements. The influence of changes within the academic sphere is clear, as “America on the Move” attempts to show multiple, complex and dynamic perspectives.

In doing this, “America on the Move” engages its viewers, and invites them to share the experiences that it is portraying. The theorist Judy Attenfield, in her work on material culture, describes how these new strategies in museum display are able to “enhance the visitor’s experience of an encounter with the past” (Attenfeld, 2000, p.225). By transforming familiar, everyday objects (in this case, cars, trains, buses, etc.) and imbuing them with history, the museum exhibition is able to facilitate identification with the display on a personal and emotional level. For Attenfield, this new museum display is thus more powerful than the “glass cabinet” mode, as it encourages explicit and personal identification. The viewer is then, not an observer, but a *participant* in history. History becomes less of a story and more of an experience. Unlike the traditional “glass case” model of museum exhibition, “America on the Move” is presented as a fully interactive experience. There is little separation between the viewer and the display, and the use of visual as well as auditory aids ensures an experience that is more visceral than the older, conventional museum exhibition.

One of the strongest portions of the exhibition is a Mass Transit Authority subway car that was used in Chicago in the 1950’s. The entire car has been transported to the exhibition, and has been placed within a setting which suggests a historic subway station. The museum viewer is invited to go inside of the car. Hidden speakers play the sound of the subway car moving through tunnels, and the windows are

blocked out by screens which emit the occasional flashes of light that indicate lamps in the tunnel and are familiar to subway riders even now. The subway car is laterally bisected by a projection screen, on which is shown the front part of the train as it would have looked when in use, complete with actors who portray passengers, and the conductor, as well as the occasional stop. The viewer sits in the back portion of the exhibit, and watches what might have happened in the front portion. In this exhibit, the viewer is invited *into* the narrative; the suspension of disbelief which is expected to take place is similar to that which occurs at the cinema in which the observer, though a momentary deferral of cognitive reality, is able to place themselves *within* an observed environment. In “America on the Move,” this is achieved through the use of audio-visual multimedia, as well as three-dimensional extension and viewer immersion within exhibit space. The use of multimedia and the placement of the observer as a de facto actor is an important way that museum exhibition differs from academic presentation, which requires its audience to maintain a critical distance from the subject at hand. The museum display, which uses material culture to evoke a certain empathy and an emotional experience is, in this way, markedly different from an academic text, which uses a narrative tactic to explicate its topic.

An impressive detail about the story that is projected in the subway car is the fact that it demonstrates how the different populations who used public transit in the

1950's might have interacted, and how their ideologies and experiences affected one another. Watching the vignette, the museum viewer is shown several very different members of the historical population, all of whom suggest the contradictions in ideology which were occurring at the time. There is an African American woman who must sit at the back of the car; this implies the African-American experience before Civil Rights. There are also two women who have come into town from the suburbs for a day of shopping; they become symbols of movements in suburbanization at the time, and the movement of many families out of urban cities after World War II. Finally, there are urban factory workers, showing the industrialization and post-War boom that was simultaneously occurring. The snippets of their conversations, the ways in which they interact (or do not) are all indicative of the complex experiences of the time, and of how public space (specifically, transportation) both facilitated and impeded these. The viewer inside the subway train is shown, first-hand, the complicated and nuanced narratives of the time.

This portion of the exhibition has the qualities of self-reflexivity that are apparent in a contemporary historical discourse. The simplicity of the projection ensures that it is suitable for a heterogeneous viewing population: both those who might be familiar with the larger economic, political and social implications behind the positions of the projection actors, and those who might learn about them in hindsight.

Without explicitly mentioning them, the exhibition makes them clear, providing a space for public dialogue. This style of presentation of self-standing primary evidence (via the projected reenaction) with minimal secondary narrative or interpretation is very characteristic of the current mode of account, which places importance on complex and often paradoxical interpretation of events and ideologies. It also ensures that the exhibition is accessible and relevant to a large, differential viewing public, who are invited to apply their own ideas and experiences into their interpretation of the exhibition. This tactic of a lack of overt secondary interpretation has at least two functions: to make the exhibit more relevant and accessible to a larger public, and also to ensure that each viewer is able to take away their own ideas. “America on the Move” not only encompasses the historical experience and perspective of a diverse population, but it also orients itself towards the reception of such. This feature is characteristic of not only the new history, but also the new museum, and shows how the two might work in tandem.

“America on the Move” as Narrative of Contradiction

Throughout its display, “America on the Move” belies an ability to address the multifaceted experiences that are a facet of new academic readings of history. One of the displays within the exhibition focuses on the new roadside communities that

emerged in the 1930's, once automobile travel had become more common. The example in "America on the Move" is an overnight cabin taken from a motel called Ring's Rest in Muirkirk, Maryland. The auto court is represented by one of the four original roadside cabins, and artifacts and text that illustrate how the rapidly growing automobile culture was accommodated by a new industry of roadside hotels, gas stations and diners. The exhibition script also discusses later standardization and chains such as Howard Johnson, which took the "local flavor" out of such lodgings.

Another prominent segment of this display is entitled "Jim Crow on the Road", and describes the difficulties that African-American travelers faced with these same roadside businesses. Describing segregation, as well as the black-owned businesses which sprung up to accommodate the growing amount of African American car owners, this portion of "America on the Move" shows the varying and contradictory experiences that different populations experienced.

The exhibition script is impressive because it touches on several different facets of history. It suggests at the economic boom that made car travel popular and possible, as well as at the fact that because of this type of travel, local communities were more and more brought into one national understanding. In addition, it hints at the fact that depending on the color of one's skin, a road experience might have been extremely varying. The narrative presented by the display of Ring's Rest is a nuanced, multifold

one, and indicates how the museum exhibition is able to provide this type of complex understanding.

The “Ring’s Rest” portion is also significant because it uses very different tactics of audience engagement than the Chicago Transit car. In this portion of the exhibit, the viewer is separated from the display by a barrier, and the primary mode of engagement is visual. Although there is an audio soundtrack, “Ring’s Rest” is closer to the mode of traditional museum exhibition than many other portions of the exhibit. However, this may also be a conscious tactic on the part of the curators. Unlike the subway car, in which observation occurs from within, the roadside rest stop was and is typically seen *at a distance* from the window of a passing car. In this way, the barrier that keeps the viewer from the cabins of Ring’s Rest can act as a simulation of the actual conditions in which the cabin would have been seen. While the activity of riding a subway car is one of active engagement, highway traveling is characterized by passive observation and disengagement. The “Ring’s Rest” exhibition is especially clever in the fact that while it appears to be adhering to a more traditional standard of museum exhibition, in reality, it is replicating the original conditions of observation as closely as any of the other displays within “America on the Move.” This double reading touches on the self-reflexivity that is an underlying theme in new museum exhibition. The differences between these two displays are fascinating because while

they appear dissimilar, in reality, they are governed by the same set of motives: to engage viewers on a level that is as faithful as it can be to the original conditions of the artifacts.

The Problem of Material Culture and “The Grand Narrative”

The importance placed on material culture as the primary source of investigation and narration is the principal way that museum interpretation differs from academic interpretation of history. While the academic discourse is primarily textual, the museum must rely on material culture and on the visual in order to make its point. The museum has always traditionally been a place of “looking,” whereas the university, one of “reading.” The museum milieu has traditionally been one of visual interpretation, despite the fact that the museum institution has taken on many characteristics of the academic one, this facet has not changed (Ames, 1986, pp.29-31). “America on the Move,” with its emphasis on social and cultural history, exemplifies how the museum attempts to approximate the standards predicated by the academic discipline of history. However, there are some aspects of the inherent nature of material culture that prevent the museum, with its reliance on visual exposition in the presentation of a narrative, from being able to provide an account which is truly characteristic of work done in the academic discipline of history. While the visceral

experience that is facilitated by the museum in an exhibition such as “America on the Move” is certainly an extremely powerful one, it is in danger of offering a picture that is oriented towards the very teleological narrative of progress that the academic history discipline, informed by the new emphases on social and cultural experience, guards against.

This danger comes in the properties that are inherent to material culture in and of itself. Foremost is the classic connection between material culture and the properties of the commodity. In his critique of capitalism, the theorist Karl Marx speaks of the danger of commodities and commodity fetishism to the possibility of accumulation of capital by the proletariat subject. In Marx’s model, the proletariat spends his wages on the purchasing of commodities, which are, by definition, elements of material culture (Marx, 1867). This connection, by implication, ties commodities, and with them, material culture, to the complex and unequal relationships that are intrinsic in Marx’s reading of capitalism. Namely, material culture, by virtue of its origins within commodification, is imbued with the class differences and subordination that is characteristic of the capitalistic system. Material culture is symbolic, then, of a larger system of domination, one within which production and thus, progress are inherent qualities. The museum institution’s reliance on material culture as the primary textual reference for interpretation might serve to underscore the inequality that is in this

relationship, which translates to a biased reading of history, one that sanctions progress in a way that is counterintuitive to the new academic model, which has tried to move away from the inevitability of this relationship of power.

By underscoring the importance of methods of transportation within the larger narrative of American progress, the “America on the Move” exhibition may be placing the impetus for social, economic and political change with the producers of the technology of transportation. It is the producers who are acting upon the American population, which is then stripped of any agency that it may have. While this viewpoint had been popular in a more traditional readings of history, newer academic history places some agency with the subject. The discourse that is implicitly presented by “America on the Move”, by virtue of the material culture that the exhibition chooses to focus upon, reinforces this idea, that the American population is without choice or agency in throughout the larger movements of history. These ideas are not explicitly advocated by the script of the exhibition itself, but are implied in the very structure of artifact exposition and the use of commodity in the production of a narrative.

This ideology (Marx’s theory of material culture) is more explicitly applied to those who are making the decisions to create and circulate the mass-produced material culture that is found in museum exhibition. In his studies, the theorist Theodore Veblen makes the observations that material culture is used by the privileged classes to assert

their own importance. By being the chief targeted consumers of produced material culture, the ruling class has a stake in the way in which material culture is designed and manufactured. In addition, because of their economic status, these classes also often have more direct ties to production, owning the factories and the capital that makes it possible (Veblen, 1899). In this way, another narrative which is implicit in the very organization of “America on the Move” is the story of its producers. It is their decisions that govern the production, distribution and consumption of new technologies, and the focus on these technologies reifies the importance of the bourgeoisie ruling class as the actors of history, as opposed to the “common man” with which the new social history is said to be concerned. By virtue of its origin, material culture is highly biased towards only one segment of population, that which, in new academic history, has become less important. Despite the fact that “America on the Move” appears to be a story of the population of “everyday people”, because of the inherent emphasis on technological determinism that is present in the very structure of museum exhibition (by nature of artifact), it instead becomes, at the heart, an account of production.

This aspect can be illustrated especially with material culture that deals with technological advance and social progress, such as the material culture that makes up the “America on the Move” exhibition. All of the modes of transportation that are

shown in this exhibit, are the result of the planning and manufacture of members of the ruling classes. The trains, automobiles and streetcars reflect the needs, tastes, and preferences of a historical ruling class, as well as their own hopes for social programming. In this way, all of the objects that are in the exhibition might actually be highly biased *at the moment of production* towards the ruling classes that are a facet of the older and more traditional history. “America on the Move” becomes, by implication, *their story*, as opposed to those less enfranchised personages whose lives were affected by transportation innovations over the last century. The individuals that “America on the Move” seeks to portray become almost irrelevant examples of a larger narrative of industrial progress in which they are not acting, but instead being *acted* upon.

Because the exhibition is visually-based, letting the artifacts tell the story, this more nuanced reading is not available to the viewing public, leaving, what is essentially, a biased and teleological account, one that places the ruling classes in control of history. As is stated by Tim Dant, artifacts have “embodied social relations” (Dant, 1992, p.2). If these relations are left uninterrupted, the history that they present becomes one that is governed by these relations, instead of explained. While “America on the Move” certainly takes into account the *experiences* of individuals within society in history, it fails to examine how these very experiences were brought about by the

power relationships of the time. Without this inquiry, “America on the Move” remains an exhibition that reflects Lyotard’s “grand narrative,” as part of this narrative is an acceptance of stated power relations.

The specific nature of the items that are in the exhibition also affects the type of reading which they might yield. The theorist Joseph J. Corn states that technological advancements especially hold the danger of portraying a story of progress, as this is inherent in technological advancement in and of itself. Corn posits that “interest in technology is spurred by an anxiety over the declining competitiveness of American industry”, and that museum exhibition in technics is most often a response to this decline (Corn, 1989, p.237). Corn identifies several problems in presenting a nuanced, non-progressive history, including the fact that museum history is nonverbal, and that it is oriented towards a popular mission and a highly differentiated museum public. All of these problems place constraints on the type of narrative which a museum exhibition can present, and these are seen in “America on the Move.” Despite the fact that the exhibition shows a complex picture of historical transportation, it is the limitations of medium (non-textual), audience (heterogeneous), and material culture that prevent museum exhibition from being representative of an academic discourse of history.

“America on the Move” on the Web

An interesting counterpoint to the visual nature of the actual exhibition of “America on the Move” is the website which is maintained as a supplement to the physical exhibition. This website is divided into three portions: “Exhibition”, “Collection”, and “Themes”, and is presented as a virtual exhibition in and of itself, as well as a companion to the actual exhibition (Smithsonian Institution, 2004). Like many websites, this one is for the most part, text-based, and provides a contrast to the visually based exhibition. The fact that there is a textual component to this heavily visual exhibition is important because it may provide a way that “America on the Move” and other museum exhibitions, can choose to more closely approximate the model of academic scholarship.

The website component entitled “Exhibition” directly follows the layout of the actual exhibition. Subsections appear for all eighteen of the displays in the museum, along with the entire script, and images of the museum exhibits. In this way, one can visit “America on the Move” virtually, without having to go to the physical space of the Smithsonian itself. Once again, this fact points to “America on the Move” as a work of original thought: as the ideas which are presented by the display can be divorced from its actual physical space.

The textual foundations of the website allow it to be read more closely than the museum, and because the text stands alone, without the audio and visual components of the exhibition, it becomes the natural focus. The “Exhibition” portion of the “America on the Move” website, it can be argued, thus, more closely approximates an academic work than the exhibition itself. Its focus is textual, and it can be read in a linear, progressive fashion, rather than the method of visual analysis, which is without a defined progression, as the nature of looking is without an ordered sequence . It is from the text that the meanings of the museum emerge: everything that is implicitly suggested in the visual and audio exhibits, is explicitly stated in the exhibition script. Because the virtual audience does not have the benefit of total, physical immersion, the script of “America on the Move” takes the forefront, rendering it more closely to the media that are typically found in academic discipline inquiry.

In addition to the “Exhibition” section of the webpage, there are also sections entitled “Themes” and “Collection”. The “Collection” section acts as a searchable database of the Smithsonian’s transportation collection. The user of the website may perform a cross search by categories of vehicle and transportation type, era, and by region in order to find information about artifacts that are housed in the Smithsonian collection. The strength of this section is that it allows the user to perform the same functions as a researcher, and to apply their already-accrued knowledge into an inquiry

that is academic. Instead of becoming the focus of a narrative, the material culture artifacts become evidence. This distinction is important; using material culture as evidence rather than basis of a discourse allows the inherently problematic properties of material culture, its twin emphases on progress and on domination, to fall away. Material culture is used as evidence to build an account, instead of creating the narrative *in and of itself*. In academia, inquiry precedes material evidence, whereas in the museum, the inquiry is *predicated* on the artifact. This distinction is extremely important: in academic work, material culture is used as evidence, while in typical museum exhibition, it is used *as a discourse*. The searchable database in the “Collection” section of the “America on the Move” website moves the exhibition closer to the academic model of history.

The third component of the website is entitled “Themes”, and focuses on the larger themes that characterize “America on the Move”, including immigration, leisure, technology, and communities. Each theme has links to smaller articles, which examine more closely the connections that are made in a broad way in the exhibition, as well as expound on topics that may only have been suggested in the actual, physical exhibit. This section is valuable because it allows users to see how larger ideologies are developed from transportation, and also what they meant to communities. In addition, each article is written by one of the curators, who is identified in a byline. This is again

significant, because it presents individuals that assume responsibility and accountability for the original scholarship that they are producing. Instead of the disembodied and anonymous curatorial force that nebulously lurks somewhere behind the exhibition, the small website articles are each credited to individuals, who have names and accreditations. Again, the website of “America on the Move” allows approximation to a more academic model.

In addition, the “America on the Move” website contains information about the curatorial process itself. There are “backstories” to each of the displays that are featured, these either expand on ideas that are suggested at in the exhibit, or depict the curatorial process; the choice of artifacts, the process of *bricolage*. There are also links to a scholarly case study by the chief curator, as well as a front-end audience user survey. All of these features demystify the curatorial process, and allow the audience perspective into the creation of the exhibition. This self-reflexivity is valuable, as it shows the very specific scholarly work that is done in order to achieve the display, as well as legitimizes and contextualizes museum exhibition as a medium that is all its own.

The website component to “America on the Move” indicates that the main distinction between museum and academic presentation of history is in the differences between visual/multimedia and textual modes and what they are able to highlight as

media in and of themselves. The website, though the benefit of text-based interface, is able to address the nuances that are missed in the physical exhibition, and move the history of the museum closer to that of the academic discipline, and moreover, do it in a way that is accessible to a large and heterogeneous population. However, the website portion of “America on the Move” contains its own intrinsic bias.

While the stated mission of the modern museum is to appeal to a large and diverse audience, the fact that, in order to access a narrative of history that is not bound by the inherent properties of material culture and museum exhibition, one needs access to the website creates a bias all of its own. Although at this point, a large number of Americans have at least occasional access to the Internet, there are still many members of the population that are not web-savvy. The reality of the digital divide, as well as the knowledge necessary to seek out the website, create a specific audience demographic which may be mismatched to the very population which the museum institution is currently seeking to attract. This group must be wealthy enough to have internet access and educated enough to know how to use a website. In addition, they must be motivated to seek out this website. In this way, while the “America on the Move” website assures the availability of a historical narrative which is within the tenets of a new disciplinary history, the structure and medium of the Internet create an access barrier that is curiously comparable to that of a traditionally academic audience. The

museum is looking to find a larger population, but the Internet may not be ready to provide it.

“America on the Move” is, in many ways, exemplary of the newest type of museum exhibition: that which attempts to parallel academic work. On one hand, by topic, by method, by narrative, and by structure, the display approximates the disciplinary model, thus asserting itself as a scholarly work comparable to any generated within the university, with the added benefit of a larger audience. On the other hand, the visual/emotive, artifact-based structure of museum display makes it impossible to present a truly nuanced account, as material culture, which is highly biased towards the relations of production, becomes less evidence and works more in the capacity of an independent and freestanding narrator, without the benefit of critical interpretation. The only interpretation is through arrangement, another visual tactic which does not present the depth which is necessary for a intricate understanding. “America on the Move,” by virtue of the properties of display, is not truly indicative of academic work, and is dangerous in both its depiction of the relationships of power, and its emphasis on progress and teleology. The companion website maintained by the National Museum of American History acts as evidence that the main discrepancy between museum and academic history, as well as the answer to the possibility of complex discourse may be text. However, the problem of access is ironically

exemplary of the power roles of technology. Ultimately, similarly to an academic text, the nuanced, complex version of the “America on the Move” narrative ends up oriented towards a very specific population, one which is counterintuitive to the stated goals of the new museum institution.

CHAPTER III: *ENOLA GAY*, THE MUSEUM AND THE NATION-STATE

The “America on the Move” exhibition shows how the structure of the museum exhibition might limit its potential for the presentation of a complex, nuanced history. However, there is an additional aspect of the museum as an institution that presents problems in the creation of a narrative in line with new academic history. The controversial 1995 exhibition of the *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum is an example of how the museum institution must negotiate its twin roles as an authority of the historical discourse and as a monument to collective national identity. In the last thirty years, the museum institution has been attempting to relocate itself as an academic and pedagogic source of historical interpretation. However, because of new features that are prominent the discipline of history, contemporary historical analyses are often ones of contradictions and ambiguity. This is at odds with the story of triumph and progress that is characteristic of a nationalistic ideology, one that must be upheld by the museum institution as a part of its identification with the nation-state. This disjunction presents difficulties for the museum institution, and by larger implications, inherent problems in the way that history is presented to a public. The controversy over the *Enola Gay* exhibit shows how the museum institution’s presentation of a historical account may serve to compromise the possibility of an inclusive and multifaceted historical discourse.

Museum to University: Structural Changes

The Smithsonian Institution, the largest museum institution in the United States, exemplifies this shift in the museum institution. Founded in 1846 as the bequest of James Smithson as “an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men,” the Smithsonian Institution, begun as one exhibition and eventually developed into a series of satellite museums on topics such as Natural History, American History and Air and Space (Kurin, 1997). At the beginning of its inception and throughout the earlier parts of the 20th century, the Smithsonian Institution was viewed as “the nation’s attic,” a slipshod collection of antiques, curiosities, and mementoes. However, by the mid-twentieth century, the Smithsonian Institution, through the hiring of curators and administrators with academic backgrounds, as well as by beginning to do original research and present exhibitions based on such, was moving more towards the model of the university, a matter discussed in earlier chapters.

The National Air and Space Museum was originally opened in 1946, shortly after the end of the second World War (Smithsonian Institution, 2005). This, in and of itself, indicates the celebratory model that the museum was based on; in the aftermath of World War II, the government and citizens of the United States were proud of the bomber airplanes that had made conquest of Axis powers possible. In July of 1976

(itself another significant and triumphant date in the public narrative of American History), the museum was moved to a new building, and renamed the National Air and Space Museum. Shortly thereafter, the Museum began presenting its first researched-based, education-oriented exhibitions, such as 1977's "To Fly", which examined the mechanics of air travel. In 1978, the director of the museum, astronaut Michael Collins was replaced by Dr. Noel W. Hinners, a noted scientist with an academic background. Shortly after this personnel change, the museum hosted a public symposium, featuring exhibitions and speakers on the development of various aircraft (Smithsonian Institution, 2005). This symposium, taking the format of an academic conference, as well as the appointment of Hinner together signify the more scholarly direction in which the Air and Space Museum, as well as the entire Smithsonian Institution, was shifting. However, the Air and Space Museum, like the National Museum of American History (still operating under its former name at this time), had still not moved away from a progress-oriented, technological focus. While it had begun to embrace the standards and models of the academic discipline, the brand of history presented by the museum institution was still of the classic top-down model that had been practiced in the earlier parts of the 20th century. Changes in university scholarship were reversing assumptions and moving social history towards prominence. While these shifts had, in part, allowed the museum to assume greater power over the setting

of a historical narrative, it was not until the 1980's that these transformations would solidify in the museum. The Air and Space Museum, because of its straightforward subject matter, was perhaps the most difficult museum to assimilate into this new model of a history that examined the cultural, along with the economic and political impact of flight innovation. This would not solidify until the late 1980's, with the selection of director Martin Harwit.

National Air and Space Museum: The New Model

As early as the 1980's, the curators of the National Air and Space Museum had begun to take steps to move the nature of their exhibitions from a straightforward and celebratory interpretation of progress in the development of flight, towards an academic inquiry into the contradictory implications of flight technology on the larger social and cultural landscape. The first step in this process was the 1987 appointment of Martin Harwit as director of the Museum. Harwit's background was strictly academic; he had been professor of astrophysics at Cornell University, and had no previous experience in running a museum (Harwit, 1996). The fact that he was chosen over a retired four-star Air Force general with a graduate degree in history indicates the degree to which the Smithsonian Institution was committed in making their museum a premier academic institution as opposed to a showplace for old planes. The

Smithsonian was allowing serious scholarly inquiry take precedence over administration over an uncomplicated program of exhibition. Harwit's progressive agenda included the introduction of prominent scholars into new curatorial positions, and a stated mission of extending historical research and writings, and of increasing the intellectual content of exhibits and displays (Kohn, 1995). The hiring of Harwit and the measures which he took in his first years in office indicate the way that the Smithsonian Institution generally, and the National Air and Space Museum specifically, attempted to bring the museum institution closer to the academic university institution and away from the older model of museum exhibition which was taxonomical rather than didactic.

By taking the focus of the museum away from a straightforward examination of technology, which, as described by Joseph T. Corn, is underscored with an inherent narrative of progress in which a reverence for technological development obscures a complex reality, the Smithsonian Institution, its curators and regents, were attempting to identify the nature of the museum as one that was more focused on the history of the nation, as ambivalent as it may sometimes be (Corn, 1989). The hiring and research practices instituted by the museum also reinforce the fact that the new discourse of then museum has come closer to that of its contemporaries in the scholarly institution of the university. As emphasized in the analysis of Gary Kulik, the museum now has a

comparable academic function and authority in terms of *defining, not representing* an accepted public historical narrative (Kulik, 1989, p.27).

The Museum as Monument to Nationalism

However, this new joint authority is not without its problems. Because the museum institution, unlike the university, has direct and explicit connections to both a national identity and a public interest, the nature of its academic inquiry is sometimes tempered by these concerns. Because of the museum's ties (financial, political and ideological) to the nation-state, its inherent role as a monument to national achievement can be at odds with its new role as an academic institution, especially when the dominant academic discourse is one that is contradictory to that of a nationalistic ideology.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm states that ideologies of progress and victory are inherent in nation forming and national identity (Hobsbawm, 1990). Benedict Anderson, who examines the "imaginary communities" of patriotic nation-states, maintains that this shared pride is a necessary component of national cohesion (Anderson, 1983). In the case of the United States, with its traditions of exceptionalism and manifest destiny, and its role as the 'leader of the free world', this shared patriotism and emphases on pride and victory are significant, especially in the case of

the atomic bomb, the development of which has long been tied, in American patriotic ideology, to the United States' international prominence. As is shown in the example of the 1995 *Enola Gay* exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum, this sometimes brings the nature of an unbiased and fair historical inquiry into danger.

This feature can be best seen when one considers the function of the American history museum as an Ideological State Apparatus, as defined by the theorist Louis Althusser. In Althusser's analysis, the Ideological State Apparatus is a non-government institution which is used by the ruling class (the nation-state) in order to sustain hegemonic relations with the subject. The Ideological State Apparatus exercises its control over the subject through direct address and a hailing practice called "interpellation" and a steady inculcation of the dominant cultural and societal ideals (Althusser, 1951). Through its role as a monument to American history and progress and through its obligation to the maintenance of public memory and patriotic ideology, the museum institution's role as an Ideological State Apparatus is clear. However, the danger of the museum as an Ideological State Apparatus comes to light when one considers the museum institution's efforts to advance itself as a legitimate source of academic thought. As will be seen from the *Enola Gay* example, the museum's obligations to the nation-state supersede its disciplinary affiliations and scholarly

function. In this way, the state gains more explicit ownership over a public historical discourse, and is more readily able to shift it towards its own nationalistic ideologies.

The theorist Carol Duncan, in her examination of the art museum as an institution, focuses on the inherent structural qualities that make the museum an organ in the ritual of citizenship. Duncan's observations, which can easily be applied to the Air and Space, and all of the museums of the Smithsonian Institution, show how the museum "identifies the highest values, the proudest moments, and the truest truths" of a national history (Duncan, 1990, p.90). This feature of the museum is not only because of the subject matters of the exhibitions, but also because of the nature of the museum. Using, as a foundation, the work on religion and ritual of Emile Durkheim, Duncan states that the physical space of the museum *looks* like a temple or a shrine: large, with sparse furnishings, and altar-like objects of focus. In addition, it is carefully marked off as a space for reception and introspection, another quality of the shrine. The physical space of the museum is ideally suited for quiet contemplation (Duncan, 1990). Because the topic at hand is one of national history, the museum becomes a place of citizen-building, of civic pride, and of celebration of the nation-state. Duncan's analysis holds especially true for the Air and Space Museum: the objects of display, being planes and other implements of flight, are larger than artifacts in other museums, and therefore, more monumental and closer to the objects of worship in

more conventional shrines. In addition, the subject matter of flight brings about celestial connotations that lend themselves easily to ideals and values. The Air and Space Museum can be seen, in the analysis of Vera Zolberg, as a “storehouse of the nation’s qualities” (Zolberg, 1996, p.70), a task that might be difficult to reconcile with its purported function as objective creator of historical narrative. This is thrown into sharp relief with an examination of the *Enola Gay* controversy.

Enola Gay: Making History

In 1993, Harwit and the other curators of the National Air and Space Museum announced the planning of an exhibition meant to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1945 dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. Focused around the newly-restored *Enola Gay*, the B-29 bomber that dropped the first atomic bomb, the exhibition was to be entitled “The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War, “ or alternately, “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II” (Luke, 2002). Meticulously researched and covering multiple aspects of the atomic bomb, from development, to events leading up to, to impact on foreign and domestic policy and relations, and finally on its role in the beginning of the Cold War, the exhibition was very much a product of the new complex and contradictory academic discipline of American history. In an article

written after the events that ultimately forced his resignation, then director of the museum, Martin Harwit, states that the Smithsonian advocates “freedom of research and publication for scholarly work, as practiced in the nation’s research universities.” (Harwit, 1995, p.1082) Harwit’s statement is indicative of the relatively new proximity between museum and academic models of scholarship.

The original script of the exhibit was to be divided into five sections; each detailing aspects of the social, cultural, political and economic milieu that led up to the events of August 1945. The first, “A Fight to the Finish”, described the vicious and deadly fighting between American and Japanese forces in the Pacific. The script detailed the motivations of both sides, stating that the Japanese fought out of fear “that unconditional surrender would mean an annihilation of their culture”, while the Americans fought as retaliation for the Pearl Harbor bombings of 1941, although “the suicidal resistance of the Japanese military justified the harshest possible measures.” (Curators of NASM, cited in Nobile, 1993). The equal consideration into the motives and cultures of both Japanese and American forces indicates how the original script of the *Enola Gay* exhibition sought to portray the complex motives and experiences of both combatants. Rather than concentrate on the United States forces, the curators of the Air and Space Museum made a conscious decision to consider the experiences of both sides in the conflict. This decision signifies the museum institution’s attempted

departure from the traditional teleological-oriented history towards a more inclusive type of inquiry, one that was more reflective of contemporary academic debate. In doing this, the museum was moving away from the indoctrination that is typical of the Ideological State Apparatus model, as it was inviting the public to draw its own conclusions based on the evidence at hand.

The second section of the exhibit, entitled “The Decision to Drop the Bomb” examined in detail, both the events that led up to the United States’ actions, and the disputes that ensued as a result of it. Consciously reproducing the academic debate over interpretation of this event, the script posed several questions that had been asked both before and after the decision became final: ‘Was a Warning or Demonstration Possible?’ ‘How Important was the Soviet Factor in the ‘Decision to Drop the Bomb?’ and finally, ‘Was the Decision to Drop the Bomb Justified?’ Each of these questions was accompanied by a short script detailing the current scholarship on these matters. (Harwit, 1996). By presenting the decision within a historiographic context, and by welcoming the viewers of the exhibition to reconsider their beliefs and opinions based on a contradictory set of ideas, the curators of the *Enola Gay* display were once again attempting to present atomic warfare in a light that corresponded with current thought and practice within the academic discipline of history. This approach demonstrates the

museum institution's attempt to locate itself within a relevant contemporary academic dialogue.

The third unit of the proposed exhibit was more in line with the traditional, progressive mode of history and the classic model of museum display. Entitled "Delivering the Bomb", this section lauded the technological merits of the *Enola Gay* itself, explaining how the B-29 Superfortress plane was both the costliest, and most effective development in World War II military technology. This portion detailed the building of the plane, as well as the successful missions in which it had flown during the Pacific conflict (Kohn, 1995, pp.1045-46). A paean to American military spending and technological prowess, "Delivering the Bomb" was the most straightforwardly celebratory section of the "Crossroads"/ "Last Act" exhibition. As neither the economic or technological aspects of the *Enola Gay* are in debate, the fact that this segment is disjointed from the rest is not especially surprising. On the other hand, it may be viewed as an example of the museum institution's activity as an Ideological State Apparatus, of its ties to the nationalistic identity of the United States, and of its efforts to mediate this aspect of its own existence.

The fourth section of the proposed exhibit presented a shocking contrast to the optimistic and laudatory form of the third as it questioned the motivations and actions of the state in a public manner. As predicted by the original planning document,

“When visitors go from Unit Three to Unit Four, they will be immediately hit by a drastic change of mood and perspective: from well-lit and airy to gloomy and oppressive. The aim will be to put visitors on the ground during the atomic bombings of the two cities.” Entitled “Ground Zero: Hiroshima, 8:15am, August 6, 1945; Nagasaki, 11:02am, August 9, 1945”, this portion of the exhibit aimed to show visitors, first hand, the terror of the atomic bomb. The proposal described life-sized photographs of victims, as well as vivid depictions of the pain and suffering of individual Japanese inhabitants of the two cities (cited in Nobile, 1995, p.45) This portion of the planned exhibition, in its narrative slant that sought to examine, in a humanistic and personal way, the experiences of all involved in the atomic bombing, as well as in its contents, first hand evidence of the fallout, is perhaps the most characteristic of parallel academic inquiry and interpretation of the event, and in its suggestion of American guilt, the most antithetical to the nationalistic narrative that exemplifies the model of the more traditional museum exhibition.

It also presents the possibility of the American History museum at its most effective, with its inherent ability, through pictorial evidence and three-dimensional space, the museum display has the ability to bring history to life, making the viewer’s experience visceral and tactile. More powerful than anything that could be written in an academic paper or presented at a lecture, and appealing to a much greater and

disparate audience, the museum has the ability to educate the contemporary viewer in a way that might profoundly change their experience and opinion. The possible advantage of display over text is suggested in the outcry over this exhibition: the fact that, despite the disadvantage of nuance, display is able to evoke stronger feelings in an audience.

The final portion of the planned exhibit followed the narrative established by Unit Four. Entitled “The Legacy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki”, it was split into two subsections: “Japan Surrenders” and “The Cold War and the Nuclear Arms Race”. The script in this portion detailed the Japanese surrender as a result of the atomic bombing, and went on to describe the way that this precedent contributed to the next forty-some years of the Cold War (Mayr, 1998). 1995 was a mere four years after the end of the Cold War, and interpretations of its causes, events, and legacy were still in formative stages. The fact that the curators of the exhibit were willing to advance an ideology that explicitly tied this incident to successive ones, and presented it all in an ambiguous light points toward their desire to advance the museum institution’s academic prestige. The original proposed exhibition was characteristic of the museum institution’s efforts to consolidate its role in the setting of standards for academic interpretation, and reflects the possibility of the museum institution at its best: a model of scholarship that

is in line with contemporaneous academic thought and methodology, and is able to express it to a receptive public in a form that is both powerful and stimulating.

Enola Gay in the Nation-State

When the exhibition proposal was released to the public in 1993, it was met with protest from veterans, chiefly the Air Force Association, the Retired Officers Association, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion. In January of 1995, a newly-elected conservative majority Congress, in the midst of fiscal planning drafted a letter, signed by 81 members, calling for the cancellation of the exhibit and the resignation of Director Harwit. On January 30th of that year, the original “Crossroads”/ “Last Act” exhibition was cancelled, and plans were made for a new exhibition. In May, Harwit, at the request of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, resigned from his position (Kurin, 1997, 75).

The *Enola Gay* exhibition which opened on June 28, 1995 was drastically different from the one that was originally planned. Centering around the plane itself, it focused, like Unit 3 of the original script, on the B-29 Superfortress, and the technological ingenuity which made it possible. Little mention was made of the Hiroshima mission, except for a small script, detailing in facts and figures and absent of any attempts at historical interpretation, the events of that day. The exhibit also

focused on the restoration efforts of the Smithsonian Institution; this was perhaps a self-reflexive attempt to reinstate the legitimacy of the museum institution, as a keeper and preserver of historical material culture (Smithsonian Institution, 1995). The *Enola Gay* exhibit, despite the best efforts of museum curators, ended up as a celebratory display of progress and victory as typical as the most traditional of museum displays.

The weakness of the final display, its sparse contextualization and its retreat from discursive narrative, can be compared to the weaknesses found in “America on the Move. As in the other exhibition, ultimately, the artifact, the bomber itself, was left to, in a manner of speaking, tell its narrative in and of itself; the nuances and complexities that could have been verbalized through text were lost. Because material culture, by nature, needs human interpretation, it alone was not sufficient to tell its account. Instead, the innate, celebratory features of artifact, especially artifact of technology and manufacture, produced an exhibition that had little to say about the greater implications of the *Enola Gay*. Ironically, it was the text, and not the object, that caused the initial controversy over the exhibition. It was not the plane itself that was contested, but the narrative that was built, textually, around its display. This fact, once again, illustrates the necessity of text to the presentation of a narrative that is reflective of scholarly work that is done within the university institution.

Display and Text

The example of the *Enola Gay* exhibition shows the limitations of the museum institution as a locus of legitimate and current academic scholarship. Because of its ties to the nation-state, the American history museum is committed to the presentation of a singular historic narrative of progress and victory, which may be contradictory to contemporary scholarly inquiry. While this in and of itself is a troubling thought as it brings into question the authenticity of academic scholarship, there are yet larger and more disturbing implications. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, the theorist Walter Benjamin worries about the potential dangers of a history that is held by the ruling class and which can thus be rewritten as a teleological ode to progress and a justification of their own legitimacy: “empathy with the victors invariably benefits the rulers.”(Benjamin, 1968) The museum institution’s ties to the nation-state, when combined with its role as an authority of the historical narrative, as evidenced by the *Enola Gay* controversy, may compromise the possibility of an inclusive and accurate understanding of events and ideology, and thus ensure that the American nation-state retains a hold on a nationalistic and one-dimensional public interpretation of history which is at odds with not only the academic discipline of history, but also the globalized nature of the modern world, in which a nuanced understanding of historical

accounts and ideologies seems necessary. This development seems perilous in its degree of indoctrination and repression.

However, the events surrounding the *Enola Gay* exhibition also signal a possibility for positive change. Benjamin also writes that “history flashes up at moments of danger” and presents itself to the subject as a means of discerning the oppressive relationship in which they are engaged (Benjamin, 1968, 255). The fact that the curators of the National Air and Space Museum even attempted to mount the original “Crossroads”/ “Last Act” exhibition points to efforts to use the museum institution as a means to help the public reexamine prevalent national mythologies. The extensive media coverage of the original script was, in some ways, an almost equally effective method to bring into question the predominant assumptions about the atomic bomb and the heritage of the Cold War, which is, even today, very present in American cultural, political and economic actions and ideologies.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the *Enola Gay* exhibition and the controversy which ensued is the constant interplay between the visual and the written that emerged. Each mode of communication was present in every stage of the inception, planning, mounting, and reception of the *Enola Gay*, and at each level, the visual and the textual worked in interesting, and sometimes contradictory ways. While it was the visual (the bomber itself) that originally inspired the display, it was the text

(the script initially released and critiqued by *Air Force* magazine) that created the controversy over the exhibition. Ultimately, the final inception of the exhibit was largely visual, and absent of any text. However, the debate *about* the exhibition was, in newspapers and magazines, largely textual. The final analysis of the exhibition, and the fracas around it has been analyzed by scholarly journals, in which academics from various disciplines (although mostly American History) have written multitudes of work. In 1995, *The Journal of American History* devoted an entire volume of its publication to the controversy, and allowed several scholars, including Harwit himself, to debate within its pages. Chapters about the exhibition have been a staple of many recent books in museum studies, and even ten years after the event, it is still a significant occurrence, the meaning of which is still being discussed.

This movement touches upon another relationship which emerges from this analysis: while the *Enola Gay* exhibit in the museum institution was inspired and made possible by work that was being done in the academic discipline, it is the academic community, through its continued exposition of the *Enola Gay* display that had the final word on the exhibition, and who were able to, using the format of text, examine the display as well as its reception and the socio-cultural implications of both through the cultural studies and postmodernistic perspective, and engage the subject matter in a discourse that was, by even the strictest definitions, academic in its nature. This again,

might point to the fact, that it is not possible to present a complex narrative with the absence of text, and because the museum institution deals mostly in visual display and exposition, it is not the appropriate forum for the type of history that it is trying to do.

While the “Crossroads”/ “Last Act” exhibit never materialized in physical form, the public account that it attempted to advance, was in many ways, made even more public through the controversy that it inspired. One might view the aborted *Enola Gay* display as a first step to social change, and a means of perhaps bringing into question prevailing nationalistic ideologies. However, the question remains: is the museum institution, because of its structure, and because of its associations, the appropriate venue for this type of scholarly work? And moreover, through attempting to usurp the power of creating a historical account, is the museum institution ensuring that the public be presented with a celebratory and teleological discourse that is out of step with not only academic research, but with the very future of a globalized world?

The Old University and the New Museum

In order to answer this question, it is perhaps necessary to return to the classical model of the university institution. In his work on the modern university, the theorist Bill Readings states that the university, as an institution, has outlived the purpose with which it was originally conceived. Examining the university from its conception nearly

three hundred years ago, Readings suggests that because of globalization and the loss of power of the nation-state, the university institution is no longer viable. Readings makes the argument that the university, as conceived during the Enlightenment, and during the first stages of the modern nation-state, was meant to be an institution for the building of citizens; a guardian of national culture (Readings, 1996). Readings points to recent trends in globalization and transnationalism, as well as the development of interdisciplinary fields such as Cultural Studies, to show that the university, in its original conception, is no longer relevant. The author instead condemns the modern university as a capitalistic enterprise, one that is more concerned with profit than with education.

In this examination of the museum institution, Readings' model of the classical university sounds strangely familiar. His observations about the university are echoed in Carol Duncan, or in Vera Zolberg, who states that the modern museum represents "civic rituals of recollection." (Zolberg, 1996, p.69) The museum model echoes that of the traditional Humboldtian university.

In Readings' analysis, the university was once used as a way to build and preserve a nationalistic narrative. The theorist Tony Bennett makes this connection even more explicit, as he compares the museum/university model to Foucault's famous Panopticon, and states that display is used to achieve hegemony in the subject by the

state (Bennett, 1998). As has been shown, the museum has now taken on a very similar function, yet through an altered model. Because of federal funding, as well as because of subject matter, the museum has closer ties to the nation-state than the university. Also, museum display has always been of a more public nature than the scholarly work that is and has been done in the university. Because of this, it is not as easy for the museum as for the university to shake the spectre of the nation-state.

At the same time, however, in a similar way that cultural studies and other interdisciplinary work has proved problematic for the university model, similar aspects of the new discipline of history have created pratfalls for the museum institution. The current museum institution is one that is riddled with contradictions: how can it stay faithful to the nation-state model, and at the same time, present research and scholarship that is representative of the academic discipline of history? Moreover, is the format in which the museum presents itself, with its emphases on visuality and wide understanding, adaptable, at all, to the model of the university, as stated by Readings and others?

Readings' answer to this question, at least in the case of the university, it to create a sort of "dissensus". Readings' model of dissensus reads somewhat like agreeing to disagree. It advocates a complex understanding and lively debate in order to contextualize the manifold experiences of modern existence (Readings, 1996). The

problem, however, in applying this solution to the university model is in its need for text.

As was seen in the examination of “America on the Move”, in order to present a more nuanced and multifaceted reading of history, the presence of text is always required. In the case of “America on the Move”, the text was in the form of the accompanying website. In the example of the *Enola Gay*, and the controversy around it, the text of newspaper and media accounts, and later, of scholarly articles on the subject, rounded out the exhibition and presented an analysis that was more reflective of the current milieu of academic scholarship. In both cases, however, the text that complemented the visual exhibition was only available to a certain habitus, either one that was research savvy, or one that was willing to seek out the text. The issue then became, not the fact that the text was not there, but that in order to find it, it was necessary to do additional research that would exclude a large amount of the very public that the stated museum mission is to reach. The question then remains, what steps must be taken by the museum to be able to produce exhibitions that are not only visually stimulating, but able to reference a complex understanding of historical narrative? The structural disjunctions between the visual and the textual, as well as the qualities that seem inherent to the museum institution model make this reconciliation seem very difficult. However, it is possible that through the very self-reflexivity, and

attention to medium, that brought about interdisciplinary work in the academic sphere,
this may yet be achieved.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION: THE NEW MUSEUM

As the case studies of “America on the Move” and the aborted *Enola Gay* exhibition have shown, the American history museum institution has been attempting to move towards a model of research and scholarship that is based on the structure of the modern university. The subject matter, analysis, and content of recent exhibitions presented by the curators of the Smithsonian Institution are meant to rival the academic discipline in their analytic and didactic discourses. However, due to the visually-oriented organization of the museum display, as well as the museum’s connections to the nation-state, this type of presentation has its shortcomings, which render exhibitions that are rooted within the “grand narrative”, progress-oriented mode of an older type of historical inquiry. As the museum emerges as an academic institution on par, and certainly more visible than the university, it is especially important to address these issues, as the museum institution, because of its prominence and accessibility, is poised to overtake the university in the creation of a public discourse of American history. In the same way that the shifts in the discipline of American history, with its focus on cultural studies and on a social history based on contradiction and not consensus, reflect changes in both national and global ideology, the museum must change in order to present a narrative that is relevant to the contemporary social, cultural, political and economic milieu.

Shifting Strategies in the University and Museum

As has been shown through analysis of the academic institution, the classic model of the university, with its emphasis on citizen building and national narrative, was once very similar to the current model of the museum institution. As Bill Readings, Mark Poster and others have argued, the shift in the university came about because of new ways of thinking about globalized society. Instead of orienting the nation-state as a homogenous collection of like-minded subjects, academic disciplines began to turn an eye towards the complexity of the historical experience; creating a narrative that attempted to incorporate the diverse ideologies, situations, and experiences of all facets of society. Out of this introspection, the modern mode of history, with its emphasis on as many populations as possible, was born (Readings, 1999, Poster, 2001).

In order to accomplish this, it was necessary for the academic discipline to engage in a self-reflexive examination of the very structures of its own scholarship. New attention was given to research topic, research method, and presentation mode. In these examinations, the power structures that created the grand narrative emerged, and the academic discipline slowly began to make attempts to create a discourse that was more indicative of the experience of the “common man”, and that did not seek to present a teleological narrative suggestive of victory and of progress.

Part of this new mode of inquiry, the attention to the archived material culture of the “common man”, was adopted by the museum institution, which used its monopoly on archived artifact, as well as the new emphasis on social history, to begin the production of exhibits that, like work that was done in the universities, produced new accounts, rather than presenting evidence for already-present ones. The institutional structure of the museum began to resemble that of the university. Curators held credentials identical to professors, and used similar methods of research and scholarship. The subjects of museum exhibitions moved from displays that reinforced aspects of the grand narrative towards the same examinations of populations and experiences that were being analyzed within the contemporary academic disciplines. Museum exhibitions changed from the “cabinet of curiosities” that exemplified the classical museum, towards displays that presented narratives representative of original scholarly work.

Moreover, the museum, as an institution more accessible and visible than the university, was able to reach a larger and more heterogeneous population. While the audience of the university is largely limited to academics and students, the museum, as a physical location, is open to the public. Its status as a national monument of sorts, a tourist destination, and a locale of entertainment ensures that the population that seeks out and is exposed to museum exhibition is far larger than that of the university.

Through its visually-oriented structure, the museum is also free to illustrate its narratives in a multimedia presentation that is akin to more familiar and conventional forms of entertainment: television, film, theme parks, etc. These qualities ensure that the narrative presented by the museum reaches a far wider population of subjects than any offered by the university and the academic discipline. It is the scholarship of the museum institution, then, that becomes more prominent than that of the university.

However, as it has been shown, museum exhibition is comparative with disciplinary scholarship only in subject matter; which is decided by the material culture that is the source of research for both types of analysis. The discourse of the museum exhibition, as has been evidenced through “America on the Move”, and through the *Enola Gay*, is, in the end, oriented towards the very narrative of national progress that academic scholarship, though its embrace of a cultural-studies and social history perspective, has been trying to escape. This analysis has posited that this is because of the innate properties of material culture, especially the material culture of technics, as well as because the visual presentation mode of museum exhibition, with its limited textual explanation, lacks the ability to provide the complex view that the new type of “dissensus” history requires. In addition, the museum’s explicit financial and ideological ties to the nation-state limit the type of history that it can present, especially about events that are still conflicted in the national memory. Because of these features,

the museum is in danger of providing a discourse that is out of touch not only with academia, but also with the conditions of globalized modernity, which, with multiculturalism, transnationalism, and as some argue, the decline of the nation-state, require a nuanced perspective on identity and ideology.

Towards an Interdisciplinary Museum

There are some signs, however, that the museum institution is aware of these discrepancies, and is attempting to remedy them. The original *Enola Gay* exhibition points to this, as do the backgrounds of the current curators of the Smithsonian Institution, who come from academic institutions that are in line with the most current mode of historical narrative. In addition, the textual supplements to both exhibitions, which are found on the Internet, show that the importance of nuance and complexity may not be lost on the cultural producers of the displays. The question then remains: How to reconcile the limitations of museum display with the type of historical narrative that is necessary in contemporary society?

Perhaps the answer to this question is the very same strategy of self-reflexivity that allowed the academic discipline to first address the issue of contradictory cultural experience. In order to present a history that incorporated manifold experiences and ideology, the academic discipline had to not only reexamine its topics of inquiry, but

also its very methods and modes of presentation. It is possible that, in adopting a similar approach to the one that was employed in the implementation of cultural studies and interdisciplinarity within the university, the museum display would be able to accomplish a similar goal and present a discourse that took into account a complex and manifold historical experience. There are several means that might aid this effort.

The first of these changes is also the easiest, as the materials are already in existence. In order to address the disparity between the visual and textual modes of narrative presentation, the administrators and curators of the museum exhibition must seek to bring together these two modes of discourse. The visual, that which is present in the current mode of museum display, and the textual, which is available through the accompanying web pages, as well as the articles that are written in scholarly journals, must be reconciled, and offered in a joint physical (and perhaps web-based) presentation. The addition of the text that is already available would serve to round out the discourse of the museum exhibition, and explain the complexities and nuances that are only hinted at in visual presentation. By making additional text available in the physical location of the museum exhibition, its curators would be providing the artifacts on display with much-needed additional context, one that is accessible through the very act of visiting the exhibition, rather than in the present mode, which is self-

limiting in the fact that it requires additional research on the part of the audience, some of whom might not have the required resources to carry this out.

In the same way that museum exhibition might be rounded out by the connection of the textual and visual components of its discourse, it may also benefit from the same sort of self-reflexivity that is found in the current interdisciplinary model of the academic institution. In order to address the biases inherent in scholarly analysis, scholarly work is now informed by an inquiry into its own modes of research and presentation; its very structure. One of the most powerful aspects of the “America on the Move” companion website is the section that deals with the curatorial process, and the decisions that are made during the evolution of the final display. At the physical site of exhibition, the process of exhibition production within the museum institution is currently shrouded in an air of mystery. The audience is only aware of the finished product, and often has no idea of the decisions that are made along the way to the finished product. In order to demystify both the research, as well as the finished narrative of the museum exhibition, curators should strive to make the public aware of the very production process that informs the type of discourse that is the end product, and include aspects of the curatorial process in the physical exhibition. In the same way that knowledge of the capitalistic process of commodity production might serve to inform and empower the proletariat, the museum’s effort to publicize the curatorial

process might make museum viewers aware of the biases that are inherent to the very research and display of the museum exhibition. This might also serve as an alternate method of involving the viewer in the narrative, and making them conscious of their own place within the historical discourse, as well as of the ways that the production process affects the narrative that is presented in the display.

Similarly, another factor that limits the ability of museum exhibition to present a truly effective account of historical experience is the fact that the curators are not explicitly named as authors. As has been discussed previously, despite the fact that, through subject, methods, context and the qualification of its author, museum display can be considered a work of original scholarship, the curators are not identified by name in any place within the physical exhibition space, nor are specific sources of research identified. Because museum display, in every other aspect, closely resembles the type of academic work that is done in the university, it would be beneficial to name the authors of each exhibition in a prominent place in the display script. This would make curators responsible for the intellectual and ideological content of the display, as well as reinforce the fact that the museum exhibition is now capable of presenting a historical discourse, distancing it even further from the “glass cabinet” model of the classical museum. In addition, this change might also serve to further the museum from the model of the temple-monument; a place where material culture is worshipped as a

part of the progressive American narrative, rather than an academic institution of inquiry and discourse.

Changes are certainly possible to address and remedy the problem of the museum institution's association with the nation-state. In order to distance itself from its function as a monument to American progress and victory, it is necessary for the museum institution (in this analysis, specifically the Smithsonian) to divorce itself from the American government. It has been shown, with the example of the *Enola Gay* exhibition, and the federal sanctions which followed the controversy generated by the display, that because the Smithsonian is chartered by the federal government, and because it receives federal money in order to support itself, the scope of exhibitions that it can potentially present is severely constricted. As long as the bulk of the national museum's operation and exhibition expenses come from federal funding, the ideological expressions of the institution must be in line with the positive image that the United States government seeks to present. At best, this allows for a limited historical inquiry, and at worst, produces exhibitions that are little more than propaganda for the nation-state, masked as scholarly works.

In recent years, the Smithsonian Institution has been relying more on donations from private corporations, as can be seen from "America on the Move", which was funded in part by General Motors. Although non-government organizations are by no

means neutral in terms of ideological and de facto power relations (and indeed, some argue that are quickly replacing the nation-state as the prime holder of power in the post-globalized world), they are worth considering as a potential source for funding, as long as they are not allowed to influence the type of and scope of museum exhibitions. Because non-government organizations do not hold the type of authority and power that the nation-state has (i.e., legal and physical force), they are less likely to be able to curtail exhibitions in the manner of the federal government. By explicitly distancing itself from the federal government, the oldest and most visible organ of the nation-state, the museum institution could move further away from its role as a monument to national progress. An alliance with non-government organizations, as well as multiple funding for each exhibition, might serve to allow the museum institution to produce and exhibit research that is more similar to that of the university and the academic discipline. While this move is not without its dangers (as has been seen from the backlash to corporate funding of university activities), it might be a “lesser evil” that outright federal funding, at least in the capacity of separating the museum from the nation-state.

While museum exhibition has steadily been moving closer to the model of original scholarly research being done in the university institution, structural aspects of the museum, which linger from the more traditional “glass cabinet” version of the

museum, prevent the historical accounts that are presented in museum exhibition from providing a discourse that is faithful to the very academic disciplines that form the basis of current museum display. With the implementation of even some of these suggested changes, the museum institution would move closer to the current model of the academic university, allowing the curators of museum exhibition to present narratives that are concurrent with work being done in the academic discipline, albeit in a manner that is more engaging and accessible to a larger audience. Because the museum institution has been explicit in its aims to represent itself as an educational institution, this shift would certainly be beneficial on a multitude of levels, as well as ensure that the museum audience is presented a historical narrative that reflects the experiences of a wide variety of populations.

Further Research

One of the most interesting aspects of this research into museum exhibition is the fact that the subject seems to yield great potential for further analysis. There are many issues that are only briefly touched upon in this project; each presents many possibilities for additional research. Perhaps the most obvious is the topic of audience reception that was mentioned briefly in the introduction. This thesis almost exclusively focuses on museum exhibition from a production standpoint. However, because of the

public nature of museum display, there is vast opportunity for research in this matter. How do audiences perceive museum exhibitions? And how can their perceptions be implemented into future display? The role of the museum visitor is an important one, and is essential to not only the understanding of museum exhibition, but to the mission and planning of the museum exhibition in and of itself. Because of the extremely heterogeneous nature of the museum audience, there has been little work done on this subject. Both as a comparison to the production of museum exhibition, and as an effort to understand museum audiences, this study would be both interesting and valuable.

While the topic of audience reception is one that would probably require an alternate means of analysis, there are several questions that would provide a more direct extension of this project. One of the most important issues raised in this thesis is that of the application of academic research methods into a format that is more visual and textual. While the museum institution is most likely the foremost example of this occurrence, one can also look to television channels such as A&E, The Learning Channel, and The History Channel for other instances of this paradigm. All of these channels present a historical account that is the result of an academic inquiry. These shows are often based on written works of research, and use university academics as consultants and oftentimes, on air, as commentators. The format of these shows, being television, is primarily visual, and such devices such as auditory narrative, historical

reenaction and artifact analysis are all common features of these programs. Similarly to the museum, these television shows present an account that is based in the academic discipline. However, the structural properties of televisual presentation, as well as factors such as corporate sponsorship, programming time, and narrative arc, render television presentations very different from their academic counterparts. A close inquiry into the production and appearance of such programs might yield interesting observations about historical narrative, public presentation, and structural adaptation. In the same vein, webpages (such as the ones that now accompany most Smithsonian Institution exhibitions) are another example of a new format for scholarly historical research and presentation. Issues of authorship, legitimacy and sponsorship are all present in this inquiry.

Another means of furthering this analysis would be by applying its methods as well as its boundaries of inquiry to other types of museums. This paper has focused exclusively on the discipline of American history, but the questions that are raised; the tension between the museum institution and the academic one, the relationships between the museum, its administration, its visitors, as well as its nation-state could easily be extended to art museums, natural history museums, and national museums in other parts of the world. For example, the debates regarding such topics as evolution and the creation-myth might play out in interesting ways in an institution such as the

natural history museum. Instances in the field of art museums that might provide interesting study include the storm over a planned exhibition at the National Gallery of the works of controversial artist Robert Mapplethorpe, or the Brooklyn Museum of Art's "Sensations" exhibit, in which artist Chris Ofili's use of elephant dung on a portrait of the Madonna, and then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani's public criticism garnered much media attention. There are countless other examples from museum exhibits; each of these would provide a fascinating case study.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the museum institution is that it is in constant flux, perhaps now more than ever. The issues raised in this thesis; of material culture, of the museum institution and the academic discipline, of textual and visual display, of the nation-state and the national narrative are almost boundless in the ways that they can be organized and examined. Moreover, as the museum institution shifts and changes, new issues arise. New technology in visual and auditory presentation, such as holographic images, CGI and animatronics might bring new possibilities of immersion to the museum audience. The continuous development of the Internet can likewise increase temporal and spatial distance between the physical location of the museum display and its possible audience. And as globalization and new technology continue to bring individuals into closer contact, historical narrative will change in perspective and scope. The museum institution, as a primary cultural institution, will

continue to take a large role in popular education and ideology. For all of these reasons, continued study of the museum institution, its ideologies, and its presentations, is invaluable.

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