

ART – MUSEUM – UTOPIA

Five Theses on an Epistemological Construction Site

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Actuality — Reality — Fiction

If like the radical constructivists one defines actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] as that which fundamentally escapes our influence, reality [*Realität*] can be defined as that which we can grasp with our senses and process in our brains to form more or less consistent constructs. However, by making these constructs the foundation of our action, they appear as actuality or second nature, especially when reified in apparatuses, constructions, organisations or theoretical constructs. This second nature differs from the first not only because it requires first nature as its prerequisite and is made by us; it is also relative: since we have different experiences in actuality and our brains process these experiences individually, we experience and process actuality in different ways and construct as a result more or less different realities.

Although 'the' reality cannot exist, a clear distinction is made between the realistic and another form of the construction based on actuality [*Konstruktion über Wirklichkeit*], fiction, because it is either denied a possibility of effect [*Wirkung*] or because it appears to be constructed so that no effective action can result from it. Realistic and fictive constructs on actuality, facts and fictions, are, however, not opposites but, in fact, merely ways in which we deal with the fragmentary character of our experiences. The construction of a reality can only be manufactured with the help of framings; on the basis of these framings, particular experiences of actuality are circumscribed and become the material for corresponding constructs. Other experiences, however, are seen as having no effect on such constructs and remain excluded. If the construction of a reality is therefore only to be had at the price of fictionalising part of actuality, the fictionalized can represent a potential that exceeds the realistic or poses an alternative to it — that which is possible or could be possible, and that which the realistic is not or cannot be.

Reality and fiction thus do not relate to one another like two sides of a coin, but rather have a dialectical relationship to one another: by exploding the frame within which realistic constructions are erected, developing fictions represents a possibility of revealing the conditions of reality constructions.

II. Utopian and Museal Consciousness

As a rule, museums take as their object a reality different from that of which they themselves are a part. This premise is shared by the museum, understood as a construction, with utopia, which Thomas Nipperdey said is a "literary-theoretical design for a possible world that consciously [transgresses] the limits and possibilities of the actuality at issue, and [aims] towards a fundamental different world [characterized] by a high degree of completion" (Nipperdey 1962:357-376). If in contrast to Utopia, the classical museum, which argues historically, precisely does not deal with Alfred Doren's wish-times (*Wunschzeiten*) or wish-spaces (*Wunschräumen*), but rather real things from particular lives in particular places, the two remain comparable in that both engage in the construction of realities not

present in the here and now. If in utopian consciousness (*utopisches Bewusstsein*) the production of an ideal image (*Wunschbild*) stands in a dialectical relation to reality, in a similar way classical museal consciousness produces images of past times, sunken cultures or distant worlds that take on meaning to the extent that they transcend the conditions in which the museum itself is located. Utopian and museal consciousness are thus different forms of fiction; they differ from one another not in a structural sense, but primarily through the prospective or retrospective character of their respective constructions in relation to the reality in which they are constructed.

Utopia as Second-Order Observation

Utopian thought was and is a form and kind of thought that fundamentally agrees with the premises of that which we now call systems-theory. Adopting the terms of systems-theory, I would like to characterise utopian thinking as a specific form of second-order observation: the prospective and/or speculative second-order observation of an existing world. Second-order prospective or speculative observation cannot be a purely academic observation, but is by definition a form of reflective agency: both as a reflection of that which is observed and as a reflection of the fact that what is observed does not correspond to what the observer desires to observe. Risking to let this dynamic develop it self, and providing it with a form and a content; this can be the basis for a timely utopian thinking.

Utopian thinking is also determined by the dialectical relationship between the fragmentary character of our experiences and the tendency — if not the necessity — of our brain to formulate from these experiences a concept that is to some extent meaningful; an utopian concept requires a certain degree of concreteness and consistency to be distinguished from an existing world or — to use the terminology of systems-theory — has to set up and describe a system of rules on the basis of which an autopoietic, i.e. self-reproducing system can be constituted and made perceptible. However, the more concrete and detailed such a system is defined, the easier it will be, on basis of such details, to criticise it, and even to reject it as a whole. It seems to me that the only possible way of escaping this dilemma is to define the utopian system not only as an operation with the help of which the existing reality can be observed but also as one which allows to reflect its inherent tendencies.

IV. Art and Utopia

The production of images and objects is a classic operation in systems-theory, and can be understood as a model for the process of how a reality can be produced from an actuality. As a medium of experience and a form of its objectification, an image is always a vision of a world: a concrete attempt to obtain an image of actuality from the flow of experience. Photography, in which the operation was developed to a simple, wieldy technique, can serve as an example of this process.

But only in the artwork does this process become a conscious operation of the self, or, in other words, a reflective construction that can allow the conditions of its world cognition to be revealed in its world image. In the difference between the fabric of an image and the image itself, in the difference between the meaningless material, physical make-up of an image (the canvas, the paint and its treatment) and the meaningful image which can emerge only in perception by a beholder, this particular

structure is present and available to experience. Its perception presupposes the beholder's active ability to reproduce, and can furthermore only be expected when the image itself offers a basis for his or her own activity. This, however, is in general not true of products of technical image production, since they cannot be reproduced in beholding, but are only received in a given state, as second a nature.

Images that reveal the conditions of a reality's construction cannot have a realistic character in the sense defined above, and thus would be misunderstood if taken as examples or instructions for action. Rather, such images always have a fictive character. We can perceive these images as constructions of a reality from actuality, from matter and its treatment, as constructions that surpass the conditions of their production and furthermore allow their facture to be recognised: it is this that makes them concrete utopias.

V. The Museum as a Utopian Site

Like the fine arts around 150 years ago, museums have now lost their realistic-practical function. Beginning with the proliferation of technical image-giving procedures and, more recently, the rapid development of the mass media and the Internet, this process will continue to the extent that electronic media become part of the standard equipment of households in the information society. Like libraries and archives, museums will increasingly become less and less vital as primary sources of knowledge; instead, they will represent — not unlike the gold reserves for currencies — only the material reference values for free floating knowledge elements drawn from them. This development seems to me the objective condition for a paradigm shift in the future role of museums.

If the classical, historically oriented museum has always been a place in which it was at least theoretically possible to compare different world constructions and world images, it has up until now hardly been seen as a site in which the conditions of those constructions could be systematically studied. Herein lies the special chance for the further development of the idea of the museum and the rehabilitation of the old institutions in the media society: by no longer conceiving them as mere silos of knowledge, but as sites within which the conditions of the production of knowledge can be experienced, and as spaces dedicated to the construction of those realities that have no place in the mass media or cannot be produced under their conditions. This means, however, that museums have to give up the fiction of objectivity, and must recognise their chance in their specific individualisation; in a particular treatment of the goods contained in them; and in building their own reality with them. In other words, only if museums give up their realistic documentary function and turn themselves into sites where fictions are fabricated, that, in whatever way, transgress and transcend the given as well as the real, they might have a chance to hold the interest of the audience on the long run.

(Translation: Brian Currid)

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Thomas Nipperdey, Die Funktion der Utopie im politischen Denken der Neuzeit, in: Archiv für Kulturgeschichte 44, 1962, 357-378