

THE WORLD AS A MUSEUM IN THE POST/POSTMODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The present study discusses actual problems on the evolution of museums at worldwide level, under the influence of some global phenomena, such as the unprecedented development of cultural tourism, consumerism, rur-urbanisation and reurbanization of the society. Globalization of culture, on one side, and grasping of today's world as a museum, on the other, become the acts of a performance staged for the rushed and stressed modern traveller. The cultural touristic pattern becomes prevailing in the postmodern society, transforming the institutions into museums and everyday life - into a work of art and a total Museum.

The present investigation analyzes the new significance and role of the museum in the post/postmodern society, starting from the understanding of the special regime imposed to it by globalization, and attempts at establishing its position and functions in the overwhelming, all-embracing culture of divertissement of today.

Everything seems to indicate that, in the beginning of the XXIth century, the whole body of traditional cultural and artistic values are once again under debate. Breaking up of the Soviet empire and the end of the Cold War, in parallel with a most rapid development of the communication technologies *sans frontieres*, reinstalled triumphant capitalism all over the world. Concomitantly with such global processes, radical transformations of the aesthetic cannons are developing under our eyes, a possible explanation of such a phenomenon being related to the free circulation of culture, brought about by the economic freedom.

The increasing number of museums and the planetary invasion of the cultural tourism raises questions upon the nature of such manifestations. Are they a sign of progress or, on the contrary, a simple culturalization of the Western life style? The experience of the American "californization" of the European culture is highly equivocal, exactly as the transformation of the modern world into a postmodern and, further on, into a post-postmodern society. Such globalization of

mass culture gives birth to the culture of tourism at planetary scale. Contributing to the development of intercontinental voyages, touristic trips have become one of the movers of modern economies, deeply influencing the contemporary world. In the new age of efficiency in which we are actually living, changes in the rhythm of work and the resulting stress create tensions that can be attenuated only during holidays. However, the time and space for leisure become scarcer and increasingly condensed every day, so that the moments dedicated to meditation, solitude and introspection appear only exceptionally. A more and more frequently invoked solution to this enormous pressure is sports, culture and voyages.

Obviously, all these parameters have important consequences upon the development of the cultural structures, expected to meet the urgent and precise requirements of the category of persons represented by active travellers. For this new category of tourists, always in a hurry, rapid touristic visits should be organized, assuring easy access to any cultural center of the world and acquaintance with other cultures, especially of the well-established touristic brands (Paris, Venice, Egypt or Bali). We are now witnessing *the reorganization of the world, transformed into a cultural show for the tired, hurried and stressed voyager*, who, nevertheless, does not want to die an ignorant. Such globalization of culture, such transformation of the whole world into a museum, into a show played for travellers (the rich ones, mainly), generates contradictory effects.

In his *Everyday life as a show*, Erving Goffman demonstrated, inspired by the anthological *Homo ludens* of Johan Huizinga, the potential of transforming even the most common news in brief into a show. In a similar manner, in his *Society of the show*, Guy Debord provided the

following definition: "Under all its specific forms, as a piece of information or propaganda, advertisement or direct *divertissement* offering, the show constitutes the actual *pattern* of the socially-dominated life" (Debord, p. 41), outlining "the huge expansion of the modern show, ... transformed into a performance, in which part of the world *is representing itself*, by displaying its best part (...). The show appears as an uninterrupted speech delivered by the present order on itself, as an encomiastic monologue about itself" (Debord, p. 49, 46).

Post/postmodernism amplified and intensified the *divertissement* connotation of this theatrical tendency: " (...) the post/postmodern world is the world of generalized, all-embracing entertainment. Nothing is of value if it does not amuse one, the theatrical component having become the fundamental cultural value in this beginning of century. Virtual reality, cyberorganisms, thematic space, etc., all have a common characteristic: *divertissement*." (Constantinescu, p. 16) Post/postmodern mutation influences, in a synchronous and global manner, economy and culture, technologies and media, consumism and aesthetics. In this respect, Guy Debord established the key-domains which used to define them: "in the *Society of the show*, the modern performance was essentially defined as the self-critical domination of market economy, which had reached a status of irresponsible sovereignty, appearing as an assembly of the new government techniques accompanying this new type of domination" (p.166). As expected, the supremacy of economics modifies accordingly the role of culture: "The culture entirely transformed into goods should also become the star-goods of the spectacular society; culture should become, in the second half of this century, the motion force of economic development" (*ibidem*, p.149).

More recently, in 2012, in the volume entitled *La civilización des espectáculo (Civilization of the show)*, the Nobel Prize winner Mario Vargas Llosa analyzes the transformation of the Western world into an artificial civilization of the show, basically associated with frivolousness, characterized by the substitution of genuine intellectuals with cheerful media protagonists, by breaking up of the relation between "specialists" and the public, by launching in the

social space of some false and dangerous concepts, among which the theory of Jean Baudrillard, responsible for having imposed the actual supremacy of image, to the detriment of the written culture. According to the French philosopher Jean-Marie Shaeffer, this recurrent conflict, begun in the XIXth century between the great art and mass art, marks the orientation of the European societies towards a more balanced social structure. Nevertheless, nowadays, art does not longer operate in full autonomy of the world of the capital, as we are now living in the post-autonomy epoch of art. It goes without saying that opening of the world through the market favored the development of a dominating culture in which art, the commercial culture, museums and tourism are more and more intermingled. From now on, the previously well-delimited cultural domains converge one towards another.

This post/postmodern world is affected by several other tensions, which transform art into a *divertissement*, traditional journalism into "infotainment", while the old-fashioned politics becomes a new politics, of the "feel comfortable"-type, heroes become stars, functional architecture is recycled in expressive architecture, biology gets revigorated as genetic engineering, while the revolutionists are transformed into hackers. All such metamorphoses began quite a long time ago, as Ludwig Feurbach had already stated in the Preface to the second edition of his *Essence of Christianity*: "Yes, naturally, our times... prefer to the real thing the image, to the original form - its copy, to reality - its representation, to essence - the appearance; as, for it, sacre indeed is only illusion, profane is only the truth" (p. 21). Actually, all these considerations lead to a single question: "is reality, in its traditional interpretation, morally, aesthetically and epistemologically better than post-reality? Or, in other words, should one prefer real life instead of its improved, embellished, yet false version?" (Constantinescu, p. 11) .

In the process of today globalization, museums have an especially important role, once they organize exhibitions accepted on the huge international *divertissement* market. Such exhibitions travel all over the world; accordingly, Tutankhamun goes to Paris, and the impresionists sail to USA. Deliverance of representations

quite easily to be integrated by the modern development of cultural tourism also leads to uniformization of the different cultures, in parallels with the manifestation of some important regional movements.

The museums of our days are like stations in which trains bring clowns, whose mission is of amusing the crowds. This metaphor has been frequently used by Thomas Krenz, manager of the Guggenheim Museum of New York. Numerous, multiplied exhibitions, which recycle up to nausea the paintings of impressionists, of Picasso or of Gustave Klimt are structured exactly as populist magazines, namely with maximum of images and minimum text. Nowadays, the success or failure of an exhibition is evaluated by the affluence of its public. Enormous sums of money are paid for advertisement, on leaving aside the scientific research normally required for the preparation of an exhibition. Such a tendency, intensely manifested in the USA, is now contaminating the whole world.

Consequently, museums ignore more and more their research mission, as observed by Laurent Gervereau in *Le musée, source ou moteur de recherche*, rapidly becoming simple commercial galleries while the latter ones are organized as museums. In this respect, the best example is offered by the *Galleries Lafayette* supermarket chain of France, whose name and concept are much indebted to the artistic display and presentation of goods. The environment created by the application of museal techniques formed a special type of buyer. Shopping should be not an irksome task, any more, but a cognitive-cultural-aesthetic walk accompanied by surprises. The goods are exposed exactly as the works of art, a technique applied as early as at *Au bonheur des Dames* by Zola, and continuously technologized and improved. The newly-established museums, as well as the commercial galleries are expected to re-activate the old-fashioned spaces and institutions, such a phenomenon being both the result of a radical change of mentality and of the general tendency of privatization of the cultural domains at world wide level.

As a result of modern world's opening towards travelling and cooperation, the world of art becomes more and more similar to the world of business, opening itself to decentralization and

diversification. In such a context, flexibility became a highly fashionable concept. The world of art proposes a large variety of productions, many of them with exotic aspect, such as, for example, the "Paul Gauguin in Polynesia" exhibition. Intellectuals hastily declared that, soon, universal communication and reconciliation will prevail, yet the social and economic realities demonstrated the opposite. The large-scale proliferation of exhibitions and festivals all over the world evidences visible differences among countries from distant geographical spaces. The extent of such international manifestations has been rapidly changed into a shop window of the dominating culture, to the detriment of the subaltern cultures, economically incapable of creating their own national art market. Does this tendency create a new form of cultural colonialism? Nevertheless, some beneficial effects should be also mentioned - for example, East Berlin became the capital of the contemporary picture of Eastern Europe. Undoubtedly, international exhibitions permit the access of artists coming from less developed countries to the international artistic market.

No one can deny that the postmodern society brought about several advantages to museums, apart from its negative aspects. In an open world, museums have become important driving forces, one of their main objectives being of keeping pace with the modern requirements. As a cultural institution which resisted along times, for "making known and preserving - as historian Neil Harris used to say - the cultural authority", the museum was forced to gain its public by divertissement actions, assuring its survival: "Museums are now housing artistic extravagancies, in which staging of the performance throws into shade the work of art. To this end, they adopt the strategies generally applied by mass-media, namely: more stress laid on the show, cult of the star, on the "mastrepiece-and-treasure" syndrome. Accordingly, several interactive multimedia exhibitions invite the public to participate and select the segment of interest for it" (Constantinescu, p. 214).

Consequently, while the Museum of Modern Art of New York, the most famous and restrictive as to the display of universal values, makes now efforts to protect itself against the commercialization trend of culture, and to

promote its traditional concepts as an entity of its own, the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao has adopted a different strategy. Unlike the museum of New York, the Spanish institution understood that it has to open itself to the external world and to build up bridges between Europe and Latin America. Extending its ramifications all over the world, conquering other countries (thus giving a hand to their local economy, as well), the museum of Bilbao followed the pattern of touristic culture, which became dominant. The success recorded by the Bilbao museum is first due to its magnificent architecture. The increasing number of tourists brought about prosperity. The splendid Guggenheim museum of Bilbao provides the best example of globalization of culture, by the incredible leap it made towards Europe and the XXIth century.

The impact of tourism is especially intense, not only upon culture, art and museums, but equally upon everyday life, so that, at present, one may feel as a tourist even at home. The longing to travel is related to one's minimum need of cutting off his roots, even for a short period of time, of leaving behind his old territory. Nowadays, the idea of moderate uprooting is more and more frequent.

The urban centers are constantly provided and protected, thus producing artefacts appreciated on the international market, attracting a large number of tourists, which favours commerce at world level. UNESCO registered, in 67 countries, 165 cities viewed as patrimonies of humanity, transforming them into museums. World's transformation into a huge museum is accompanied by increased consumerism, as the expenses made for protecting such cities are usually supported by multinational companies or transnational trusts which display their logo in the most visible positions.

The process of transforming urban centers into museums is completed by the re-creation of fortified villages of mediaeval type, now highly fashionable. Such communities - built up according to a paradoxically Utopian project - may be met especially in California, Florida or Australia, but also in Transylvania. They appear as traditional villages capable of having reconstructed a mythic world, substantiated on personal relations, simple and direct communication. The disadvantage of such

achievements is that these fortified villages are sometimes closed, being protected by a wall formed by other localities. Equipped with sophisticated surveillance elements, they are accessible only to elites. The highly urbanized society of today is obviously affected by the nostalgia and extended tendency of rural-urbanization (which refers to a common set of rural and urban elements), manifested especially in post-industrial countries.

Another tendency of our days is that of building imaginary cities, quite similar in aspect to those created by Walt Disney. The best example in this respect is the town called "Celebration", in Florida, erected on the territories belonging to Disney company; with its 2,000 inhabitants, this place is a copy of a XIXth century community, a phantasy initiative of quite rich people, for whom all facilities (golf terrains, forest paths, a lake, shops, schools, hospitals, a gym center, etc.) have been provided. In this way, the whole city becomes a work of art, while also imitating a possible dwelling place for the tourists attracted by post-modern architecture. The main concepts lying at the basis of such a community have been founded are: education, health, technologies, space, community and comfort. Such a protected space responds to the preference of its inhabitants for a more simple and better organized universe, in a world busily involved in postmodern transformation.

In parallels with the nostalgic tendency of rural-urbanization at societal level, the decaying towns are strongly subjected to reinvigorated reurbanization, urged by the consumistic trend. A good example in this respect is the city of Los Angeles, the capital of entertainment industry since 1955, ready to colonize the world in the same way as the Roman Empire did. Actually, contemporary Rome itself has become an open museum of history, turning to good account, in a monumental manner, the logic of history into the logic of memory. Some theoreticians (e.g. Glynn, Tomasulo and others) have observed that, among others, postmodernity recommends other type of proofs than the traditional ones for describing and understanding the historical events, so that "our ideas on historical references (what happened), epistemology (knowing how it happened) and historical memory (interpreting what had happened and the significance of

events) are now mainly determined by the image offered by mass-media" (Constantinescu, p. 25, 26).

The American cities show the strongest tendency of being totally transformed into museums. This extraordinary initiative is especially indebted to Jon Jerde, considered the architect of globalization. He imposed a peculiar aesthetics, creating irresistible structures for the consumer-tourist, namely cities and, at the same time, divertissement parks. Altogether, this new conception of urbanism is the symbol of the economic neo-liberalism. Copying, according to his own words, "the intelligent geography of the European cities", he added a baroque theatrical characteristic. The architecture of Jon Jerde is based on techniques basically similar to those of the divertissement and museum industries.

Thinking over the future evolution of such problems shows that they have rapidly become actual in our own space, as well, if considering the context of globalization to which we all aspire, which prevents us from remaining prisoners in the Museum of history. Accordingly, the touristic cultural pattern becomes dominant in the postmodern society, causing muzealization of both institutions and of everyday life, viewed as a work of art and as a total Museum.

In an original artistic formula, the concept of total Museum was developed by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuc, Nobel Prize winner, in his novel *The Museum of Innocence*. The story teller who lost his lover in an accident decides to transform the house in which she used to live in a space lodging his memories: "I was dreaming to tell my story by means of objects" (Pamuc, p. 585).

While visiting several museums, the idea of organizing a museum of his own becomes obsessive: "in the Small Museum of Lost Objects I could have gathered for the public all that I had collected about her, all things that reminded me of her..." (*ibidem*, p. 585), an idea finally put into practice: "I was actually creating a private museum, exactly as in Europe" (*ibidem*, p. 599). In the museums he visits, the narrator looks for guide-marks for his own initiative: "my love for Füsün deserved a similar display, full of glamour and splendour. I spent a whole day in the Museum of Perfume of Grasse, "the world center of perfume", situated in the south of France,

making efforts to remember the sweet smell of Füsün" (*ibidem*, p. 589). Visiting museums becomes an obsession, the idea seizes him entirely: "I felt the same comfort while wandering along the rooms of various museums, not the agglomerated, imposing spaces, such as those of Louvre or Beaubourg, but the desert museums, which I discovered by simple chance, while strolling all over Paris, sheltering collections of no interest to anybody" (*ibidem*, p. 584). In time, the number of museums he visited becomes impressive, indeed: "up to his death, he came to visit exactly 5,723 museums" (*ibidem*, p. 619).

The idea of Pamuc's narrator remains nevertheless original by its profound personal touch and sentimentalism: "The museum of innocence was created for giving the possibility of living beside one who is no longer alive" (*ibidem*, p. 593), "Some people crowd their houses with different kinds of objects, so that, towards the end of their lives, they get the aspect of museums. As to me, I was striving to transform into a house a dwelling become museum, only with the help of my bed, my room and my very presence" (*ibidem*, p. 602).

The final sentences of the novel express the idiosyncrasy between the narrative aspect and the exhibition show: "the objects and photos I had arranged for remembering the events related to them should have found their place in some chapters of a novel, corresponding to the boxes or show cases of a museum" (*ibidem*, p. 606), while the impressing, sensible story of an individual feeling gains a space-temporal generalization: "the story is not only the story of two lovers, but the story of a whole world, namely the story of Istanbul" (*ibidem*, p. 619); "The true museums are spaces in which Time gets transformed into Space" (*ibidem*, p. 602).

Such a concept of personal museums has been previously developed, in a genuine manner, as the Imaginary Museum established by André Malraux, by means of which the French former ministry of culture and the famous writer defines in *La tête d'obcidiennne* the "pictures and sculptures we carry inside us" (p. 210) and "which can exist exclusively in our memories" (*ibidem*, p. 208). "We have in mind a Museum which, definitely, is not Louvre. It looks like Louvre. It does not look like it" (*ibidem*, p. 221). This Imaginary Museum is also a total museum,

once "everybody is free to enrich it (...) as one wishes" (*ibidem*, p. 231).

A possible conclusion would be that the mission of the museum is not of searching for the universal structures of the museistic language or realization of a simple classification and toponymy, but of evidencing the information provided by the museum of the socio-human world, of the way it reorganizes it and reconfigures the past and the collective memory. Neither a close system nor a simple reflection of the social aspects, the total museum should be interpreted globally, both from the inside and the outside, as both effect and renewed pattern. Always related to philosophical thinking, the relations developed by the museum with both society and culture offer the most suitable keys for understanding its essence and specific evolution in space and time. Recognition of such a force, capable of transforming the global cultural imaginary world, whichever its profile, will unveil its panoramic, equally cultural and socio-aesthetic, trans-political and anthropological dimension so that, far from accepting the announced death of museums, one has but to acknowledge the birth of a new spirit of muzealization across the world.

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