

Fact, Fiction and Nostalgia: An Assessment of Heritage Interpretation at Living Museums

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore and discuss the role of nostalgia (a concept that is inherently grounded within a psychological framework) in heritage interpretation from both provider and consumer perspectives. Whilst many cultural practitioners recognise the relationship between sentimentality and authenticity, particularly within a folk-heritage context, few have sought to examine the effect this has on the visitor experience. This paper questions visitors' ability to objectively assess objects and experiences at heritage sites, and the role of practitioners in presenting often blurred views of social history that may sometimes negate historical fact. Drawing on case study research at two UK living museums, Blists Hill Victorian Town in Shropshire, England, and the Big Pit: National Coal Museum in Wales, notions of reminiscence, authenticity, myth and intangibility are considered within the framework of the interpretive experience. Findings suggest that the visitor experience is inherently subjective, highly individual and that the concept of intangibility is integral to an understanding of the nostalgia-authenticity debate.

Introduction

Often referred to as 'folk' or 'vernacular' heritage, living museums aim to represent social history and traditional ways of life. Such a concept has existed in one

form or another for over a century and first emerged as a response to the perceived threat of the Industrial Revolution on traditional rural lifestyles (Walsh, 1992) although in Britain, it is often the remnants of the

Industrial Revolution, such as redundant buildings and obsolete machinery that have been used to create folk heritage sites. Whilst these objects are clearly worthy of representation as part of Britain's social history, the 'way of life' they present is often questionable. Some writers liken such representations to the ultimate 'simulated experience' suggesting that the vast majority of living museums produce representations of lifestyles that are devoid of conflict and anti-social behaviour, and exist within over-idyllised landscapes (Walsh, 1992). Social structures portrayed in the living museum, suggest that the subordinate classes represented are often a highly stereotyped construction of the middle class imagination (Bennett, 1988). This is reinforced by the misguided notion that the use of the word 'folk'; to describe such classes and the various intangible activities attributed to them suggests at best a sense of the rural, and at worst, connotations of peasantry and patronage. Such a term has subsequently become problematic, since one might argue that it *evolved from an earlier system of colonialist thought and domination* (Seitel, 2001 cited in Van Zanten, 2004: 37) inevitably becoming *tarred with the rustic brush and subordinate to 'proper' history* (Rattue, 1996: 217). The idea that the representation of ordinary people within a museum context is subject to discreet (or even blatant) hierarchical systems of authority therefore persists, suggesting that cultural hegemony is present and manifesting itself through the medium of interpretation.

The growth of social history and the recognition that working class culture was not only worthy of representation but in danger of being marginalised has led to a *consciousness of history from the bottom up* (Young, 2006: 322) promoting *ever more professional forms of heritage commemoration* (ibid.) Yet the words of E.P. Thompson (1963) paraphrased here are negligible in this context, since the history represented in living

museums is often little more than just a construct of the hegemonic classes (or in this case, the museum management) - used in varying degrees to perpetrate a highly romanticised view of the working classes that may have more to do with myth than reality. *To say that it was 'myth' is not to say that it was all false; rather it is a montage of memories, an average* (Thompson, 1963, cited in Bell, 1996: 32). The words of Thompson (1963) echo the ideas of Raymond Williams (1961) whose concept of 'selective tradition' suggests that the activity of historical study and reconstruction is in itself merely a process of selection. This process is one which builds an average picture of a past culture based on the records that have survived it and governed *not by the period itself, but by new periods, which gradually compose a tradition* (Williams, 1961, cited in Storey, 1998: 54). Yet, herein lies the problem. The rejection of certain aspects of a previously living culture, and the reliance on memory as suggested by Thompson (1963) to build an accurate appraisal of the past is fraught with ambiguity, particularly within a heritage context. One might argue, however, that this is precisely what heritage, and its custodians, wish to facilitate - an environment where a series of myths can be perpetrated to induce the idea of a cultural tradition and a nostalgia for a 'golden age', thus retaining hegemonic equilibrium.

Perhaps the most unfortunate result of folk representation is that it tends to create a functionalist view of the past related to the myth of the unchanging community (Bell, 1996). The ability that heritage has to stagnate history, particularly within the living museum context is ironic given the fact that attaching the word 'living' to 'museum' suggests a certain degree of activity. Yet such sites present history as frozen in time - a perfect snapshot of a past epoch existing now only in memory, where myths, nostalgia and reminiscence can flourish.

Yet these concepts remain an endemic part of the heritage experience, allowing the visitor to engage with their emotions on an individual level and sense history as if it were their own; both by drawing on and exploring their own emotions empathetically, and by immersing themselves in an historical experience.

Heritage and Nostalgia: a Symbiotic Relationship?

In its most simplistic form heritage can be defined as *something inherited at birth* (Collins English Dictionary, 2005: 399). However, such a narrow definition overlooks the multitude of objects, ideas and traditions, both tangible and intangible, that the word has been applied to, both within the cultural sector and outside of it.

In purely semantic terms, it could be argued that the word 'heritage' is *without definition* (Hewison, 1987: 31), presenting instead a series of vague dichotomies that even extend to its physical manifestations - tangible and intangible. Traditional notions of heritage such as tangible artefacts, buildings and objects of historical significance will always persist. Yet recent developments in cultural heritage management have recognised the importance of intangible heritage both as a form of heritage in its own right and as a supplementary aspect of tangible heritage - providing further depth and context that cannot be achieved by the tangible alone. Thus endangered languages, oral heritage, traditional forms of music and performance, customs, rituals and folklore and *the recognition of communities and groups as those who identify, enact and re-create and transmit the intangible and living heritage* (UNESCO, 2006) are also defined as heritage. Smith (2006) furthers the idea of 'intangibility' by the suggestion that heritage is more complex than simply a term that designates or classifies. Instead, she defines the notion itself as *a mentality, a way of knowing and seeing meaning that all heritage becomes, in a sense, intangible* (Smith, 2006: 54). Heritage, it seems, is without precise definition, or at least it can no longer be defined in terms of its physicality, rather it is an idea, a concept, a phenomenon and a feeling based on a system of values and meanings *that are symbolized...by those heritage sites or cultural practices* (Smith, 2006: 56). It is unsurprising therefore, that we struggle to define a concept that is inherently dependant on subjectivity, particularly if those meanings and values are

constructed both collectively, and by individual engagement. The onus on heritage managers to reflect the intangibility of past experiences accurately, therefore becomes even heavier.

Since heritage can, by its very nature, involve exploring the past by evoking personal/collective meaning as part of an internalised experience, one can begin to see how the psychological concept of 'nostalgia' may have relevance when viewed as an important 'intangible' value. Current psychology conceptualises nostalgia as a positive emotion, involving positivity and even happiness (Davis, 1979, Batcho, 1998 et al). It can be *a self relevant emotion that has an affective structure and fulfils crucial functions* (Sedikides et al, 2004: 202) and memory with the pain taken away - a bittersweet longing for a past that no longer exists (Davis, 1979, cited in Goulding, 1999). The element of loss then is endemic to nostalgia, prompting some theorists to highlight the duality of its nature and its ability to bring about discomfort and sadness due to the contrast between a desirable past and an undesirable present (Johnson-Laird and Oatley, 1989, cited in Sedikides, 2004). Such constructs present very specific challenges at intangible heritage sites.

Several theorists suggest nostalgia can be experienced vicariously; a 'simulated nostalgia' (Baker and Kennedy, 1994, cited in Goulding, 1999) evoked from stories, images and possessions, for a past never experienced. Nostalgia therefore, is crucial for the intangible, since it exists purely in the mind - ultimately manifesting itself through memory and reminiscence.

Kavanagh (1996: 1) suggests that:

--museums are a meeting ground for official and formal versions of the past called histories -- and the individual or collective accounts of personal experience called memories--

The audience thus engages in their own construction of heritage through an intangible experience using mentefacts as opposed to artefacts (Dube, 2004). This move from 'object' heritage to 'subject' heritage where *the person sees her/himself once again centred at the heart of cultural interests* (Dube, 2004: 127) is integral to the idea of the living museum, where 'folk' are both represented, interpreted and consequently experienced by the 'folk' who visit.

However, where we rely on subjective emotions in

order to make sense of an experience, discrepancies in visitor understanding must surely occur since:

History is interpreted to stimulate nostalgia, idealize the past, and leads to a selective understanding of the past that has more to do with fantasy and fairy tales than veracity (Laenen, 1989: 89).

The ambiguity that arises from the use of nostalgic representations to provoke such a reaction is the ability to glorify a 'golden age', a problem that is perhaps typified at folk and living museums where visitors are often encouraged to indulge in sentimentality and the imagined and inauthentic landscape is imbued with all that is missing from the modern world (Lowenthal, 1985). This poses the question of whether traditional notions of authenticity are relevant within this context, and if so, how is the intangible authenticated? Indeed, analogous references could be made here with McCannell's (1996) notions of 'staged authenticity' in a tourism context, where he argues that tourists are often happily complicit in the constructed inauthentic as a form of escapism and pleasure.

The Challenges of Authenticity and Representation

This idea of authenticity as a sociological discourse was initiated by MacCannell (1973, 1996) who discussed its relevance within the broader framework of a controversy regarding the relationship between tourism and modernity (Cohen, 2002). MacCannell saw modern people as alienated from their own society and therefore *reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and other cultures, in purer, simpler life-styles* (MacCannell, 1976, cited in Cohen, 2002: 269). This fits in neatly with writers such as Hewison (1987), Lowenthal (1985, 1998) and Wright (1985) who suggest that feeling nostalgic for the past represents dissatisfaction with the present. Thus reality can be found in the past, leading people to consume everything it embodies.

Early work on authenticity, such as MacCannell's, assumed the existence of some objective authenticity of sites as defined by professionals, the assumption being that the visitor's sense of authenticity will be stimulated by the site (Cohen, 2002). However, later work suggests that *authenticity is not a non-negotiable, given quality, but*

is in practice often socially constructed (Cohen, 2002: 270) and as such different people have different criteria for judging the authenticity of a site or object. The amalgamation of different criteria on which to measure authenticity can also promote the idea that culture is complete and unquestionable in its authority. Mauss's concept of 'total social fact' implies that culture should be recognised as a concrete experience where the social, individual, physical and psychic meld into a unique expression, that is in itself total and global (Mauss, cited in Dube, 2004). This suggests that the reality of the 'cultural experience' is borne out of a combination of elements, that includes both the physical (or tangible) and the experiential (or intangible). This raises further questions about the real ability of heritage providers to offer anything which is definitively authentic.

Communicating 'Folk' to 'Folk' - Interpreting the Intangible

Communication of the story of a site, and the people who inhabited it, often causes conflict to arise, especially at 'living museums' where multiple themes are usually present and the desire to enliven the story in some way results in the past often being depicted as much more exciting than it actually was (Howard, 2003). An interpreter may therefore find their strategy incorporating a version of the historic story that emphasises the exciting rather than the ordinary. However, in the 'nostalgia debate', one could argue that it is the mundane that is authentic and what ultimately appeals to people. By using everyday familiarity and a story that everyone can relate to, the interpreter is able to link today's visitor to their historical counterparts.

Hooper-Greenhill (1994: 143) suggests that museums communicate through two main methods - mass communication and interpersonal communication. Interpersonal communication such as demonstrations, live interpretation and workshops, enable interpretation

---through shared experience, modification or development of the message in light of 'on-the-spot responses', involving many supporting methods of communication (bodily movements, repetitions, restatements, etc.)

This form of 'enactive' engagement (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994) is essential to the living museum, which displays or

demonstrates intangible activities such as traditional crafts and industrial processes in their working context. At such sites the opportunity often exists for visitors to participate themselves, and become part of the exhibition experience, rather than act as passive bystanders.

The nostalgic memories that visitors share and may transmit to one another can take on some of the characteristics of storytelling, almost constituting 'folklore' in themselves. This is given further credence by the fact that the stories that are prompted are often passed down from one generation to another, developing and taking shape as they go, as traditional folk stories often are. Kischenblatt-Gimblett (2004: 53) suggests that

---folklore by definition is not the unique creation of an individual; it exists in versions and variants rather than in a single, original and authoritative form; it is generally created in performance and transmitted orally, by custom or example, rather than in tangible form.

The belief that performance and example aid folkloric transmission also links to the views of Hooper-Greenhill who suggests that 'doing' may be a more effective mode of engagement than merely passively absorbing information through 'reading' or 'seeing', which in turn is supported by Edson and Dean (1994: 178), who state that: *Most people prefer active, rather than passive information-gathering activities; they desire to do things rather than just read or hear them.*

McIntosh and Prentice (1999: 591) suggest that living museums require cultural competence in terms of visitor understanding, being devoid of written interpretation in the traditional sense such as labels and text. For many visitors, 'cultural competence' can be achieved through *the stimulation of selected memory or nostalgia*, (Walsh, 1992, cited in McIntosh and Prentice, 1999: 591). Understanding is therefore facilitated by the representation of collective memory, into which visitors personal memories can be slotted (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999).

Yet this poses the question of how the interpreter can ever communicate the 'right' message? If every visitor has their own way of understanding a presentation, based on personal experience, then there is an increased likelihood that the message will be interpreted in a way that was unintended, since the interpreter cannot possibly know beforehand what personal experience the visitor is bringing with them.

This suggests that nostalgia, rather than being a phenomenon that manipulates and distorts the message is instead an intrinsic part of the understanding process, one which is often uniquely personalised and in itself, intangible.

Exploring Nostalgia and Authenticity in the Living Museum - a Methodological Approach

In this research, a case study strategy was employed for its ability to focus on relationships, processes, and the complexities of a given situation (Denscombe, 2003). Thus the subject of nostalgic representation could be thoroughly scrutinised within an appropriate setting. As previously discussed, this research aimed to (a) assess the meaning and role of nostalgia in heritage interpretation, (b) examine the impacts of nostalgic interpretation on the visitor experience, (c) critique visitors ability to objectively assess the heritage experience presented at certain sites, and (d) the functionality of museum managers in the construction of nostalgic spaces and experiences of intangible heritage. These research aims were explored at two contrasting living museums in the United Kingdom.

The methods used in this study to collect primary data consisted of semi-structured interviews with both visitors and practitioners, supported by participant observation of visitors at the point of interaction with various stimuli. Visitor interview structures were formed to address issues of nostalgia, authenticity and the conflicts between practitioners and visitors. Visitors were asked about their visiting habits and how the interpretation made them feel. Photographic prompts of images of each site were used to elicit conceptual, qualitative responses (without creating bias through pre-formed descriptions). The conflict between practitioners and visitors in terms of authenticity and nostalgia was also explored and interviewees were invited and encouraged to raise any points that may not have been covered. Open questions were used to *explore the topic and to produce a fuller account* (Saunders et al, 2003: 258).

Practitioner interview schedules were also constructed following the topics and principles outlined above. Since it was a key aim of the research to explore the decisions behind the interpretation *and* the way it was delivered, it was necessary to produce two schedules - the first was aimed at those responsible for interpretive planning and the second for those involved in the actual

interpretive delivery. The aim of the first was to establish the context in which the heritage experience was being produced and therefore questions were designed to obtain responses that would provide a frame of reference to the research topic. The second practitioner interview schedule was designed not only to add to this context, but also to determine the day to day reality of interpretation delivery and to analyse organisational consistency.

The research population consisted of adult heritage visitors to the sites over a one month period. The only profiling stipulation was that the interviewee or visitor under observation was over sixteen and a UK resident, due to the risk of cross-cultural perceptions influencing responses to certain questions, and reactions to the stimulus. The sample for visitor interviews was attained by employing convenience sampling whereby visitors were approached at random until the required sample size of twenty five in-depth interviews at each site was reached, making a total of 50 rich semi-structured interview transcripts for analysis. Respondents consisted of lone adults, family groups and adult groups.

For the heritage practitioner interviews, potential interviewees were identified in advance with some assistance from both organisations, and so a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select cases that best enabled the research questions to be answered (Saunders et al, 2003). Focused interviews were carried out at both heritage sites and involved site managers, curators, guides and demonstrators.

In order to triangulate the research methods, observation was undertaken to generate data and substantiate the responses elicited at interview. Participant observation is grounded within a sociological or anthropological standpoint (Denscombe, 2003) and can be used to explore the occurrence of social phenomena within a 'setting', therefore conceptualising the phenomena as 'naturally occurring' (Mason, 2002) without the need for a contrived situation.

A schedule pro-forma was designed in order to record behaviour and reactions with ease. A content-analysis code was devised based on features identified through the ideas and theories presented in the literature relating to the topic (e.g. whether the nostalgic emotion displayed was negative or positive). Observation sessions took place in four different areas of each site, lasting approximately two hours each, after interview data had been collected. During each observation session the behaviour, interaction and verbal responses to the stimuli were noted.

The data analysis used in this study combined a deductive and an inductive approach by utilising the concept of template analysis (King, 1998). As in a general approach to analysing qualitative data, template analysis involves categorising and unitising data *to identify and explore themes, patterns and relationships* (Saunders et al, 2002: 396). In this study, the initial starting point from which to build categories for analysis naturally centred around the key issues under research, therefore the concepts of nostalgia and authenticity became the initial themes from which categories emerged. As themes and interconnections between the data emerged, categories were refined to focus the analysis and aid the building of explanations. A number of themes emerged from the data which suggested a relationship between the concepts under discussion and an analysis of the two separate concepts of nostalgia and authenticity gave rise to theory that was grounded in the data.

Case Study One: Blists Hill Victorian Town, England

Blists Hill Victorian Town is part of a complex of seven museums all administered by the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, based in the West Midlands of England, which was established in 1967 to *preserve and interpret the remains of the Industrial Revolution* (Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, 2006). Ironbridge itself is of particular historical importance and is designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site as the birthplace of British industry.

Blists Hill is an outdoor reconstructed village which presents a mixture of original in situ industrial buildings, and buildings that have been rescued from demolition from other locations in the Shropshire area. Aiming to represent a 'typical' Shropshire town from the nineteenth century it consists of domestic buildings such as a school, a bakery, a chemist's shop and a bank, where money can be exchanged for historic currency, and several industrial buildings where traditional practices and crafts are demonstrated by costumed staff who interpret historic life and recite tales of life in the nineteenth century. As there is very little textual interpretation available there is nothing to suggest that Blists Hill is located at a precise date in history, therefore the visitor can create their own timeframe. Although classed as an industrial museum, the focus is undeniably very much on the retail and domestic life of the

nineteenth century folk represented there.

Blists Hill vaguely informs its visitor that it is a *late Victorian working town* (Ironbridge Gorge Trust, 2001: 2). One can safely assume then, that the staff manning the site do not have personal experience of the historical periods represented, and it therefore follows that neither will visitors. This however, had little or no bearing on the site’s ability to provide an empathetic experience. The findings at this site suggested that visitor perceptions of authenticity fall distinctly into two separate types those who perceive authenticity in terms of its tangibility and those who perceive it in terms of its intangibility. A minority of respondents defined authenticity along traditional lines, citing objects and buildings as key devices in the construction of an authentic experience:

I think all the original equipment, you know like the milliner’s sort of shop with the hats... all that helps doesn’t it... to recreate a period? (BH6)

Yet the lack of comments relating to the ‘original’ tangible features of the site, such as the Brick and Tile Works, or the Blast Furnaces was marked. Moreover, interviewees consistently defined authenticity in terms of the intangible, or whether ‘the experience’ *felt* real. For the majority of interviewees the intangible aspects of their visit, such as being able to experience the past through ‘doing’ what historical figures may have done, or engaging with interpreters, were the crucial determining factors in what constituted an authentic experience, for example:

Well I like the role play... if you get face to face with them and you react with them then its really really good... you get a real feeling for it (BH5)

Thus ‘people’ or ‘folk’ are integral to the authentic experience, either through providing access to the past in the form of face to face interpretation with a guide or demonstrator, or by physically experiencing historical life. Moreover, being able to relate to the experiences of the people portrayed in the interpretation in this way promotes the impression that an authentic experience has been achieved. Empathy is facilitated and evoked by the emotions that the site induces, through nostalgia and a sympathetic reaction to the ‘folk’ stories that are represented and interpreted on site. Interestingly, visitor responses to nostalgia were recorded in both case

studies, regardless of the sites’ personal relevance to the visitor, which in itself appears to support the existence of ‘vicarious nostalgia’ (Baker and Kennedy, 1994, cited in Goulding, 1999). The nostalgia concept manifested itself in this research as three different reactions to the stimulus of the interpretive content and can be modelled in Table 1 below:

Nostalgic Response	Indicative Behaviour/Commentary
Regressive	Wishing for the Past
Progressive	Yardstick for Comparative Progress
Sympathetic	Regret at human living/working conditions

Table 1
Nostalgic responses to intangible heritage

The minority of those who displayed ‘regressive’ or ‘progressive’ reactions to the stimulus were more or less completely divergent in their responses, either wishing a return to times past (generally prompted by recognition of a familiar object or item) or by using nostalgia as a tool to consider progress and development and appraise the wider progress of society. Although a ‘progressive nostalgic’ presents somewhat of a contradiction, it does perhaps go some way to supporting the idea that nostalgia can be *self relevant* (Sedikides et al, 2004), therefore acting as a catalyst for self or societal improvement. However, the majority of responses were expressed in terms of sympathy for the way of life portrayed in the interpretation. What was interesting is that responses were overwhelmingly framed in terms of issues relating to ‘people’, ‘folk’ and the ‘way they lived’, often in the negative, for instance:

It’s all very well for us today to go down in there and say ‘oh it’s really pretty’ and ‘it’s really wonderful’ but, I mean, it’s damn hard, it really was (BH14)

This reaction was displayed in the majority of responses and recognition of the negative aspects of domestic and folk life goes some way to disputing the claim that visitors can be duped into accepting comforting and nostalgic images of the past (Uzzell, 1998). What is clear is that as long as ‘people’ are available to engage and interact with, an authentic experience can in fact be achieved through the fact that the visitor can empathise with folk life as if it were their own. By leaving the period presented in the vaguest possible terms, it allowed the visitor to create their own sense of ‘time past’ based on their life histories and personal experience.



Figure 1
Case study one

The evocation of personal memory in this context also presents itself in the way that visitors felt that they not only understood history by relating it to experiences from their own life, but can feed those experiences back into the interpretation by relating and transmitting them to other visitors and staff. The experience therefore becomes a collective activity, suggesting that authenticity can not only be *socially constructed* (Cohen, 2002: 270) but has a dual aspect - an internal aspect that relates what is presented to personal experience, and an external aspect that promotes empathy through collective remembrance and memory sharing.

By encouraging visitors to tell their own stories and recall memories, sites can also challenge the concept of museum hegemony since

--- the complex relationship between the audiences and the actors challenges the notion of the museum as a place where passive visitors inevitably consume a dominant ideology (Bagnall, 2003: 95)

However, if the visitor's stories are chosen to be integrated into a site's interpretation, it might be reasonable to assess critically the reliability and validity of such resources. One heritage practitioner noted that:

--- you can bring your own stories into it but also what visitors give you as we-- their memories-- a lot of them we can actually pass on-- we learn from visitors, but what you learn from visitors, you need to

be very careful with, its not always the true fact, you know memories play tricks on you as well. (BH, P2)

Such practices could be regarded as either an enhancement of the site's commitment to present multiple truths and variations of history, or as a distortion of the framework of historical fact around which the interpretation should be built, although Blists Hill actively encourages its visitors to consider *a broader perception* (BH, P3)

Case Study Two: Big Pit (National Coal Museum, Wales)

Big Pit: National Coal Museum was a working mine until it closed in 1980 due to the declining coal industry, re-opening again in 1983 as an open air living museum (Wales Underground, 2006). The main focus of the museum is an underground tour led by former miners, and the site has since been designated and funded as the national mining museum for Wales (Thompson, 2005). Where Blists Hill uses costumed interpreters whose characters are based on supposition and secondary data, Big Pit employs real ex-coalminers as interpreters and guides. Drawing on their personal experiences, they provide, arguably, an experience with an authentic message about the realities of heavy industry. Those interpreting Big Pit chose to restore all the buildings already there, regardless of age, thus portraying the complete history of the site and creating a link from past

to present. This also helped to avoid the static presentation of time that is unavoidable with the recreation of a community from one period. The recent inclusion of an exhibition detailing the lives of miners, their families and the communities they lived in, presents a human side to juxtapose the industrial. Traditional mining maintenance and blacksmithing practices are still undertaken at Big Pit, and visitors are encouraged to partake in an underground tour to understand the realities of the mining industry.

Evidence of nostalgia was also procured at Big Pit, which is perhaps explained by the fact that the historical period represented is still relatively recent and therefore actively remembered by a larger majority of visitors. It was also typified by pride and admiration for the past, rather than the simple happiness of recognition evoked by regression, meaning that it took on the principles of a 'progressive' reaction (see Table 1):

-- nostalgia-- for the things past--It's sad that the landscape has changed so much, but its all part of moving on and progress isn't it?(BP 13)

Visitors to Big Pit particularly expressed a 'sympathetic' reaction towards the site's portrayal of women, children and the mining conditions, and observation of visitors to the Pit Head Baths Exhibition provided evidence that was consistent with this reaction. Visitors were typically heard commenting:

Look at the poor children in that photo, they look so miserable (BP, People of Coal)

What was particularly surprising at Big Pit was a lack of recognition of the tangible aspects of the site as 'authentic'. The whole site was a working mine until recently and therefore the buildings that visitors have access to are genuine industrial remnants. Yet the knowledge that Big Pit did exist as a mine and is not artificially reconstructed had minimal bearing on its ability to be identified as 'authentic' by visitors. As at Blists Hill, visitors consistently defined authenticity in relation to the intangible aspects of their experience, such as being able to 'do' and experience what miners did. By drawing on the personal experiences of the mining folk, visitors can access the intangible *mentefacts* of history as suggested by Dube (2004). In light of this, one might again suggest that empathy is crucial to the living

museum, where stories of folk and people are intrinsically linked to the history of the site.

One might infer that an empathetic reaction is more prevalent at Big Pit, where visitors are given the opportunity to engage with 'real' remnants of history through the mining folk who still work on site. However, since this type of response was also noted at Blists Hill, with costumed interpreters cited as contributing to the authenticity of the site just as consistently as at Big Pit, it could be suggested that authenticity is not entirely dependent on the availability of genuine historical artefacts. This has wide ranging implications for future interpretive decisions at Big Pit, as it serves as an early indicator that when there are no longer 'real' miners to provide interpretation, they could in fact be replaced by performers, without completely negating the authenticity of the experience for the visitor.

Practitioners should, on some level, be aware of the different phenomena operating within these sites in order to fully understand the visitor experience and deliver successful interpretation. This was certainly the case at Big Pit where steps have been taken to ensure that visitors can relate to, and therefore empathise with, what is presented. The recognition that some exhibits have failed to engage the visitor due to their lack of an empathetic theme is clear:

--- we wanted to show the scale of the colliery underground--we've got a flip book that tells you all that information and this mine model that would show it in -- total failure -- we came to the conclusion, the reason people didn't engage with it was there was no people in it (BP, P2)

Through interview it also transpired that a major difficulty at Big Pit is making such a technical subject accessible to a wide audience. However, the staff also recognise that this can be achieved by integrating the stories of the people who worked in the mines into their interpretation so, as the Curator explained,

-- the display areas were planned to be as 'human' as possible; we used images of people everywhere and oral history quotes as 'headlines' above the graphic panels -- (Thompson, 2005:16)

Thus, even where tangible interpretation is a mainstay of the interpretive content and strategy, there was a

consciousness of the use of people to enhance empathy. Employing miner-interpreters also has its disadvantages. Their closeness to the subject matter and the knowledge that they have lived the culture being represented means they are in a strong position to reject the message or version that the museum may wish them to interpret. Clearly, the idea of *selective tradition* suggested by Williams (1961) is evident here, with the recorded culture beloved of curators often conflicting in a very real sense with the lived culture of the mining folk. The following response, which demonstrates this issue, arose in an interview with a miner-guide, who was asked whether he believed that what he had learnt through job training and the interpretation the site delivers is consistent with historical fact:

it's on the right level -- but after saying that -- anything that I don't agree with in what we're told, I simply won't accept it because if something's not right, I don't agree. (BP, P1)

Personal experience in this context not only enhances authenticity, but also questions it. Employees as well as visitors are able to share memories collectively which encourages a sense of validation and acceptance as the same interviewee explains:

--- they shut the mines and took my work away from me so I didn't have a job -- but now I'm here, and I can talk about it as if it were real -- when we go underground, very often we sit down for five minutes and have a little talk amongst ourselves -- it's nice (BP, P1)

To reiterate, by employing human interest themes and delivering them in an accessible form, either tangibly through familiar objects and buildings, or intangibly through verbal interaction with on-site interpreters and physically experiencing historical life by engaging in activities, visitors can gain an emotional response that promotes empathy through strength of feeling. In turn, this leads the visitor to believe they are experiencing the authentic as the emotions stimulated by the interpretive content are 'real'.

Visitors can also, in a sense, be objective about what they see by also recognising the negative aspects of history. However, this is still born out of a subjective experience based on strength of feeling and emotion. This presents a dilemma, but more importantly poses the question of whether visitors in this context will ever be able to be objective about an experience that hinges entirely on their ability to sense and understand historical life as if it were their own. As Smith (2006) suggests, heritage is not only the physical experience of 'doing', but also the emotional experiences of 'being'. The use of personal experience within this context was discovered across the data set and was integral to an understanding of the relationship between nostalgia and authenticity.

Conclusion

Nostalgia in the living heritage context can, as discussed, be classified as 'regressive', 'progressive', and 'sympathetic'. The findings in this research suggest that nostalgia is an emotion capable of evoking a desire for the past *and* a desire for the future, whilst also promoting



Figure 2
Case study two

feelings of empathy. This leads the visitor to believe in the reality of their experience, therefore achieving individualised-authenticity. For visitors, nostalgia offers the opportunity to access our historical past and either use it as a resource to contemplate change and development as a society, or to go back to a past that feels safe, comfortable and unchallenging. However, as Ashworth (2005) suggests: *The past and future are imagined entities: only the present is real*, therefore nostalgia cannot illuminate either, it merely fosters the conditions for an 'experience', and whether that experience feels authentic or not rests with the individual.

With this in mind, we can therefore argue that authenticity is the negotiable concept that Cohen (2002) suggests, if it is dependent on the visitor's own ability to relate to the represented theme. The idea that authenticity is a negotiable concept has also been recognised within the framework of cultural tourism and heritage studies in the past (Gable and Handler, 1996, Bendix, 1997). Yet previous studies have neglected to consider authenticity in the light of the nostalgic response. This paper suggests that the concepts of nostalgia and authenticity are more closely related than perhaps previously recognised, particularly within an intangible heritage context. The perception of the visitor experience as 'authentic' is almost entirely dependent on the existence of nostalgia to promote the correct conditions for empathy and strength of feeling to be realised. Consequently, a belief in the reality of the experience is fostered, leading nostalgia to become a psychological resource for perceived authenticity.

By using human interest themes as interpretive devices, visitors can connect to the past by relating the lives of those being portrayed to their own. Drawing on the work of Ang (1985, cited in Bagnall, 2003), visitors can experience 'emotional realism' through the medium of heritage sites, in order to gain an authentic experience, and this has been strongly proved in this research.

What is clear here is that the success of living museums lies in 'people' either by employing real life characters with whom visitors can interact through intangible heritage activities/folklore, or by telling their own stories through more static forms of interpretation. The ability to engage the visitor in a psychologically complex way disputes the claim that the heritage visiting public are a passive homogenous mass (Hewison, 1987). Clearly this issue would benefit from further research, as it constitutes an interesting discussion in its own right,

but it does raise an important point regarding the ambiguity of 'dealing' in the past. Is it appropriate for heritage providers to enhance the experience in such a personal way? These findings suggest that interpreters of living museums and folk life may have little choice if they are to make the subject understandable and accessible to all. One of the single most interesting results to emerge from this study shows the overwhelming framing of heritage 'meaning' within the personalised context of the intangible. Authenticity and nostalgia are dynamic, volatile, site-specific indicators that colour the heritage experience. Ultimately, real questions of *meaning* can only be answered at the level of the individual; authentic truth, however, is another matter. 🇬🇧

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