CHAPTER 8
Exhibiting the Past: The Japanese National War Museum and the Construction of Collective Memory

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Introduction

This essay attempts to analyse from a performance studies perspective the ways in which a museum display, as a cultural performance, is organized to serve the purpose of the maintenance of a dominant social discourse. The focus of the essay will be on a national history museum called Showa Hall, named after the late Emperor Showa (1900-1989), opened in 1999 in Tokyo. Although expectations were high that it would become the first national war museum in Japan to address squarely the issues of crimes against humanity committed by the Japanese military between 1931 and 1945, the decision taken by the government was to avoid all politically contentious issues. The museum was inaugurated with a publicly stated mission to teach for posterity how the Japanese had suffered during and after the war.

At the beginning of the essay, I will briefly demonstrate in what ways museums can be analysed as performance and cite a number of key concepts suggesting the ontology of a museum in the age of multiculturalism and postcolonialism. Then, before going into the discussion of Showa Hall, I will consider the difficulties of displaying war, using as an example the aborted Enola Gay exhibition planned for 1995 at the U.S. National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. The main objective of this essay is to offer a critique of the ways in which Showa Hall uses its mode of display to transform individual wartime memories into a single and coherent narrative and thus to construct a homogeneous collective memory of a nation.
less concerned with the canonical reconstruction of a "grand récit.

Already in the 1991 anthology entitled "Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display," the editors Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine announced their conviction that "few serious museum practitioners would claim that a museum could be anything but a forum for the experience of the power of the image as a means of communicating with the audience."

Karp reiterated the notion of the exhibition as a political arena in his 1992 essay, "Making Visually Based Exhibitions: Metaphors for a New Museum Culture" (Karp and Karp 1992). In the introduction, Karp argued that "museums are likely to be accepted as "specific places of transmission between discrepant communities" (Clifford 1988: 23).

In a performance studies point of view, Richard Schechner's concept of the "theater as a living space of theatrical events" provides a framework for understanding how "theatricality" is employed in contemporary museum displays. Schechner's "theater as a living space" is a model for understanding how "theatrical" elements are integrated into the design and structure of museum exhibitions.

The theatrical nature of museum display is applied by Barbara Krushelnicki-Gimblett when she says, "Exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, and do so by performance." Institutional frameworks for the display of objects create "authenticity" by framing and contextualizing the objects themselves. The objects are "seen and heard" by the audience in the context of their display, and the audience is active in the creation of meaning.

Krushelnicki-Gimblett's view challenges the traditional notion of the museum as a passive recipient of objects. Instead, the museum becomes a dynamic space where objects are "performed," and where the audience actively participates in the creation of meaning.

Recent museum practitioners, who are becoming increasingly conscious of the performative nature of museum display, have begun to explore new strategies for integrating theatrical elements into their exhibits. These strategies include the use of "performance" in the form of "live" demonstrations, "site-specific" installations, and "interaction" between objects and audience.

The museum as a "living space" is a framework for understanding how theatrical elements are integrated into the design and structure of contemporary museum displays. This framework provides a means of understanding how museums are actively involved in the creation of meaning, and how the audience actively participates in the performance of objects.
The “Enola Gay” Exhibition at the U.S. National Air and Space Museum

It is, however, often the case that external pressures thwart the efforts of museum practitioners, especially when dealing with politically contentious issues. When the interests of a community that is represented by a museum are at risk, power often intervenes. As a result, minority groups that the majority regards as “other” are denied a space to articulate themselves, or at most allowed a token representation to feign a “politically correct” appearance. The display often becomes exclusionary when it touches on the issues of gender, sexual, ethnic, or historical identity of a certain group. The question I would like to pose before going into the discussion of Showa Hall, is whether it is still possible to represent minority voices when the subject of an exhibition is a collective memory of a nation, an “imagined community” according to Benedict Anderson’s oft-quoted definition (Anderson 1983). As a case study, I would like to consider briefly the cancelled Enola Gay exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution’s U.S. National Air and Space Museum, planned for the fiftieth anniversary of the victory over Japan, because the expectations and disappointments that accompanied the exhibition were shared by many at the inauguration of Showa Hall.

Enola Gay is a B-29 bomber that dropped an atom bomb on Hiroshima in August 1945. Air Force veterans had long been campaigning that the aircraft be restored to its original condition and put on public display. Partly responding to their call, the National Air and Space Museum planned an exhibition entitled “The Crossroads: The End of World War Two, the Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War,” in which the fuselage of the bomber was to be the main exhibit. The museum’s intention was to review the use of an atom bomb from an historical perspective, by asking the viewers to consider its implications and to reflect, not only on the glory achieved, but also on the horror unleashed by the bombing mission.

As soon as the proposal was announced, the same people who demanded the display of the bomber in the first place raised opposition. Opposition by the Air Force Association, a powerful lobbying organisation for the U.S. Air Force, was soon joined by the American Legion, members of Congress, and the national media, which portrayed the museum curators as anti-American academics campaigning for a politically correct version of history. When repeated revisions and rounds of negotiations failed to convince the Air Force Association, the exhibition was cancelled and the director of the museum, Martin Harwit, resigned. In the place of the themed and nuanced exhibition that had been planned, the restored Enola Gay was made available for public viewing, with no commentary attached at a museum annex at Dulles International Airport outside Washington D.C. Smithsonian Secretary Michael Heyman admitted the mistake they had made of trying to honour veterans while presenting a balanced view of history. In his words, “[the veterans] were not looking for analysis and, frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke” (Stone 1995: 1). Historian Mike Wallace observes that museum goers do not want to see “the exhibits that dismantle the mythic dramas that give meaning and value to their lives” (Wallace 1997: 125). And Richard Kurin, director of the Smithsonian’s Centre for Folklife Programs, believes that the exhibition failed because the museum neglected to respect those who would be represented in it. It offered veterans “a history that was not of their memory, and also a history that was not how they wanted to be remembered” (Kurin 1997: 80). This issue of who would be represented and how, was also central to the display at Showa Hall.

History Wars: Memories of Japanese Imperialism

Japan’s first war museums post 1945 were built in 1955 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where a large population had been decimated by atom bomb attacks. In 1975, three years after its sovereignty was returned to Japan, another museum was opened on the island of Okinawa, where one of the fiercest ground battles in the Pacific left more than 100,000 civilians dead, compared to the military tolls of 85,000 Japanese and 15,000 Americans. Those museums had a clear purpose of appeasing the dead and making a plea for peace.

Most Japanese, however, for many years after the war, had uncertain attitudes about how they should come to terms with the memories of it. The majority opted for selective amnesia, remembering their own

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2 U.S. Republican Senator Thad Cochran commented that a national museum “shouldn’t be used by revisionist historians to try to change the facts of World War Two” (Stone 1995: 1). The Wall Street Journal claimed in its editorial that “the American museum whose business is to tell the nation’s story is now in the hands of academics unable to view American history as anything other than a woful catalogue of crimes and aggressions against the helpless peoples of the earth” (Kohn 1996: 161).
suffering but consigning to oblivion atrocities committed either by themselves or by other Japanese.\footnote{Regarding the question of guilt, a double standard exists in Japanese foreign and domestic policies. By accepting the verdict of the Tokyo War Tribunals, Japan assumed full responsibility for the war. But the end of the war also meant Japan’s swift incorporation into the Cold War structure as a Western ally. Immunity was granted to the Emperor, and when the execution of a few army chiefs was over, remaining charges of war crimes were dropped. Admission of guilt became domestically an obsolete subject.}

In the early 1990s, however, records documenting atrocities committed by the Japanese began to be unearthed. NGOs both in and outside Japan made active campaigns demanding compensation and an apology from the Japanese government. In particular, the testimonies made by former “comfort women” who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military fuelled the public anger.\footnote{Until the 1992 discovery of documents that proved otherwise, the government had stubbornly denied their involvement in military brothels, saying that they were operated by private entrepreneurs (as commercial prostitution was legal in Japan at the time).} Memories of the war became a focus of intense debates.

On the other hand, the conservative government and its right wing supporters have tried to revive nationalist sentiments. In their view, aggression has been justified as necessary military action to defend Japan’s interests. Some even wish to portray Japan as a liberator of Asia from Western colonialism. In 1982, the Ministry of Education censors ordered publishers of school textbooks to use the word “advancement” to describe the invasion of China, and “riot” for the pro-independence rally organised in Korea. Although strong protests by China and Korea forced the ministry to retract the order, the incident gave a momentum to the Chinese and the Koreans to display history from their own perspectives. In 1983, two new museums, the Nanjing Massacre Memorial and the Korean Independence Hall were inaugurated.

In the late 1990s, the revisionist tendency was accelerated by a group of scholars who criticised the teaching of what they called a self-incriminating or a masochistic view of history. They claimed that history taught in schools was prejudiced and was depriving children of opportunities to manifest healthy and spontaneous nationalism.

With these developments as background, the early 1990s saw the construction of a number of war museums in Japan, mostly by municipal or prefectural governments. Although some avoided an explicitly accusatory tone of language, they have generally portrayed Japan as an aggressor nation during the Asia-Pacific War between 1931 and 1945. The museums in Osaka and Kyoto have made it their special commitment to display Japanese atrocities. These museums invite visitors to approach history both from the victim’s and the victimiser’s points of view and engage in reflexive re-examination of the country’s past.

### Planning Showa Hall: Japan’s First National War Museum

But the story behind the construction of Showa Hall was different. Showa Hall is state-owned but independently run by a private foundation, the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association. It was conceived, not out of the growing awareness of Japan’s war responsibilities, but as the government’s response to a petition, submitted by the association organised by (not all) the families whose members were killed while serving the Japanese military. Long time recipients of the war pension, the members, as they reached old age, sought a construction of a memorial museum, to preserve in a tangible form, memories of their fathers.

The museum, like the Enola Gay exhibition, was planned for opening in 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. However, it was clear to anyone that any museum, especially if it was a national museum, could not memorialise the nation’s past without a proper sense of critique. A series of advisory boards were summoned to discuss the character of the museum: all failed to reach agreement. The Japan War-Bereaved Families Association did not agree to any mention of Japan’s wrongdoings. The final planning committee submitted three alternative proposals without recommending any: a display including Japanese aggressions; a display limited to the suffering of the Japanese; and a research library instead of a museum. The Japan War-Bereaved Families Association, however, was adamant about having a visual display.

To avoid all politically sensitive issues, the government’s final decision focused on the display of the suffering that survivors had experienced, which would neither glorify nor accuse the dead. They chose not to display “materials that get into the discussion of the interpretation of our wartime history” (Yamaguchi 1996). On the first page of the exhibition catalogue, the museum states its mission objective:

\[\text{[In recognition of the process in which Showa Hall has been planned as a memorial to the children of the military personnel who sacrificed their lives during the last war, the Ministry of Health and Welfare, as a part of the support it extends to war-bereaved families, proposes to convey to succeeding generations the daily hardships endured during and after the war.}\]
by Japanese nationals and in particular by the children of the war dead and other members of war-bereaved families.

The goal of academics and concerned citizens who wished to build a national museum that would look squarely into the country’s past and create a forum where history could be debated had been lost. All they could manage was to delay the opening till 1999.

**Showa Hall and Its Topography**

In the centre of Tokyo is what Roland Barthes calls "a sacred void," the Imperial Palace (Barthes 1982). On its eastern periphery lie public gardens famous for cherry blossoms. Located just outside the gardens, Showa Hall intimates a symbolic but not openly stated relationship with the Emperor. Further away from the palace, across the street from Showa Hall, stands Yasukuni Shrine, a controversial Shinto shrine dedicated to fallen Japanese soldiers. Because those enshrined include war criminals executed by the Tokyo War Criminal Tribunal, the shrine invites the furor of neighbouring Asian governments when it is officially visited by Japanese cabinet ministers. Scattered around the shrine are the statues of great generals and monuments dedicated to soldiers killed in action. The area surrounding the museum is suffused with memories of the war and exudes a sacred aura to veterans and their families. The majority of the museum visitors are groups of veterans and war-bereaved families who come to Yasukuni Shrine on their annual pilgrimage.

The silver coloured museum is eye-catching in its singularity of architectural style. I was told that the concept behind it was a storehouse. Indeed it is a vault in which the memories of 3 million Japanese who died in the war are stored. The hollow entrance to the museum suggests a torii (gate) placed at the entrance of a Shinto shrine. The gigantic torii of Yasukuni Shrine is merely a hundred meters away. Its shape also reminds me of ancient Japanese clay figurines (dougu) typically of a pregnant woman depicted with her large belly and short legs spread out. Figuratively, the museum is both a womb and a tomb where soldiers, once taught to become children of the Emperor, are conceived and buried. They were told that once they died their souls would reunite at Yasukuni Shrine. During the war, the shrine’s elaborately staged rites included the deification of those who died in the preceding year. In a torch-lit procession, priests carried a palanquin that was said to contain the spirits of the dead to the sanctuary. On this night, mothers lined the approach to the shrine to see their sons off.

**The Showa Hall Display**

The Showa Hall display replicates the mother-son relationship celebrated by Yasukuni Shrine. Upon entering the exhibition area, visitors are greeted by some forty seminbari, meaning literally one thousand stitches. During the war, mothers who sent their sons to the battlefield asked one thousand other women to each make a stitch on a rectangular cloth. Stitches were often made in the shape of a tiger, a brave and mythically auspicious animal, or in the shape of letters signifying victory. The time and effort it took them to complete such a cloth epitomised the affection of mothers for their sons. Soldiers wore them under their uniform as a talisman to protect them from enemy bullets. Directly across from the seminbari, letters that soldiers sent home are on display.

Claiming political neutrality, Showa Hall displays no panels that attempt to interpret history. No essays are printed in their catalogue. Gruesome photos that might horrify the visitors are nowhere to be found. Seminbari and the letters are about the only objects that evoke the presence of soldiers. On the wall leading to the next exhibition corner is an enlarged life-size photo of a flag-waving crowd, bidding farewell to departing soldiers at a train station. Upon scrutiny, however, one realises that soldiers are conspicuously absent from the photo. Showa Hall avoids with meticulous care any representations that might directly suggest the war. In its absence, emphasis is placed on the presence of home, the home front, and the mother.

The two floors of exhibition space are divided evenly between the periods of the war and its immediate aftermath. Going down the staircase, visitors are confronted with the front pages of newspapers from August 15, 1945, on which appears the Emperor’s message announcing the end of the war. The imperial rescript begins with the famous appeal to Japanese subjects: “you have endured the unendurable...” the words rightly summing up the hardships that the people were forced to endure as the war approached its inevitable conclusion. The people’s suffering
included, among other things, conscripted labour, curtailed freedom of
speech and movement, constant state surveillance, and the deaths of
many loved ones. Yet Showa Hall displays none of those. It just
transforms hardships into acceptable forms of representation.

The upper floor gallery includes exhibits that recall daily life during
wartime, things such as ration tickets, wooden buckets used after
everything that contained metal was “voluntarily turned in” to increase
arms production, old school uniform, posters, medicine bottles and
plastic replicas of the meagre food that was available at the time. But the
display also includes items not related to war, everyday household
objects such as a wooden ice box used before the days of the
refrigerator, an old clock, a gramophone, and children’s toys. Making a
subtle connection with the seminbari display at the entrance, these
items emphasise the mother’s presence and memories of childhood. The
display of hardships is thus turned into a discourse of home, personal
origin and nostalgia.

Construction of Nostalgia

David Lowenthal states simply that “nostalgia is memory with the
pain removed” (Lowenthal 1985: 8). Bryan Turner, in his more com-
prehensive review of the “nostalgic paradigm,” cites “a departure from
some golden age of ‘homefulness’” (Turner 1987: 150) as one of his
major components of nostalgia. Whether nostalgia deals with the past
falsely, or accurately is not the point. It is more important to consider
how nostalgia is used “in specially reconstructed ways” (Davis 1977:
417). Nostalgia is the feeling that I find powerfully evoked in Showa
Hall. A newspaper article covering it’s opening (The Asahi Shimbun,
March 29, 1999: 38) summarises a characteristic reaction that the
reporter observed among the first visitors to the museum: reminiscing of
the days gone by. I have also overheard visitors speak fondly of the past
on several occasions. At Showa Hall, the war has been transformed into
something that the elderly can reminisce about.

Lighting and spatial arrangements help create a feeling of nostalgia.
In a windowless, grotto-like intimacy, exhibits are placed on wooden
shelves that impart warmth. Lighting is subdued. It is dark compared to
the way other museum spaces are lit in Japan. The dim but warm glow
of a remembered childhood permeates the space. The way Showa Hall
creates a family atmosphere is characterised by James Clifford as the
“boutique style” of display, which makes the exhibits seem not “out of
place on the walls or coffee tables of middle class living rooms” (Clifford 1988: 228).

On video monitors, short clips from old newsreels are replayed over
and over again. They feature such narratives as how school yards were
turned to vegetable gardens to increase food production and how school
children were evacuated to rural villages to escape strategic bombing of
urban centres. Set to cheerful music, people in these films seem to be
animated, even joyful. No explanations are offered. There is no mention
of the fact that these were propaganda films designed to boost morale
and conceal the reality of life.

Showa Hall allows visitors to regard the past with a retrospective
gaze. Nostalgia presumes the innocence of remembering subjects.
Reporting on how Westerners recollect their former colonial experi-
ences, Renato Rosaldo observes, “nostalgia is a particularly appropriate
emotion to invoke in attempting to establish one’s innocence” (Rosaldo
1989: 108). Nostalgia is at once a selective memory and a selective
amnesia that deals only with sweet remembrances. It consigns to
 oblivion shame, humiliation, and crimes that one has committed in the
past.

Susan Stewart, in her analysis of memory in “On Longing,” descri-
bes that “[n]ostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological:
the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always
absent.” (Stewart 1984: 23). Roland Robertson distinguishes two types
of nostalgia. Following up Hobbsbamw and Ranger’s conceptualisation
of “invention of tradition,” Robertson associates what he calls “willful
nostalgia” with myth making strategies of emerging nation states toward
the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century. His
inclusion of discussion of skilful “political exploitation of nostalgia”
(Robertson 1990: 48) in Meiji Period Japan (1868-1912) is both
appropriate and insightful. The political elites at that time dexterously
instilled in the Japanese mind the notion of a racially and culturally
homogeneous nation which had never existed before. Another type of
nostalgia that Robertson mentions is contemporary “consumerist-
simulational nostalgia” (Robertson 1990: 55) of the late capitalist global
economy. Robertson, however, is careful to point out that the latter does
not necessarily overwhelm the former, manifestly political “willful
nostalgia.”

The point I wish to make is that nostalgia evoked by the mode of
display at Showa Hall incorporates both of types that Robertson
expounds on. Just as elderly visitors can reminisce about the past, a
younger generation of visitors with no first hand memories of the war
may be attracted to the sepia coloured exhibits that resemble kitsch
simulation of the past commercially available everywhere outside the
museum. But Showa Hall artfully frames the latter type of nostalgia
Exhibiting the Past

Conclusion

History, when displayed publicly, can become a contentious site. The relationship between memory and history is problematic. We remember to forget, forget to remember. As Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Starn write, 'forgetting is only the substitution of one memory for another.' Davis and Starn (1989:1). We are constantly making a conscious and unconscious choice between what should remain within our memory and what should not. The case of constructing publicly an authenticated experience of war into the narratives of nostalgia and progress. In his well-known lecture delivered in 1881, Ernest Renan stressed the role that both shared memory and shared amnesia play in the construction of a common sense of belonging. "A large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future." (Renan 1900:19). The ways in which Shōwa Hall organises its display echo the dominant political position that prescribes a unified and stable national identity. But the museum is silent on the point that the choice of others who are neither represented nor acceptable within it.

Works Cited


Inside a nationalist narrative of the former. Its display conjures up an absent past that takes back visitors to their idealised origin, not only to their personal home, but also to a community identified as a nation. Shōwa Hall assumes the position that hardships were suffered by all, and by doing so it positions itself as a construct of a collective memory of a museum. In its display, the narrative of the Shōwa period as a collection of historical objects is made to stand for the experience of the display of a whole nation. It attempts to objectify the nation and its culture by a single category of objects. It must be noted that a large national group within the museum, namely the Japanese, share a significant space in the exhibition. Shōwa Hall, nowhere is mention of recent history, of the majority of the Japanese population and what happened in a certain historical period. The museum becomes a place of comfort that shows the past of the present. The museum protects people with a sense of belonging to the mainstream Japanese whom the museum represents. Shōwa Hall constructs through its display of a national identity and an exclusive narrative that Shōwa Hall constructs through its narrative of national progress. It is also constructed with another sense of loss that drives alienated moderns to seek solace in a past origin of wholessness. The combination of the two narratives may strike one as strange. But indeed, the two are profoundly connected to each other, present prosperity that without the suffering shared in the past, present prosperity could not have been attained. It is the past with comfort of today that allows visitors to look back on the past with nostalgia.

Alternatives

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Alternatives
Debating Theatre Culture
in the Age of Con-Fusion
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Japanese names are printed family name first. The long vowel sound in Japanese is indicated by a macron (e.g., No) unless in common use without.

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