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THE IMPOSSIBLE MUSEUM

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Museums are not archives. Still less are they collections of collections. More than anything, they are instruments of power used to represent worldviews informed by particular epistemologies. 'National' museums are designed to produce and diffuse a particular memory of national identity. Sometimes, in particular democratic contexts, museums can also inscribe subaltern narratives when they have become unquestionable truths. The best such examples are museums of memory, of human rights, and some African American museums.

In this sense, questions of museology are determining factors in constructing an institution's narrative. In the case of national museums, the curatorial logic is informed by a desire to classify and to construct a public heritage. This process of making-heritage deploys a dual strategy: it mobilises a narrative of unique history, and a project of exporting national tourism. "Tourism is a great consumer of tradition," (1) and exhibiting the 'wonders' of a particular country supports nationalism in the same way as do international competitions or talent shows.



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It is no coincidence that those people calling for the creation of a 'Museum of the Discoveries' assume that it would be quite natural for the Portuguese to have such an institution and that any debate about the question has been imported from abroad. This argument is steeped in parochialism and is informed by the idea that there are some debates that only national subjects can truly appreciate. Whilst there are fundamental questions at stake here about knowing and interrogating the spirit of our time at an international scale, reckoning with European histories of empire and expansion is unavoidable in doing so.

To return to the construction of 'heritage' – this process serves to cohere a country around a narrative which excludes either foreigners or those over whom the official story tells us the nation triumphed. There are many examples of this production of invented and essentialising heritage. For all its gothic splendour, the Konopiště Castle in Bohemia, for example, was actually commissioned in 1887 by the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Folkloric representations of happy peasants of yore, a trope in many countries, belies the emiseration and suffering that characterised the lives of those people. The idea that a nation must have a national language is another example of this essentialising invention, that we see, for example, in the historic imposition of Albanian as a national language in a country full of dialects. What became 'Albanian' was actually the language of an minority group from the north of that territory. (2)

The national myth of 'The Discoveries'

Why is this project of establishing a 'Museum of the Discoveries' in Lisbon, with its attendant angry debate, rearing its head now? It is worth returning to the creation of the XVII European Exhibition of Art, Science and Culture in 1980, an exhibition organized by the Portuguese government and sponsored by the President and by the Council of Europe. The accompanying text read:

"This Exhibition thus becomes a conversation with the past, through which the Portuguese public can reenounter their cultural history, not in an exclusionary mode, but rather with an awareness of the decisive role that Portugal played in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in discovering for the first time new modes of universal human relations." (3)

Here was an almost nineteenth-century project of self-glorification of the past in a society that, though it had come out the other side of a dictatorial regime, had, the revolution notwithstanding, never undergone a narrative rupture. The XVII Exhibition projected the past onto the future. The exhibition materials do not refer to critical takes on the Portuguese expansion, nor to any perspectives from the 'discovered' regions.



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In this sense, the XVII Exhibition was really just a calling card for Portugal to cosy up to Europe. For all that Europe had sought to clean up its image as a continent of violent colonization and internal wars, the past it shares with the formerly imperial founder-members of the EEC underlies Portugal's entry to the European community.

In turning towards Europe, Portugal turned its back on the South Atlantic and on the first possibility of interchange with those it 'conquered' during its histories of maritime expansion. Such a debate would only start, tentatively, over twenty years later. The National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries (1986-2002), which followed the XVII Exhibition, was the product of the first re-evaluations of the murkier dimensions of the 'Discoveries,' and assumed some of its subsequent contradictions. Festival Europália 91 showed some signs of taking up these early re-evaluations, and even began to draw connections to between the past and the present, although it did so whilst leaving the official narrative intact. This official narrative lasted until the turn of the millennium. That said, from a symbolic point of view, and because of the financial and political investment involved, the inauguration of the Belém Cultural Centre in 1992 can without a shadow of a doubt be seen as the inauguration of the first 'Museum of the Discoveries'. It was part of the project of gelling the nation and represented the Portuguese presidency in Europe.

It was not by chance that the CCB's inaugural exhibition was called *The Triumph of the Baroque* (1993). This grandiose, glamorous, curatorially sophisticated exhibition went further than simply celebrating the 'Discoveries.' The exhibition's implicit claim was that the Portuguese Baroque – and that of the former colonies – had only been possible because of the conquest, occupation and exploitation of the natural resources and labour that the expansion was not so much permitted as actively desired. With that exhibition the CCB portrayed a heritage of great national purpose emerging out of the national past into 20th Century Europe. Before the 2014 inauguration of the mini-Disneyland 'Museum of the Discoveries' in Porto, even before we began to hear about the idea of installing a cultural centre in Sagres, the CCB made that heritage manifest in stone and spirit.

The cosmopolitan ambition of the bastard heir of the National Commission for the Commemoration of the Portuguese Discoveries, Expo 98, confronted the Portuguese public with two consequences of the expansion. First, in the form of representations of the ex-colonies of several European countries through the pavilions and festivities. Second, in the form of the thousands of immigrant workers from the ex-colonies whose labour literally constructed the exhibition spaces. And so these 'others' from the 'discovered' countries ceased to be phantasmagoria, and became visible in the public space, with



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their bodies, their cultural practices, their Creoles, their mixed colonial heritage. It was no coincidence that debates began to emerge at that point around questions of colonialism, postcolonialism, racism, and land-based rather than blood-based citizenship rights, driven by the work of historians such as Francisco Bethencourt, Diogo Ramada Curto, Anthony Disney and Isabel Castro Henriques among others.

Equally, it is no coincidence that this debate is being resuscitated now, hooked onto the question of a 'Museum of the Discoveries.' In a time of exploding nationalism and disillusion in a Europe that is still struggling with its postcolonial hangover, in a country whose language is amputated by standardisation, one way of enduring the inquietude and unpredictability of the present is to invent a glorified past. In its colonial melancholia, this past returns to the myth of *The Lusíads*: an extraordinary poem, but an epic myth populated with heroes inspired by other ancient heroes whose contests are between equals, or between heroes and titans.

How could it ever have been plausible that conquering and occupying so many territories and so many peoples could unfold without violence and without subjugation? It should no longer be necessary to say this: the names we give to things matter, and they condition our actions. The term 'Discoveries' describes, from a position of supremacy, the conquest, subjugation and extermination of peoples and nature, of entire nations and of languages because the routes of expansion were almost always monolingual. As Glissant affirms: "the route is monolingual." (4)

[Museums today must be postcolonial or nothing at all.](#) What does this mean? This statement draws on the revolution brought about by *négritude*, by independences, by postcolonialism in its various expressions and by contemporary Amerindian thought, with an impact and an intellectual energy comparable only to the Copernican revolution. Just as no one would think to establish a museum of the history of science that ended when the sun and all the planets still revolved round the earth, so it is not acceptable to disassociate the Portuguese and European expansion from the narratives of the occupied and vanquished, from their perspectives and from their attendant collections, so far as they exist. It is simply impossible to approach the history of the expansion without talking about the black Atlantic, colonialism, and imperialism.

This has been said before. A museum is not a receptacle. Museums tell particular stories. Their inventories are composed and organised in particular ways so as to persuade the audience of a given project's *raison d'être*. To call for a 'Museum of the Discoveries' is to call for a site of memorial that would



impose a fake memory. Such a museum would legitimise and institutionalise a worldview that denies the existence and epistemological challenge of postcolonial and Amerindian thought. It would deny the re-evaluation of the history of empire. It would mark the regression to neo-colonialism that lurks in the very spirit of Europe. Even a 'Museum of Colonialism,' if such an option were even possible, would still be conceptually complicated. Firstly, because expansion, occupation, colonialism, and imperialism are associated, and, secondly, because who in Europe could speak for the conquered and colonized? John Mackenzie, in *Museums and Empire* (2009), and Marieke Bloembergen, in *Colonial Spectacles* (2006), explain how difficult it is to conceptualise such museums. In most instances in Britain, the Netherlands, Norway, and Denmark, colonialism is treated in generic and comparative terms, ignoring the crucial and understudied transnational histories of colonialism. One option could be to resort to the methodology of "cultural negotiation" between the former empires and the ex-colonized, but this would only be possible at a time when the post-European colonial memory allows it.

Would the not-building of a 'Museum of the Discoveries' correspond to an absolute devaluation of the expansion? No. The 360° exhibition commissioned by Henrique Leitão in 2013 was an important example of the consequences of European expansion. It brings forward the positive results of that history in terms of the literature produced, European dietary changes and the production of scientific and technological knowledge. But then, as now, much of this technological production and scientific experimentation was driven by military motives, and sought to develop new equipment for use in combat. Experiments took place in the conquered territories and were allied to a program of resource exploitation in other parts of the world. The most barbaric element of this history was the trafficking and trade in people. Although other countries were also involved in slaving pasts and presents, the act is always criminal.

Of course, it is true that within this history some women and men were courageous; some temperate or intelligent; some daring. Equally, some were also wicked, greedy or criminal. But the maritime expansion surpasses them. This is the stuff of state affairs, of disputes between kings and nations, and between hegemonies of European kingdoms. Even the Vatican was involved.

Having demonstrated the impossibility of constructing such a 'Museum of the Discoveries' by contesting the narrative it would inscribe, I would also like to say something about its logistical impossibility. In truth, the ambition of those who advocate the museum is too modest, and seems more like an obsession than a real programme. What specific objects exist that could constitute a collection of the

voyages of expansion and conquest? Are there objects scattered throughout national and international collections which would be available to sell to a permanent exhibiting museum? The available collection is sparse, the objects are scarce, and producing proper or life-size replicas of the boats and material history is technically and financially impossible: few remains exist, the relevant documentary or fictional sources are missing or hidden, and funds are limited. Would it be a museum of miniatures? And miniatures of what? And - most importantly - returning to the problem of multiple narratives, who would present them and using what material, given that most existing artistic or literary testimonies are by Portuguese or European - not Native American, African, Indian - authors. Furthermore, given that museums produce hierarchies of facts and memories (5), what place would the Portuguese occupy and what place the conquered nations and people?

Vestiges exist in Portugal and in the ex-colonies already, some of which merit attention even though they were acquired through plunder. For example, amongst many others, there are artefacts and stories from the same period as the expansion on deposit or exhibited in places such as the Museums of Ethnology and of Ancient Art, the Geographical Society, the National Archives and the National Library in Lisbon. These places constitute a constellation that bears witness to histories of imperial expansion and to its future.

In this constellation of spaces, which could be organised as a route, a map, or a circuit, is to be found the possibility of confronting (in part) the epoch of expansion. We could add further documents, such as those in the *Cinemateca*, or in other research centres, but with one condition: that the readings of the works and testimonies, the commentaries on the paintings and objects, take seriously into account the knowledge and the readings produced by this latter-day Copernican revolution of postcolonialism.

Such a project implies suspending all colonial and neo-colonial narratives, and brings into view the real stories bequeathed to the sub-alternized peoples. It implies a revised museology, adapted to the present day and to the modes by which people move around urban space. It would allow a public consideration of the tensions and the possible conviviality of past and multiple histories, many of them still in the making. This museum is possible.



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- (1) Thiesse, Anne-Marie (1999), *La création des identités nationales: Europe XVIIIe-XIXe siècle*, Paris: Points, p.257.
- (2) Cf. Thiesse, Anne-Marie (1999), *La création des identités nationales: Europe XVIIIe-XIXe siècle*, Paris: Points, pp.133-137.
- (3) Prefácio Pedro Canavarro, (1983), editor Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, Commissariado para a XVII Exposição Europeia de Arte, Ciência e Cultura, Lisboa, pp.20-21.
- (4) Glissant, Édouard (1999), *Poétique de la relation (III)*, Paris: Caillois. p.7.
- (5) Simpson, Moira G. (2001), *Making representations, museums in the Post-Colonial Era*, Londres: Routledge, p.119.
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