Performance as Exhibit: When Edward Curtis met the Kwak'wak'wakw

Hannah Turner, Museum Studies Program University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

Hannah Turner is in her first year of the Master of Museum Studies program at the University of Toronto. Prior to pursuing this degree, she obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology and Religious Studies from the University of Victoria. Her research interests lie in indigenous issues and museology, with an emphasis on the issue of repatriation and digital access to artefacts. She also has a broader interest in the connection between museums and human rights globally. After completing this degree, Hannah hopes to pursue a PhD in Anthropology and Museology.

Abstract

When Edward Curtis first arrived in the small community of Alert Bay in 1914, he had set out to make a film about its vibrant and extraordinary culture and was unaware that his film would still be in use almost one hundred years later. He could not have foreseen the way the descendants of people in the film have subsequently used the original footage to re-appropriate and repatriate aspects of their culture. This paper uses the case study of the performance, “Edward Curtis Meets the Kwak’wak’wakw: In the Land of the Head Hunters,” to examine the role of performance in museums. The contemporary performance screens the original ethnographic Curtis film, “In the Land of the Head Hunters,” followed by a dance performance by members of the Kwak’wak’wakw community. This paper examines the use of this juxtaposition in terms of re-appropriation and cultural memory. This paper stems from research on the relationships between source communities and tangible and intangible cultural heritage. It critically examines the idea that the museum has become a place that ‘freezes’ or ‘mummifies’ cultural heritage. This pa-
per argues that museums and First Peoples can collaborate to make the colonial museum a place of active re-negotiation through performance. The performance uses dance to highlight the relationship the Kwakwaka’wakw have with the traditional ethnographic film. Through direct community development this performance acts to re-appropriate ethnography. It involves the viewer in the complicated relationships between community, museum and object. This paper argues that this performance works to engage the visitor in cultural memory through the processes of repatriation and re-appropriation, and introduces a new way of thinking about objects and the connection they have to a community’s past, present and future.

Introduction

The act of creating ethnographic film has been called an act in the “museumification” of culture because of its notorious ability to freeze and capture cultural heritage (Hearne, 2006). This should cause us to question how and when the term “museum” became derogatory. Recalling a performance that I witnessed this summer, I began thinking critically about archival films, contemporary cultures and the place of performance within the museum. This paper is a reading of the performance, “Edward Curtis meets the Kwakwaka’wakw: In the Land of the Headhunters” (Evans, Glass & Sanborn, 2008), in which I propose that the performance functions to re-negotiate the ways in which film and archival footage ‘museumify’ cultural heritage. The main research questions addressed are: what is the function of this type of performance in museum theory? How does this performance function to create new meaning for the visitor as an audience member? Finally, how do we effectively connect cultural memory to the museum? Objects in museums arrive with pre-established pasts and many have contested histories. A significant problem facing museums is their communication of these histories to the public in terms of the cultural memory that is an essential part of these objects’ pasts. This performance adds new meaning to the idea of exhibits in museums through the negotiation of meaning between the source community and the archival footage to form a new kind of repatriation. It also engages the visitor in the processes of re-appropriation that comprise an important dialogue between the contemporary performers and the archival film. This engagement succinctly connects the audience with the complicated processes of repatriation, and the relationship that source communities have with archival footage, ethnography and objects within the museum. Through viewing repatriation in this broad context, this type of exhibit can truly redeem the museum as a place that acknowledges and respects indigenous heritage.

To add a brief caveat: the literature that exists on this topic is extensive (Evans, 1998; Griffiths, 1999; Holm and Quimby, 1980; Morris, 1994; Ruby, 2000 & Wakeham, 2006). This paper will not address all of the issues con-
cerned with performance, ethnographic film or repatriation. It will present a brief history of the original film, *In the Land of the Headhunters* (Curtis, 1914) and its further forms and edits, ending with the contemporary performance which makes up the case study of the argument. It will then place this performance within museological and anthropological literature. However, because this is a contemporary performance, there are no published works that describe the performance directly. What this paper offers for evidence is a brief description of the performance itself and my own critical review situated within literature that describes contemporary aboriginal performance art. This performance works to repatriate and re-appropriate cultural memory to the community while engaging the visitor. It presents a new way museums can conceptualize their exhibits and the repatriation of indigenous heritage in Canada.

**History of the Film**

To begin, I will turn to a brief history of Kwakwaka’wakw culture and the original ethnographic film. The Kwakwaka’wakw are a cultural group that live on the northwest coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. They are perhaps best known for their extravagant cultural performances, most notably in the potlatch ceremony, a gift giving ceremony that distributes wealth (among other important functions) and is one of the most important cultural ceremonies of many Northwest Coast indigenous peoples (Cranmer Webster, 1992; Glass, 2004; Olin; 1983). An intrinsic element of this tradition is the dances. Each family maintains a certain ownership of dances and masks that are passed down through descendants (Glass, 2004).

However, these ceremonies were condemned by the Canadian Government in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the Kwakwaka’wakw people were severely punished for exhibiting their culture in this way. In fact, the potlatch ceremony was officially banned from existence by the Canadian government through the legislation of the 1884 Indian Act (Cranmer Webster, 2004; Glass 2004). The Christianizing West deemed the ceremony wasteful, irrelevant and heretical. The Kwakwaka’wakw refused the ban on their culture and in most cases continued these practices in secret. When these covert ceremonies were discovered, participants faced imprisonment if they did not relinquish their regalia to the Canadian government. Potlatch regalia was sold and shipped to dispersed parts of North America and Europe without the consent of originating communities, to be placed in museums and private collections (Cranmer Webster, 1992).

In 1914, photographer and ethnographer Edward Curtis came to Alert Bay, a Kwakwaka’wakw village, and began filming what became *In the Land of the Head Hunters*. Curtis had been on his quest to recapture the ‘vanishing Indian’ for some time, having felt that interest regarding the issue had waned. The melodramatic film or ‘photoplay’ he created involved Kwakwaka’wakw dancers and exhibited many

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1 The trope of the ‘vanishing Indian’ was relied on heavily in early anthropological theory and was a view that saw the Aboriginal cultures of North America as fast disappearing in the wake of Western civilisation, unable to cope with the rapidly changing times. This resulted in a boom of ethnography as a way to preserve and capture Aboriginal heritage.
dances and ceremonies that were at the time banned from public performance. The film saw little critical acclaim and was lost to academic knowledge until it was discovered in private collections in 1924 and 1947. Only when it resurfaced again in the early 1970s did it garner real attention from the broader academic community (Evans et al., 2008). The archival footage was heavily criticised by scholars for its colonial interpretation of First Nations culture, its blatant disregard for Kwakwâkâwakw oral narratives and its reconfirmation of the stereotypical “Indian” constructed by Western colonialists (Russell, 1999). The footage was then recut and edited to form In the Land of the War Canoes, by Bill Holm and George Quimby in 1973 (Holm and Quimby, 1974). This would be the only surviving reinterpretation of the original footage for the next thirty years (Evans et al., 2008). In the following decades, more footage has been found – including the original orchestral score – and the film has now been remade in a way that closely resembles its original or intended state.

This is what is shown at the contemporary performance, Edward Curtis meets the Kwakwâkâwakw: In the Land of the Head Hunters.

Edward Curtis Meets the Kwakwâkâwakw

This performance was on tour in Canada and the United States throughout 2008 and 2009 (Evans et al., 2008). It has been created in collaboration with many museums and produced by a Kwakwâkâwakw woman, Andrea Sanborn, and two scholars, Brad Evans and Aaron Glass. The performance screens the newly remastered footage of Edward Curtis’ film, In the Land of the Head Hunters, along with an orchestra playing the original composed score for the film. The remade version of the film includes most of the original captions that were written by Curtis himself and that were excluded from the earlier War Canoes version.

The film is almost uncomfortably long, though playful (Sanborn, personal communication, November 23, 2008). It is clear that Curtis’ intention was to make the film accessible to a broad audience, as a means of creating public awareness regarding the issues affecting indigenous cultures during that time. However, when watching the film, one becomes a viewer through what has been called the colonial gaze (Edwards, 2001). The impression of gazing upon a colonized landscape becomes increasingly overbearing, and faces the potential of the audience’s acceptance Curtis’ claims made nearly one hundred years ago. The audience is confronted with a view of Kwakwâkâwakw culture that is archival, ethnographic and static.

Theories of vision in museology and anthropology have analyzed how we see and therefore how we understand, in terms of our social perspective and our cultural fields of vision (Herle, 2003; Grimshaw, 2001; Edwards, 2001). Some scholars have suggested that images, be they in photography or film, contribute to the differentiating, ordering and controlling of people and landscape under Western colonialism (Hight and Samson, 2002). The archival, ethnographic film acts in its own way to confront the audience with a highly stereotypical and colonial encounter – offset sharply by the performance.
from the Gwa’wina Dancers who come boldly on stage after intermission.

The dancers greet the audience with individual explanations for each dance, each seen or introduced in the preceding Head Hunters. Many of the Kwakw’ak’wakw people who dance on stage are in fact descendants of the dancers in the original Head Hunters. This is a visceral connection not only to their culture as a whole, but also to individual relatives in the film. Moreover, because the dances performed in the film were banned by the Canadian government at the time of the film’s making, re-enacting the sacred, but subsequently outlawed dances on stage to a predominantly Western audience is undoubtedly a powerful experience. The program for the performance situates the desires of the dancers as “refusing to play stereotypical ‘Indian’” (Evans et al., 2008). The archival footage pre-intermission is sharply contrasted with a vibrant and living culture.

**Repatriation and Performance**

Visual repatriation is a term with which anthropology is now familiar. There is a body of literature concerning the importance of archival footage for source communities, and many studies that document community reactions and opinions concerning the return of cultural knowledge through vision (Herle, 2003; Grimshaw, 2001). What makes this performance different is that it specifically aims the process of repatriation at an audience. This audience/performer interaction is incredibly important. Viewers have the chance to see the masks danced on a stage as they are in many important ceremonies. The cultural memory of the Kwakw’ak’wakw confronts the film but does not attack it. It works in dialogue with the film to produce an audience experience and a new venue for repatriation.

The official statement from the U’mista Cultural Society states:

> The Kwak’wala speaking peoples - the Kwakw’ak’wakw, represented by the U’mista Cultural Society – are indeed indebted to Edward Curtis for his work in documenting some of our traditions in this early film… we continue to learn by watching the dance movement and the expert paddling in the film (Cranmer, 2008, p. 4).

From the view of the community, this project has been an extremely important endeavour. In an interview, Sanborn has said this performance is important in another way: “We are still here and growing…we wanted to show the audiences that we are very much alive, living in a modern world but still practicing our culture” (Sanborn, personal communication, November 23, 2008). This performance also becomes important for the audience. As audience members, we are forced to reconsider what we saw as archival, and begin to understand what meaning photographs and films such as these may have for originating communities.

Charlotte Townsend-Gault, a contemporary art critic, also draws attention to the fact that performance art can reincorporate historical forms (Townsend-Gault, 1992). This, she argues, creates the audience as meaning-makers. She draws on theory that identifies ritual or ceremony as a “vehicle for personal and social
negotiation” (Townsend-Gault, 1992, p. 51). The audience as visitor, through witnessing this performance, can come to terms with the stereotype of the “authentic.” As Glass argues, dance has a special significance as performance. He says that dance has the ability to be accessible as a form of knowledge that is embodied, rather than knowledge that is based solely upon literature or vision (Glass, 2004, p. 55). This performance is well situated within these theories, and acts as a contemporary example of how these ideas can function within the museum.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the initial questions of how performance functions to create new meaning. Through the juxtaposition of the colonial stereotype of the film In the Land of the Head Hunters and the Gwa’wina dancers’ performance, the viewer – through the experience of dance – can understand a new meaning of photographs and objects in the museum. Situating this performance in theories of vision, performance and repatriation we can examine how this film interacts with a living and vibrant community, and how the restitution of the cultural memory of a community through archival footage is an important role that museums can play.

The performance speaks with the Curtis film, and creates a new moment of cultural encounter for the audience. This is also evidenced by the title, “Edward Curtis meets the Kwak-wag’wakw”, and it proves that this dialogue is at the heart of the performance. It has been argued that this example ultimately works to counteract the idea that museum is a place that freezes cultural heritage. If museums can begin to view indigenous heritage as fluid, growing and active, then new exhibits and encounters may arise. Preserving objects as cultural products further separates them from the relevant and interesting process – in this case, a remarkably active and performative tradition. This is the experience museums should be striving for as a way to engage visitors and re-engage the institution in a cultural dialogue. Repatriation is a large part of life for many communities, and visual repatriation is a starting point for many. Through further collaborations with a focus on indigenous knowledge between museums and First Peoples, it is my hope that in the future ‘museumification’ can mean a revival of culture – instead of a death.
References


Curtis, E.S. (1914) In the Land of the Head Hunters [Motion Picture].


