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Provoking numinous experience:

contemporary art interventions at the Brontë Parsonage Museum

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The early part of the twenty-first century has seen a dramatic rise in the number of heritage organisations commissioning artists to create 'interventions', contemporary artworks to be seen juxtaposed with their sites, buildings and collections. This article takes as its case study one such site, the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, West Yorkshire which, since 2006, has had a formal Contemporary Arts Programme. Through the examination of interventions from this programme and consideration of visitor comments in response, this article suggests that numen and cognitive dissonance are particularly appropriate concepts to explore contemporary art interventions in heritage sites. I argue that while interventions are thought to provoke new readings of historic sites, experiences of contemporary art which have numinous and dissonant characteristics can reinforce rather than disrupt hegemonic heritage narratives.

Keywords: contemporary art; interventions; numen; cognitive dissonance; visitor comments

Introduction

> No exhibition should be held in this sanctuary of the Brontës!![i]

The early part of the twenty-first century has seen a dramatic rise in the number of heritage sites commissioning artists and curating artworks to be seen in conjunction with their buildings and collections. The term 'intervention', though contested (Brown 2018), is often used to refer to artworks commissioned directly from the artist by a heritage organisation. The primary purpose for the artwork is to be seen in the context of that historic site in order to address a particular history, audience or provoke new interpretations. Artists have long been critical of the ideological nature of museums and art galleries. The work artists have produced in response to museums has had sustained

critical attention (Putnam 2001; Robins 2013; Stearn 2014; Marstine 2017) and curatorial approaches juxtaposing contemporary with historic art to create 'active dialogue' is a common strategy (Tzortzi 2016, 59). However, the rapid rise of 'interventions' in heritage sites has yet to be matched by equivalent critical analysis. To address this strategy is, therefore, important, not least to redress this imbalance of critical attention.

The 'lively and sometimes bitter debate' (Lumley 2005, 15) which has been a feature of heritage discourse in recent decades, has centred around whether heritage is safe, nostalgic and backward looking (Hewison 1987; Waterton and Watson 2013, 550), a manifestation of postmodern dislocation (Jameson 1984; Walsh 1992), a singular discourse dominated by experts (Smith 2006), or a critically engaged assemblage of practices which are future focussed, open and dialogic (Harrison 2012). Given that contemporary art is being used to 'intervene', not just in the physical space of a heritage site, but also in this broader 'discourse' of heritage as praxis, this work has significant implications both operationally and theoretically. Thus, it needs close examination, in order draw this practice more clearly into this heritage discourse.

To provide a central point of reference for the nascent debate on contemporary art commissions in heritage spaces, especially given the significant rise in art commissioning as an interpretive strategy, this article examines the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth, West Yorkshire, home of the world-famous authors. Since 2006 it has had a formal Contemporary Arts Programme (CAP), through which the museum has selected a wide range of artists to respond to the site and its collections; the resulting artworks displayed in the period interiors of the museum. Responses to contemporary art in this context are largely related to the way in which this site is treated as a 'literary shrine' by visitors, many of whom self-identify as pilgrims paying 'homage' to the

Brontë sisters. Here, I focus on two interventions in particular; 'The Land of Far Beyond', by Su Blackwell from 2010 and 'Capturing the Brontës' by Charlotte Cory from 2013. These exhibitions provoked widely differing reactions which suggest tensions between the curatorial rationale, visitor expectation and potentially conflicting approaches to interpretation at this site. This article seeks to contribute to the emerging debate on contemporary art in heritage through an examination of these tensions.

Methodology

This article is based on part of a research study carried out between 2010 and 2015, which was granted ethical approval by the University of Leeds. The phenomena of 'interventions' implicates widely differing approaches, such as the critical analysis of visual artefacts, anthropologically oriented participant observation, and interpretive phenomenology suggested by visitor studies. The approach taken for the wider research project that this article draws on emerged as a result of engaging with the site and its processes within an ethnographic framework. The Brontë Parsonage, as the central case study, offered a relatively complex set of circumstances in which contemporary art commissioning could be analysed. While there are acknowledged challenges with Participant Observation, and more broadly with qualitative study of heritage (Filipucci 2009), taking a comparative study of exhibitions within the CAP offered one way to advance the understanding of these projects. Thus, the case study was analysed and located in its wider context through exhibition and document analysis and semi-structured interviews carried out with commissioned artists, site staff and visitors.

During the period the research was undertaken, Parsonage staff paid particular attention to their visitor comment books to monitor reaction to the CAP. Given the extant suggestions that visitor comments are overlooked as a research source (Macdonald 2005), useful as forms of public writing (Noy 2015), and able to reveal the

distortion of expectations (Crane 1997, 45), it seemed apposite to take account of visitor perceptions through a detailed thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of comment books from each of the contemporary art exhibitions. Comment books and interview audio files were transcribed by the author, with external help translating comments not written in English. Themes were identified through a coding process based on close reading of the transcripts. An iterative process involved the re-reading of transcripts and codes, utilising both deductive and inductive approaches in an effort to locate emerging themes within broader discourses of heritage and tourism. Later in the study, to correlate emergent themes, a small number of short interviews were carried out on-site with visitors to one of the exhibitions. Again, these were transcribed by the author, coded and considered in relation to themes established from earlier analysis. From a constructionist perspective, thematic analysis was employed as I do not seek to focus only on visitor experience; instead, this research seeks to articulate a richer, holistic understanding of this case study in order to explore how art is able to contribute to heritage interpretation, given the ways in which the contemporary art programming is being widely adopted amongst major heritage organisations, particularly in the UK (Black and Farley 2019).

The Brontë Parsonage Museum

The Brontë Parsonage lies at the top of the old village of Haworth, which is located in the Worth Valley, part of the Pennines ten miles north west of Bradford in West Yorkshire. The Brontë family moved here in 1820 when Patrick Brontë became Perpetual Curate of the parish. During their brief lives here, his three daughters, Emily, Charlotte and Anne wrote and published a range of novels and poetry which now rank among the most celebrated pieces of literature in the world. In the context of this success, the tragic story of the family is well known. After his wife and first two

children died, Patrick Brontë was to witness his remaining adult children die early from disease, Charlotte being the last, succumbing to tuberculosis in 1855. Patrick remained in the Parsonage until his death in 1860; very quickly, however, even during Charlotte's last years, Haworth and the Parsonage became popular with visitors seeking a glimpse of the famous authors and the landscape inspiration for their work.

The Brontë Society was established in 1893 with the aim of preserving Brontë related memorabilia. After first setting up a museum in the village in 1898, the society purchased the Parsonage in 1928 as their headquarters and logical location for a museum. Thus, the sisters' life story, their literary output and the tragic family history are inseparably tied up with both the history and contemporary heritagisation of Haworth as a place, the Parsonage as a personality house-museum, and the local landscape as 'Brontë Country'.

Contemporary Art Programme

In the early 2000s, the Parsonage began to react to what it perceived as a problem with period interior interpretation. Andrew McCarthy, then Education Officer, expressed a desire:

> to look at how we could draw attention to the fact that the house was a stage set in many respects. When you go round those period rooms there's this kind of illusion that the Brontës have just stepped out of the room, which is fine, I think it is something visitors like, that feeling, but at the same time it's quite nice to puncture that and make people question that and think about that a bit more.[ii]

This rationale resulted in a successful bid to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to fund a residency in 2006 by the artist Cornelia Parker, which cited that:

> the Parsonage museum has been seeking to explore new forms of display and interpretation in a bid to occasionally challenge the period room presentation that has defined the museum since it opened in 1928.[iii]

A bid to further fund the programme from 2007 to 2010 pointed out:

> the Brontë Parsonage Museum has frequently been described as a 'literary shrine' and its presentation has traditionally focused on 'period home' display. Whilst this is entirely appropriate and has been very popular with visitors it does have its limitations. In particular, it is very difficult to convey the rich heritage of artistic response there has been to the Brontës across three centuries and to establish connections with the contemporary arts. The danger is that the 'period home' museum reduces the Brontës to heritage celebrities and that it becomes caricatured as a literary 'mausoleum'.[iv]

The emergence of the Contemporary Arts Programme (CAP), as it has been articulated through these policy decisions and funding applications, can be seen to be a response to the idea that the Parsonage is fixed and unchanging, characterised as a 'literary "mausoleum"'. This funding application for Parker's residency argued that she was the ideal artist to examine the celebrity nature of this infamous family due to her particular interest in relics. Important here, is the idea that contemporary art, as a new form of display, is necessary because the period interior is not able to adequately communicate the continuing contemporary relevance of the Brontës and their work.

Pilgrims at a Shrine

A strong chronological correlation can be identified between the development of contemporary art 'interventions' in heritage sites more generally, this particular case study, and the heritage debate which emerged in the UK in the1980s. Responding to the significant growth in heritage sites at that time, central to this discourse was a question over whether those who visited heritage sites were passively experiencing a shallow,

nostalgic and unreal representation of historical events, or more deeply engaged in a productive and two-way dialogue through which they were able to develop their own meaningful responses, both through, and in spite of, the ideological framing of heritage presentations.

Within the longer history of visitors to Haworth and the Parsonage, however, the concept of being on a pilgrimage to a 'literary shrine' has been a dominant narrative. In 1877 Thomas Wemyss Reid (cited in Lemon 1996, xiii) suggested that Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë meant:

> Haworth and its parsonage became the shrine to which hundreds of literary pilgrims from all parts of the world began to find their way to see the house in which the three sisters had spent their lives and done their work.

Testimonies describing pilgrimage appear a number of times in early issues of *Brontë Society Transactions: The Journal of Brontë Studies* (1928, 137). Also, in 1904 Virginia Woolf (1979, 273) visited Haworth and wrote:

> At a certain point we entered the valley, up both sides of which the village climbs, and right on the hill-top, looking down over its parish, we saw the famous oblong tower of the church. This marked the shrine at which we were to do homage.

This enduring sense of pilgrimage as a meaningful personal journey, suggests a great deal more than shallow tourism.

The concept of pilgrimage was also evident in the analysis of current visitor comment books. The Parsonage have used two visitor books; one intended to be specific to each CAP exhibition, and one which is always available. However, visitors have used both books interchangeably. Through an analysis of comments in both books which described motivations to visit, several key themes were evident.

Long held ambitions to visit the village were expressed in a number of ways, often because visitors had read Brontë literature. This desire was articulated through the concept of the significant journey in both time and space:

> Absolutely wonderful - very enjoyable, wanted to come for many years, Made it today well worth the Journey. Named my daughter - 'Emily - Jayne'.

> A pilgrimage from the other side of the world!

Here, the importance of the visit is underlined by referring to the distance travelled, and the amount of time the ambition to visit has been held. Repeat visits, demonstrating an enduring attachment to place, are important:

> 2nd Pilgrimage to the parsonage. Wonderfull [sic] feelings here.

Pilgrimages often feature a journey to visit relics:

> 'The Brontes will always hold a special place in my heart and imagination. Thank you for preserving these relics so that they may continue to inspire future generations!'

These sources demonstrate, complex reasons for visiting and, partially at least, refute accusations of shallow nostalgia. Brontë 'pilgrims' appear already to be emotionally invested in their visit having read the novels or seen a film or television adaptation. This sense of pilgrimage as a result of engaging with the Brontë's works is an important context for this analysis, as it suggests visitors are already purposefully engaged in a deeply meaningful visit. Placed in the broader context of heritage discourse, the CAP at the Parsonage is thus a key example of praxis, responding to, and experimenting with heritage, in very particular ways.

Numen

Exploring visitor responses to sites associated with conflict, Gatewood and Cameron (2004, 193) show that ‘battlefields and military cemeteries came to be seen as holy places, sanctified by the death of the soldiers’. This is not to compare the Parsonage to a battlefield memorial, however, one consistent theme of Brontë discourse is the extent to which the family experienced tragedy, illness and death and many visitors often write about their responses to this tragic history, and the relics they encounter. In their research Gatewood and Cameron (2004, 194) suggest:

> a certain portion of visitors want to consume history in a deeper, affective, and personal way. They speak of attempts to go back in time and imagine what actors were feeling. We have labelled this impulse numen-seeking.

In defining ‘numen-seeking’ as a form of visitor engagement, they draw on Rudolph Otto who first used the concept of numen in his 1923 book *The Idea of the Holy*, summarising his argument that numen is ’a religious emotion or experience akin to rapture awakened in the presence of something holy’ (2004, 208). This clearly accords with recent heritage thinking which argues for more affective experiences of heritage sites (Uzzell and Ballantyne 2008; Waterton and Watson 2013, 552; Staiff 2014). While it has been suggested (Maines and Glynn 1993, 19) that ‘numinous objects’ have sometimes not been taken seriously in museums because of their emotive rather than aesthetic merit, Kiersten Latham (2007; 2013; 2016) provides a key point of reference, arguing that 'numinous experiences (also referred to as reverential, pivotal, profound) with any museum objects/exhibits are akin to aesthetic experiences with objects of art and encounters with the beautiful' (2007, 254). Furthermore, Latham’s use of John Dewey’s concept of ‘transactional experience’ and Louise Rosenblatt’s concept of the ‘transactional model of the literary work’ (2007, 254) helps us understand that ‘the

potential for a numinous experience lies in the unique combination of ingredients found in the transaction between the exhibit/object, the viewer, and the situation in which these components all meet each other' (2007, 257).

Building on Latham's work, it is my argument here that numen is a particularly appropriate concept with which to explore the CAP, and contemporary art interventions in heritage sites more generally. While the terms 'contemporary' and 'intervention' suggests a corrective interruption of museum space and time, this does not preclude strong feelings and powerful meaning-making experiences. This is because interventions form part of a 'total holistic and dynamic experience' (Latham 2013, 8) in which profound affective responses to objects and artworks are able to 'transform a shrine into a "contact zone"' (Coles 2000, 70).

Comment books are an important source of feedback for the Parsonage (Cass 2015, 27), and it has been argued that they are, in fact, an important source which can be used to gain an insight into visitor experience (Noy 2015). Prior to considering comments referring to contemporary art, it has been productive to contextualise themes from general visitor comments with aspects of numen defined in the literature, to think more clearly about what numinous experiences of the Parsonage are.

A substantial number of visitors expressed a sense of being brought closer to the Brontës, often by being moved through time:

> What an experience. Going back in time. Lovely day at Haworth with my friend June.[v]
> I can feel the years pass away looking at there[sic] artefacts, brings me one step close to those that held them. Wonderful![vi]
> Lovly [sic] being here, take's [sic] you back in time - timeless elegance. Wonderful.[vii]

These three statements from different books and different years, demonstrate a

consistent theme that visitors feel temporally closer to the Brontës when in the Parsonage and that pleasurable emotions are the result of this sense of passing through time. Latham describes this aspect of numen as 'being transported'; Gatewood and Cameron as losing the sense of time (2004, 208).

Visitors also write about their feelings towards the Brontë family and their lives in the 1800s:

> A real insight into the lives and work of the Brontë sisters.
> A moving experience for us all. An intimate insight into this talented but tragic family!
> It is very moving to walk through the house and to see where such genius was created.[viii]
> Its [sic] very touching to know that the family died at or before the age of thirty.[ix]

These comments, which speak of moving and intimate insight, or reflect upon the tragic death of the sisters, articulate a connection with the quality of the sisters' lives and show empathy for the sadness they experienced. Both Latham and Gatewood and Cameron identify a key aspect of numen is figured around strong connections to people of the past, their experiences and a sense of struggle or tragedy.

A further element of numen is the sense of being in touch with something holy, or, in secular terms, objects arousing feelings of awe and reverence. Comments that express this tend to refer to the importance of seeing the Brontës' personal belongings:

> It is inspiring to be in the presence of the history & to see the many possessions of this awesomely gifted family.

> I did not know the Museum had so many personal belongings to this famous family. Outstanding display, one I will never forget. [x]

The similarity between religious relics and the museum's collection cannot be underestimated. There are fragments of Brontë hair, as well as intimate items of

clothing and jewellery; the dining table has Anne's name carved into it; the Children's Bedroom shows evidence of their drawing on the walls. Here, the very existence of the Parsonage as a museum, set up by the Brontë society, in which these objects are preserved, demonstrates that these objects have been 'set-apart' (Evans 2003), the process by which they come to have sacred meaning. Thus, the responses cited here, reflect experiences of being moved through time, of recognising qualities of the Brontë's past lives and of contact with relics, all of which can be matched to conceptualisations of numen, suggesting strongly that visitors are 'numen-seekers' and that the Parsonage is a powerful place in which to 'expect intimate personal communion with famous strangers' (Young 2012, 155).

Latham (2007, 253) extended Cameron and Gatewood's work by adding 'embodiment' as a quality of numen. Underpinning many visitor comments is that 'temporary habitation of the space' (Behagg 2012, 68) provides the context for provoking numen in a manner which emphasises the historical context of present experience as an 'intertwining' of place, people, things and emotions. One visitor noted that it was 'very thrilling to be in presence of greatness'. [xi] Another, that 'it is inspiring to be in the presence of history.[xii] Gregory and Witcomb (2007, 265), tease out this sense of liminality in their thinking about nostalgia and house museums, suggesting that:

> When we perceive the imprints of past lives that are somehow embodied within the house, despite their actual presence being long gone, we experience a collapse of the present with the past, and momentarily enter another world. Such an affected response is heightened by the silence of the house, the absence of real life living within it. For in silence, in gaps, there is presence.

This 'imprint' of the lives of the Brontës exists both within the biographical narrative of the house and within the biographical narrative of visitors' lives, given their

engagement with the literary output of the family.

With this evidence of visitors' personal connections to the museum leading to numinous experiences, it is hard to think of the Parsonage as 'cliched' and 'dead'. Given the significant increase in contemporary art commissioning in heritage sites globally, this does raise questions about the ways in which contemporary art might add to, or change, the unique 'combination of ingredients' (Latham 2007, 10) found at the Brontë Parsonage Museum which results in such profound engagement with place and both public and personal history.

Numen and Contemporary Art Interventions

In contrast to the fixed notion of a shrine, to which a pilgrimage can provoke deeply felt experiences; the CAP has been articulated as a challenge, seeking to dispel the notion of a mausoleum and instead create a place of imaginative and creative meaning-making, transforming the site for each exhibition. Jenna Holmes has worked as Arts Officer at the Parsonage since 2006 and is largely responsible for both selecting and working with artists throughout the process of design and installation. Her selection of artists has been largely intuitive, choosing to work with artists who either have a connection to the Brontës in some way, or whose practice was thought to be able to bring a new dimension to visitor experience in a way which underlined their continuing relevance. Keen for 'unexpected outcomes', Holmes is clear that artists are able to bring new material to light through their research processes, whilst also being able to emphasise the creative nature of the Brontës.[xiii]

Within the history of the CAP, two exhibitions are notable for the ways in which they provoked substantially different reactions. Su Blackwell was commissioned to respond to the Parsonage, based on her work with books and fictional narratives. Being given *Wuthering Heights* as a child was important to her, and Blackwell wanted to

‘work in unison with the building, to be sympathetic to what already exists there, and to simply add another, more contemporary voice’.[xiv] Her installation, ‘Remnants’, in 2010, was ‘met with almost universal delight’.[xv] The second exhibition, in 2013, was by the artist Charlotte Cory who has been a trustee of the Brontë Society and is seen as a deeply serious Brontë scholar. Cory did express a desire to be provocative, but also that she didn’t ‘want to destroy the experience. I really want people to be able to come and walk round that Parsonage and have that Brontë experience without feeling I’ve imposed’.[xvi] Despite her exhibition being based on intense scholarship and archival research, responses to the resulting installation, ‘Capturing the Brontës’ (2013), show it was thought to be profoundly problematic.

Blackwell’s installation 'Remnants', according to Holmes, was significant for the museum in that it was the most ‘invasive’ intervention to date, appearing in a wide range of rooms, draped across the period interiors and collection objects (Figure 1). Given the very precise, biographical nature of the curatorial approach to presenting the Brontë’s home (Quince 2007), the radical nature of this installation cannot be underestimated. The work employed sound, moving objects, and paper and fabric sculpture, creating an environment which sought to collapse the temporal space between visitors’ contemporary experience of the museum and the lives of the Brontës. Blackwell installed the sound of barely audible footsteps that, in echoing gently within the Parsonage, suggested that the Brontës were still present within the house. A mechanical book in the Dining Room whose pages turned, apparently of their own accord, suggested this was a ghostly presence of the sisters, 'remnant' in the space (Figure 2). A substantial part of the installation was the paper 'battle scene' in the Children's Study, inspired by the Brontë children's complex imaginary worlds, well

known through their early writing, or ‘juvenilia’ (Glen 2006), which combined fantastical characters and places, inspired by real world people and events.

These fictional battles from the children's writing were enacted across the furniture through Blackwell’s paper cut-out depictions of castles, soldiers and weapons (Figure 3). In addition to traces of drawing still extant on the walls, thought to be by the Brontë children, 'Remnants' layered the space with additional narrative from their real and fictional worlds in a space that, it has been argued, is 'physically insignificant', but of great importance in the 'interior lives of the young writers' (Alexander 2012, 102). It is interesting that the Brontës themselves were not immune to this conflation; Emily’s writing in her diaries intertwined real and fictional events with no distinction (Barker 2001, 156).

Staff and visitors saw the exhibition as an undoubted success. In the evaluation report, Jenna Holmes noted:

> In previous exhibitions there has been debate about the role of art within a historic space such as the Brontë Parsonage Museum, but this exhibition met with almost universal delight.[xvii]

This 'universal delight' was articulated very strongly by visitors in the comments book. Of the 316 comments which related to the exhibition, 303 represented a positive reactions such as:

> Su Blackwell’s images help to create a lasting impression of such a beautiful place. Thank you.

> We were absolutely charmed by these wonderful pieces - thoughtful, imaginative & moving. Thank you! A real treat.

> A brave attempt to educate tourists! Thank you for re-creating something of the Brontë era in contemporary terms to stimulate our imagination.

Here, a characteristic of numen which is to be ‘moved’ is evident, showing deeper, stimulating experiences of place and its past inhabitants.

A further theme which emerged from the comment analysis was the concept of 'addition':

> Hard to imagine that anything could add to the museum, but this exhibition adds magic.
>
> Please keep this artwork as a permanent exhibition – it adds so much to the experience.
>
> Excellent artistic expression adding a new layer of meaning to the museum. Fantastic interpretation – both dress and sound brought me to a fuller understanding of the author.
>
> The exhibition is fascinating and thought provoking in relation to the content and ideas from the Brontës life here.

These comments go some way toward demonstrating that the juxtaposition of artwork and site is not only able to generate the empathy, awe and reverence which is characteristic of numinous experience, but that there is an intangible quality of additionality, which one visitor above qualified as 'magic'.

Some visitors expressed more particular aspects of meaning-making:

> I enjoyed your additions to the parsonage museum, the footsteps in particular allowed me to imagine a world where the house was full of Brontës!
>
> Some of the pieces are very moving + really connect their experiences + writing with the place – e.g. Emily’s thinking of her writing in the kitchen as shown by the linen. Really enlivened the museum – thanks

The first comment here indicates that this visitor experienced the shift in time and space which contact with heritage can provoke, adding to this visitor’s experience a quality of

closeness to the sisters. The second shows what Latham (2013, 10) calls ‘connections bigger than self’, in that the artwork enabled very specific connections between the kitchen, Emily Brontë’s act of writing, and the visitor’s own emotions. Rather than provoke or remind visitors of the illusory stage set, these comments suggest that Blackwell’s intervention added to experience by enabling imagination and feeling.

While a significant number of comments articulated the idea that the art had added some intangible quality, some did not. Emerging from these comments is the concept of 'subtraction':

> Su Blackwell exhibits add nothing [...] to the overall experience. A shame to mutilate authentic textiles!

> The museum doesn't need an other[sic] addition to add to its value.

These comments implicitly deal with subtraction in the sense that the works 'added nothing'. The first notes that an ‘authentic’ Victorian textile had been ‘mutilated’ by the artist, showing a concern with the object’s historical, rather than creative value. The second comment suggests that the site itself is ‘complete’, and that nothing further is needed to invoke valuable experience.

Here, perhaps, the focus on visitor comments potentially limits the analysis, as further questioning of these visitors might have revealed other aspects of their experience, not accounted for in a brief written response. At this point, though, it is reasonable to conclude that visitors' positive experiences of Blackwell’s intervention relate to the way these juxtapositions transform space and articulate ways of thinking, being and feeling in such a way as to affect the atmosphere, generating a rich range of emotional reactions that may not otherwise have been possible. While the concept of numen is, though, helpful in articulating the quality of these positive experiences, what concept is needed to account for the negative reactions visitors sometimes express?

Given, that ‘Remnants’ generated few negative comments, it is useful here to consider an intervention which generated much stronger negative reactions.

Dissonance

That the Contemporary Arts Programme was born from the museum’s desire to ‘provoke’ change to visitors’ experience, connects to a point made by Myra Shackley (2005, 36) about tourists visiting revered places:

> It becomes important that the site appears to be untouched by the modern world, even if in practical terms this is romantic but impossible since the building will have been continually modified since its construction. The tourist, however, sees it as a space to be preserved rather than used, to be gazed upon but not changed. Thus, when attempts are made to radicalise the use of that space, whether by the physical modification of the site or by the introduction of some commercial activity, a dissonance arises.

Shackley suggests that dissonance might occur when a site that is sacred is 'radicalised' in a way which does not meet with people's expectations. It is my argument that the radical and experimental nature of the CAP at the Parsonage has, at times, given rise to severe dissonance for visitors and this is evidenced through their written comments.

In ‘A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance’, Leon Festinger (1957, 3) articulated what is now well known as a theory of experience. In his theory, 'any knowledge, opinion or belief about the environment, about one's self, or about one's behaviour’ is an element of ‘cognition’. When an individual encounters conflicting cognitions, ‘psychological discomfort’ occurs, and as a result of this ‘cognitive dissonance’, they will try to reconcile the conflicting ideas (1957, 3).

The concept of cognitive dissonance has found traction in heritage discourse (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1995; Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2005). For example, Tunbridge and Ashworth suggest that uses to which buildings and relics are

put can be a source of dissonance, particularly when they are ‘felt to be […] misused’ (1996, 229). Whereas the basis of Festinger’s original theory is that these conflicting cognitive elements are held by the same person, Joel Cooper (2007, 118) suggests an approach which is also useful in the context of the CAP, that of 'vicarious cognitive dissonance'. Rather than being the product of the internal conflict of an individual, vicarious cognitive dissonance is socially constructed among people who identify with each other in some way. This is closely related to the suggestion that common meaning and value arises from 'interpretive communities', in that 'one powerful reason that causes people to feel close to one another is common membership in important social groups' (2007, 119).

Cooper (2007, 121) explains that it is possible for someone to be motivated to change their own attitude or behaviour because the behaviour of someone else causes dissonance to arise. The dissonance experienced in these types of situation is the result of the actors 'shar[ing] a social identity caused by [their] belonging to the same social group' (2007, 121). To explain further, a form of socially constructed, or ‘vicarious cognitive dissonance’, can clearly be seen in both visitor and staff reaction to Charlotte Cory's 2013 exhibition 'Capturing the Brontës'.

This exhibition was born from Cory’s lifelong commitment to, and passion for, the Brontës.[xviii] Cory’s intervention combined fact and fiction, drawing inspiration from her ongoing project, the world of the ‘Visitorians’; an alternative universe of human/animal hybrids. By replacing key portraits of the family with her own surreal portraits of them (Figure 4) and installing long lost belongings of the family, mysteriously ‘found’ for this exhibition (Figure 5), Cory playfully made:

> an alternative Brontë narrative in which Branwell achieves his dream of studying at the Royal Academy, and Maria Branwell’s shipwrecked trunk is rediscovered –

> full of wonderful things that end up prized, accessioned and properly labelled in an alternative Visitorian museum within the Museum.[xix]

Producing an exhibition based extensive and accurate scholarship, which resulted in identifying that the doomed ship carrying Patrick Brontë's wife's luggage was the Plymouth Packet, lost in November 1812, the artist shares much with 'pilgrims' to the Parsonage.

Responses to this exhibition, however, were profound and extreme. Daily complaints to staff led to the introduction of a 'live guide'; a student intern who spent time each day in the house, talking to visitors about Cory's work. A number of complaints were received by email. This example expresses the sense of a pilgrimage disrupted:

> Having travelled over 300 miles from Cornwall to Derbyshire and a further 60 miles to get to Haworth from our cottage, we were more than a little disappointed.[xx]

The Brontë Society Heritage and Conservation Officer responded with an official complaint, noting that the installation was, in fact, a contravention of policy:

> it should not have been staged in the historic house […]. Our Heritage and Conservation Policy clearly states that the house must be presented as a home and all items which are extraneous to this should be removed as far as possible.[xxi]

In the comments book, of 646 entries related to 'Capturing the Brontës', 149 were positive responses:

> It is sometimes good to shake things up a little and get some discourse going! Well done!
> Very clever with all the animals linked to what they liked to do and their personalities.

However, 478 comments articulated experiences of dissonance:

> I do adore this house, its atmosphere, incredibly well preserved artifacts/furniture/items from Brontë family history - but the Charlotte Cory portraits are ahistorical and dissonant - they marred the whole experience for me.

Here, the conflicting cognitions relate to a temporal disjunction between the period interior and the contemporary artwork. Visitors also expressed strong dissatisfaction with those responsible for allowing the exhibition, perceiving it as an 'aversive outcome' (Cooper 2007, 121):

> Whoever decided on having an artist to do this ridiculous exhibition needs their head examining. Talk about spoiling something so FABULOUS!!!!!!

> Absolutely appalling! I have travelled a long way to visit Haworth. I am very upset and annoyed at this pointless, disrespectful portrayal of what should have been a wonderful experience, who authorised this?

These visitors are clearly struggling to reconcile the ‘custodianship’ of important relics with a decision-making process which allowed for Cory’s intervention. Thus, vicarious dissonance was produced through the decision of the staff in allowing this to happen.

In this way, Festinger's theory offers a way to understand the motivation for visitors to write comments. One of the key aspects of his theory is that 'the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance' (1957, 3). The comments cited in this analysis have all shared a strong emotional reaction. In addition, some have included aspects pointing to both 'reduction' and 'avoidance', which Festinger postulates is the resulting behaviour in response to an inability to alter the circumstances producing the dissonance. For example, a significant effort to reduce dissonance was to ask that the works be removed:

> Please remove this exhibition & return the home to its original state.
>
> Please take this abomination away as soon as possible. I have loved coming here over the years and this has totally ruined it for me.
>
> It's nonsense and a mistake - please rectify forthwith.

A further reaction was to suggest a return visit would be necessary, visitors thus replacing their current frustration with the promise of a better experience in the future, with the implicit message that art would not be wanted:

> Will have to return again to see "The Parsonage" in all it's[sic] near to original glory!
>
> Spoils the museum - will return when it has been removed!
>
> My heart sank as I climbed the stairs and saw that the beautiful painting of the sisters by their brother replaced by geese. Will come again when the house is restored to its original beautiful displays.

Trying to affect other people's visit was another theme of dissonance reduction:

> I would advise anyone thinking of visiting the parsonage to wait until next year when this exhibition has gone.

While Cory's installation critiqued museological processes of accessioning, labelling and interpreting, it is interesting here that the 'original' Parsonage is invoked as part of these visitors' rejection of the intervention. It is evident that this exhibition has not drawn attention to the illusory nature of the period reconstruction, one of the stated aims of the CAP at its inception. Cory herself felt that 'people have just totally missed the point'.[xxii]

A final strategy, 'avoidance', can best be illustrated by visitors' argument that they were, in fact, unable to ignore the work:

> I found myself going from room to room becoming more and more stressed and annoyed having to try and ignore all the 'Visitorian' items.[xxiii]
>
> This exhibition distracted from the atmosphere which is so much part of a visit to the Parsonage. It wasn't possible to imagine the family around the table, in the kitchen.[xxiv]
>
> It staggers me that this exhibition has been thrust upon us so indiscriminately and in such a blatant excessive manner. We could not avoid or get away from it.[xxv]

These extracts from emailed or written complaints suggest that selective attention was simply not possible. Despite their best efforts, these visitors could not 'ignore', 'imagine' or 'avoid'.

Visitor behaviour and comments can be seen as an active attempt to moderate both the immediate effect of the artworks, moderate the effect for future visitors who might experience the same exhibition and create the possibility that this 'radicalisation' of the Parsonage is limited in the future. That 'vicarious cognitive dissonance' has its basis in social identity as constructed through shared ideas and values, suggests Festinger's work is helpful in understanding the heritage space of the Parsonage as one of dialogue. Vicarious cognitive dissonance is dialogic, because the Parsonage is perceived as a shrine and visitors experience dissonance when the actions of somebody else impinges on their expectations and values. This results in attempts to ameliorate the effect for the social group, through the forms of communication available to them. In the case of Capturing the Brontës, this extended well beyond the comments book, into conversations with staff and written complaints which queried the rational for the exhibition. Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to the idea that the CAP may be dialogic in nature and thus the Parsonage is not a fixed and unchanging site.

To further elucidate this conceptualisation of the CAP as dialogic it is necessary, however, to go beyond Festinger's concept of 'cognitive elements' (1957, 9). Because 'cognition' signals more conscious knowledge, it does not account for the full range of

precognitive feelings which the comments examined here point towards and are especially suggested by the prevalent descriptions of the Parsonage's atmosphere. It is not possible to articulate a full and complete experience of the Parsonage, any more than it is possible to fully articulate the experience of art. As Michael Holquist (1990, xx) has summarised of Mikhail Bakhtin's view, 'all transcription systems - including the speaking voice in a living utterance - are inadequate to the multiplicity of the meanings they seek to convey'. What is thus necessary, perhaps, in terms of understanding the effect of the CAP exhibitions studied here, is to conceive of a range of experiences with both dissonant and numinous characteristics. This is because the artworks were so profoundly against what some visitors were expecting, their reaction was more than an intellectual disagreement, it was deeply felt affective dissonance which, conversely, strengthened the depth of reverence for the site and its role as a place of memory. For some visitors, the apparent dissonance created between the illusory period interior of the Parsonage and the interventions of contemporary art were able to lead to powerful ‘aesethetic’ experiences with complex combinations of dissonance, cognition and, numen.

Conclusion

Contemporary art is increasingly being used to ‘intervene’ in heritage, with the often-stated aim to provoke new meanings. This analysis suggests the concepts of numen and cognitive dissonance are particularly appropriate to conceptualise how visitors engage with ‘contemporary’ and ‘historic’ juxtapositions at one particular site. In its key aim of encouraging visitors to move beyond a hagiographic worshipping of long dead writers within an illusory reconstruction, the CAP was able to provoke new readings of the site and, in doing so, foreground the contemporary relevance and continuing impact of the Brontës today. However, a thematic analysis of general visitor comments demonstrates

a far more complex meaning-making process is taking place at this numen-provoking site. It also reveals the intertwined impact of Brontë literature on the visitors' lives who are anything but passive receivers during their embodied experiences of the Brontës' former home.

The CAP does offer new ways of engaging with the heritage but, despite the ambitious aims of the programme, it does not necessarily influence, or challenge, the idea that it is a shrine. Where visitors have encountered contemporary art, a range of reactions can be discerned. Su Blackwell's work created few conflicting cognitions between concepts of the 'contemporary' and the 'historic'. Where visitors expressed a deep appreciation for this juxtaposition, the substantive underpinning notion has been that the artworks have facilitated a rich affective connection to the Brontës as the objects of their reverence. Rather than engaging with a critical questioning of why the museum has chosen to create an illusory period interior, one of the early aims of the CAP, Blackwell's work reinforced, rather than disrupted, the notion of the museum as a liminal site at which to connect with the past lives of the sisters. Where conflicting cognitions caused severe dissonance, as was seen in Charlotte Cory's installation, this too led to a strengthening of visitors' perceptions of the dominant narratives available at the Parsonage. With 'Capturing the Brontës' largely rejected as inappropriate, this was founded precisely on the notion that the site is a shrine and a tribute to the family. In particular, that it should be an unchanging tribute, and under no circumstances should those responsible for it be allowed to 'radicalise the use of that space' (Shackley 2005, 36). The Brontës' memory was regularly invoked by visitors to argue that the artwork is not welcome because the Brontës themselves would not have appreciated it.

Given that neither exhibition appears to have disrupted hegemonic narratives available at the Parsonage, both despite and because of provoking affective responses, a

problem remains in trying to identify what kind of 'intervention' contemporary art installations are in this context. Pilgrimages are already seen as transformative engagements which involve change through separation from, then return to, normal life (Urry and Larsen 2011, 12). Visitors to the Parsonage are deeply engaged in profound and personal meaning making processes which can be characterised as numinous. Thus, it can be asked whether the goal of interventions ought to assume the critical transformation of passive, uncreative visitors through provocation. This has wider implications for contemporary art commissioning in heritage sites as is suggests a deeper understanding is necessary of how visitors' experience might be changed through their engagement with this type of curatorial juxtaposition.

Perhaps, though, what needs to be asked in this case study, is not how visitor experience of the heritage site might be changed by the insertion of artworks, but whether the common understanding of a stable heritage site intervened in by the separate discipline of contemporary art needs to be challenged. I argue that contemporary art, rather than being an intervention from a different discipline, is a heritage process which, deployed here, has been able to draw out hidden, forgotten, or neglected aspects of the life struggles and posthumous influence of the Brontës. Through their experimental and innovative contemporary art programming, the Parsonage has offered a way for visitors to 'be with' the Brontës in embodied ways that are significantly more complex than passive visitors being 'shocked' into critical engagement with illusory processes of heritage by the unexpected intervention of contemporary art.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Remnants, Su Blackwell; installation view. Photograph by Simon Warner courtesy of the Brontë Society.

Figure 2. Remnants, Su Blackwell; installation view. Photograph by Simon Warner courtesy of the Brontë Society.

Figure 3. Remnants, Su Blackwell; installation view. Photograph by Simon Warner courtesy of the Brontë Society.

Figure 4: Capturing the Brontës, Charlotte Cory; installation view. Photograph by Simon Warner courtesy of the Brontë Society.

Figure 5: Capturing the Brontës, Charlotte Cory; installation view. Photograph by Simon Warner courtesy of the Brontë Society.

Figure 6: The Silent Wild, Diane Howse; installation view. Photograph by Simon Warner courtesy of the Brontë Society.

[i] 'Jane Eyre Prints', visitor comments book, 2004.

[ii] Interview with Andrew McCarthy at the Brontë Parsonage Museum on 6 July 2012.

[iii] Extract from application to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for Brontëan Abstracts (2006). Provided by Jenna Holmes, Arts Officer, Brontë Parsonage Museum.

[iv] Extract from application to Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for the funding of the Contemporary Arts Programme 2007-2010. Provided by Jenna Holmes, Arts Officer, Brontë Parsonage Museum.

[v] 'Remnants', visitor comments book, 2011.

[vi] 'To be Forever Known', visitor comments book, 2011.

[vii] 'Remnants', visitor comments book, 2010.

[viii] 'To Be Forever Known', visitor comments book, 2011.

[ix] 'Brontëan Abstracts', visitor comments book, 2006.

[x] 'Brontëan Abstracts', visitor comments book, 2006.

[xi] 'Remnants', visitor comments book, 2010.

[xii] 'Brontëan Abstracts', visitor comments book, 2006.

[xiii] Interview with Jenna Holmes, Haworth, 2013.

[xiv] 'Interview' with Su Blackwell, by email. 2015.

[xv] 'The Land of Far Beyond: Su Blackwell Evaluation Report', 2011. Unpublished report written by Jenna Holmes.

[xvi] Interview with Charlotte Cory, Haworth, 2013.

[xvii] 'The Land of Far Beyond: Su Blackwell Evaluation Report', 2011.

[xviii] Interview with Cory, 2013.

[xix] 'Capturing the Brontës by Charlotte Cory', exhibition leaflet, 2013.

[xx] Emailed complaint, 10 November, 2013.

[xxi] Document written by Brontë Society Heritage and Conservation Officer, 14 October 2013.

[xxii] Interview with Louisa Briggs, Arts Officer (Maternity Cover), 2013.

[xxiii] Email to the Parsonage, 10 November, 2013.

[xxiv] Email to the Parsonage, 5 November 2013.

[xxv] Letter to the Parsonage, 29 October 2013.