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Helen Graham

Policy Review: Department of Culture, Media and Sport 'Peer Review Pilot'

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'Excellence' is a tricky concept. Like the US Supreme Court's definition of obscenity, excellence is in constant danger of falling into the category of 'I know it when I see it'. In the specific case of the DCMS Peer Reviewers sent out late last year in quest of museum excellence, it was more the case that excellence will be known when *they* see it. Except this is a case very much yet to be proved – as I will argue.
Three DCMS-funded museums were included in the Peer Review: the Natural History Museum, the National Portrait Gallery and Tyne and Wear Museums.[1] Three Peer Review teams were assembled – made up of senior museum managers, an academic and a business leader – and each reviewing team spent three days conducting their task. Before the Review visit, each museum completed a self-assessment and after the Review report had been completed, each museum had the opportunity to respond. While DCMS is still deciding what the next stages will be, it is the paper trail generated by this three stage process – published in April 2009 – which I will review here.

What is immediately clear from reviewing the reviews is that the Peer Review Pilot was flawed, both in conception and in practice. However, it is also the case that the precise nature of these flaws reveals quite a bit about what is at stake in current cultural policy. Specifically the use of 'excellence' to knit together the *means* of risk, innovation and international reputation with an *end* of 'changing lives', generated Peer Review documents made of up idiosyncratic pointers which when taken together reveal a museum sector divided over the long standing problem of what it might mean for museums to 'change people's lives' (Purnell 2008, p. 4).

McMaster Review: The problem of 'excellence'
The DCMS Peer Review Pilot was a response to the publication of Sir Brain McMaster's *Supporting Excellence in the Arts: From Measurement to Judgement* (2008). Pulsing through every sentence of what has come to be known as the 'McMaster Review' is the ongoing epistemological problem of how the value of culture can be known and, more over, how it can be known in a way which facilitates – rather than limits – that value (e.g. Holden 2004). As the McMaster Review's subtitle suggests, the Review was commissioned by then Secretary of State's James Purnell to address his perception that the arts had been subject of 'burdensome targets' (2008, p.4). To focus his enquiry, McMaster was sent out to consider the following:

- How the system of public sector support for the arts can encourage excellence, risk- taking and innovation;
- How artistic excellence can encourage wider and deeper engagement with the arts by audiences;
- How to establish a light touch and non-bureaucratic method to judge the quality of the arts in the future.

(McMaster, 2008, p. 6)

Clearly, these questions set up a number of conceptual connections: that excellence is connected to risk-taking and innovation; that excellence creates wider and deeper audience engagement; that excellence can be best determined through a 'light touch' methodology. In his Review, McMaster juggles these key terms, making some conceptual connections stronger and re-connecting others in different ways. There is

no doubt that when taken on its own terms, the McMaster Review does basically hold. However, as Susan Eckersley has pointed out, the Report is underpinned by a specific and highly problematic concept – 'excellence' (2008, p. 184). Yet the problem with 'excellence' is not only that it is hard to define, but rather that McMaster imagines 'excellence' in a very particular way. Central to his juggling is the definition of excellence as 'life-changing experiences': 'excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual. An excellent experience goes to the root of living' (2008, p. 9). McMaster then identifies 'innovation', 'risk-taking', 'relevance', 'diversity', 'internationalism' and 'governance' as the key 'conditions' for excellence and through defining and connecting these conditions a number of criss-crossing logical strands emerge:

1) Excellence is guaranteed by relevance and diversity (2008, pp. 10, 11). Relevance is facilitated by constant innovation ('the introduction of something new, where old methods and systems are insufficient' (2008, p. 10)). Innovation is facilitated by risk-taking ('experimentation and pushing boundaries' (2008, p. 10)).
2) The barrier to having a life-changing experience is non-attendance. Non-attendances is caused by expense and can be mitigated by free access (2008, p. 17). Non-attendance is also caused by mediocrity (2008, p. 18). Therefore, attendance can be achieved through excellence (2008, pp. 18, 25).
3) Targets create mediocrity. The barrier to excellence is mediocrity (2008, p. 18). Peers can 'judge artistic excellence' (2008, p. 22). Therefore excellence should be determined through self-assessment and peer review.

It is through peeling back the strands of McMaster argument that its ground – and the specific meaning of excellence – is revealed. The Report imagines that audiences are willing to attend and are only put off by money and mediocrity. 'Life changing' is, therefore, understood – once periodic free entry and touring shows have been suggested (2002, pp. 17, 19-20) – not as an issue of politics and inequality (O'Neill 2008, p. 300) but one of generating better art. As a result, 'audiences' are only imagined in relationship to the aesthetic encounter provided by the arts organisation rather than as social beings living complex lives. Better art is understood as coming from making art more relevant. However, the source of greater relevance is not, however, 'the public', rather practitioners are encouraged to become 'better [at] articulating their vision' to meet what is imagined as an already existing 'public demand for a deeper engagement with the arts' (2008, p. 25). As a result 'life changing' is not social, political or something likely to take place beyond the art encounter – and instead emerges as something like the early-twentieth century understanding of transcendent aesthetic art experience (Duncan 2005, p. 84). It is only, therefore, because 'life changing' is imagined as taking place via an excellent aesthetic – and because targets will tend towards mediocre art – that it becomes possible for 'excellence' to become something which can be judged by Peer Reviewers.

The Peer Review

Before moving on to explore specific tensions which best reveal the conceptual problems with the Peer Review Pilot, I give a brief flavour of each of the Peer Reviewer comments and pull out key institution-specific issues.

- Natural History Museum NHM was praised for its 'innovative' linking of 'the work of its scientists and the public' (DCMS 2009s, p.6), with the Darwin Centre drawing particular praise. The museum's international links with comparable institutions and relevant research networks were noted. In

addition, the volunteer scheme was singled out for praise. Areas for development were considered to be the visitor experience as a whole, the offer for teenagers and a greater role for the museum 'using its position as a voice of authority to drive the public debate on scientific issues of the day' was suggested (DCMS 2009a, p. 9).

- National Portrait Gallery In shorter review documents than those published for the NHM and TWM, NPG was judged to offer 'freedom' to curators which translated into innovative permanent and temporary displays. Their audience engagement work was especially noted, especially with young and disabled people. In was recommended that a future strategic plan was needed, building in decisions about collections storage. NPG's digital offer and volunteer programme were noted as 'strongly desirable' areas for expansion.

Tyne and Wear Museums TWM was praised as an organisation 'primarily focussed on making a positive difference to the lives of the local community' (DCMS 2009c p. 7) and specifically for having developing excellent museums (Discovery, Great North Museum), as having strong volunteer, school and Not in Education, Employment or Training programme and as having developed a 'world class' outreach service. Areas noted for development included a change in the governance structure a more strategic collections strategy, a review of the numbers of museums in the service and a greater focus on differentiating between Region, National and International ambitions (more on these issues, plus the TWM responses, below).

While some of these comments from the Peer Reviewers were welcomed as useful by the museums and others certainly weren't, what I want to dwell on is the more general conceptual problems generated by the McMaster criteria being transferred to a museum context. The core logic of the McMaster Review is that excellence is 'life changing' via a transformatory aesthetic moment. However, museums have not tended to be bounded into 'changing people's lives' as, or at least not *only* as, an aesthetic encounter. Indeed, museums have long traditions of seeing their roles as pedagogic and civic, a purpose which while certainly concerned with 'life changing' has an extended scope, with the museum being imagined as a site for improving life beyond (Bennett 1995). In recent years, this purpose has become of increasing concern to DCMS, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, specific museum services and academics (AEA 2005; Dodd et al 2002; MLA 2004; 2004; Sandell 2002; Sandell 2007) and a proliferating set of research, guidelines and policy directions have been produced. While some have characterised governmental use of museums to realise social aims as new or potentially problematic (e.g. Appleton 2000; NMDC 2004), others have strongly argued that such aims were museums' founding purposes (Cole 2008; Mason 2004; O'Neill 2008) and have shown the movement towards an aesthetic transformatory experience as emerging only in the twentieth century (Duncan 2005, p. 85). As a result, 'life changing' has more than one meaning in a museum context – and this lack of consensus over the primacy of the aesthetic in 'life changing' also, therefore, unseats the logic that *peers* are best placed to determine excellence.

The Problem with 'Peers'

The most immediate problems with the idea of a peer review in the context of the Peer Review Pilot is that while each of the peer-reviewed institutions are funded by DCMS – TWM is a local- authority museum service made up of 12 museums and galleries located across Tyne and Wear and is funded by nine different stakeholders – the five unitary authorities (Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council, North Tyneside Council, South Tyneside Council, Sunderland City Council), DCMS, MLA and Creative Partnerships Programme (TWM 2009a). Conversely, out of the Peer Reviewers, seven were national museum senior managers, either in UK or abroad

(of the other Reviewers one was an academic and one a business leader).[2] It is therefore not coincidental that the areas subject to most disagreement between Reviewers and their hosts relate to TWM. As TWM Director Alec Cole and Cllr. Ged Bell (Chair, Tyne and Wear Joint Museums Committee) note in their response to the Peer Review 'what was missing from our panel was anyone with a strong local government background who could have provided context to some of the governance issues discussed' (TWM 2009b, p. 38). McMaster characterises governance structures as being crucial because 'the board' are 'the guardians of innovation and
risk-taking' and recommends that 'the board of every cultural organisation contains at least two artists and/or practitioners' (2008, p. 12). Referencing this, it was argued by TWM's Reviewers that 'the Executive Leadership Team at TWM should be given the power to manage the Service as a single corporate whole' through 'a longer arms-length relationship from local authority political decision-makers' (DCMS 2009c, p. 9). Specifically, the Peer Review recommended that TWM 'consider looking into 'trust status' or an 'independent board'. This was hotly contested by Cole and Bell in their response, 'we do not accept that any evidence was presented, or considered, that justified calls for changes to governance structures' (TWM 2009b, p. 34). Indeed, it was even suggested 'we do believe that the Chair of the review panel came with pre-conceived ideas particularly regarding issues of governance and funding' (2009c, p. 33). Clearly who counts as a peer needs to take into account not only what they know but also their ability to review a museum on its own terms, not only on the terms generated by McMaster.

Secondly, and while this is changing with the increasing importance placed on knowledge transfer (British Academy 2007, p. 25), the University model of peer review has always relied on a clearly defined audience for research. To put it another way, it has been assumed that 'peer's' review research that is *for* other 'peers' – this is quite different to a museum working for a diverse public audience. TWM explicitly questioned not simply whether the panel were effective peers but also that: 'We are, after all, accountable to our stakeholders and, in particular, our direct and indirect funders. Surely it is these groups that we should be seeking to impress rather than our peers!'. Cole and Bell go on 'Indeed, one of the factors, in our opinion, that has held back museums and other cultural intuitions in the past has been an over-emphasis on what our peers think, rather than on what the public might think' (TWM 2009b, p. 36). TWM scepticism at Peer Review was tangible in their being not only the only museum to set up meetings with people who had participated on its outreach programmes (more of this below) but also the only Museum to even get the Reviewers to speak to non-management staff. In other words, it was the only organisation to attempt to value the multiple 'communities of practice' (from conservators, to learning and front of house staff) within museums (Mason 2007).

Criteria for Life-Changing Experiences

One of the benefits promised by the DCMS Peer Review was that interconnection between different parts of the organisations might be identified. The Peer Reviewer's brief is described as: 'to examine the functions and strategic direction of the Museum, evaluate the Museum in terms of self-assessment and identify both areas of excellence and opportunities for development' (e.g. DCMS 2009b, p. 4). However, clear criteria does not seem to have been actively shared and discussed in advance and the DCMS peer reviews were working to this broad brief via the six McMaster-derived criteria for guidance:

1. Provides a Life Changing Experience
2. Shows Creativity and Innovation
3. Is willing to take risks
4. Has an International Reputation

5. Is Open to Everyone
6. Presents relevant and challenging concepts to the public

While the vagueness of the criteria was itself a problem, self-assessment forms completed in advance did ask museum to identify their own ways of measuring successes. However, these specificities do not seem to have been used to modify the McMaster criteria to help give institutionally-appropriate definitions.
As a result what emerges in a close reading of the reviews is an incredibly idiosyncratic bunch of *things noted*, which come across a little bit like cursory ethnographic field notes. So the NHM is exhorted to work with artists 'to a greater extent' (DCMS 2009a, p. 16), TWM's Laing is praised for Catherine Yass and the NPG is praised for using items from their reference collection (DCMS 2009b, p. 6). Sometimes the things noted were genuinely significant – NPG Youth Forum is undoubtedly a model of good practice (DCMS 2009b, p. 6), as is the TWM People's Gallery in Discovery Museum (DCMS 2009c, p. 7). While this demonstrates the limits of the time spent at each museum service, this is not all. Each of these things noted – in order to qualify – had to be coded by the Reviewers as either 'innovation' or 'risk'. Where McMaster imagines risk as a way of underpinning innovation as a condition for excellence, the lack of shared ground in the Peer Review led to some bizarre conclusions being drawn. The NHM review praises interdisciplinary teams as if such a way of working was an NHM innovation (DCMS 2009a, p. 6). Equally, the Laing's People's Panel was praised as 'world class and truly innovative' which while certainly good practice, is also a pretty standard model of engagement across large museum and museum services. A more nuanced engagement with current outreach practice would probably have led to noting the current contemporary collecting programme Culture Shock. In each case specific practices were validated by deeming them risk-taking or innovative through (often faulty) comparisons with practices elsewhere.

The use of 'risk taking' and 'innovation' as proxies for excellence became necessary because the loss of the grounding aesthetic moment meant that 'life changing' is sited elsewhere and therefore effectively beyond the reach of the Reviewers. This also led to the emergence of the issue of priorities. This was visible in the NHM review, where while praising the Darwin Centre and NHM's attempts to link their world leading research with the public, the Peer Reviewer's encouraged the museum to consider the visitor experience as a whole in terms of the aging permanent galleries (DCMS 2009a, pp. 6, 9). NHM came back in response, not surprisingly, with the need for them to prioritise and the limitations of current resourcing (NHM 2009b, p. 5). In the TWM review, the issues of prioritisation came through in the relationship between the 'local' and the 'international'. Throughout the review documentation the TWM Peer Reviewers did repeatedly recognise the significance of TWM's audience focus and that 'many of its outreach and learning programmes are innovative and really superb and can be seen as being a benchmark standard for excellence in this area' (DCMS 2009c, p. 7). Yet the Reviewers' position on governance was directly connected to concerns over how TWM is organised and there was a suggestion that TWM might need to 'rationalise' the number of museums (DCMS 2009c, p. 9).
At present there is some confusion between local museums very closely linked to the community and the ambition to develop a collection of international standing. There can be links between the two, but more could be done to rationalise some of the collections so that material of national and international importance is presented to its maximum potential and set fully in context. (DCMS 2009c, p. 9).

The DCMS panel implicitly assume the need for a certain disaggregation between local and international foci. This emerges because 'international reputation' is imagined in terms of competing on the same terms as national museums and

without, apparently, considering that TWM might have an 'international reputation' for audience engagement because of, rather than in spite of, its locally-orientated museums (and local authority connections). TWM counter this by questioning whether single topic museums necessarily make 'the impact intended' (TWM 2009c, p. 29) and, working at realignment between the local and the international, link their designated collections (arts, science and technology, natural sciences), with international audiences for certain sites (Discovery, the Laing, Segedunum) with their (acknowledged) international reputation for engagement with audiences (TWM 2009b, p. 17). While this is an understandable response from TWM, both their response and the Peer Reviewer's comments point to the contradictions in the criteria which emerge once McMaster's reading of excellence is dispersed. While in the McMaster Review, 'international reputation' *is* artistic excellence *for* the public, without this conceptual grounding – and in my view quite rightly – the need to prioritise audiences will emerge. Clearly, and at a minimum, this disagreement points to the need for more nuanced and museum-specific criteria.

Reviewing the implications

A Review of the Peer Reviews certainly suggests the limits of what can be seen by the people chosen as Reviewers in such a short time. Both NHM and TWM made this point. NHM, comparing the DCMS Review unfavourably with a more extensive peer review of its Mineralogy Department, request a longer duration, time for greater engagement with trustees and for more time to be spent 'interrogating managers to support [Reviewer's] lines of enquiry' (NHM 2009b, p. 1). TWM noted that 'whilst supposedly three days, because of our distance from London, it was not more than two days spent on site' (TWM 2009c, p. 36).

However, there remains the broader issue of how the visitor and the museum need to be imagined to secure Peer Review as a legitimate process. If museums are re-imagined as having varying different governance structures and as subject to, and in relation to, other local authority or third sector agencies and if 'visitors' are re-imagined as people embedded within daily life, then who is 'peer' and how a review might operate itself needs to be re-imagined.

One of the possibilities offered by Peer Review is certainly that of 'fresh eyes' and the possibly of seeing organisational interconnections which are not easily seen from within. This could include how a management structure relates to an outreach session; or how a collections policy affects the visitor experience for a blind visitor. Rather than a three (or two) day intensive review, this benefit of 'fresh eyes' and seeing interconnection might be better offered through developing a 'critical friend' role, someone who can work over time with an organisation on its own terms. Such an approach would allow the reviewer to develop a better appreciation for the specific context and existing organisational lines of accountability, whether that be Mineralogy scientists, DCMS, Local Authorities or specific local visitors. Taking into account some of the current trends in University Peer Review, Reviewers might need to be trained to be reflective in such situations and to have a more comprehensive understanding of different museum's working contexts (British Academy 2007, pp. x, 24-26). It is also worth recognising multiple 'communities of practice' (Mason 2007) and that staff throughout the museum – from senior managers to front line staff – have Peers who are better able to respond to specific issues of practice. Clearly, this kind of peer-to-peer support is already going on both officially – as in the case of the NHM Mineralogy Peer Review – and on a more unofficial basis through networks such as Group for Education in Museums and Social History Curators' Group.
The other challenge for transferring the DCMS Peer Review to museums is that implicitly revising McMaster's definition of excellence has knock-on effects on the potential value of peer review. A wider definition of 'life changing' requires

methodologies to explore this. McMaster effectively defers this problem in the following way: 'I understand that funders are investigating or commissioning toolkits for assessing the impact of work on audiences' and suggests that 'light-touch examples of good practice should be shared widely and become a bed-rock of the self-assessment process' (2008, p. 22). However, while developing methodologies to explore 'social impact' has been a widely acknowledged ongoing problem (MLA 2005; Message 2009), this remains key to a museum-specific understanding of what 'life changing' might mean.

Conclusion

The Peer Reviews could only see certain things – and this is certainly equally true for my review of the documentation of the Peer Review. What is obviously the case, however, is that 'excellence' remains as illusive as before. When transferred to the museum sector – with its specific histories and current priorities – the reading of 'life changing' as an aesthetic encounter is not sustainable. Accepting this point calls the McMaster criteria – used for the DCMS pilot – into question. As numerous research and advocacy projects have noted, life changing experiences are unlikely to be one transformative moment. While museums maybe be 'catalysts for change' (Dodd et al. 2002), lives are probably more likely to be changed through a range of factors including friends, family, local or third sector agencies with, as Mark O'Neill put it, the museum 'supporting a move towards an inclusive cycle' (2002, p.3). Three days audit by Peer Reviewers will not be able to capture that and without a more nuanced and interconnected view it's unlikely, in fact, that they'd be able to know excellence even if they did see it.

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[1] Since the Peer Review Tyne and Wear Museums merged with Tyne and Wear Archives in April 2009 and are now know as Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums. I will, however, use Tyne and Wear Museums (TWM) throughout as the Peer Review happened before the merger.
[2] NHM Peer Review Panel: Carol Butler, Registrar and Chief of Collections, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution; Ian Blatchford, Deputy Director, Victoria and Albert Museum; Michael Reiss, Professor of Science Education, University of London.
NPG Peer Review Panel: Dr Kevin Fewster, Director, National Maritime Museum; Sir William Proby, ex-Chairman of the National Trust; Dr Deborah Swallow, Märit Rausing Director, Courtauld Institute.
TWM Peer Review Panel: Martin Earwicker, then Director, National Museum of Science and Industry; Susanna Patterson. Head of Development, The Finnish National Gallery; Michelle Percy, Marketing Director, Silverlink Properties.
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