

Is There Neutrality in Postmodernism? An Exploration of Value Assignment of Material

Culture

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Abstract

The prospect of the neutral or objectivist archivist and archive has been challenged within the field for the past 25 years. The postmodern discourse today calls for an archivist to proclaim their bias and its effects on their interactions with donors, appraisal, collections, and outreach, as well as employ subjectivity in the archive, including practicing empathy¹. These calls are answered with methods such as post-custodial archiving² and processing techniques like More Product Less Process³. Postmodernism seeks to give agency to the user and owner, and uplifts pluralistic⁴ notions of history in doing so.

Working within this contemporary framework, this paper aims to underscore the nuance of bias and subjectivity as it occurs in value assignment upon objects. I argue that objects are inherently neutral entities, and only maintain value and meaning as assigned by those viewing or assessing them, rather than naturally holding any intrinsic quality or value itself. This paper examines this phenomenon through two lenses: display and gaze. Pulling from disciplines including anthropology, museology, and psychology, I identify how these two lenses inform complex and layered value assignments onto objects. By analyzing these constructs, I expose the depth of subjectivity occurring in value assignments upon material culture. In response to this acknowledgment of value assignments and the forces informing them, such as the built environment, I interrogate the awareness of the concept of inherent neutrality in

¹ Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Challenge of Intellectual Place of Archives," 9, (2002).

² Hannah Alpert-Abrams et. al, "Post-Custodial Archiving for the Collective Good," 2, (2019).

³ Mark Green and Meissner Dennis Meissner, "More Product Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," (2005).

⁴ Michelle Caswell, "On Archival Pluralism: What Religious Pluralism (and Its Critics) Can Teach Us about Archives," (2013).

objects. Through this investigation, I express the need to contend to the construct of neutrality when assigning value to objects, and implore archivists and users to therein acknowledge the depth of the subjective projection actually occurring. Ultimately, by acknowledging how human conceptions of value and meaning are created and understood, this paper will provide a dynamic shift to approaching archival materials by patrons and staff.

Introduction

Prior to postmodern ideology, most archival institutions honored best practices that included standardization, neutrality, and objectivity when concerning objects and an archivists' role in processing material culture⁵. Archivists were assumed objective arbiters in processing collections. When materials were processed, they were categorized into pre-determined descriptions and hierarchies.

Today, archival scholars largely practice within a postmodernism framework, which reflects subjectivity and transparency in archival processes⁶. Examples of postmodern ideology in use include radical empathy⁷, post-custodial stewardship⁸ and the rise in community archives⁹. These practices give their users or donors agency over the collections, and are themselves the center of concern in archival practices. Rather than cater to standardize

⁵ Society of American Archivist "Standards and Best Practices Resource Guide," (2020).

⁶ Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Challenge of Intellectual Place of Archives," 9, (2002).

⁷ Michelle Caswell and Maria Cifor "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," 35, 2013.

⁸ Hannah Alpert-Abrams et. al, "Post-Custodial Archiving for the Collective Good," 2, (2019).

⁹ Michelle Caswell et. al, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing" Covering the Impact of Community Archives," 1, (2016).

methods, archivists prioritize multiple forms of knowing¹⁰, and intellectually and physically decentralize archival materials. Archivists therein acknowledge and include the ambiguity of the human existence and our differing perceptions of reality into their archiving practices. The notion of an objective or neutral reality is rejected.

However, I argue the mere existence of subjectivity points to the existence of neutrality. An object holds no meaning, value, power or partisan until someone determines it does. Moreover, another person can *equally* determine the opposite value or meaning of the same object than another projects it to have. This occurrence supports that objects themselves are neutral entities. This understanding of the inherent neutrality of objects is critical to fully realizing the gravity of human subjectivity applied to objects.

To be sure, it is in postmodernism that I frame the basis of my argument. I aim to further postmodern ideology by acknowledging what qualities of archives are fundamentally neutral; their objects. By doing so, I point to the gravity and nuance of the subjective claims made upon objects. This is not to argue that subjectivity does not belong in the archive, rather, subjective claims without an acknowledgement of the neutrality an object holds is a flawed basis to assume. In doing so, I will first define 'neutrality,' 'value,' and 'subjectivity. Thereafter, I will outline what constitutes an 'object' and in what parameters these objects and their value assessments will be analyzed in: the gaze and display which occurs in the built environment.

For the purposes of this paper, neutrality is defined as maintaining no expressed meaning or quality, nor partial leaning towards a specific value. Value is defined as a form of

¹⁰ Michelle Caswell and Maria Cifor "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," 35, 2013.

importance, projection, or quality one assigns an object whether it be of positive or negative merit. Subjectivity is used to describe the type of value statement being made, and includes opinions or assumed facts derived from one's personal understanding of the world.

Archives store, preserve, and make available objects of material culture. By definition, material culture is "objects, their properties, and the materials that they are made of, and the ways in which these material facets are central to an understanding of culture and social relations"¹¹. This includes, but is not limited to, paper documents, photographs, ephemera, diaries, and more – largely, all physical items and objects in a collection. For the purposes of this argument, objects are considered the array of tangible collections material an archive may hold. This may include physical digital technology, but does not include born-digital material nor digital objects.

To impart the gravity and importance of understanding neutrality in objects, I will first explore how subjectivity is shaped and formed by the built environment. The built environment is human created spaces in which we exist, such as buildings, roads, and cities. This includes public history institutions, such as archives and museums. Further, the built environment maintains tools such as display and gaze. These forces and their abilities within the built environment will be analyzed to reveal how differing subjective values are created and projected onto objects. By examining these influences dynamics, an objects inherent neutrality will therein be interrogated and fully realized.

Once the built environment is considered and the notions of subjectivity and neutrality are contended, the function and perception of objects in archives will be reviewed. This

¹¹ Sophie Woodward, "Material Culture," 1 (2013).

theoretical framework will create awareness surrounding preconceived notions of archival materials, and work as a catalyst to combat the assumption of 'objective' (in reality, subjective) outcomes derived from value assignments of objects. Ultimately, understanding the forces of the built environment and forms of human consumption will lead to assessing objects more critically and inclusively, furthering the postmodern ideals of recognizing bias and subjectivity in the archive.

The Built Environment

Panopticons and Gaze

Systems of control and influence are implemented in our daily lives in almost every facet of our interaction within a built environment. One way public institutions perform this function is through panopticism, an intangible mechanism employed to feel as if you are being watched or potentially being watched.¹² Panopticism is a form of gaze from a true or imagined entity, and is employed through specific architecture. For example, the panopticon control tactic is used in prisons¹³. Prisons are constructed so that prisoners are positioned to be in view, or potentially in view or under surveillance at any given time. This effect helps regulate prisoners actions, as they feel they could be watched at any moment, regardless if they currently are. The panoptic effect changes how prisoners act and react, as well as their perceptions of enforcement and their place and relation of self and others within the prison.

¹² Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture," 104, (2001).

¹³ Michael Foucault, "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison," (1977).

Dome shaped buildings also conjure this effect, as a hierarchy of viewing upon the inhabitants of the building is created by the open architectural feature¹⁴. This type of architecture (or similar) is common in many public institutions, such as archives and museums. Moreover, the geography of where these public history institutions sit reinforces panoptic effects, as it is common for these buildings to be in city centers or near other public services, such as government buildings¹⁵. These buildings are visually seen as domineering due to their architecture and location¹⁶. This creates an affect similar to the prison system – informing the visitor they and the items inside such buildings are being monitored and controlled.

Through this perpetual feeling of gaze performed by panopticism, visitors of the building self-regulate their actions in accordance with the rules or laws of their society, even without the rules and laws being actively enforced upon them.¹⁷ Visitors are informed to regulate their movements, such as standing appropriate distances from objects, keeping their hands near their bodies, and not lingering “too long” in certain areas, such as when visiting an exhibit in a museum. Both the regulation of visitors and objects is crucial when considering the value assigned to the objects these public institutions may hold.

Visitor’s perception of surveillance informs their value assignments upon the objects they view or interact with within a panoptic environment. This understanding lends value to objects visitors would not inherently maintain out of the gaze of panopticism. For instance,

¹⁴ Mark Leone and Barbara Little, “Artifacts as Expressions of Society and Culture: Subversive Genealogy and the Value of History,” 163, (1993).

¹⁵ Mark Leone and Barbara Little, “Artifacts as Expressions of Society and Culture: Subversive Genealogy and the Value of History,” 164, (1993).

¹⁶ David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Eds., “Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritages, and Museums,” 359, (1999).

¹⁷ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, “Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture,” 106, (2001).

objects held in private residence or behind closed doors of a public institution are exempt from the panoptic forces, while all the same bolstering their value in terms of importance or lack thereof. Objects in these “private” environments would indeed maintain value assignments, but a different value judgement is made as the panoptic gaze is unfounded. This points to the reality that an object is not what necessarily maintains value itself, but the demands of the environment determine its cultural or social worth. The built environment reveals the intricacies that create subjective value assignments. While not inherently corrupt, it reveals how objects themselves hold no meaning and are inherently neutral entities if they were to ever theoretically be removed from the forces of the built environment including gaze and display.

Panopticism is specifically observed in archives and museums as they act as exhibitionary complexes. Exhibitionary complexes are outlined by anthropologist Tony Bennett as “the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domain in which they had previously been displayed (but to a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power throughout society.”¹⁸ Bennett touches on the transformative nature of an object’s value when moved from private ownership to a public institution. He furthers his assignment of “exhibitionary” onto the building complexes of archives and museums to underscore the nature of objects on display. While not all archives maintain exhibits, many of their materials are loaned to display. Moreover, the collections are

¹⁸ David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Eds., “Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritages, and Museums,” 333, (1999).

processed and curated for specific forms of viewing, uplifting the concepts seen in exhibitionary complexes.

It is important to note this change in dynamic of an objects purpose when held in a public collection or on display versus within a private domain. Publicity and display infer qualities about objects of which they are assigned, not naturalistically guaranteed, as they do not harness such meaning when placed within other previews. Exhibitionary complexes, such as archives and museums, therein reinforce the argument that objects are pawns used to contend to a value in which a viewer already holds, or a value the complex hopes to impart to the viewer. The reality that value statements are altered due to the environment in which an object is held furthers the notion that objects themselves are only guaranteed a quality of neutrality rather than qualities of subjectivity.

Furthermore, visitors viewing an archival exhibit, or assessing archival objects requested from the stacks, are doing their own watching; the watching of objects deemed representative of other cultures and histories, and understanding them as separate from themselves. Even if the objects are representative of culture and history in which the patron feels a part of, they are not in ownership of the materials. This distance from the materials in terms of ownership employs an imagined gaze created by a panoptic environment, while creating a gaze the visitor casts upon the object itself. In their gaze, the visitor is granted power, just as the building construction of a panopticon is granted power over visitors in its physical structure of dominance and security. The construction of the 'other' versus the self is realized when viewing displays, collections, or individual objects, as the self is granted the ability to interpret the objects and understand them through their own means, rather than through the means of the

culture or history in which the object was created or intended.¹⁹ The objects themselves are not given the privilege to provide the visitor with knowledge in their own form, they are unanimated. A layer of value assignment is performed by the visitors gaze through constructed and contextualized spaces (i.e., the built environment), such as the order in which objects are perceived, or the accompanying material in which an object resides next to.

Once the visitor is granted viewing privileges of an object or collection of objects, a layer of spectacle is added to the encounter²⁰, and the value and inferred purpose and meaning of the objects is formed through the preconceived notions the visitor may have. The visitor's notions about how their reality is structured, whether it be via time construct, social relations, or the like, is therein imposed onto the viewed object. Othering and spectacle ensues.

The structures and privileges of spectating corroborates the argument that objects themselves are inherently neutral entities, as their value and meaning are able to be perceived differently by each visitor's notions of their own existence, confirming that objects hold no inherent value themselves, at least, at a minimum, not value that is universally recognized. This understanding is important to acknowledge when archivist process, teach, and assist researchers with collections. Determining evidence through objects will always be subjective, but realizing the basis of subjective claims are formed from external factors, including the built environment and gaze, is necessary when addressing evidence as fact. The gravity of subjective claims is heightened once the acceptance of objects as neutral entities is made, as fuller and more truthful conclusions can then be formed and asserted.

¹⁹ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture," 104, (2001).

²⁰ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, "Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture," 108, (2001).

Redefining the Archival Approach

While it is true objects are created with intent, it cannot be fully known by another that intent nor its effects. Moreover, as seen from the fundamentals of panopticism, exhibitionary complexes, and gaze, it is understood that an object's value is perceived subjectively. However, it is not enough to only recognize and acknowledge subjective value assignments are occurring. It is imperative to understand that objects are not only assessed in these manners, but at their core, they are neutral entities, regardless of their original intent in creation or current use. In this sense, the only known certainty of material culture is the neutrality that it holds, in that it exists and only maintains value as so far the viewer or user contends it to have. Fundamentally, it is only physically known, but intellectually, these materials hold no *meaning* until it is argued or projected unto them by a subjective value.

I implore that objects are neutral to acknowledge the gravity of its foils, subjectivity and value. This is to say, that all value assignment is equally as disparate or valid as another value cast, because an object is fundamentally neutral. To interweave this ideology within archival methods, two factors must be addressed and thoroughly applied throughout archival processes: (1) Rectifying and acknowledging the built environment and how visitors consume information and (2) the promotion of pluralistic ways of knowing.

The built environment of an archive consists largely of a reading room, and perhaps small traditional exhibits. A reading room is traditionally monitored through cameras and physical eyes. Furniture and work flow is curated to control the visitors movements and

agency²¹. Moreover, many archives are housed in historic buildings deemed of importance, and many preform similar psychological implementations of control, such as those seen in panopticism²². As I argued that the built environment is seen as a catalyst to visitors ultimately creating value assignments upon objects, this phenomena must be addressed through redirecting patrons sense of place within an archival institution.

To do so, archival institutions should prioritize multiple forms of access for patrons. Rather than asserting the traditional reading room, where patrons sit amongst others, stripped of their belongings and waiting for their materials to be brought to them, archives should consider additional forms of contact with their materials. Other forms of contact could include patrons accessing the stacks independently and making physical materials accessible through digital means.

While it may be difficult for an archivist to release physical control of the stacks, by doing so informs the visitor that the objects held within them maintain the fluctuating value assignments they realistically may hold. This practice pushes against the forces of panopticism and the traditional intent of exhibitionary complexes to curate and tell the visitor what they are seeing. Rather, it allows for the visitor to understand the objects dynamically and within multiple arenas – within the panoptic gaze of the traditional reading room, within their own uncurated gaze (independently), and through the digital environment. Allowing multiple forms of access is a step to acknowledging that the objects themselves hold no defined meaning, and

²¹ Jesse Erickson, "The Gentleman's Ghost: Patriarchal Eurocentric Legacies in Special Collections Design," 131, (2020).

²² David Boswell and Jessica Evans, Eds., "Representing the Nation: A Reader: Histories, Heritages, and Museums," 330, (1999).

subconsciously promotes the notion of neutrality within objects. This practice garners recognition of the subjectivity that ensues upon objects, and helps visitors recognize the ways in which their value statements are formed by the environment rather than inherently from the object itself.

Even further, creating access to objects digitally creates an additional form of consumption exempt from the panopticon and somewhat removes the “exhibitionary” component of archival complexes. While digital objects are categorized and curated, allowing them to exist both physically and digitally creates a forum for multiple forms of knowing and assessing material. By maintaining multiple structures in which the same objects can be addressed, the archive is recognizing the conventions of the built environment. The archive is recognizing multiple forums of viewing and consuming objects, and therein reveals the differing values assigned to objects due to the different environments in which they are placed. This begins to remedy the traditional hierarchy of panopticism by offering multiple forms of contact with the materials. Through allowing patrons to perceive objects in these various ways and environments, it uplifts the notion that the objects themselves are not inherently tied to the place or value of the traditional built environment of the reading room commands.

Instead, an object’s worth can be seen changing through the different platforms a patron receives them in. Through radically redefining the ways in which the patron experiences materials within an archive, the archive insinuates to the patron an acknowledgement of the multiple facets of subjective values an object holds – even values that may contradict each other. Ultimately, by providing multiple forms of display and access to objects and insinuating multiple forms of value, the archive points to the neutrality an object holds. By doing so, the

archive contends to the consideration of where neutrality may stand within objects, causing deeper consideration of the subjective claims made upon objects viewed in different environments.

To further transparency and promotion of multiple forms of knowing, archives need to participate in actively revealing the methodology imposed upon appraising and processing a collection. This is to say, when patrons receive materials, they should also receive the intellectual framework in which the material is known to exist in the form of the archive it resides in. By explicitly revealing and stating these methods and the intellectual framework imposed upon the objects, the patrons can contend with the processing methods of an archive while examining what they determine the content and context of the collection to be. Again, by promoting transparency, patrons will be given an active outlet to consider the layers of value assignment given to the collection, via the archivist, archive, and now themselves. This reveals not only the multitude of subjections occurring, but points to the even fewer forms of objectivity one may assume and object to inherently hold. This consideration is important for the archive and user to acknowledge when projecting object-based claims of evidence. If the forces of the built environment, gaze, subjectivity and neutrality are not considered, objects as evidence is invalid.

Conclusion

If an archive were to consider consciously providing three or more forms of access, as I suggest, it would insinuate that the collection materials are open for interpretation and varied subjective meaning. However, I acknowledge this notion may be counter to the mission of

many archives. Many archives operate within the parameters of their appraisal and processing processes maintaining an underlying notion that their objects have an objective inherent value in some capacity, and are always relevant to their scope and mission. By challenging this narrative and allowing multiple forms of access and ways of knowing, it inherently challenges the validity of the collection and archive in the eyes of stakeholders who seek clear and impartial objectives to the uses of their funding. Archives have served the public traditionally and to the requirements of their stakeholders while still producing dynamic research, why change their methods now and risk shaking the status quo?

Recognizing the dichotomy between neutrality and subjectivity seen through pluralistic forms of knowing creates a fuller truth, not the antithesis of value. Reckoning with the traditional forms of assessing objects in archival institutions is imperative to furthering knowledge past the confines of a singular built environment and conventional archival processing methods. Providing access to bolster subjectivity and contend neutrality is necessary to the demands of the postmodern ideology modern archives attend to today.

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