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‘Presence’ and ‘absence’ in themed heritage

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Abstract

We take the case of an industrial museum portraying the Victorian period and investigate the commercial staging of history. We argue that this re-enchants the past through the culmination of a series of factors, including: the spatial and temporal organization of material history; the material ‘re’-production of history; and; the politics of absence. We posit that absence is not simply a case of what is not there. Rather, absence can be experienced, it can be felt and it can be evoked through the medium of heritage. Absence also has agency and can be political in that it can conceal or render invisible, alternative, subaltern or excluded narratives to those of the master discourse. This in turn has consequences for how the past is experienced and understood.

Keywords: Absence; Presence; Themed heritage; Material history; Participatory observation; Industrial museum

Introduction

That heritage tourism is one of the most significant mainstays of the British tourism economy is well articulated in the literature. Britain, after all, is an old nation with a long history. It also has a diverse domestic and global tourist market eager to consume its past in its many guises – from city museums and art galleries, castle ruins, Viking and Roman settlements, re-enactments, stately homes, to living museums offering trips back in time. Within this lexicon of heritage experiences, museums are possibly the most controversial, given their legacy as the bastions of scientific knowledge and aesthetic value, and, as guardians of the nation’s treasures and collective memories (Andermann & Arnold-de Simine, 2010; Stylianou-Lambert, 2011). During the 1930s two wealthy American philanthropists, John D. Rockefeller and Henry Ford, embarked on an experimental project involving the relocation of historic buildings, their restoration and their conservation. The end result was the reconstructed town of Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia followed by Greenfield Village in Michigan. Faithful in their material reinterpretation of the period they were staffed by demonstrators dressed in period costume who enacted life as it would have been in the eighteenth century. The success of these set the standard for a new form of museum - the living heritage site (Stallings, 2016). Since the 1980s, there has been a proliferation of museums, often dedicated to vanishing industries such as steel making, iron smelting and mining (Hewison, 1987). For the majority of these museums the objective was “the development of touristic activities and industries on man-made sites, buildings and landscapes that originated with industrial processes of earlier periods” (Edwards & Llurdes, 1996, p. 342). They were further “driven by a sense of social purpose rather than an accumulation of artifacts or information [where] the goal” was “to change people by bringing them into contact with new and potentially inspiring experiences” (Skramstad, 2000, pp. 25–26). These museums varied in scale, size, mission and interpretation and were predominantly focused on the material remains of industry, including; “architecture, buildings, sites, machinery, equipment and plants, housing, industrial landscapes and settlements, processes and product, and documentation of the industrial society in its many forms” (Xie, 2006, p. 1321). In the UK there are a number of museums related to a key defining era, the Industrial Revolution, which are best defined as ‘living museums’. For example, The Black Country Living museum in the West Midlands, Beamish Museum (‘The Living Museum of the North’, near Durham), and the Birmingham ‘Back-to-Backs’ (19th century terraced housing), and Tyseley Locomotive Works (Birmingham). A good example, and one of the first independent museums of this type in the UK is Blists Hill living industrial museum, located in Ironbridge, Shropshire, an area generally

credited with being the birthplace of the first Industrial Revolution ([Alfrey & Clark, 1993](#)).

These museums were influenced by the ‘new museology’, a term that emerged in the 1970s as an analytical approach to understanding the role, function and responsibility of museums. Key to this line of thinking, a series of landmark essays published in 1989 under the title *The New Museology* ([Vergo, 1989](#)), outlined an alternative epistemology of museums in which they were recognized as contested social constructs. Consequently, museums have come to be viewed as problematic spaces, raising questions about, for example geography, architecture and location, and about which items should be exhibited, how they should be ordered, which objects convey messages in their own right, what labels and narratives are employed to convey these messages ([Forgan, 1998](#)) and who has the power to represent history and dictate its interpretation ([Kreps, 2003](#)). Ultimately from this perspective, museums are viewed as ‘technologies of classification’, which should produce enlightened ways of viewing people, objects, and cultures ([Macdonald, 1996](#)).

Fundamentally, these museums signaled a change in emphasis – from static displays of objects, artifacts and treasures ensconced in glass cases, to interactive, performative experiences designed to bring history to life through the application of theatrics ([Andermann & Arnold-de Simine, 2010](#)). One of the more obvious consequences of this has been a shift from a didactic-object display orientation to a participant, practice related consumer focus and the commodification of some types of heritage ([Andermann & Arnold-de Simine, 2010](#); [Goulding, 2000](#); [MacDonald, 2013](#)). But, this in itself has generated controversy, with the criticism that industrial museums (and other themed/living heritage) have become part of the ~~the~~ ‘heritage industry’ ([Hewison, 1987](#)). As a result, “museums in the contemporary world are expected to do more than simply curate and display collections. They are expected to make their collections accessible, not just for education but for pleasure” ([Pye, 2008](#), p. 113). Taking this approach, heritage is reconstructed as a form of staged authenticity ([MacCannell, 1973](#)); a tourist experience which is primarily created for the excitement and entertainment of visitors.

Unsurprising, with the spread, diversification, and fragmentation of heritage sites and museums, the issue of historical interpretation has become the focus of intense academic enquiry on the part of tourism scholars. In particular, questions concerning authenticity have proved a fruitful area of investigation and debate (see for example, [Chhabra, 2008, 2012](#); [Cohen-Aharoni, 2017](#); [Martin, 2010](#); [Waitt, 2000](#); [Zhu, 2012](#)), as have museums as anchors of collective, social and individual identity ([Jones, 2010](#); [MacDonald, 2013](#)). The focus of most of this work, however, is primarily on what is presented, ‘present’, produced or consumed within the heritage context. In this paper we adopt an alternative, but we suggest equally important lens, and that is to critically examine what is ‘*absent*’ from the heritage/historical narrative ([Firor-Scott, 1984](#); [Holtorf, 2006](#)). Accordingly, we consider the ‘*presence*’ of materiality versus the ‘*absence*’ of history. We recognize that interpretation that excludes or silences important histories ([Martin, 2010](#); [Park, 2016](#)), or reinforces a particular hegemony or ideology through the cleansing of history ([Goulding & Domic, 2009](#)), can blind us to the implications of those histories in the present. Drawing on participatory observation and visual data, we focus on a museum which is dedicated to a radical and transformative period – the so called Industrial Revolution. We examine how a particular history can be reconstructed through material culture which in turn becomes the reification of historical discourse. We contend that the themed industrial museum offers access to a ‘re-enchanted’ past; a selective and somewhat rose tinted nostalgic slice of history that portrays a harmonious community founded on, and bound together by, retailing and consumption. But, this image of harmony is only made possible through the omission of the darker, industrial side of the historical story which is the culmination of a series of factors, including: the spatial and temporal organization of material history; the material ‘re’-production of history and, the politics of absence.

The idea of the absent

Like a missing tooth, sometimes an absence is more noticeable than a presence

Jodi Picoult

In recent years concepts of presence and absence have been the subject of enquiry most notably in the arts and humanities, for example; history ([Firor-Scott, 1984](#); [Holtorf, 2006](#)), architecture and atmospherics ([Dorrian, 2014](#)), and, increasingly, cultural geography ([Desilvey, 2006](#); [Edensor, 2012](#); [Frers, 2013](#); [Heatherington, 2004](#); [Holloway, 2010](#); [Meier, Frers, & Sigvardsdotter, 2013](#); [Meyer, 2012](#)). Yet, in tourism the concept of absence has received scant attention. This accords with the general tendency in the social sciences to prioritize the tangible, observable and physical; with ‘things,’ matter and processes of embodiment ([Meier et al., 2013](#)). Nevertheless absences are also important because they can be just as instrumental in the construction of experience as the immediate, tangible and material. Moreover, if we accept that museums are a source of national and cultural identity, of knowledge about the past, and curators of history, it becomes incumbent to look beyond what is ‘present’, or material, and question the hidden or absent histories and their possible meanings for modern day tourism. According to [Heatherington \(2004\)](#), what museums and heritage curators engage in is a process of absence management (see also [Desilvey, 2006](#)); not through any deliberate desire to exclude or forget certain histories, but through the massaging of the contours of absence ([Adeny-Thomas, 2000](#)). For [Benjamin \(1968\)](#), such museums as we describe would be typified by an absence of ‘aura’. Aura is associated with ritual, tradition, the optical, and the contemplative ([Rickly-Boyd, 2012](#)). In their orthodox form, museums were defined through conditions of ocular-centrism and *distance*; the impenetrable void that exists between the genius of the artist or the work of art itself, and the viewer ([Benjamin, 1968](#)). Themed heritage, on the other hand is consumed as interaction, *closeness* (the need to make everything instantly accessible and relevant), and *distraction* (that which stops the audience thinking through over stimulation) – a triumph of the tactile and multi-sensorial, over the optical or contemplative experience ([Benjamin, 1968](#)). From this perspective, the public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one ([Robinson, 2013](#)). Aura is connected to authenticity which cannot be reproduced ([Rickly-Boyd, 2012](#)). In this sense absence of aura equates to absence of authenticity due to the material ‘reproduction’ of the past. Crucially, however, beyond physical reproduction, absences have

stories to tell; they can resonate in the ‘hauntings’ of places by those who are lost or gone (Holloway, 2010); or, they can reside in the material – in the very stones, bricks and fabric of buildings and places themselves (Edensor, 2012). Absence, whether material or otherwise, is usually connected to memories or places of the past (Meier et al., 2013). Indeed, histories only become alive in embodied and place related memories. As Meier et al. (2013, p. 425) note: “Absences need memories to fill them with life, just as they need traces in the socio-material world that can draw them into a present situation”. What is more, while memories and images of the past can be evoked through selective interpretation in the museum, equally our understanding of the narratives of the past can be structured and filtered by that which is absent (Firor-Scott, 1984).

Hartog (2005) argues that themed heritage in particular represents an “invitation for collective amnesia” (p. 14). But, absence is not simply a case of forgetting, or even about what is not there. Absence is quite different from that which is gone, forgotten, erased from memory or vanquished – this is a void and lacks the experiential qualities of absence (Meier et al., 2013). Importantly, absences are not empty spaces. On the contrary, absences or absence can evoke strong emotions and may therefore be experienced intensely (de Beer, 2013; Frers, 2013). As such absence can better be understood if we view it as “a relational phenomenon, something that is produced in the back and forth between absence and presence, materiality and immateriality, the social and the natural: essentially this requires us to see absence not as existing as a ‘thing’ in itself but as something that is made to exist through relations that give absence matter” (Meyer, 2012, cited in Meier et al., 2013, p. 424). Frers (2013) distinguishes between different forms of absence and in particular, *the presence of absence* and the *absence of presence*. For example, with the death of a loved one, absence, and the experience of absence, may be so obvious and *present* as to be more tangible and physically felt than the ‘here and now’, or presence itself (*the presence of absence*). Conversely, *presence* can also be profoundly absent, as in the case of bodily presence accompanied by psychological or emotional absence – an absence of connection, as when a relationship breaks down (*the absence of presence*) (de Beer, 2013). As such absence can only be felt if there is conscious awareness of what ‘should’ be there but is not. In other words, we have to know that something is missing and *feel* its absence or its loss; i.e., I do not feel the presence of the thing that I miss, but I feel, or know, that it is missing (Frers, 2013). In the case of heritage, absence as ‘loss’, is that which has gone and no longer exists in any physical or material form. Absence as ‘lack’, on the other hand, is that which exists but is excluded through the abstraction of certain histories in order to create alternative narratives (Crane, 2000; Samuel, 2012). Absence therefore can also possess a political dimension which may be negotiated and contested. Such absences need to be questioned in the museum, because absence (but only with awareness) can have agency (de Beer, 2013; Frers, 2013) and “by putting a specific perspective on history and by presenting different threads together in a discursive formation, powerful narratives are created that neglect many alternative, contradicting and subaltern forms of narrating and presenting history” (Meier et al., 2013, p. 426). In this sense, without prior knowledge or awareness of the histories of the time, and a realization of their absence in the museum, questions remain unasked and narratives unchallenged. Without historical or educational habitus (awareness), history becomes the history of that which is physical, material and present. As such “it matters to attend to absence because considering today’s absences provides insights into ongoing contestations of the right to be present or absent” (Meier et al., 2013, p. 426).

Study methods

Given the debates surrounding the commodification of heritage (Forgan, 1998; Hewison, 1987; Kreps, 2003) and the selection of what is portrayed in the ‘new’ museum (Goulding, 2000; Holtorf, 2006; MacDonald, 2013), our research questions emerged as; 1) How do industrial museums use the past to ‘tell’ and ‘sell’ their story? 2) What stories are omitted? and, 3) What might this mean for heritage as a tourist attraction?

Our research site was Blists Hill, living industrial museum situated in Ironbridge, Shropshire, in the UK Midlands. Blists Hill is one of ten museums/sites owned and governed by the Ironbridge Museum Trust, a registered charity with the twin aims of education and heritage preservation. The other sites include The Museum of Iron in Coalbrookdale, Coalport Museum of China, The Toll House, which is situated next to the historic iron bridge, the first of its kind and a world heritage site, the Tar Tunnel, and a visitor center. The trust does not receive any regular funding and relies predominantly on revenue from visitors to maintain the historic buildings and monuments in its care. As their website states: the museum “is reliant on earned income to fulfill its charitable aims of education and conservation. More than half of the Trust’s revenue income comes directly from visitor admissions including Gift Aid and the remaining balance comes from revenue generated from its retail operation, conference and banqueting, tenanted properties and income from grant making trusts and individuals”. Over the years the museum has “enjoyed substantial support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, European Regional Development Fund, the Regional Development Agency, trusts and foundations, commercial sponsorship, covenants and private donors” (Ironbridge, 2016).

As a research site, Blists Hill, while similar in many respects to other industrial museums in the UK, offers a unique context to examine the portrayal of industrialization. It is also part of a site that has UNESCO World Heritage Site status, and is one of a small number of sites of early industry and manufacturing to receive this accolade. Second, it is widely recognized as the birthplace of the first Industrial Revolution and contains many of the original buildings and sites of industry and manufacturing. Third, it is the largest preserved industrial heritage site in the world. Fourth, Blists Hill is one of the earliest heritage sites to be subject to preservation (dating from the 1950s, with the museum established in 1967), predating the popular movement towards developing heritage sites from the 1970s onwards. It was also “one of the first to deliberately choose a derelict area for regeneration as part of the wider new town development initiative”; Fifth, It is a popular tourist destination that attracts approximately 550,000 visitors to the region annually. Finally, UNESCO observes the integrity and authenticity of the site (Ironbridg, 2016), so this makes it an interesting case to explore questions relating to absence and presence.

Data Collection: Participant Observation: We collected data at the museum by way of participant observation, deconstruction of the heritage narrative and visual data. Participatory observation is particularly suited to the study of value laden phenomenon because it requires active and, importantly, reflexive engagement with the context (Ingram, Caruana, & McCabe, 2017). Intrinsically, we adopted the position that places the researcher at the center of the investigation as both an instrument of data collection and an engaged, reflexive participant (Charmaz, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). To collect data we visited the museum six times over a three month period and immersed ourselves in the context. Initial visits allowed us to become familiar with the site, the exhibits, the people and the stories which generated early ideas. We reflected on these ideas during the intervening period and returned to re-

examine particular exhibits in greater detail and to clarify emerging themes. As a team we discussed these themes and collectively examined each other's notes and memos in the spirit of co-negotiation ([Ingram et al., 2017](#)). Our later visits were designed to support or negate our themes and to look for incidences that we might have missed ([Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015](#)).

During our time at Blists Hill, we travelled the width and breadth (the actual exhibits do not extend over the full 52 acres) of the key sites as well as exploring sites that were harder to find. We observed exhibits and merchandising, made notes, wrote memos, interacted with the demonstrators and asked them questions regarding provenance, the lives of people of the time, working conditions and community relations. We interviewed the Director of Life Long Learning in order to gain insights into the operations of the museum and we also listened to the histories as told by demonstrators and through the objects themselves.

Visual Data: In addition to participatory observation we collected data in the form of photographs to add richness to our analysis and provide support for our findings. As [Scarles \(2010\)](#) suggests; “new and alternative methods are required that engage with research participants in ways that move beyond the realms of representation to access the haptic, non-representational spaces of encounter and experience” (p. 906). From our perspective, absence, as a non-representational ~~phenonemon~~phenomenon, required support beyond the written reflexive narrative. Accordingly, through the process of looking for and questioning what was not there, and by capturing images of what was, and through deconstruction of the message(s) conveyed both implicitly and latently, meanings, were sought that illuminated the culture and content ([Scott, 1994](#)) of Blists Hill. More specifically, visual descriptions can be mobilized to transcend the limits of the spoken word ([Scarles, 2010](#)), and provide complementary information on the dynamics of social interactions between people, place and space ([Harper, 2002](#); [Scarles, 2009](#)). In our case we collected photographs of key sites relating to the various histories presented at Blists Hill; streets, shops, buildings, posters, adverts, and significantly, images of industrial structures, their geographical position and the accompanying narratives that determined their story. Vital to our project, we not only questioned what was present, but importantly, what was *absent* from these images of physical representations. In terms of analyzing these images we followed Clarke's (2005) process of progressive interrogation focusing on: 1) Location - which required us to reflect on who produced the object that was the source of the image? and who were the intended audience? 2) The big picture - this involved deconstructing the image to identity the details that contributed to the whole, and; 3) Specification - or looking from outside of the frame for multiple interpretations so that all possibilities could be considered before reaching a final interpretation. Ultimately, these visual images helped us construct a cultural inventory of the experience of materiality (that which is present) and absence in the museum. In the next section we reflect on these readings of the various sources of data.

A trip around blists hill: the spatial and temporal organization of material history

Today, the small town of Ironbridge is situated in a beautiful gorge, bifurcated by the River Severn. With its historic buildings, restaurants, quaint shops and winding ancient jitties, it is a major tourist attraction. But, the iron bridge which spans the River Severn and the gorge which flanks it was once a hive of iron smelting, trade and transportation. It is hard to imagine today's picturesque tree-populated scene as the birthplace of the industrial revolution when the gorge was barren and mud soaked. Although the very name 'Bedlam Furnaces' hints at what life was like.



A painting of Madeley Wood Furnaces (also known as 'Bedlam Furnaces') entitled 'Coalbrookdale by Night' by Philip Loutherbourg 1801. These furnaces remained active in the production of pig iron until 1912 when they were closed after a major implosion. They remain today on their original site at Blists Hill.

Of the museums/sites in Ironbridge, the most popular is Blists Hill, a living museum featuring a reconstructed industrial town where visitors can experience life in late Victorian England. The museum includes 55 buildings and sites of interest. Out of these, 36 are historic buildings of trade or retail origin which have been removed from their original site and painstakingly reconstructed in the museum. The enormous blast furnaces, the mine, the brick and tile works and the Lee Dingle Bridge are all original to the site.



The main street in Blists Hill

The Blists Hill Experience: Passing through the visitor center entrance, rather than stepping into the village, the visitor finds themselves in a cavernous, pitch black room of obvious industrial origins. In here a film depicting the iron smelting process, along with the thundering noise of the machinery that would have accompanied it plays in a loop. Heat, inferno-like flames and molten metal are the dominant images, along with dirt and the sweat of the laborer. This certainly sets the scene for what would have been a hive of heavy industry. Once this is over, the route takes the visitor through another set of doors into a light, plain room where one wall is dominated by a Victorian town street scene along which ghostly, translucent specters of industry workers, children and women, pass. The final stage of the introduction involves climbing a steep set of stairs at the top of which is the entrance to the late Victorian town.

Enter the village and the clock turns back to 1900. This is the exact year that the reconstruction is set, although there is no specific reason given for why this year in particular. However everything that follows reinforces this and adds continuity to the story. Once through the final doors the visitor is faced with a short walk until they reach the first building, a Lloyds Bank which has been removed from its original site and painstakingly rebuilt. From the outside it looks like many other old banks still in use today, but inside, everything is as it would have been in 1900, from the fixtures and fittings, an impressive intricate spiral staircase, to the bank clerk's tools of work. This is one building that is constantly manned by a demonstrator dressed in period costume, but there is little to spend time pondering on. It is a single room with a counter, a picture of Queen Victoria, and little else. The main activity that occurs here is the exchange of money from modern currency to tokens representing old coinage and notes. In the process pounds become pennies and coins become farthings which can be spent in the many retail outlets and leisure activities which abound in the town.



The inside of the bank

Emerging from the bank, the immediate buildings on the left are all shops of various kinds. There is a cycle showroom, a grocer's and a chemist, all of which are genuine reconstructed buildings sourced from various locations in Shropshire and the Midlands. Turn left at the corner and there are more shops - an iron merchant's, a general outfitter's, a photographer's studio, a post office, a sweetshop and a fish fryer's selling traditional fish and chips. Every one of these has an inviting window display which offers an insight into the past. For example, in the post office there are old advertisements for such dubious remedies as 'pink pills for pale people', while another offers 'free passage to Queensland, Eastern Australia', and yet another looks to find sellers of 'old false teeth'. In the druggist you can buy soaps, moisturizers, balms and many other potions and harmless remedies based on original ingredients.



The inside of the chemist shop
(items on top of the front counter are all for sale)

In the sweetshop the window is crammed with large jars and tins of sweets such as wine gums, liquorices, aniseed balls, Pontefract Cakes, and Cadburys Chocolate Creams, all brands with Victorian heritage. As well as these you can buy bread from the baker's, pots and pans from the ironmonger's, candles from the candle factory, or a christening outfit from the outfitter's. But, the peculiar thing about Blists Hill is, that although it is an industrial museum, the real heavy industry that would have been the bedrock of the community is left almost derelict. A massive engine sits idle while the large ironworks looks deserted and forgotten, the only clue to its purpose being the dormant and lifeless machinery, glimpsed in the cavernous, cold space which is half open to the elements. Likewise, the dark and foreboding blast furnaces are still and stripped of history, save for a single notice telling of the paternalistic behavior of the owner to the workers. The engineer works and the mine are similarly grim and void of demonstrators which, on the one hand allows for imagination to do its work, but on the other, signals a lack of importance. Cynically one might speculate that this is because there is nothing to sell or buy at these exhibits.

Buildings, such as these, which are exposed to the public gaze, often convey stories of social relations. As such absence can have agency which is often brought into play when "borderline situations and experiences are analyzed, when the uncanny grows in the dark corners of regulated and orderly places and social settings" (Frers, 2013, p. 435). The very bricks and stones, even when empty or derelict are haunted by their histories or past lives (Edensor, 2012). In the museum the purpose of these structures can be two-fold; they can be both a spatially defined commodity, and a symbolic structure. As such they can have economic value as well as symbolic 'sign' value (Michelson & Paadam, 2010). The blast furnaces, ironworks and mine are all places of labor, and the type of labor which cannot be easily reproduced in the museum. They are high on historic symbolic value, but low in terms of economic exchange value, and therefore command far less prominence in the narrative. For visitors with no prior knowledge or understanding of the function or social significance of these monolithic ruins, a sense of absence may not be felt. Conversely, those who possess an appreciation of this particular history are given no sensory input or contact with the absent entity, yet may 'experience' its absence. To be experienced, absence has to be part of the individual's habitus (Frers, 2013). It relies, in a Bourdieu (2005) sense, on the cultural capital of the visitor to bring the narrative to life and instill it with meaning, or, conversely question the narrative and develop alternative interpretations (Zhao & Timothy, 2017).

Desilvey (2006) suggests that: "Strategies for heritage preservation tend to neutralize such ambiguous objects/places through a set of value judgments involving categories of 'artifact' and 'waste'". Objects and places from the past generate social effects, not only in their preservation and persistence, but also through their destruction and decay. "The death of the object allows for the continued animation of other processes. This is also true of objects transformed or disfigured by ecological processes or disintegration and regeneration. These things have social lives' and the 'disarticulation of the object may lead to the articulation of other histories, and other geographies" (p. 234). This is brought to the fore in the position of these old monuments of industry, positioned as they are, off the beaten track and well away from the main street; and the strange juxtaposition when the two happen to co-exist geographically. For example, for visitors making their way back to the high street from the workers cottages or the school, the enormous blast furnaces which would have been the site of unbearable heat, toxic smoke and back breaking toil are seen through the frame of the animated and populated fairground with its brightly painted swing boats, coconut shy and tombola. This signifies a sharp contrast between the message of 'live' heritage as play, and 'dead' heritage as empty, drained and obsolete. These monuments to industry evoke a form of spectro-geography that signals the unsettling haunting quality of absence, and of the trace of former times that lingers within them (Frers, 2013). Nonetheless, despite the fact that the memory or trace embedded in these buildings "is a resolutely human history... any loss of physical integrity is seen as a loss of memorial efficacy" - an incremental forgetting (Desilvey, 2006, p. 326). In this sense time and space are manipulated in order to tell a particular story. But the real history of the area embodied in these structures is peripheral, absent and out of kilter with the story of the Blists Hill community.



Sign outside of the blast furnaces



The large steam engine



The furnaces glimpsed through the fairground

Whilst these structures are symbolically significant, their geographical exile from the hub of activity also has implications for how many visitors take the time to find and explore them. Meanings of place and space are socially and culturally constructed and consumed at the point of visitation ([Rakic & Chambers, 2012](#)). Research into the spatial and environmental features of museums has shown that circulation patterns, viewing sequence and spatially guided movements are vital to the cultural function of the museum. Issues of access to the main exhibits from the entrance, the exhibits visibility, its spatial grouping, thematic consistency and visual coordination all influence the choice of exhibits and the length of time spent at each. In effect space dictates the 'hierarchy' of exhibits and those representing the 'big idea' should be within easy reach of the entrance, themed together and be visually strong ([Wineman & Peponis, 2010](#)). At Blists Hill, the 'big idea' is the idea of consumption and the shops, pub, and places of saleable production are those that sit at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. The 'real' industrial structures are geographically peripheral and the token display of iron smelting only takes place once a week, on a Wednesday morning.

When thinking about museums, we can consider them as rhetorical devices. That is in terms of their discourses, theoretical stances and critical tactics that offer ways of understanding and interpreting meaning. Within the museum, memory and place interact in a complex rhetorical relationship to both time and space ([Dickenson, Blair, & Ott, 2010](#)). Blists Hill is preserved in the year 1900, most likely because this is a period where there is still availability of buildings and material artifacts for display. However, it never moves forward, and time and again the year is emphasized and reified through posters, objects, newspaper headlines from the year and the authenticity of the costumes, and home and shop decor. It is a 'site' of historical memory where the past is organized, frozen and embodied in the material.

The material 're'-production of history

The second concept in our analysis is that of 're'-production. We use the term, as it is used to describe many objects or things from the past that are copied, but altered versions of an original. Just like a piece of 'repro' furniture, which is by nature newer, cleaner, shinier, more polished, devoid of all the lumps and bumps, grime, love, disuse and change acquired through time, so too is history in the industrial museum. As such, while the buildings are real, the stories and social histories of the hybrid community are essentially derivative and selective. Ironically, as Telford District Council were manufacturing an 'authorized' but inauthentic version of history at Blists Hill, they were simultaneously forcibly clearing rows of eighteenth and nineteenth century worker's cottages and other buildings of historic interest in Ironbridge, in order to provide access to the new museum. This demolition of authentic but

‘unauthorized’ heritage was carried out despite public protest and the fact that they were home to a close knit and vibrant community ([Belford, 2015](#)).

Materiality and authenticity: There is no question that Blists Hill has been designed and built with meticulous attention to detail, using authentic materials. Where possible, original dwellings and shops have been transported to the site, rebuilt and finished to exacting specifications. In this respect they represent a ‘meshwork’ of social and material assemblages ([Harrison, 2013](#)). But, the history they tell is more one of retailing than of industry and, engagement with the past is largely through consumption of the material, authentic goods on sale in virtually every outlet at the site. However, it is interesting to note the detailed attention paid to the merchandise. The brands that are sold are all ‘authentic’ in terms of their heritage and packaging.



The druggist

For example, in the grocer’s the original items are behind the counter, on high shelves so that they can be viewed and discussed. And, it is in here that the importance of the brand becomes evident. On open display the visitor can purchase Camp Coffee liquid, Colman’s Mustard, Tunnock’s Caramel, and Farrah’s of Harrogate Toffee, amongst others. The main criteria for products being sold in this shop is that all the brands existed in 1900. Behind the counter are the originals from the year – tins of Heinz Soup, which look remarkably similar in all respects to those sold today, Colman’s Mustard and Fry’s Homoeopathic Cocoa.

[Grayson and Martinec \(2004\)](#) argue that authenticity can be both a social construction and a source of evidence depending on the application of belief or through the use of imagination. Moreover, perceptions of authenticity are influenced by the perceived links to a particular time, person or place. It is generally accepted that today’s society is a society of consumption, advertising and the media and this is reflected in the cues that are selected to inform us of the past. The tin of Heinz Soup was remarked on by many because, as the demonstrator explained ‘*we all know Heinz, even the children who come in here recognize the tins, and the packaging has hardly changed so it isn’t like some of the others that seem strange to them*’. However, even away from the shops, in every available site, are fences and boards with brands from the past (and the present) prominently displayed.



A fence on the road leading out of the main town

This articulation and presentation of consumer objects as the discourse of history accords with the postmodernism view that sees consumption as the master narrative of contemporary society ([Barthes, 1998](#)). Taking this approach, heritage is necessarily reconstructed as a consumer experience which is primarily created for the pleasure of visitors ([Pye, 2008](#)). The past is reinvented as a simulacrum, a simulated representation or an ‘imitation’ that [Baudrillard \(1994\)](#) explicitly associates with the modernity of the Industrial Revolution. Accordingly the commodity’s ability to imitate reality replaces the authority of the original and accords with the tenets of marketing itself that ‘consumption is the sole purpose of production’. So the shopping experience is the lens through which Blists Hill’s history is enacted by visitors to the museum. There is neither physical engagement by visitors with the industry or engineering exhibits nor any opportunity to work with real or model machinery or produce objects made of iron. The visitors’ role is to shop, to buy, and to pay.

According to [Samuel \(2012\)](#) it is the historian’s job to search out and sort the dialectical relationship between the imaginary and the real. At Blists Hill the real is a material reality of presence. But this flawless attention to materiality masks historical social processes and leads to a partial interpretation or a form of *staged authenticity* ([MacCannell, 1973](#); [Wang, 2000](#)). Moreover, in consumer society with its ever increasing emphasis on instant gratification and experience, the general public might be said to contribute to this staging, or loss of authenticity by constantly seeking to interact, engage, and bring things *closer* ([Benjamin, 1968](#); [Robinson, 2013](#)).

The politics of absence

History and heritage

To quote David [Lowenthal \(1986\)](#) “the past is a foreign country”. As such we can never truly know it in its authentic form. It is gone, it can never be re-lived, and our accounts of it are often attributed to the experiences of the educated elite who took the trouble to document the social, political and economic events of a given period in time ([Hobsbawn, 1983](#)). Of course history itself is not a singular uncontested story. Economic historians have studied the Industrial Revolution from different approaches at different times leading to very different conceptualizations of its characteristics, causes and consequences. On one hand it transformed the British economy from feudal backwardness to the machine age with astonishing speed and turned English rural life upside down. On the other hand, the period was famously dramatized by social reformers characterizing conditions in terms of Blake’s ‘dark satanic mills’. Long working hours, lack of worker safety, and unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions were the norm, as well as a heavy dependence on female and child labor, the latter who undertook dangerous tasks and were frequently ill-treated ([Hartwell, 1971](#)). Such accounts contrast sharply with working life enacted at Blists Hill. However, for the purpose of this paper, the critique of the practices and effects of the heritage industry’s representation of history lie not in the so-called ‘accuracy’ or not of its portrayal, but concerns the way in which it tends to treat the past as a commodity, and as a consequence, excludes significant meaningful histories, such as these documented accounts which have less economic market value. This occurs through the selection, value given, and meanings attached to the objects on display and in this case it is historical materiality that acts as a marker of value and authenticity ([Jones, 2010](#)).

According to [Nora \(1989, p. 8\)](#) “memory is life...history; on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer”. As such museums not only contain memories, they can also be sites of social amnesia and forgetting depending on what is absent. We contend that this practice constitutes what we term, the ‘politics of absence’. In essence this is the product of dominant socio-cultural discourses which shape historical perceptions of work, class and gender. Ultimately memory is an act of thinking about things in their ‘absence’; which may be triggered in response to objects ([Nora, 1989](#)).

[Samuel \(2012\)](#) talks about the ‘violence of abstraction’ which is connected to the will for mastery on the part of the historian or curator. However, no matter how well it is reconstructed, the past is always divorced in time and space, and it will always tell a particular story that is inevitably bound up with experiencing both material (tangible) and socio-psychological (intangible) remnants of the nation’s past ([Park, 2010](#)). In the context of Blists Hill, we conclude our analysis by focusing on three areas of absence - labor, class and gender that collectively and selectively construct the story of this industrial community.

Labor and heritage

With the decline of heavy industry in the UK, [Hewison \(1987\)](#) argues that the only place to experience it is in industrial museums such as Blists Hill. Nevertheless, despite the promise of a real ‘industrial experience’, often the hard labor inherent in mining, iron smelting and manufacturing is eclipsed by another history - the history of retailing. Moreover, while recognizing that scholars of class formation theory struggle to recover the meanings behind working-class social action of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there remains a fascinating social history that goes beyond the physical labor process itself. As [Somers \(1992\)](#), p. 26*** points out “in the midst of the worse economic distress of their lives, English industrial families based their protests not on economic demands or those of a ‘moral economy’, but on a broadly conceived claim to legal rights to participation, substantive justice (Poor Laws), local government control, cohesive family and community relations, ‘modern’ methods of labor regulation (trade unions), and the right to independence - be it from capitalists, the state or other workers.” Yet these narratives remain invisible in the telling of the story within the boundaries of many living museums ([Goulding, 2000](#)). Often, displays claiming to represent the subordinate classes are little more than shallow, picturesque, sentimentalized versions of a bygone period ([Bennett, 1988](#)). There is labor at Blists Hill, but it is the kind of labor that produces saleable products or skills. Those that do not produce, such as the engineering works, are left for the visitor to imagine and interpret.



The Engineering Works

Social class and heritage

At Blists Hill, the classes are defined by their roles within what may be described as productive communities who work to serve the visitor. But, they are also communities of the mind in which the working and middle classes seem to live harmoniously side by side, each accepting their allotted place in life. For example, the doctor's surgery is typical of an affluent middle class country home, with its large range, ebonized chiffonier, phonograph, wallpaper, pictures, and lace tablecloths. The demonstrator, 'the doctor's wife' sits at her table embroidering white linen and informs visitors that the doctor provided a service that only the middle class could afford. To quote, '*if you were ill and you didn't have sixpence to pay the doctor you could die*'. Moreover, her 'home' and role as the doctor's wife allowed her to explain the dangers of working in the heavy industries of the area and the frequent damage to limbs which were often better amputated than left for infection to set in. And, how even after amputation, those who could not afford wooden prosthetic limbs, had to improvise with such things as table legs. Nevertheless, despite these graphic tales of inequality there was no discussion of class relations, or of the movements that were fueling discontent, disquiet and collective organization.



The doctor's wife

Gender and heritage

Working relations are not the only area where there are invisible stories. Female demonstrators at Blists Hill are primarily employed as shop girls, seamstresses, and rarely, with the exception of the candle factory which is oppressive, hot and malodorous, as manual laborers. Indeed any real discussion of gender in the museum is incidental with women portrayed either as 'ladies' engaged in genteel tasks, or as servants or shop girls ([Porter, 1988](#)). And, again, their labor is service labor rather than that produced in the home, as campaigners or, as would have been the case in the surrounding area, as workers in heavy industry such as chain making, for which they were paid a fraction of their male counterparts - 4-6 shillings compared to 10-14 shillings for a sixty hour week ([Morgan, 1997](#)). Moreover, the only indication of the suffrage movement was in the form of a poster advertising a meeting:



Posters on a building wall

Overall the general atmosphere reflects an apolitical population in which the often exploitative social and working relationships are forgotten in a fog of nostalgia (Chhabra, 2008, 2012; Goulding, 2000). In this sense, re-produced heritage is related to the general paradox of memory which equates to the overlapping states of consciousness regarding time, past, present and future and the ability to connect these in a meaningful way. Citing Husserl, Bohn (2007) refers to this process as ‘retention’ and ‘protention’, a process which necessitates selective abstraction from the dialogue, or involves ‘absences’ related to the past; a form of ‘absence management’ (Heatherington, 2004), or the mobilization, ordering and arrangement of the agency of the absent.

Conclusion

Through the lens of the ‘politics of absence’ we can evaluate Blists Hill and its master narrative of a community of consumption, as one that can be contested by its re-enchantment of the past through the absence of certain key narratives. This leads us to briefly reflect on the research questions we raised earlier in the paper. Initially, we asked; 1) how do industrial museums use the past to ‘tell’ and ‘sell’ their story. In the case of Blists Hill, heritage is recreated through the postmodern lens of consumption with the means of production consigned to the margins of the narrative. Hence the story told becomes one of consumption and retailing and an exercise in ‘brand nostalgia’ as the acceptable face of industrial heritage. While the connections with material culture, material memory, objects and artifacts trigger a connection with the past and provide a way of making it visible, this is not unproblematic as what is ‘absent’ is imbued with politics through its re-enchantment.

The second question we raised asked what stories are omitted from the narrative. As historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has observed, those wishing to shape the master narrative “must always ask themselves not only which stories to advance, contest, and accept as ‘true’ but also how to discipline those stories with research and experience and to advance them with power” (Hall, 2005, p. 1239). When reinvented as a mythical heritage at Blists Hill, the Industrial Revolution is disengaged from its central economic and political context. It is thereby ‘decoupled’ from history by the dominant ideology and reformed as a story which ‘celebrates’ the birth of modern industry. This necessitates the omission from the ‘heritaged’ historical record of the environmental destruction involved, the human misery and the exploitation of labor and the working classes in the interests of capital accumulation. This presents the challenge of how to connect the past to the present. The narratives provided at industrial heritage sites are important – they influence how we see and make sense of our own world – and Blists Hill draws on the trope of consumption through the careful use of material cues (e.g. brands and advertising) and the consumption process (e.g. retailing), which provides a convenient link to our modern society of consumption and pervasive advertising. But, crucially, here production is decoupled from the privileged trope of consumption somewhat ironically at the very site where the received historiography records that mechanized mass-production originated.

Our final question, asked what might this mean for heritage as a tourist attraction? Our analysis has taken a critical perspective regarding what is missing from the story, and we suggest that this is important when evaluating the role of museums and their purpose in terms of the tourist experience. As a tourist attraction Blists Hill has been, and continues to be a success in terms of visitor numbers, heritage lottery grants and as a benchmark for other living museums to look towards. Therefore we cannot say that it fails in its portrayal of the past. Nor do we suggest that it engages in any deliberate attempt to mislead the paying public. On the contrary, what is presented cannot be faulted in terms of material authenticity. Moreover, there are a number of practical considerations, both in terms of what is available and also what is economically viable that need to be factored into any critique. Blists Hill provides an example of a particular type of *independent* heritage museum and as such has to generate sufficient revenue to sustain both its own existence and support the other attractions in the Ironbridge museum portfolio. This, to some degree was, and still is, a reflection of changing market conditions such as government cuts in spending on the arts and heritage, and increased pressure on museums to become more customer friendly. The result of this has been a shift from

a production orientation, with history defined and presented by experts from a distance, to a consumer focus (Goulding, 2000). Moreover, it has “become accepted that the purpose and social function of museums must be redefined, particularly in terms of the relationship with the visiting public” (Fitchett & Saren, 2002, p. 318). Nevertheless, consumer orientation should not mean that everything has to be performed and laid bare. Imagination is also a key aspect of the visitor experience (Goulding, 1999) and creative techniques, such as photographs, textual narratives, as well as individual's histories can be employed to convey and enrich that which is missing. As Edensor suggests Edensor (2012, p. 462) “Since absences are everywhere, distributed in various materialities across space, it is imperative to acknowledge them and allow them to provoke and proliferate the ways in which they can be narrated, for behind each absence lies a story, whether historically apparent, fantastic, or somewhere in between.”

Limitations and future research

This research is located within a particular heritage site, a UK themed, industrial museum and is therefore bounded by culture, time and place. It is also derived from an observer/documenter perspective and would therefore benefit from the integration of further in-depth visitor data. What we have discussed are alternative or absent histories at a museum set in the Victorian era. Nevertheless, we suggest that such absences are equally ‘absent’ from the whole gamut of museum/heritage attractions – from stately homes that show only the lives of the privileged, through to more orthodox museums that have to build collections that again, tell a specific story. Moreover, absence is not a concept confined to heritage. On the contrary absences abound in tourism-scapes and tourist experiences – in the boundary ridden all-inclusive holiday resort; in the safari holiday that ensures not only the safety of the tourist, but also makes sure that poverty and inequality remain invisible; and, in the silenced or hidden histories of war and conflict rendered absent and invisible in the drive to resurrect a devastated tourism industry. These and many other contexts could benefit from further research and possibly other methodological techniques using the lens of absence theories put forward and employed in this paper.

Uncited references

~~Harper (1994), Richards (1996) and Sartre (2003):~~

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Highlights

- Draws on participatory observation and visual data.
 - Contributes to theories of heritage interpretation.
 - Highlights the concept of absence as a theoretical framework for analysis.
 - Raises questions over the privileging of material *presence*.
-

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