The Myths of the Crystal Palace

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The Transept of the Crystal Palace, Seen From the Entrance.
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Myths Under Glass

The 1851 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations', to give it its full title, exhibited over one hundred thousand objects from around the world. They were shown in a massive temporary glass building, covering over eighteen acres of Hyde Park: the Crystal Palace. Many, often conflicting, agendas and ideologies produced the Crystal Palace but, when it opened on May 1st 1851, the dominant ideology was undoubtedly that of liberal free trade in the context of British industrial and imperial dominance. As one of the scheme's principal architects, Sir Henry Cole put it:

> A great people invited all civilised nations to bring in to comparison the works of human skill. It was carried out by its own private means, was self-supporting and independent of taxes and the employment of slaves which great works had exacted in ancient days.[1]

Objects from all over the globe were now co-opted into serving the myth of benign British industrial and imperial dominance. The Great Exhibition is an example of the process by which objects were turned into myth. What was achieved by placing these objects under glass for observation? What effect did glass have on the mythologising process at the Great Exhibition?

The word 'myth' derives from the Greek 'mythos' or 'word'. Roland Barthes defines myth as 'a type of speech'[2], but to Barthes myth is an essentially parasitic culture in which the myth drains the original meaning from an object or image in order to support the myth itself. In *Mythologies*, he uses the revealing metaphor of glass to suggest this:

> The Meaning [of the original subject] is always there to present the form...[the myth]...is always there to outdistance the meaning. And there is never any contradiction, conflict or split between the meaning and the form: they are never at the same place. ... if I am in a car and I look at the scenery through the window, I can at will focus on the scenery or on the

1. Quoted in H. Hobhouse, *The Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition: Art, Science and Productive Industry: A History of the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), p.xix

2. R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.109

> window-pane. At one moment I grasp the presence of the glass and the distance of the landscape; at another, on the contrary, the transparence [sic] of the glass and the depth of the landscape... the glass is at once present and empty to me and the landscape unreal and full.[3]

That Barthes should use glass to describe the difference between form (myth) and meaning demonstrates how glass sets apart and rarefies the object that it screens or encloses. To focus on the glass is to render what is behind it somehow 'unreal'. Barthes emphasised that, 'myth itself hides nothing; its function is to distort, not to make disappear.'[4] Thomas Richards describes this combination of rarefication, protection and distortion produced by myth and glass at the Crystal Palace:

> The view of the Crystal Palace that the Victorians liked best was the view from a distance. From a distance it could be seen as a purely magical object. A building begotten not made. ... Unless you got very close, you could not see in and catch a glimpse of the thousands of commodities that it contained ... indeed most Victorian engravings represent the outside of the building as if it were opaque rather than transparent.[5]

It is certainly true that many visitors preferred to focus on the décor of the Crystal Palace rather than the exhibits it was created to hold. From the front pages of *The Times* to the letters of Charlotte Bronte, the building, inside and out, was consistently compared to the landscape of *The Arabian Nights*. The combination of glass, the giant crystal fountain, light, greenery and statuary is reflected in contemporary imagery; less the 'workshop of the world' than a mythical landscape of fantasy and spectacle.

One literal but dramatic example of the transformative power of glass in the context of the Crystal Palace is revealed by the changing image of Hyde Park's elm trees during the Exhibition. There was a vast public outcry against cutting down any trees in Hyde Park to accommodate the Crystal Palace ('Albert spare those trees!' a *Punch* Cartoon begged in 1850[6]). The Crystal Palace's designer, Joseph Paxton, produced an admirably pragmatic solution; incorporating the trees in to the design of the building with a vast arched transept. The Crystal Palace was, after all, based on the design of a giant greenhouse. It became a telling example of how encasing an object in glass could transform its image.

Before the Crystal Palace, the elms of Hyde Park had a decidedly British and conservative symbolism, if the members of fashionable society who sauntered under their branches thought of the trees as having 'meaning' at all. Such trees were a feature of the British countryside and a little piece of pastoral in sooty London. Significantly, many contemporary images of the Crystal Palace, such as those in *Tallis's History and Description of the Crystal Palace*, suggest that it sat amid rolling hills and wooded countryside. However, the landscape that the groups of trees in Hyde Park most closely echoed was the park of a British country house. Furthermore, these elms in particular, had a political symbolism. They were part of Hyde Park's 'Rotten Row' of trees, a haunt of fashionable society, whose name was a corruption of 'Route de Roi', a route of the kings out of the city.

Enclosing one particular elm in glass at the centre of the Crystal Palace in the great transept however, focused attention on the 'meaning' of the tree in its new context. The elm's image as part of a pastoral idyll, with echoes of eighteenth-century classical design, was transmuted into being part of an exotic and profoundly 'other' visual spectacle. Newspapers vied with each other to describe and mythologise the scene of the centre of the Crystal Palace. *Sharpe's London Magazine* described it thus:

> Here are large and leafy European trees proudly extending their huge branches under the transparent roof; there a thicket of palms and bamboos which speak of the East, a giant crystal fountain whose limpid waters rise to an extraordinary height and sparkling in the sunshine descend noisily into the basin beneath ... In the first moment of amazement you behold at the same time, in the midst of these confused sounds, carpets from the East, arms from India, a European Park with its woods and rivulets and an innumerable army of equestrian statues around you. [7]

In this chaotic image, a plethora of symbols are co-opted to serve the myth of the Crystal Palace. Like all good mythical landscapes, this one transcended

3. Barthes, pp.123-4
4. Barthes, p.121
5. T. Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914* (London, New York: Verso, 1991), p.23
6. *Punch*, 19 (1850), p.10
7. *Sharpe's London Magazine*, 14 (1851), p.250

geographical boundaries and realities, with elms, palms and bamboo all occupying the same space. Outside, the elm had stood for British grandeur and a pastoral idyll, under glass it became disruptive of the categories both of the nationalist and the naturalist. This exotic image, the very incongruity of giant trees in an exhibition space, emphasised the uniqueness of the Crystal Palace. Yet even as its conjunction with palm and bamboo made it part of an exotic and ethereal image, the towering elm still represented the heights of European civilisation. The myths co-opted to serve the purposes of the Great Exhibition were European as well as those of the 'exotic' orient. The 'equestrian statues' alluded to classical culture, but also to the martial spirit of the Roman Empire; colonisation and culture.

Barthes always said that myth was a 'second order semiological system'[8], in which the complete meaning of the first system (the text, image or object) became the raw material of the second system (the myth itself). At the Crystal Palace, myth itself had that double structure. Myths of old empires and civilisations were all brought together to serve as the raw material for the myth of the new world order.

Myths and Maps: Navigating the Great Exhibition

The use of mythologies at the Great Exhibition hints at the difficulties organisers had in communicating their huge aims. While the organisers of the event used old mythologies to create a new one, the largely bemused general public was using them, literally and mentally, to navigate the Crystal Palace. Ultimately, practical constraints meant that the Exhibition was laid out not according to the processes of production as Prince Albert had hoped, but along national and imperial lines, with a second classification system for the different classes of goods. With Canada's stand next to that of Birmingham and leather goods, for example, the effect for the observer was chaos. Individual stands contained little information; even price tags had been banned. Collective sales of catalogues numbered in the tens of thousands compared to the millions who viewed the exhibition. We can assume, therefore, that the majority of visitors entered the Exhibition largely uninformed and were left to make sense of the visual spectacle as best they could.

In the absence of a logical explanation of the processes of production, mythology provided a comforting narrative for the middle and upper classes to navigate the exhibition. It is surely significant that the central aisle of the Great Exhibition was lined with mythological and historical statuary. The upper classes were quick to colonise this central area as the place to see and be seen, rather than look at the more industrial exhibits. There is something intensely symbolic about the image of fashionable society clinging to mythical statuary, understood, rather dimly by many, to be connected with power, culture and refinement, rather than attempting to grapple with the complexities of the modern world scattered across the vast building. It is true that a few pieces, such as Kiss's *Amazon*, represented new techniques in casting and metalwork. However, they and their subject matter might well be thought to be odd things to place so centrally in an exhibition dedicated to international industrial progress if one did not believe in the centrality of mythmaking to the process and ethos of the Great Exhibition. The central positioning of a statue of Victoria and Albert opposite that of Venus and Cupid at the Exhibition, for example, implicitly presents the royal couple as givers of world peace and love. The mythology of Venus and Cupid presents Venus as the personification of love and Cupid as the deliverer of it. The juxtaposition of statues at the centre of the Exhibition implies that Victoria is the figurehead of this event, and Albert (who was far more involved in the setting up of the Exhibition) is the active worker. Mythology is used not only to imply peace, love and bounteousness, but to explain the roles of monarch and consort, so complicated by Victorian gender roles.

Mythologizing the Empire

The Great Exhibition was a place where nationalism could be subsumed by myth. In *Mythologies*, Barthes deconstructs the image of an African man in French army uniform saluting under the French flag.

> [He]...who salutes is not a symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, *indisputable* image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperiality...[9]

The Great Exhibition saw a multitude of objects from other parts of the world co-opted into serving the myth of British colonial and industrial power. Nowhere is this clearer than in the *Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations*. The list of articles from

8. Barthes, p.114

9. Barthes, p.118

'Western Africa' tells a tale of appropriation of objects and meaning.

> 2) Messrs Foster and Smith: Zobes or cotton robes from Sierra Leone ... knife from Gambia, grass cloth from Sierra Leone, table mats from Gambia, leather pouch containing extracts from the Koran ... the glass obtained by melting European beads.
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> ...
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> 5) Trotter, Capt H D (RN): Various articles of African growth and manufacture, chiefly from ... places on the banks of the Niger between three and four hundred miles from its mouth... From Samia Aduga, raw silk, can be had in ... the Haussa country ... Lime, material made of bones turned in to ashes, mixed with water and dried in the sun, used by those who spin thread to keep their fingers dry.[10]

Within the text there is a terrible irony in the care taken to state the European owners of the objects and an eloquent silence about their previous owners. Within these descriptions there is at least a vivid sense of another mode of life, of sophistication and ingenuity. But very few visitors to the Exhibition would have seen a catalogue. The version quoted above did not even come out until August of 1851, when the show had been running since May. Within the context of the Great Exhibition, these objects tell another tale entirely. The table mats from Gambia, as objects, reflect life in Gambia. Their construal as a British myth explains why emphasis is put on the quite precise geographical locations and not on the original owners. They serve to prove the ability of the British to get anywhere, procure anything and bring it back in triumph to reflect British power and glory. Denuded of its everyday context of use, it becomes, within the exhibition, insignificant. That very insignificance demonstrates the omnipotence and omnipresence of the British who can obtain it.

The stand of Indian exhibits was similarly used. As the *Illustrated London Exhibitor* put it: 'India, the Glorious, glowing land, the gorgeous and the beautiful; India the golden prize contended for by Alexander of old.'[11] The image presented of India, particularly of the fantastic Koh-i-Noor diamond, then the largest in the world, was of a civilisation that had a sophisticated culture but which was weak: 'a prize' for the taking. The jewels in a Sikh chief's coat, for example, were both admired for their beauty and mocked for their effeminacy.[12] India was always 'the jewel in the crown' of Britain's empire, but the ruthlessness with which her civilisation was relegated to the picturesque and exotic represented something important about the nature of myth itself as well as colonialism. Once enclosed in the glass of the Crystal Palace for exhibition, the meanings of objects within their original culture and context became redundant. Their function was to demonstrate the power and ingenuity of Britain for bringing them there. If other countries and other cultures could be relegated to the realm of myth and exoticism, then the realm of the practical, the industrial, the political, could be left for Britain to bustle in.

The context of the Crystal Palace, the fantastic elements and the centrality of classical statuary in particular, created a structure within which the myths and fragments of old empires glorified the new. The vast chaos of the Exhibition, stemming from its confusing layout, its complex classification system and its aesthetic of fantasy, rendered the objects within it less representatives of other cultures than fragments of them. Hats, knives, steam engines and statues mixed together became shorn of their individual cultural identities in this glass forcing house of British cultural and imperial identity. However unusual, interesting or beautiful the exhibits were, their main message was that the British had caused them to be placed there. They became contributions to the myth of British industrial and imperial omnipotence.

10. *Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, Third Corrected and Improved Edition, 1st August 1851* (London: Spicer Brothers, 1851), p.166

11. The *Illustrated Exhibitor* quoted in L. Kriegle, 'Narrating the Subcontinent in 1851: India at the Crystal Palace', pp.146-170 in L. Purbrick (ed), *The Great Exhibition: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p.146

12. 'All this lavishing of wealth upon mere articles of dress, upon that of a soldier too, strikes us as a notable instance of "wasteful and ridiculous excess."' *Tallis's History and Description of the Crystal Palace*, 3 vols. (London: John Tallis and Co., 1851), p.31

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