

Culture



Michael AMES, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991; 230 pages, \$39.95 (hardback)

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Michael AMES, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991; 230 pages, \$39.95 (hardback).

By Christopher Anderson
South Australian Museum

Following their origin in the nineteenth century as proud temples of the pursuit of knowledge and the conquered object, museums now have to maintain their existence in a present of McDonald's and high-tech worlds' fairs. They have trouble competing with the commercialism of contemporary entertainment and computer- and video-based learning. Museums can no longer even bring out treasured collections of the remains of ancient civilizations and exotic cultures without criticisms of cultural genocide and hegemonic representation.

Despite their relative recency in history, museums have a solidity and naturalness as institutions in western urban culture. Most people take museums as given. One goes to museums as one goes to school; museums are as much a part of normal city life as libraries and churches. Indeed, astonishing figures are often cited for the number of people who visit museums.

The days of museums as we know them, however, seem numbered. In this set of short, sharp and disturbing essays by Michael Ames, we feel the full impact of an institution in crisis. It is a crisis which Ames extends to anthropology itself. He questions nothing less than the basis of the endeavor itself: are museums and anthropology relevant any more? Are they morally defensible? If so, how well do they do what they say they do? Can they be sustained in their present form?

Museums, especially before the general availability of television, have always given the West its most detailed and vivid images of other cultures. Museums have defined the 'Indian', the 'Aborigine' and other native peoples. It is this very definition and the process of defining through anthropology that is now causing the problem. The 'Other' is here, part of 'Us', learning about its own history, including the huge collections of the material culture from that history held in museums. The 'Other' is now reading and viewing the representations of themselves done by 'Us' and not much liking it. Ames argues that museums can no longer sustain themselves with the

glass-cased 'Other' and the gaping 'Us'. He asks who is audience and who is subject matter? Can we represent other cultures? For whom are we keeping these collections and for what purpose?

This book is a rewritten and expanded second edition of a book originally published in 1986 as *Museums, the Public and Anthropology* (Ranchi University Anthropology Series, New Delhi). It is "about relations between anthropology and the people it represents, particularly in museums" (p. ix). The book gets its new title from what Ames describes as the cannibalistic tendency of museums to drain the life force out of objects from other cultures and the repackaging of that force into glass cases for consumption by an all-observing, absorbing and dominating culture.

Ames argues that museums are feeling the pincer crush of 'democratization': on the one hand, an awakening 'Other' who no longer see museums as legitimate repositories of their cultural histories; and on the other hand, a non-acceptance by the society in which museums are embedded of the self-justifying importance of keeping collections and of the curator-as-god.

Ames describes and analyses the role of anthropology both in museums and more broadly in society. He looks at the difficulties for anthropologists working in increasingly bureaucratic institutions at a time when the public is seeking greater access and demanding more accountability. Tension is added by the requirements of a profession becoming at the same time more specialized in focus and more vague in objectives. Some of Ames' most challenging discussion is of how anthropologists create what they study and how, through description and analysis, they stereotype human cultural activity. Ames shows how native peoples reject the assumption of the non-problematic nature of anthropological observation and definition. Their resentment is not so much directed at the content of museums, but rather stems from the chagrin and humiliation of being defined by others. Although Ames is clearly defending the museum enterprise of collecting, preserving and exhibiting, he articulates the often bitter questions of indigenous peoples asking why and for whom this enterprise is being carried out.

Ames' book is a very worrying one for those who think that museums still have an important role to play in a society that is rapidly turning its back on history and losing sight of the possibility and legiti-

macy of other ways of life. The questions and criticisms he raises certainly need to be aired. I just wish there were more answers. In the debate on the future of museums, we run the real risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water. It seems clear, certainly in North America and Australia at least, that while being sharply critical of museums past and present, indigenous peoples are clamouring to gain control of collections and develop exhibitions and other similar programs themselves. In short, they want museums of their own. The implications of this are largely unexplored, both in this book and in the museum profession in general. Whether museums have any future at all may in part be determined by how we handle the necessary shifts in perspective and the blurring of the categories of 'Us' and 'Them' which this requires.

Alexander WILSON, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991; 335 pages. \$24.95 (paper).

By David Whitson
University of Alberta

Frederic Jameson, on the dust jacket, calls this "a beautiful book about ugliness." It is an accurate phrase to describe this compellingly written and aptly illustrated series of essays on tourism and recreation, national parks and zoos, world's fairs and theme parks, suburban landscapes and gardens, nature films and television programming, and the changing discourses of environmental education and advertising. The threads that knit together the author's reflections on these apparently disparate topics, several of which have developed out of earlier articles in journals like *Massachusetts Review* and *Border/Lines*, seek to make conceptual connections between postwar transformations in the North American landscape, changes which have made many kinds of ugliness now so familiar as to seem unremarkable, and successive mutations in our dominant ways of thinking and talking about nature. In Wilson's view, the environmental crisis is also a crisis of culture which reveals itself in our cottage country and our atrium malls as well as in the languages we have developed for "recreation resource management" and tourist promotion. Indeed for Wilson, "The war at Oka was in part a war over

the meaning of the earth. The earth as home or habitat, as resource, as refuge and inspiration . . . as laboratory, as playground" (p. 12).

Two of the most novel and interesting essays explore the ripple effects of socioeconomic developments which have meant that most of us now encounter nature primarily in our leisure. The consumer affluence and the new mobility that were part and parcel of the postwar boom produced, among other things, apparently insatiable demands for new kinds of leisure spaces, as well as for greater accessibility (in every sense) to established forms of recreation. The outcome has been the creation of many new public parks (national and, especially, provincial and state parks) and the transformation of many more rural regions — in the Maritime provinces, in the Ottawa Valley and Collingwood regions of Ontario, in the Okanagan — into holiday home economies. Ski hills and golf courses have burgeoned, both as leisure industries in their own right and as the magnets for up-market property developments. Farms have developed new sources of income as dude ranches or bed-and-breakfast operations, while resource towns like Telluride and Kimberley have sought to reposition themselves as recreational destinations. All of these, for Wilson, are instances of the multiple ways in which rural spaces have become appended to urban culture and integrated into a post-modern service economy. However it is not only the economic transformations that are significant here, or even the environmental effects of shifts from resource extractive industries into tourism. It is equally important, Wilson insists, that we understand the cultural effects of these and other developments — most ubiquitously of all, perhaps, pleasure driving and 'sightseeing' — that collectively construct nature for us as entertainment and as scenery.

An endemic tension between the projects of education and entertainment is brought into sharper relief in subsequent essays on nature movies and television, and theme parks and world's fairs. The first of these offers an interesting reprise of the ideologies and technical virtuosity that informed early Disney movies as well as the Cousteau films and other National Geographic and Time/Life productions. All these films pretended to realism; but they presented reality in attractive packages featuring majestic predators and cuddly fawns. They also relied heavily on action narratives and anthropomorphism, to 'bring nature to life'. How do you film