From Ethos to Mythos: The Becoming Mythical of History

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In the Chaos and Order Courtyard of Berlin’s Neues Museum, reverberating amongst the pale figures of Hermann Schievelbein’s (1817-1867) monumental narrative frieze depicting the destruction of Pompeii, is a whisper: to the sea or to the museum. Fleeing from the erupting Mount Vesuvius, incarnated in the frieze by a voracious and all-powerful face, the Pompeiians are chased in two directions: either to the sea or to the museum, to temporary safety or to symbolic, collective immortality. Both paths lead to a sort of survival. Both paths tread the line between history and myth because, while the 79 AD eruption of Mount Vesuvius is a historical event, it can also be argued that this event has mythological resonance in that it shares space in the representational pantheon with Poseidon and Mnemosyne.

Lending the Vesuvius eruption mythological status provokes little controversy. However, what happens when the historical events in question are in close proximity? The narratives of our history, our destructions (both natural and man made) will no doubt one day be looked on as we look on events in Herodotus. But what does it mean when, several generations removed, history feels mythological, not in the sense that it is untrue, but rather in the sense that it is monumental, fragmented, and overarching?

“From Ethos to Mythos” explores the becoming mythical of history, specifically in the context of 20\textsuperscript{th} century Germany. It offers the concept of mythological history as a structuring narrative response to the call to reconstruct conceptions of the shattered and fragmentary past and as an attempt to look for unity amidst the shards and the multiple.\footnote{See Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, \textit{Shattered Past, Reconstructing German Histories}, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 16, 60, 253.} Mythological history is a concept that is both a narrative pathway to the past as well as a way of characterising historical events. It is situated within the dialectic between cultural and collective memory, in other words, between the idea of a unified narrative and the collection of fragments. In such a conception, the historical event is itself a simultaneously universal and particular ethos: we all breathe the same air but every individual’s lungs process oxygen in their own way. I will argue that mythological history is one possible way of characterising this unified plurality. Not only does the concept hinge on the notion of the representation of the past, it also relates to how we inherit it.

In order to establish the becoming mythical of history and the concept of mythological history, I will seek to define it in both abstract and empirical terms. The theoretical section of the paper both invokes concepts from the historical materialist tradition (largely Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin’s work), and relies on texts from the growing field of Memory Studies (most notably Jan and Aleida Assmann’s work on cultural memory). The empirical section examines
these concepts in relation to the German 20th century. I ground my argument in Berlin, a city where the traces of the 20th century continue to fester. I will specifically examine how the museum, the site of national and personal self-mythologising, incorporates mythological history. To this end, I will offer a study of three post reunification museums: The Neues Museum, The Jewish Museum, and The Humboldt-Forum.

Given the specific scope of this project and my intention to work on the establishment of theoretical apparatus with which to parse the presence of the past, I cannot delve into detail about the specific historical events of the German 20th century. Furthermore, while I will rely upon several texts in museum studies, my intention is to read the space of the museums in question phenomenologically. My paper proceeds in the following manner: I will first outline the idea of mythological history by recovering key concepts from mythology aided by historical materialism and cultural memory studies; next, after briefly discussing the role of the museum and Berlin in the process of myth making, I will perform a reading of the three museum spaces in question, in order to ascertain how their narratives express mythological history and what this implies.

I. Mythological History

While 20th century thinking saw a problematisation and de-canonisation of both historicism and linear conceptions of temporality, mythology, as a means though which the presence of the past is conceived, received no such revitalisation. Since the Enlightenment, myth, as the symbolic account for why things are as they are, has fallen out of favour. Myth was variously considered to be superstition, the counterpoint to both reason and history, uncritical commonly accepted opinion, propaganda, and a regression to pre-scientific ways of thinking. Representing the historical past in mythic terms was tantamount to denying its legitimacy, or the all-out manipulation of its content for nefarious purpose. However, as Astrid Erll suggests in the introduction to her book Companion to Cultural Memory Studies, mythology is one amongst the multiple narrative pathways through which the past can be accessed:

[...] A war, for example, can be remembered as a mythic event (‘the war as apocalypse’), as part of a political history (The First World War as ‘the great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century’), as a traumatic experience (‘the horror of the trenches, the shells, the

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2 Following Webber, I consider Berlin to be the capital of the 20th century, echoing Benjamin’s conception of Paris as the capital of the 19th century. See Andrew J. Webber, Berlin in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Topography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

3 For a good discussion of this see Stéphane Mosès, L’ange de l’histoire, Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem, (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

4 For example, on how Nazis appropriated myth see David Pan, “Revising the Dialectic of Enlightenment: Alfred Baeumler and the Nazi Appropriation of Myth,” New German Critique, 84 (2001): 3-52.
barrage of gunfire,' etc.), as a part of family history (‘the war my great-uncle served in’), as a focus of bitter contestation (‘the war which was waged by the old generation, by the fascists, by men’). Myth, religious memory, political history, trauma, family remembrance, or generational memory are different modes of referring to the past.  

Conceiving of myth and history as complementary narrative pathways is one way to break down the staunch barrier between myth and history. Any attempt to conceive of the becoming mythical of history starts with the acknowledgement of these narrative and representational pathways.

However, the notion of complementary pathways (historical and mythological) to a historical event, does not account for the becoming mythical of history. In order to investigate this becoming mythical, myth and history need to be related in a way that is not mutually exclusive. As such, I will first examine the idea of history’s becoming mythical as a form of transcendence, and second look closely at the structures of mythology that manifest in our representation of history. This will allow for the formalisation of the mythological history concept. By blurring the firm line between history and myth, as well as showing how the historical event can be considered to be mythological, we will see how the ethos of a particular moment becomes the mythos of the next.

History becomes myth when it transcends its incarnated position of immanence and fixes itself in what seem like constellations in the collective imaginary. Like a great work of art, great historical moments continue to be relevant and culturally formative long past their conception and original contexts. This is the reason why I will argue that historical events, particularly when their ramifications are profound and prolonged, become mythology. This mythological history marks defining moments and could give a particular culture a new charter or, as Kant would have it, *categorical imperative*.  The new *categorical imperative* is the first part of the definition of the becoming mythical of history, or mythological history.

That the historical event may be represented in a mythological manner implies that the boundary between myth and history is not impervious. Even if the cycles of mythological temporality were juxtaposed with the notion of the historical horizon until the 20th century, there is precedence for a sort of third way between myth and history. From the Parmenidian third path, neither of being nor non-being, but rather the way of becoming; through the intersection in the cross where transcendence meets immanence in the earthly-heavenly, mortal-immortal incarnation of the divine; and more recently, to Arendt’s characterisation of the human condition as the rectilinear mortal path cutting through the concentric

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circles of immortal nature, humans have always found ways of anchoring their way of being by intersecting their mortal experience with something both fixed and transcendent. We could say that these intersections are moments when history transcends its immanent context and becomes mythological: these are the moments of the new categorical imperative.

At the intersection where the new categorical imperative is formed, history is already myth and myth is already history in a manner analogous to Horkheimer and Adorno’s formulation in the Dialectic of Enlightenment: “[…] myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology […].” Derived from this formulation, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the grossest atrocities of modernity are not in fact anti-reason, but rather they are the ultimate expression of its instrumentality. Remaining in the rubric of the analogy, history is already myth because it expresses mythological qualities. In his Mythistory, Joseph Mali suggests that since Herodotus, there has always been a sort of hybrid entity between myth and history. He writes that a myth is “[…] a story that has passed into and become history”. For Mali, the task of the artist or human scientist is to engage with these stories and myths by identifying them and rendering them obvious. Mali’s work is just part of an unbroken line of discourse that puts myth and history on a continuum. While Mali demonstrates that myth and history are not polar opposites and can operate within the same field of thought, the idea of the becoming mythical of history works in an opposite direction. Rather than mythological stories implicating themselves in history, mythological history is when history coalesces into myth.

Putting the new categorical imperative in context leads to the ideas of identity and nation-building. In outlining the notion of canon as the pluralistic inheritance of cultural memory, Assmann suggests that there are two sorts of

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9 See Bernstein: “[…] at least part of the intelligibility of Auschwitz is that it is utterly continuous with, fulfills and exemplifies the destruction of individuality and particularly that the disenchantment of the world and the rationalisation of reason have been preparing from the beginning of the modern epoch.” Jay M. Bernstein, Adorno, Disenchantment and Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 371-415. Also see Buck-Morss, Origin of Negative Dialectics, 59.
11 Mali states that unlike the artist and other thinkers in the humanities, historians tend to eschew the ‘mythological method.’ Mali, 13, 26.
12 Mali cites Wittgenstein’s notion whereby myth is not to be conceived of as an explanation for particular worldly phenomena, but rather an expression and representation of how it is perceived by people. Mali, 22.
13 Please note that in using the word identity in this context, I am not referring to the identity/non-identity thinking in Adorno or other critical theorists. I am, rather, referring to a particular current in Cultural Memory Studies.
myth: the lie and myth as identity. Both have the capacity to serve foundational, nation-building purposes.

Das Wort 'Mythos' hat eine doppelte Bedeutung [...] Mythos ist die Manifestation einer Lüge und eines falschen Bewusstseins, die durch die Wahrheit der Historie dekonstruiert und ad acta gelegt werden [...] Es kann auch die Form bedeuten, in der Geschichte, mit den Augen der Identität' gesehen wird; in dieser Variante bedeutet Mythos die *affektive Aneignung* der eigenen Geschichte. Mythos in diesem Sinne ist eine fundierende Geschichte, die nicht durch Historisierung vergeht, sondern mit einer andauernden Bedeutung ausgestattet wird, die die Vergangenheit in der Gegenwart einer Gesellschaft präsent hält und ihr eine Orientierungskraft für die Zukunft abgewinnt.¹⁴

This *Mythos* forms part of what Assmann calls cultural memory.¹⁵ For Assmann, when history becomes myth and serves as this foundational new categorical imperative, two possibilities emerge: either the foundation is a lie or it is a form of affective appropriation. In a sense, the process described by Assmann is the inverse of that which occurs in Mali’s *mythistory*. For Assmann, history becomes myth rather than myth working itself out through history. She gives the example of Shakespeare’s histories forming part of the English national identity, not so much in the way they accurately portray history, but rather in how history is swept up in the imagery of the plays.¹⁶ However, both the lie and the myth as identity play into a notion of the myth as fabrication. While this fits in with the premise outlined by Erll, whereby mythology is a pathway to the past amongst many such narrative pathways, it does not adequately debunk the notion that myth is always somewhat untrue and needs to be countered by a more truth-seeking kind of narrative.¹⁷ From Assmann’s conception we can glean that there is a continuum between history and myth that involves the transcendence of the historical moment via cultural appropriation.

The idea that I am proposing, mythological history, differs from both Mali’s conception and challenges Assmann’s approach. Siding with Assmann over Mali, I argue that the historical event becomes myth rather than myth unfurling in history. However, unlike Assmann, I argue that the becoming mythical of the

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¹⁵ For Jan Assmann, cultural memory is a sort of worldview. He suggests that the ability to derive a *personal self* and *meaningful biography* stems from this *worldview*. Assmann defines cultural memory as the interplay between the individual subject and the universality of the accumulated social knowledge. He writes: “Collective and individual identity, society and self, cultural and individual memory, the social origin and individuation of consciousness and conscience mutually condition each other and form two sides of the same culturally objective and socially mediated knowledge.” Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. R. Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 38.
¹⁷ See note 5 above.
historical event is more than just its transcendence of an immanent context and location in the realm of cultural memory, though clearly this transcendence is of utmost importance. When I suggest that the historical ethos becomes mythos, I am suggesting we come into the presence of the historical event as though it was mythological. We inherit history as though it was mythology.

There are structural elements of mythology that, when they come to bear upon thinking about the past, challenge our conceptions of the various narrative pathways that represent the past. It is for this reason that I turn to the historical materialist tradition. While Hegel and Marx are clearly in the background, I am primarily drawing from the thinkers of the 20th century, as they work in a fragmentary time without recourse to an Absolute. It is in their disruptions of linear notions of temporality, and opening up the temporal space of presence (as seen in both art and theory) where I locate the becoming mythical of history. The structural elements I will investigate are: the simultaneity of mythical eternal return and fixity, as well as the importance of the image as fragment. I will then be able to examine how this takes place in the context of three major post reunification museums in Berlin.

Mythological temporality is characterised by a strange tension; on the one hand, this temporality represents that which is eternal and always the same, (das Immergleich). On the other hand, the myth is often associated with the cycle of the eternal return. I will argue that there are elements of both the eternal return and eternal fixity that are present in 20th century conceptions of history. This is the mythological history’s first structural characteristic.

The 20th century saw a proliferation of conceptions of non-linear temporality. While Benjamin’s historical materialist Theses on the Philosophy of History including his Jetztzeit, the idea of a present “[…] in which time stands still and has come to a stop […]” or the present comprising “[…] the entire history of mankind […]”, best expresses the mythological character of history, he is not alone. Concepts and work ranging from Marcel Proust’s recovery of that which is lost to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s cogito as the lived body and its sedimentary nature, establish the idea that the past is never really past, but rather more of a presence. Nothing is ever truly lost to the body nor is it lost to the world: scars are ubiquitous. Merleau-Ponty writes that “[e]xistence always carries forward its past, whether it be by accepting or disclaiming it.” It is impossible to work through (Aufarbeitung) the past without excavating it from the point of view of the

20 Ibid, 262.
21 Ibid, 263.
22 For an examination of the relationship between Benjamin and Proust’s work and temporality see for instance Mosès, 152.
24 Ibid, 457.
Adorno puts forward a similar idea when he says that the past is alive and dwells in the unbroken objective conditions structuring our society. In all of these visions of temporality, the past is suspended in a state of presence, in other words the historical moment is frozen and fixed. The very nature of this frozenness implies the propensity to repeat. Other visions of temporality, Yeats' gyres for instance, signal a 20th century trend to perceive history as natural cycles.

What emerges is a conception of history whose temporal flux includes elements of the mythological. Whether the narrative is of the eternally returning cycle, or the seemingly eternally fixed ephemeral past that is itself constantly repeating, 20th century thinkers saw historical events represented in a manner that paralleled the structure of mythological events. While the 20th century liberated thinking about the historical event from its fettering linearity, it also mired us in the tension between seemingly eternally returning cycles of violence and the possibility for new beginnings.

The events of the German 20th century, whether one considers them to be a series of catastrophes or as one unending catastrophe, fulfil the mythological criteria in that they are both points of origin and the grounding of a circle of seeming eternal return to barbarism. Samuel Weber effectively characterises this tension as the Allemal (each/every time) of the historical event. He writes:

> The 'event' of an instant [...] suddenly breaks the continuum of progress, and [...] opens out onto a very different dynamic of space and place, time and instant, concretion and abstraction [...] In this allemal is congealed not merely the reification, hypostasis, and levelling that Adorno saw as the essence of the Culture Industry, but also, at the same time, allemal, a movement of repetition as alteration and transformation [...].

Perhaps in the same manner in which a myth is always one and the same as well as constantly renewing, history may be viewed as both Allemal and Immergleich,

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25 Merleau-Ponty cites Proust and states that the “cogito is perched on a pyramid of past life”, in Merleau-Ponty, 457. Parallels can be drawn to Andreas Huyssen, Present Pasts, Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). The city is as a papyrus scroll upon which history is written and re-written in the same manner as Merleau-Ponty’s lived body cogito.


28 That which Benjamin’s Angel of History perceives as “[...] one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage [...]”, we perceive as a seemingly unending series of catastrophes. Benjamin, Illuminations, 257


wherein the *Allemal* and the *Immergleich* constitute a form of dialectic: the historical event is both always new and always the same. As during the Passover Seder when every individual must look upon himself or herself as though they had been redeemed from Egypt, every individual comes into a history that is always already there and always made new. The dialectic between the *Allemal* and the *Immergleich* is the temporality of mythological history.

After having examined the temporality of mythological history, it is necessary to examine how it is encountered. I put forward that, like mythology, mythological history manifests in images. The image is the fragment, the remnant, and the particular where the universal is inhered. It is what is left of the historical event. Benjamin writes: “[w]hen an era crumbles, history breaks down into images, not into stories.” The images into which history breaks down are neither archaic symbols nor unchanging conventional archetypes. These images, dialectical images, are the frozen historical moments that become mythological in transcending their particular contexts. The historical moment and possible future interpretations converge in the present in order to forge the image. Benjamin writes that the “[…] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: Image is dialectics at a standstill.” Adorno describes this as: “[t]he life process itself ossify[ing] in the expression of the ever-same […].” When dialectics comes to a halt in the image, the *Allemal* and *Immergleich* come together. Mythological history’s dialectical images are where the historical past is both a fixed point as well as a moment subsumed in a recurring historical dynamic.

As the idea of mythological history differs from Mali’s *Mythistory* in that it represents the becoming mythical of history rather than the becoming historical of mythology, these dialectical images differ from the archaic images of traditional mythology because they are historical in nature. Both the deciphering and the making of these images fall within the domain of human history. Adorno, as quoted by Buck-Morss, writes: “[t]hese images are not simply self-given. They do not lie organically ready in history […] [T]hey are not magically sent by the gods.

31 The coming into an already existing is influenced by Heidegger's idea of *Dasein*'s *thrownness* and general temporality of the present that is given, the future that is at hand, and the past that is yet to come. Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* is perhaps the best example of breaking with conceptions of horizontal or linear time. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1962).


33 Benjamin called them dialectical images and Adorno called them historical images. While not identical concepts, Buck-Morss characterized them as *close fraternal twins* at origin. See Buck-Morss, *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 102-103. Buck-Morss gives an account of how the conception and production of these images created an intellectual rift between the two thinkers.


36 For example, the work of art, which, for Adorno, is the historical image of art *par excellence*, both contains a history, and is a historical image. It contains history in that is a *fait social* and it is a historical image in that it is an autonomous interpretive interface. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 225.
to be taken in and venerated. Rather, they must be produced by human beings [...]”.

37 These human-made images are the building blocks of the narrative language that forms a pathway to the past. 38 Buck-Morss refers to these images as “[...] a code language, ‘ciphers’ of socio-historical truth, whose translation into the conceptual language of Marx and Freud provided their interpretation, [...] [and] mak[es] it possible to ‘transform’ them into a readable text.”

39 The piecing together of these images to form a text gives historical moments a form of transcendence in a manner analogous to traditional myths immortalising an eternal truth. However, in the aftermath of catastrophe, for example the events of the German 20th century, the historical constellation is constituted of damaged fragments as opposed to the totality of grand narrative and mythological epics. 40 As opposed to the stars coming down to earth 41 to give us an account for the way things are, as in the model of mythistory, all of the ambiguity and tension inherent in history rise to the stars. This results in the fragmentary constellations of mythological history.

42 The piecemeal nature of these constellations responds to the fractured nature of the past. For example, Adorno writes: “History is the unity of continuity and discontinuity. Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it.”

The lines drawn around dialectical images forging the historical constellations of mythological history offer a pluralistic but unified narrative of history. As such, these constellations also reflect the idea of the intersection between cultural and collective memory. In their need to be created and interpreted, these fragmentary constellations cause us to ask questions about history and nature. They do not oblige us to live under the domination of normative explanations. In order to see an example of this, I will turn to an examination of three museums in Berlin and give a reading of the narratives to be found therein.

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37 Buck-Morss Origin of Negative Dialectics, 102-103.
38 Benjamin suggests that these images are often found in language. Benjamin, Arcades Project, 462.
40 Seen in this way, Adorno’s Minima Moralia could be seen as a work of mythological history.
41 The expression “stars down to earth” is the title of an essay in Theodor W. Adorno, The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture, ed. S. Crook (London: Routledge, 1994). The essay looks at the form and content of the Los Angeles Times’ astrology column. Adorno claims that the column plays to the weak ego’s feelings of narcissism, fear.
42 This notion is very similar to Adorno’s concept of Natural History which is “[t]he retransformation of concrete history into dialectical nature.” Adorno, “The Idea of Natural History,” in Robert Hullot-Kentor, Things Beyond Resemblance, Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 260. Natural history transfers the world of human experience to the stars. See Adorno in Things Beyond Resemblance, 266-267. Natural History is a sort of ‘second nature’ or history as nature paralleling Benjamin’s Urgeschichte. See Buck-Morss, Origin of Negative Dialectics, 106.
II. Mythological History and Three Berlin Museums

In this section I will deploy the concepts developed in the previous section of this article, the becoming mythical of history as the establishment of the historical constellation and the way in which we interact with it, in the examination of three Berlin museums.

Before discussing these three museums I need to devote a couple of words to explaining why I chose Berlin and the museum in order to explicate the becoming mythical of history. As previously mentioned, I side with Andrew Webber in his proclamation of Berlin as the capital of the 20th century. Not only are the events of the 20th century carved into the city like no other, but Berlin also seems to be aware of itself as a city of becoming rather than one that has been. Both Webber’s characterisation of Berlin as the ‘stone city,’ whose stones have been broken down, eroded, re-constituted into new stones, and turned into rubble mountains, thus evoking the idea of “sands of time,” and Huyssen’s description of Berlin’s urban landscape as a palimpsest, lend themselves to the temporality of mythological history. Berlin is the city where the Allemal meets the Immergleich.

Amongst the many possible ways of thinking the intersection of the Allemal and the Immergleich in the city of Berlin, the museum is an ideal place in which to read the dialectical images constituting the constellations of mythological history. The museum is a place where fragments are collected. While museums do have a collection and curators who establish particular narratives by arranging material from the collection, this narrative is not necessarily a master narrative. According to Susan Crane, there is always interplay between the collection and the re-collection in the minds of the visitor. This re-collection is the self-mythologising that museums facilitate. She writes:

We go to museums to learn about ourselves, to witness what has been identified as significant art or history or science, and to come away with a stronger sense of ourselves as implicated in a vast web of tradition and knowledge. At the end of the twentieth century, the average museum-goer may well ask, ‘Who decided which objects I may view here? Who has established this master narrative of meaning with which I am being presented?’ But I think it is far more likely that the individual museum-goer continues to go seeking to be impressed by the objects and meanings that [they] either expected to find, or is expecting to be initiated into.

44 See note 2 above.
45 “Berlin bleibt Berlin” and “Berlin Wird” are among the current city slogans. See Webber, 25.
46 Ibid, 25.
47 See Huyssen, 51-54.
49 Ibid, 2.
50 Ibid, 12.
The possibility for re-collection as the engagement with the past is the reason why the museum is a site where a plurality of narratives are spun into mythological history’s constellations: the museum houses a meeting of cultural and collective memory. The individual is connected to the ethos of history by a process of self-mythologising.

I will now engage in a reading of three of Berlin’s post-reunification museums: The Neues Museum, The Jewish Museum, and The Humboldt-Forum. These three museums convey three very different sorts of German self-mythologising.

The Abuse and Misuse of Mythological History: The Jewish Museum and Humboldt-Forum

Both Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum and Frank Stella’s Humboldt-Forum engage in problematic mythologising of history. On the one hand, The Jewish Museum’s narrative neither brings the myths down to earth nor the earth to the heavens. Rather, it returns to the pre-20th century vision of history as a linear narrative. Mythologised in this fashion, history comes to incarnate a variation of mythical necessity. On the other hand, by its active presentation of the vision of the eternal return of the same, The Humboldt Forum gives the sense of constructing a mythology that is detached from history. In both instances, the becoming mythical of history is an artificial rendering as opposed to an organic becoming.

Though purporting to be a space of voids, Libeskind’s Jewish Museum is filled with normative visions and renderings of history. The deconstructivist architecture imposes domineeringly upon the simplistic and almost childish seeming permanent collection. Analogously, a marked path of red arrows leads the visitor through the museum in a unidirectional, univocal, and unequivocal way as if to say: here is the one red path through history, thus implying here is the one red path upon which to interpret history. When history is mythologised in such a normative and prescriptive fashion, it becomes absolute. This absolutist vision reduces history to caricature and invokes the idea of mythological necessity: there only was this one red path through history, it couldn’t have happened any other way.

To give another example, the supposed three axes of Continuity (to the exhibition), of Emigration/Exile (to the garden from which there is no escape), and of the Holocaust (to the tower/dead end) all lead to the same place: Jewish German history, as narrated in the museum, is telescoped through the Holocaust. If one wants to leave the museum one must proceed from the crisis of the 20th

51 It must be noted that at the time of writing construction on the Humboldt-Forum is on hold, and is scheduled to resume in the spring of 2011 (at the earliest).
52 See chapter “Voids of Berlin,” in Huyssen, Present Pasts.
53 By way of contrast see Peter Eisenmann’s monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe. The monument is a series of pathways which form no ‘right’ way and have no fixed meaning.
century through the exhibition that ploddingly leads from the beginnings of the German Jewish experience to that same crisis point. Drained of its dynamic, flattened into an archetypal and necessary narrative, this rendering mythological of history offers answers and solutions in a manner similar to traditional mythology, rather than asking questions. If there are no questions to be asked and there was no other path to take, then what is the point of continuing to try to do better?

If the Jewish Museum is the becoming normative of history, then the Humboldt-Forum turns history into a fable; in other words the history turned mythology fabricated as the constellation of the Humboldt-Forum is just that – fabricated. The proposed structure is fraught with problematic symbolism. It is a re-building of the façade of the original Hohenzollern Berliner Stadtschloß, masking the hyper-contemporary interior, housing an “international forum of art, culture and science” on the grounds of the GDR Palast der Republik, which was, in turn, built upon the ruins of the original Stadtschloß. While the Jewish Museum attempts to portray the Holocaust as an absolute rupture in German history, the Humboldt-Forum does the complete opposite with the traces of the 20th century: it attempts to cover them up. By creating an illusory old façade and a polished contemporary interior, the museum’s architecture presents a historical continuity glossing over the problematic and fractious German 20th century but also reflects the ambiguity and tension relative to its representation. Far from being a unity of continuity and discontinuity, the constellation presented by the museum is not only false, it is unstable; the re-construction of the Stadtschloß can almost be described as the attempted anti-palimpsest.

While the Jewish Museum’s narrative takes what is most dangerous about mythology, the notion of fateful necessity, and brings it into history, the Humboldt Forum’s narrative does function like mythological history by bringing history into the realm of the mythical. However, I suggest that even though the Allemal and Immergleich of destruction, violence, and rebuilding converge in the project, its narrative of mythological history is more akin to the myth as lie to be debunked than myth as the collection of dialectical images. In concluding these first two readings, the Jewish Museum makes a normative vision out of the historical constellation, while the Humboldt-Forum constitutes itself as merely another star in barbarism’s constellation.

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56 See for example “To rekindle a distant memory, like the reconstruction of Berlin’s Schloss, will ultimately not mend a brutal rupture in the city.” Rik Nys, “The Treachery of the Fake,” in Neues Museum Berlin, ed. Rik Nys and Martin Reichert (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2009), 150-151.
57 Ladd suggests that underpinning the debates on architecture and form are fundamental tensions regarding questions or identity, memory, nostalgia, and nationalism. Brian Ladd, The Ghosts of Berlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 66.
58 See note 43 above.
Bullet Hole Constellations: Mythological History and The Neues Museum

Unlike the Humboldt-Forum’s glossing over of Germany’s 20th century history by leaving no space between the false façade and its unrelated interior, David Chipperfield’s Neues Museum creates a space in which the palimpsest of 20th century Germany becomes the vantage point from which the narrative of human development is problematised. Moreover, unlike the Jewish Museum’s normative pathways through history and the interpretation of history, Chipperfield suspends the visitor in an in-between time through which they are bound to find their own path. In other words, the Neues Museum offers itself, both by its form and its content, as an interface upon which the visitor may contemplate both the historical constellations of the 20th century and general problematic notions of progress and continuity. I will first briefly describe this new architectural language and then show how it relates to the concept of mythological history that I have been establishing.

Consistent with the notion whereby “[...] history breaks down into images” 59 the new language of Chipperfield’s museum is one of fragments sewn together to form a complex interactive space. The museum’s language, both in terms of its form and in terms of its content, is one of dialectical images and fragments expressing the idea of mythological history. First, Chipperfield froze the ruins of the original 19th century structure. Then he recovered as much of the original material as possible and used this material in the building of a contemporary building. Finally he married these two together. 60 The effect is a unity of continuity and discontinuity. 61 In Chipperfield’s own words:

Our vision was not to make a memorial to destruction, nor to create a historical reproduction, but to protect and make sense of the extraordinary ruin and remains [as well as construct] a new building that neither celebrates nor hides its history but includes it. A new building that was made of fragments or parts of the old, but once again conspiring to a completeness. 62

The idea of a unity of continuity and discontinuity is also an aspiration to a fragmentary completeness and is incarnated in the language of the museum. While the destruction experienced by the city of Berlin in the 20th century may feel like a rupture of the historical continuum, it is in fact an expression of the simultaneous Allemal and Immergleich of unending catastrophe. The particularity of the Neues Museum’s architectural language is that it creates a space where the historical event is both frozen and a harbinger of new beginnings. It thus

59 See note 32 above.
60 The Neues Museum was extremely damaged by Allied bombs during the war. The museum was deemed beyond repair and would have been demolished had it not been essential for the stabilisation of the water table. As such, it was hastily fortified and left exposed to the elements for about sixty years.
61 See note 43.
grounds mythological history in the unity that is the tension between continuity and discontinuity.

The tension between continuity and discontinuity is also expressed in the museum’s exhibitions. First, continuity: The papyrus scrolls. There are several scrolls displayed in the museum on which a discussion of Platonic dialogues is written. The papyrus scroll is the original palimpsest, in that it is the scroll upon which text has been written and re-written. As with Huyssen’s notion of urban space as palimpsest, the scrolls show how all of these moments and writings are stacked one upon the other. An unbroken chain between Plato and the visitor via generations of engagement with the ideas written upon the scroll evokes an unbroken continuity.

Second discontinuity: Heinrich Schliemann, renowned 19th century German treasure hunter (or archaeologist) thought he had located Troy as the hill called Hissarlik. The archaeological site was multi-layered and Schliemann thought that Priam’s Troy and Priam’s treasure would be found at the bottom. The team dug and blasted their way through the upper layers. Later it was established that Priam’s Troy would have been at a shallower level. It is said that Schliemann blew up the time which he was seeking. In a sense, this anecdote conveys a rupture of the continuity of time by exploding the temporal palimpsest. Not only did Schliemann’s ‘blowing up of time’ cause an apparent rupture, the exhibition itself casts questions on continuity. In actuality, the museum houses replicas of what is called Priam’s Treasure, smuggled out of the Ottoman Empire by Schliemann. The originals are purported to be in Russia. The authenticity of the originals, whether they were or were not from the time of Priam’s Troy, is disputable. Even if the authenticity of the artifacts and their exact nature is murky, that they can still be woven into some sort of fragmented narrative is emblematic of the narrative of continuity of discontinuity museum found in the museum.

The exhibition permits a reading of both continuity and discontinuity. Suspending the two in the same space challenges the visitor to forge the unified narrative. In both the case of the papyrus scrolls and of Priam’s Treasure the language of the museum is fragmentary. It is up to the visitor to connect the fragments together in their own interpretation of the images. It is the possibility to interpret, to re-collect in the mind of the visitor, that allows for the plurality of constellations of mythological history to be formed. These constellations are not normative, like those of The Jewish Museum, nor do they attempt to obfuscate history like those of the Humboldt Forum. The constellations of The Neues Museum express questions rather than providing answers.

Conclusion

The main question posed by the Neues Museum is the question of progress. While originally built during the heyday of Enlightenment faith in reason, science,

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63 Related to this is Benjamin’s idea that the work of art contains the sedimentation of the traces of the eyes of the viewers. See Adorno’s discussion of this in Aesthetic Theory, 193.

64 See note 48 above.
and progress, the events of the 20th century have rendered faith in reason, science, and progress problematic. Reading between the museum’s artifacts, the visitor cannot help but gauge a narrative of progress. One moment ‘we’ made tools. The next we made better tools. At one point we started decorating them. The slow development of and progress in technological and aesthetic consciousness is undeniable. However, turning around, the visitor is struck by the redolence of bullet holes in the wall. While there might be progress in terms of technology, the very progress being depicted in the exhibition is ultimately responsible for the scars in the architecture. As was the case with Pompeii, the very historical event that destroys, preserves. It was the historical events of the 20th century that destroyed the museum and from which the new museum has emerged. Progress has brought us both catastrophe and a variation of mythological immortality, thus recalling the lingering whisper: to the sea or to the museum.

For me, the bullet hole constellations in The Neues Museum are the perfect embodiment of the idea of mythological history. Attempting to decipher these constellations involves a sort of philosophical archaeology as it attempts to re-establish the truth of a particular moment, but also uses the light of these stars in order to establish the truth about now. Unlike the traditional archetypes/ideas frozen in the heavens such as Odysseus and Orion, our heroes are shoe salesmen, human and flawed in a sad and beautiful rather than a tragic manner. Our truths are contingent. Our villains are not thunderbolt-lobbing jealous immortals, rather, they are the anonymous heads of banal institutions and faceless perpetrators of violence. Whereas the face of Pompeii’s petrifying demise was the volcano god, if we are to be chased to the sea or to the museum, it is by the efficient cogs in the socio-political machinery.

As the ethos of the historical moment becomes the mythos of mythological history, and we draw lines between the bullet holes in The Neues Museum’s walls to form our pluralistic, unified narratives and constellations, we must ask the following questions: does the eloquent and fragmentary language of the museum close the circle of eternal return? What about the literal and metaphorical unexploded bombs that lie in wait under the city? In spite of all of its efforts and thoughtfulness, is the return to barbarism lurking somewhere amidst the museum’s frozen ruins, biding its time, waiting for its next incarnation?

Schuster writes: “A temple of memory has emerged out of what was once the temple of a progressive faith in history […] The resplendently colourful optimistic faith in progress […] [in] history as the best of all possible worlds – turns into sheer mockery in the face of the staircase gutted by bombs […]” Peter-Klaus Schuster, “A Temple of Memory – On David Chipperfield’s Neues Museum,” in Nys and Reichert, 183.

According to Ladd there are 15000 unexploded bombs buried in Berlin. Ladd, 175.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


