Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory/Revue canadienne de théorie politique et sociale, Volume XIII, no. 3 1989

DISCO TUT: POSTMODERN EXHIBITIONISM

Robyn Gillam

Between 1976 and 1980 North America experienced a recrudescence of interest in the art and culture of Ancient Egypt. Although such episodes are not unprecedented in recent times, nothing could parallel the range of consumer products, publications, and events that proliferated during this period. As noted by the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, by late 1979 every feature of daily existence had been included by such paraphernalia.[1] Yet, while the object of this celebration resided in a travelling art exhibit that visited Toronto as well as a half dozen American cities, Tut'ankhamen, himself, was an extremely remote figure, dead three thousand years, still lying in his tomb in the desert hills of southern Egypt. Who was "King Tut" and why did North America seek to saturate its marketing space with his image? This paper tries to answer these questions and show how these activities fit into a postmodern "sign-scape" of the type described by Baudrillard and Jameson.

1

In those tales of the genesis of Ancient Egyptian kings that survive, the ritual of naming invariably coincides with the moment of birth. Attempting to hasten the child's deliverance from the womb, the mother or midwife spontaneously utters the name by which the offspring will later be known.[2] [He is] the living image of the Sun!"–Tut'ankhaten[3]–is the exclamation that is thought to have greeted our protagonist on his entry into the world.

If his name seems inoffensive to modern ears, it did not sound that way to the Egyptians of the late fourteenth century B.C. Although the word "aten" does indeed denote the physical manifestation of the sun as it appears in the heavens,[4] its connotations in the years immediately prior to Tut'ankhamen's accession were far more complex. For a period of almost two decades, his predecessor, who called himself Akhenaten ("Useful for Aten"), had tried to completely remold the religious beliefs of his people in honor of a god he called by this name. He first went about this by attacking the tutelary god of his own ruling house, Amen of Thebes. It was under the aegis of Amen that Akhenaten's ancestors had rid Egypt of foreign rulers two centuries earlier and had gone on to conquer most of Syria-Palestine. They expressed their gratitude by making his temple the richest and most splendid in the known world and his priesthood the most powerful in Egypt. The family further honored him by naming many of its sons Amenhotep ("Amen is content"). Akhenaten was the fourth king of the line to bear this name and his repudiation of it was his first act of rebellion. Later he not only founded a new capital city but actually began a campaign to have the name of Amen expunged from the written record. Everywhere it was hacked from stone and erased from papyrus. Later not only the names of other gods, but even the plural of the word for "god" itself was attacked. There was no god but Aten and Akhenaten was not only his prophet but his son. The king sought to augment his already semi-divine status by making himself the sole intermediary between the world and its creator. The new god was depicted in the form of the sun as it appears in the heavens. The only concession to anthropomorphism in this image was that the rays of the sun ended in tiny hands which held the sign of life. It is only the king and his family who are depicted as receiving this gift. Indeed, in the funerary art of this period, the images of the ancient gods are not replaced by the image of the sun but by that of the king. Such a severe and iconoclastic heterodoxy, however, proved to be both too authoritarian and difficult to grasp for the people of Egypt, and this so-called religious revolution died with its creator. Although his name marks him as one of Akhenaten's circle, Tut'ankhaten soon changed it to Tut'ankhamen. During his short reign of about nine years, he presided over the reinstatement of the old dynastic god Amen of Thebes as well as the rest of the traditional Egyptian pantheon. Tut'ankhamen sought to change the image of the god that formed his name. By so doing, he not only hoped to change his image politically but to alter his own essence.[5] Once this had been achieved, his name and good reputation would endure forever, for the Egyptians believed that to speak the name of the dead was to make them live again and that their other-worldly existence would continue for as long as they were remembered.[6] The young king's successors had other ideas however. These were the rulers, who had usurped the throne and tried to legitimize themselves by substituting their own names for those of Akhenaten and his immediate followers in the king lists. To this end

they usurped the monuments and hacked out their names and images where convenient. They may even have destroyed the body of Akhenaten (whom they referred to as "the great criminal"), thus according to their beliefs, completely annihilating him. With the others of his house, they were not so thorough. If the cult of another king was celebrated in his funerary temple and his name forgotten, so was his burial place. But here Tut'ankhamen slept for over three thousand years, awaiting a resurrection of both body and name, strange beyond the imaginings of himself or his detractors.

2

In Egyptian, the word "tut" meant image, figure, statue, or likeness. By an adjectival extension of meaning, it could also be used to denote "like" or "like to."[7] Up until the sixteenth century, a similar range of meanings is found for "image" in English. It came via the French *image* from the Latin *imago*, itself derived from *imitari*–to imitate, copy, portray, or ape.[8] From the sixteenth century onwards, additional meanings are found for "image." They include: something that represents or is taken to represent an object (like a symbol or an emblem); a thing which exhibits a particular quality, becoming its symbol; a vivid description of something; a simile, metaphor or figure of speech.[9] The idea of the symbol, or something that embodies a particular quality, is that which informs the use of this word in advertising and mass media. It can also be used in this context to connote perceived reputation.[10] Unfortunately, an etymology of "image" does not not always reveal the intention with which the word is being used. Is the image actually of something that exists, or not? Even in ancient languages a tension exists. (Note Latin *imaginari*, to imagine, with the same meaning as its modern counterparts.) The mind can devise things which have no physical existence, but are these figments more or less real than everyday experience? Today we would answer this question in the negative, but this has not always been the case. Platonism, for example, held that the material world was derived from an intellectual and ultimately spiritual realm of ideas. This viewpoint, which heavily influenced both Medieval and Renaissance Christianity, enjoyed great popularity until the seventeenth century. At this time, radical Protestantism had envisioned a transcendent God, leaving the world to the steady gaze of Empiricism and Rationalism. The creation of modern science and the rise of the capitalist economic system thus took place in a universe purged of ideas and essences.

While the biological sciences have reduced essence to a genetic code, structural linguistics has shown that the meaning of language, the primary medium through which humanity has engaged its world, is not only purely relative, but constantly shifting. De Saussure was able to show, through etymologies, that what is signified by a word may change in the course

of time in an arbitrary fashion. Indeed, all the terms in a language, grammatical and syntactical, as well as lexical, exist in a one-to-one relationship grounded in difference.[11] In Jacques Lacan's theory of the "floating signifier," the sign and its meaning are forever separated by language and experience.[12] Any disturbance in this chain of relationships entirely displaces meaning, reducing the subject to the condition of schizophrenia. One in such a condition is subjected to the direct materiality of the instant, unmediated by either significance or temporality. Such a process is observable even in some modernist works of art and literature, but it is more characteristic of the postmodern period.[13] Since the First World War, consumption has replaced work as the chief labor of Western society, and sustained effort has brought all classes (in North America and Europe, at least) into this scheme. A subtle manipulation of common social codes has generated a perpetual train of needs and wants whose circulation guarantees the perpetual growth of a system/code to fill every corner of existence.[14] It was Roland Barthes who first pointed out that the images used in advertising and other forms of mass culture have often had their referents arbitrarily changed and are not what they seem.[15]

This process has greatly accelerated since Barthes's first observations in the early fifties. The entire contents of history and culture (greatly augmented by the labors of academe) have been liberated of their putative meanings and set free as floating signifiers in search of advertsing copy. The *logos* has become a logo and everthing is a sign or image without an outside referent. Thus the Tut or "image" show, even if it occupied particular sites on specific dates in North America from 1976 to 1979, seemed timeless and all-pervasive. It became a seamless extension of our collective sensorium that constitutes the cultural and social environment of the postmodern age.

3

The discovery of Tut'ankhamen's tomb in 1922 by Howard Carter and George Herbert, the Earl of Carnarvon, constituted one of the first great media events of the twentieth century. It appears that from the very beginning the excavators realized how valuable a commodity it was and sought the most profitable contracts with newspapers, magazines, and motion picture companies. The documentation and removal of thousands of objects from the tomb were so skillfully stage-managed that public enthusiasm was maintained over a period of eight years.[16]

The widespread interest generated by this find must also be considered in its historical context. The discovery of Tut'ankhamen comes at the end of the golden age of archeology. This discipline had its origins in the Renaissance when humanist scholars and artists sought closer contact with their classical forerunners. This early period had culminated with the uncovering of Pompeii and Herculaneum at the end of the eighteenth century. Such ventures, based on the aesthetic and intellectual aspirations of the likes

of Goethe and Winklemann, had little in common with what followed.

Napoleon sought, through his invasion of Egypt in 1799, to capture that country not only physically but within a complete discursive framework. His army was accompanied by a host of scholars, artists, and cartographers who documented every aspect of Egypt, ancient or modern. The entire field of Egyptology as well as much of the history and sociology of the Middle East is based on their reports.[17] In a similar way, agents of the western powers, both in officially sanctioned forays and private expeditions, appropriated the remains of cultures from Asia Minor to the Far East. This enterprise, a forgotten aspect of the Western colonial push, can also be seen as an outgrowth of the historicist outlook. One cannot possess, let alone manipulate history, without its raw materials in one's possession. At first this activity was limited to the recovery of textual material, as well as the plundering of attractive or valuable objects. But by the late nineteenth century, simply pilfering treasures did not seem as interesting as studying them in accordance with the scientific method. As noted above, attempts at systematic excavation had already been attempted in Europe on remains of different periods and, by the end of the nineteenth century, various practitioners had tried these methods in the Middle East.[18] At this time, a larger literate public had arisen to take an interest in these proceedings. The newly educated working classes of Britain and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still counted the Bible as one of their main literary influences. The names of Egypt and Babylon and even some of their rulers were familiar to a public also steeped in the Classics.[19] This audience, although sensitive to the cultural significance of such discoveries, was still more interested in the idea of buried treasure than archeological niceties. If such a fascination strikes us as unsophisticated, it is only because we have been subjected to endless images of opulence from every period of history and past culture.

When Carter first discovered the tomb, it was obvious to both him and his patron, Herbert, that they did not have the resources to deal with a find of such magnitude. It so happened that the larger and better equipped expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of New York was excavating nearby. Carter asked them for assistance. Having sought and obtained permission from its superiors, the Metropolitan team was able to provide photographic and conservation facilities for the entire operation. As a result of this, the Metropolitan holds a considerable amount of material relating to the excavation, including a complete photographic record and substantial quantities of notes.[20]

Despite the tremendous publicity that it garnered and the interest thus generated in Egyptian archeology, the results of this project were not all advantageous to its directors. The discovery of the tomb coincided with the formation of the first parliamentary Egyptian government.[21] Carter and Herbert's determination to treat the excavation as their own personal fief grated on the nationalist sensitivities of the new government. As time passed, and the archeologists' behavior became increasingly intransigent,

the anger of the Egyptian officials grew to the point where the excavation was temporarily closed. As a result, the guidelines for the division of objects found between foreign archeologists and the Egyptian government were completely changed. Until this time they had been divided equally. A special act of the Egyptian parliament prevented any object from Tut'ankamen's tomb from being surrended to foreigners and subsequently non-Egyptian excavations have been allowed to keep only unimportant objects or duplicates.[22] Thus Carter's and Herbert's work in the Valley of the Kings signalled the end of an era as well as a beginning.

4

Despite avowals that the treasures of Tut'ankhamen would never leave its native soil, the Egyptian goverment allowed a collection of some of the smaller objects to circulate in Europe, North America, and Japan. Each of the countries that hosted this exhibit had been engaged in archeological salvage work in the southernmost part of Egypt throughout the sixties. This was part of an operation coordinated by UNESCO to document and salvage, where possible, ancient sites about to be flooded by the waters of the Aswan dam. This display was intended as a gesture of appreciation to the governments of those countries which had contributed expertise and equipment to this project.[23] Most of these shows received little publicity and the objects in them were of more scholarly than aesthetic interest.

The great travelling exhibits of the seventies constitute, however, a completely different phenomenon. Although they were still a form of cultural exchange conducted at the highest level of government, much of the expense and all of the publicity was handled by multinational corporations. This situation undoubtedly reflected the waning economic power of governmental structures at this period, as well as the ongoing need for expansion in the corporate marketplace. The earliest of these shows, the Chinese Exhibition, for example, symbolically re-opened China to all kinds of intercourse (most of it commercial) with the West. Although not all of these exhibits originated in underdeveloped countries, in all cases those who created them stood in need of monetary gain. The Tut exhibit which toured North America from 1976-79 was the direct result of Egypt's turning away from the Soviet Union towards the United States. This direction was clearly motivated by a desire for economic improvement and was symbolized most clearly by the Tut exhibit and the Camp David accords. In a direct way, all proceeds from the sales of tickets, official literature, and souvenirs went to the Egyptian Antiquities Organization for the upgrading of all cultural properties and in particular for the refurbishment of the permanent display of Tut'ankhamen's burial ensemble in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Indirectly, publicity for Egypt as a tourist destination was supposed to lead to an influx of foreign currency into that country. All of this however, was nothing compared to the revenue generated within the United States and Canada during the course of the exhibit[24] Once the American sixth Fleet

had moved the show to New York safely and cheaply, it was handed over to its proper custodians, Exxon (Egypt is after all an oil-producing nation) and the Metropolitan Museum.[25] The oil company provided the form and vehicle for this event and the Met supplied the content.

5

The size, design, and central concept of "The Treasures of Tutankhamun" are all claimed by Thomas Hoving, Director of the Metropolitan Museum from 1967 to 1977. This is not the place to challenge such an assertion but rather to examine the actual exhibit and the man who established it in more detail. By 1976 Hoving, who was nearing the end of his tenure at the Metropolitan, was already famous (or infamous). His populist, salesman-like persona first began to develop during his tenure at the office of Parks Commissioner in New York in the mid-sixties. Hoving had achieved notoriety for staging "happenings"; later, as curator at the Met, he devised exhibits which juxtaposed the work of Poussin with old cars, spaghetti, and pop art. He once earned the admiration of Andy Warhol by referring to the busts of three Egyptian princesses as "The Supremes."[26] Hoving was also responsible for the appointment of the ex-editor of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar,* Diana Vreeland, to the position of curator-consultant in the Met's costume institute. This engagement, although at first controversial, in later years provided the museum with some very profitable connections in the worlds of fashion, business, and politics.[27]

In many ways, Hoving presided over and was personally responsible for the final absorption of this, the pre-eminent American art museum, into the marketplace. The way he organized the Tut exhibit is no exception to this trend.

6

"The Treasures of Tutankhamen," as conceived by the Met's director, consisted of fifty-five objects, one for each year since the tomb had been discovered. As such it was the largest exhibition of its kind, containing several pieces, most notably jewellery, that had never before left Egypt. The pieces were to be displayed in the order that they had been found in the tomb and were juxtaposed with blow-ups of photographs taken during the course of the excavation. The intention was to recreate the entire discovery for anyone who passed through the exhibition. The official catalogue supplemented this experience with concise, scholarly commentary, giving more detailed descriptions of each exhibit and some historical background to the period when Tut'ankhamun lived. It also included a brief account of the excavation.[28] Although it is more plausible to try to evoke the experience of the archeologists rather than of those who buried the king, supplementary material produced by the Met went even further. In an album of field photographs from the Metropolitan's archives, tremendous

emphasis was placed on the role the museum played in the excavation. A past director is approvingly quoted to the effect that the museum's expedition alone was equipped and competent to cope with the situation.[29] The international, cooperative character of the venture is noted, a state of affairs which in hindsight seems to suggest the multinational corporation.

Equipped with the catalogue and attendant publications, the exhibit moved around the North American hinterland in the form of that quintessential postmodern phenomenon, the franchise. Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Seattle, and as an afterthought, Toronto, one after another, received this package. The success of the project was ensured by Exxon's saturation advertising campaign, commencing up to nine months before each show. It was eagerly taken up in media, such as newspapers and lifestyle magazines. Thus was simulated "Tutmania," a phenomenon not unlike Beatlemania in that it was just as carefully engineered and the object of its enthusiasm equally insubstantial.

Any successful media event, be it a film, royal wedding, or TV miniseries, is not complete without a book. Thomas Hoving produced *Tutankhamun: The Untold Story* in 1978. The phenomenal success of this publication was to be expected, given the effectiveness of the Tut publicity campaign. It also added to the carefully constructed Hoving persona, through his manipulation of the materials for the book. It purports to be the result of his "discovery" of valuable correspondence concerning the excavation, in the Egyptian Department of the Met, where it had been predictably ignored by its custodians.[30] The documents Hoving uses that show that Carter and his patron were not just venial and ambitious but downright dishonest. Not only did they go right through the tomb before it was properly excavated, but persistently attempted, and with some measure of success, to smuggle objects from it out of Egypt. This in itself is provocative enough, but the book is also filled with rumors and innuendo about a great many persons, most of which appears quite unfounded. But although it caused controversy and criticism in the scholarly community, this was not the book's main purpose. The entire narrative is a pop cultural simulacrum of history, ripe for transformation into a miniseries. Even the title is more redolent of the *National Enquirer* than a legitimate work of history or biography. The first two chapters are entitled respectively "*Dramatis Personae*" and "The Stage." It follows naturally that the characters are delineated in a fashion at times uninformed and at others bigoted and downright racist. This brings us to the main thesis of this work and that of Hoving's later publications: that the Western (read American) art curator/collector and his minion, the archeologist, owe it to "civilization" to remove as many beautiful and culturally significant objects as possible from Third World countries. This is done so that they may be properly appreciated by a cultivated audience and suitable measures taken for their conservation and storage. It goes without saying that, in the eyes of the Hovings of this world, no one in the countries where these objects originate

is willing or able to fulfill these requirements. That such a state of affairs is in large part due to the inequities of the global economy goes unnoticed and unremarked.

For these reasons, *Tutankhamun: The Untold Story* is a deeply ambivalent narrative. While much of it concentrates on Carter's and Herbert's attempts at theft,[31] Hoving never really passes judgement on their behavior in the book. His views have been stated quite clearly elesewhere. In an interview with John McPhee, Hoving says of the sources of his own museum's collection:

> The Metropolitan Museum has never done anything slightly illegal. And you had better believe that. We are not more illegal in anything we have done than Napoleon when he brought all those treasures to the Louvre.[32]

In a discourse where collecting is legitimized plunder, any agent moving to hinder this activity is seen as the enemy. Such an attitude explains the unflattering light in which Hoving casts the members of the Antiquities Service, both foreign and Egyptian, along with members of the government, press, and other scholars. While the head of the antiquities organization is quickly dismissed as "the French Jesuit,"[33] Hoving's most unpleasant characterization is reserved for Morcos Hanna, minister in charge of antiquities. After describing him as "a stolid bear of a man... his knowledge of archeological affairs negligible," Hoving notes that Hanna had been tried and convicted for treason.[34] As far as I have been able to ascertain, Hanna's only "treasonable" act was to sign a manifesto demanding the release of the leader of his party who was interned by the British in 1922.[35] Such an act has none of the violent and unsavory undertones that Hoving would like to impute by the use of this word and merely serves to further unmask his neo-colonialist bias. Throughout the book expressions of outrage at Carter's treatment by the Egyptian government are found.[36] Furthermore, this work may be criticized for its use of unsatisfactory source material, gossip, hearsay and the author's propensity for unfounded assertions. It seems most unlikely, for example, that the objects in the Metropolitan and Brooklyn Museums, which Hoving says come from Tut'ankhamen's tomb, actually did so. None of this matters, however. Hoving has little interest in "facts" or the "experts" who supply them. This is suggested not only by the way he has written this book but by his treatment of specialists who have assisted at this and other exhibitions he has organized. In hypermuseology, "information" is not a path to knowledge, but an ingredient in the semiosis of culture and commodity.

7

The modern museum, a late comer to the commodity simulacrum, is an historically and culturally complex phenomenon. Its ancestors, the royal and aristocratic collections of Europe, were put together under the in

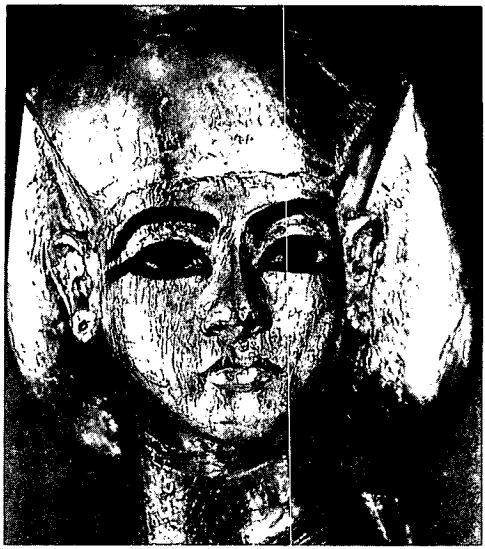

Photo Credit: Lee Boltin
The Goddess Selket (detail) Egyptian Museum, Cairo

Photo Credit: Gillean Proctor
Cover, *City Magazine* 9 Sept. 1979

fluence of Renaissance humanism. When the revolutionary government first threw open the Louvre to the public in 1793, these assemblages joined the Enlightment project that sought to substitute culture and science for religion.[32]

By the mid-nineteenth century, many hoped that teaching cultural pursuits to the newly educated working classes would serve to inoculate them against the virus of revolutionary agitation. In Britain, English Literature was seen as the ideal medium for such an enterprise,[38] but in North America the museum was deemed more suitable. In a very direct way the contemplation of art was considered as a means of fighting vice and crime, and provided "entertainment of an innocent and improving character."[39] This led not only to a plethora of educational programmes, but explains in large measure, why tycoons such as J.P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and William Mellon were so generous in their donations to these institutions. (The Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan was a direct result of Morgan's largesse.[40]

The museum's appearance coincides with the rise of historicism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It quickly became part of a project that sought to validate the rapid social change that characterized the industrial revolution and shift to the capitalist mode of production. The present was displayed as an improvement on the past and a road of infinite progress into the future. The "moral and improving" nature of the objects in the displays was given a more specific meaning as part of a continuum of betterment. An intense, increasingly "scientific" study of the contents of the museum only magnified and reaffirmed the exultant Candidian outlook of the bourgeoisie.

Today, however, few would try to reconstruct a past out of which some kind of blueprint for the future could be put together. Events of the last half century have deprived us of both the desire to undertake such an exercise and have faith in its results. While history as a discipline may have lost its credibility among western intellectuals, its place has been taken by antiquarianism and nostalgia, the latter enjoying a special place in the realm of mass culture. The realm of nostalgia is style, and style as we know it is almost always the product of the mimetic photographic image. André Malraux observed in "Museum without Walls," that when objects are photographed, it is their common elements ("style") rather than their individual characteristics that are emphasized. These characteristics can thus be stressed irrespective of the original medium (for example, whether in two or three dimensions). Thus art is sublimated to a history of style which for Malraux is much more important than the individual pieces; indeed it is a form of superart.[41] The popularity of the artbook and the postcard has done much to transform the entire living space of the postmodern into an imaginary museum. But it is an environment which, because of its ability for total electronic recall, is also burdened with complete functional amnesia. In connection with a project for the Tut show, a school

child might be asked to "interview an old person about what life was like in Canada when they were young."[42] Or, as President Carter told us, what happened in Iran in 1951 is ancient history. If, as in Nietzsche's formulation,[43] an historical culture presupposes the old age of Mankind, we have finally reached senility. So it came about that nostalgia for the twenties and a past colonial age becomes inextricably linked with the exhibition itself. The field photographs are just as much artifacts as the objects from the tomb. In fact it is only when we can locate exhibition pieces in the photographs that the former acquire a validity for us. This has little to do with the proof offered as to their origin but rather with their authentication in the form of a two dimensional image, which has become the primary medium of communication.[44] The image with a caption, whether written or spoken, is the basis for transmission of the sign, both as information and commodity. As was long ago recognized by Walter Benjamin, information *is* a commodity, and this is what distinguishes it from knowledge. Information relies for its impact on prompt verifiability and that it appear "understandable in itself."[45] Everything is explained and there is no opportunity for the recipient to interpret the facts as she or he understands them. The consumption of information is a completely passive process. Indeed the consumer is just one in a series of "transmitters," continually beaming signs from one monitering screen to another. The function of information is that of lubrication. A highly motivated sign slips more easily through the channels of communication. The opening up of higher education to larger numbers of students from the middle and working classes in the sixties seems to have finally achieved its objective of the "educated consumer" in the "yuppie." To know of something is to want it, be it a country (as tourist destination), an historical period, a new type of cuisine, or even just a work of art or architecture. Where the more tangible thing cannot be obtained, the sign will do, although against all odds, the auratic power of works of art still seems to hold, which is perhaps just another illusion. The North American audience, for the most part, only knows of the golden funerary mask of Tut'ankhamen through its images found in popular culture: a piece of chocolate, a china plate, or a poster on the subway. Almost no one is alive today who remembers the actual discovery of the tomb and only a tiny fraction of the population went to see the exhibit (in the United States, only about half a million people).[46]

It is indeed a paradox of the modern museum that despite prodigious, almost frenzied, efforts at populatization, it has failed to corner an audience substantially larger than that which it acquired in the nineteenth century. Surveys taken during the last fifteen years continue to show that between ten and twenty percent of the population ever visit its component institutions and this audience is composed of an affluent middle class, typically aged between thirty and fifty.[47] Even for the Tut show, the audience profile was almost identical.[48] It seems that the elitist nature of the modern museum, inherent in its origins, has operated against its popularization. Indeed, the appearance of a technology capable of the endless reproduc

tion of objects (through photographic reproduction) and information about them, has not brought about the acculturation of the general population. Rather, what has actually occurred is the desublimation of culture. This phenomenon has come about through the short-circuiting of the avant-lgarde project which sought the break down of formal categories of artistic production. This was a process where modern artistic endeavor, originally a form of self-criticism by the bourgeoisie,[49] was incorporated in a utopian social project for its own complete dismantlement.[50] With the final demise of both political and cultural aspirations in 1968, these strategies were co-opted by the consumer economy of late capitalism. The disappearance of a shockable bourgeois audience and the need for constant novelty to stimulate the circulation of goods and services have transformed the daring strategies of modernism into the trappings of an aestheticization of an alienated everyday life. All forms of knowledge, be they practical or cultural, have become commodified and this includes the museum, one of our main points of contact with past historical periods. Ironically it was the modernist struggle to liberate the aesthetic impulse from individual works of art that brought about their replacement by events such as the Tut exhibit. Such happenings, however, are only the beginning of a chain of events unleashing a whole new set of floating signifiers into circulation. The liberated consumer is let loose to romp ecstatically through the entire span of world history and culture, while the so-called expert, theoretically the custodian of this cultural property, is reduced to the role of a eunuch guarding the cultural harem.

History, art, and authenticity have disappeared in the free flow of signs, the endless code of the consumerist marketplace. It is a movement of signs with no outside referent that has replaced commodity exchange. Such activity inexorably replaces all cultural intercourse. We all went to the Tut exhibit whether we wanted to or not, just as we witness the image of every newsworthy event on earth, no matter how trivial or monstrous. As Baudrillard puts it:

> All functions abolished in a single dimension, that of communication. That's the ecstasy of communication. All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information. That's obscenity.[51]

Department of Near Eastern Studies
University of Toronto

Notes

This article is based on a paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, Learned Society Conference, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 4th June 1987. I would like to thank Daniel Jones for helpful remarks on later drafts of this paper.

1. Liam Lacey, "In Tut We Trust," *Fanfare* Magazine, *The Globe and Mail,* 27 October 1979.
2. Anonymous, "Legend of the King Cheops and the Magicians," (Papyrus Westcar 10.1 ff.), in Miriam Lichthein, *Ancient Egyptian Literature.* Volume One, *The Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 220-1.
3. There is some disagreement as to how this name is to be interpreted. "Beautiful is the life of the Sun" as well as "All life is in the hands of the Sun" have also been suggested. See Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt, *Tutankhamen: The Life and Death of a Pharaoh* (London: The Connoisseur and Michael Joseph, 1964), 136.
4. On this period in Egyptian history, see Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
5. On the importance of the king's name see Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 61.
6. See above and Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 88ff.
7. Raymond O. Faulkner, *Concise Middle Egyptian Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 295.
8. Charlton T. Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, n.d.), 888.
9. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1971), 1376.
10. Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London, Fontana 1983), 295.
11. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (London: Fontana, 1974), 100, 120.
12. Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud", *Écrits: A Selection,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 146-78.
13. See further Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review,* 146 (July-August 1984) 71-75.
14. Jean Baudrillard, *Consumer Society* in *Selected Writings,* ed. Mark Poster (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), 44-5.
15. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 109-37 and passim.
16. Unfortunately, the most accessible source of such information remains Thomas Hoving's *Tutankhamun: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 146-57.
17. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 42-43, 80-88.
18. Kenneth Hudson, *A Social History of Archaeology: The British Experience* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 43-97.
19. Paul Fussel, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 155-69.
20. Tom Buckley, "The Discovery of Tutankhamen's Tomb," *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1976), 4, 14-15, and Harry Burton; *Wonderful Things: The Discovery of Tutankhamun's Tomb* (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 1976), 1ff.

21. The Wafd Party, under Zaghlul Saad, forced the end of the British protectorate in 1919 with a broadly based agitation for independence. Egypt was declared a constitutional monarchy. A power struggle between the king and the Wafd ensued which lasted until the fifties. See Marius Deeb, *Party Politics in Egypt: The Wafd and its Rivals 1919-1939* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979).

22. Charles Breasted, *Pioneer to the Past: The Story of James Henry Breasted Archeologist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 360-72; and Hoving, *Tutankhamun: The Untold Story,* 219-22, 239-52, 256-62, 270-76, 276-325, 338-49.

23. Rudolph Anthes, *Tutankhamen Treasures: A Loan Exhibition from the Department of Antiquities of the United Arab Republic,* forward by Sarwat Okasha (Washington: The Smithsonian Institution, 1961).

24. *Treasures of Tutankhamun,* 4ff.; and Grace Glueck, "Where Tut Money is Going," *New York Times,* 23 March 1979; and G. Wall and C. Knapper, *Tutankhamun in Toronto* (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 1981), 2. The total expenditure generated was in excess of 259 million dollars (U.S.), while the Antiquities Organization expected to receive about seven million.

25. *Treasures of Tutankhamun,* 4-5, 8; and C. Ratcliff, "Tut, Exxon and Anita Loos," *Art in America* (March/April 1979), 94, 96. In Canada, the exhibition was sponsored by American Express. American Express has stated that it became interested in cultural sponsorship and especially conservation of art objects because of the material deterioration of tourist sites! See *Public View: The ICOM Handbook of Museum Public Relations* (Paris: The International Council of Museums, UNESCO, 1986), 88.

26. A.S. Witlin, *Museums: In Search of a Usable Future* (Cambridge, MASS: The MIT Press, 1976), 187; and Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol '60s* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1980), 207, 221.

27. Debora Silverman, *Selling Culture: Bloomingdale's, Diana Vreeland and The New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan's America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 106-07.

28. Concept and layout described in the catalogue itself, *Treasures of Tutankhamun,* 4.

29. See Burton, *Wonderful Things,* 1.

30. Ibid., 16.

31. Hoving, *The Untold Story,* 318-37, 349-57.

32. John McPhee, *A Roomful of Hovings* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979), 60.

33. Hoving, *The Untold Story,* 64.

34. Ibid., 277.

35. Deeb, *Party Politics,* 58 and note 61.

36. Hoving, *The Untold Story,* 290-92, 300.

37. Edward Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 23-24; and Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity – An Incomplete Project," *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 9.

38. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 22-30.

39. Alexander, *Museums in Motion,* 34-5.

40. Alexander, *Museums in Motion,* 34; and Burton, *Wonderful Things, 1ff.*

41. André Malraux, "Museum without Walls," *The Voices of Silence,* trans. Stuart Gilbert (St. Albans, Herts.: Paladin, 1954), 21-23, 46.

42. As suggested in J. Free, *Tutankhamun, Mysterious Boy King of Egypt* (Durham Board of Education, 1979), 1.
43. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History,* trans. Adrian Collins (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 48-49.
44. Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sincerely Yours," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985), 191.
45. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov," *Illuminations,* trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schoken Books, 1969), 88-89.
46. Wall and Knapper, *Tutankhamun in Toronto,* 2.
47. P. Di Maggio and M. Useem, "Social Class and Arts Consumption: The Origins and Consequences of Class Differences in Exposure to the Arts in America," *Theory and Society,* 5 (1978), 141-61; and Canadian material in R.E. Schliewen, *A Leisure Study-Canada 1975* (Ottawa, 1977), 17-55.
48. G. Wall and C. Knapper, *Tutankhamun in Toronto,* 18-23.
49. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 46-54.
50. Russell A. Berman, "Modern Art and Desublimation," *Telos* (Winter 1984), 33-35, 41-42.
51. Jean Baudrillard, "The Esctasy of Communication," *The Anti-Aesthetic, 131.*