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2019-10-27

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14769>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Holdsworth, Amy; Moseley, Rachel; Wheatley, Helen: Memory, Nostalgia and the Material Heritage of Children's Television in the Museum. In: *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, Jg. 8 (2019-10-27), Nr. 15, S. 111–122. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/14769>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.18146/2213-0969.2019.jethc168>

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MEMORY, NOSTALGIA AND THE MATERIAL HERITAGE OF CHILDREN'S TELEVISION IN THE MUSEUM

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Abstract: 'The Story of Children's Television, from 1946 to Now' was an exhibition co-conceived by the authors and colleagues from the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry, UK, running from 2015 to 2017 through a national tour. At the exhibition, objects from children's television history sat alongside screens showing the programmes to visitors. Our research explores how children's television culture operates as a site of memory and nostalgia, through which we can investigate forms of (inter)generational cultural memory. This paper explores the reconnections and disconnections that emerge in encounters with the material heritage of children's television in Britain.

Keywords: television, history, children, museums, exhibitions



Figure 1. Two women encounter Rosie and Jim puppets at the exhibition The Story of Children's Television Exhibition (May 2015)
© Mark Radford Photography.

A woman stands in front of a Perspex box containing three large puppets. Her hand clasped to her face with joy and excitement, she appears to be overwhelmed by a reunion with three long-lost friends.¹ Behind the next case, a man leans close to photograph another puppet, preserving for posterity a close encounter with a material trace of what is almost certainly his own personal television history: the television of his childhood. He wears a t-shirt which announces his fandom for another children's programme from the same era,² evidence of the ways in which this history has been incorporated into a retro material culture in the last decade or so. However, the reverence in this exclamation and in this photography suggests that this encounter with an 'original' artefact from children's television history carries with it a Benjaminian 'aura', a sense of these puppets' 'presence in time and space', a 'unique existence at the place where [they happen] to be' that excites and delights in a way that extends far beyond a simple (re-) encounter with past programming.³ How might we understand the significance of such affective responses to the material history of children's television? In a later interview, the woman in the picture described above told us:

I was excited - as we turned around the corner and saw Rosie and Jim, I had the pure excitement feeling of being represented in that gallery - a that's me right there moment! I recognised many characters in the exhibition but these two were my favourite and in a bizarre way it was like seeing two old friends. I guess it was also a nostalgic moment, I was slightly emotional from seeing them during and after, it immediately brought back the moment of me sitting on my nan's rug watching it with a milky bar in hand (my treat for helping her) my nan passed away a few years ago and it was the first time I'd recalled those moments. Really though - it was just a pure joy moment of seeing those lovely characters up close- they're so much bigger than I thought they would be - I remember thinking that!

1 These are the three key puppets from the UK children's programme *Rosie and Jim* (Ragdoll for Central/ITV, 1990-2000).

2 The puppet is the titular character from *Pob's Programme* (Ragdoll for Channel 4, 1985-90); the t-shirt features the branding from *Button Moon* (Thames/ITV, 1980-88).

3 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in Hannah Arendt, ed, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, 1968, p. 220.

Important here is the combination of joy and melancholy which is characteristic of nostalgia, the material traces of children's television in this instance beginning a chain reaction of memories about a past life.⁴ This moment is emblematic of our findings from this exhibition, a nostalgic moment of intergenerational relation prompted by the encounter with television history in the museum.



Figure 2. The Story of Children's Television exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, UK (May 2015).

This article offers a critical exploration of research conducted at the exhibition *The Story of Children's Television, from 1946 to Now*, which was co-conceived by the authors and colleagues from the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry, UK, and which toured the UK from May 2015 to January 2017. At the exhibition, around 200 objects from British children's television history (props, puppets, programme-making equipment and documents, publicity material, merchandise and so on), sat alongside a series of screens showing visitors the programmes themselves. The exhibition was organized chronologically around a large studio space with thematic sections in the middle of the room covering topics such as children's drama, animation and puppetry, and factual programming (e.g. *Blue Peter* (BBC, 1958-)). At the end of the exhibition, there were separate spaces devoted to Ragdoll Productions, a local and internationally significant independent production company based in the British Midlands and specializing in children's television (from *Pob's Programme* (Ragdoll for Channel 4, 1985-90) and *Rosie and Jim* (Ragdoll for Central/ITV, 1990-2000) to *Teletubbies* (BBC2, 1997-2001) and *The Adventures of Abney and Teal* (CBeebies, 2011-2012));⁵ the final space was designed to prompt and gather responses from visitors about their encounter with this history and contained a voxpops film gathering the memories of local people in the city centre about children's television. The organization of the exhibition space enabled people to map their own journey through the exhibition rather than sticking rigidly to the chronological structure around the edges of the room. Throughout its initial run at the Herbert, we conducted research into the ways in which children's television culture operates as a site of memory and nostalgia, and how an encounter with its material history might offer opportunities to investigate forms of (inter)generational cultural memory. In what follows, we explore our observations of visitor interactions with the material heritage of

4 Amy Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

5 CBeebies is the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) free-to-air channel for children under six years of age; the sibling channel, CBBC, is designed for children aged six to 15 years. Like the BBC, ITV (Independent Television), is also founded on public service principles, but is funded by advertising revenue rather than by a Licence Fee.

children's television in Britain, building on geographer Gill Valentine's proposal that childhood is not a category that we 'grow out of' but a 'performative or processual identity' and one that 'shapes us throughout [our] life course'.⁶

What we hoped, in setting up the exhibition, was that it would allow us to bear witness to those reconnections *and* disconnections⁷ that emerge in intergenerational encounters via a history of children's television and through the material traces of this history. We were particularly interested in thinking about how television can work in the museum setting to engage inter-generational audiences through memory work – and to look at the kinds of encounters facilitated via the history of a popular media form. By 'memory work' we mean 'an individual's conscious, voluntary, and methodical interrogation of the past within collective frameworks, predominantly a familial one', where television is the collective framework in question.⁸ Alongside our interest in inter-generational memory work, the museum setting allowed us to pursue an inquiry into the material cultures of television memory (following up on work Amy Holdsworth had done previously at the UK's National Media Museum) that responded to Andreas Huyssen's suggestion that 'television denies the material quality of the object'.⁹ This article thus seeks to answer the question 'What happens then when television finds its way into museums and art galleries?', through an analysis of visitor interactions with this exhibition.

The turn to the material histories of television in this and other exhibitions has to be placed in the dual contexts of a broader 'material turn' in the writing of social history, and in what is known in the UK as the 'impact agenda', the imperative to move academic research beyond the academy in ways that have an 'effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life'.¹⁰ While for some fields, the increased emphasis on research impact might be experienced as both disabling and limiting, for Television Studies, it has also offered a welcome opportunity to address television's material and affective registers, in ways that both acknowledge and extend beyond the social science models of 'audience research' as the third element of the classic production-text-reception approach to television as an object of study. Some of the research impacts referred to by the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE's) criteria for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) will be explored in what follows, particularly its impacts on intergenerational social interaction, and the cultural benefits of the exhibition were also acknowledged by the broadcasters whose history we were telling:

For the BBC and the Children's department in particular, this exhibition enabled many of us to reflect upon the rich heritage of British Children's content and confirmed why we are so committed to our youngest viewers. We want to create happy, positive memories, inspire young minds and fire their imaginations. The exhibition ran during a period of instability in the Children's sector and it was heartening to learn that over 80,000 children and adults visited the Herbert Museum and hear the joyful remarks made by those able to see one of their favourite characters or be transported back to their childhood. It certainly helped to raise the profile of Children's content and commitment to our youngest viewers became a key factor during the BBC Charter renewal process (Kay Benbow, then Head of Cbeebies).

There is clearly mutual benefit in television historians, curators and collaborators from the TV industry coming together to assemble an exhibition made up of the material traces of television's history. This acknowledgement of the cultural value of the exhibition from one of the key figures in UK children's television at the time clearly demonstrates the pressing need to celebrate and disseminate an important aspect of British television culture, at a moment where fiscal pressures on the industry and the academy necessitate enterprising collaborations.

It is also worth pausing here to acknowledge the complexity of assembling a history of children's television from its material traces. In their work on the broader material turn in the field of historical research, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio

6 Gill Valentine, 'Boundary Crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood,' *Children's Geographies*, 1, 1, 2003, 38.

7 Owain Jones, "Endlessly Revisited and Forever Gone": On Memory, Reverie and Emotional Imagination in Doing Children's Geographies. An 'Addendum' to "To Go Back up the Side Hill": Memories, Imaginations and Reveries of Childhood' by Chris Philo,' *Children's Geographies*, 1, 1, 2010.

8 Nina Fischer, *Memory Work: The Second Generation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 2.

9 Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, 2011; Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, Psychology Press, 1995, 255.

10 HEFCE, 'REF Impact', 19 February 2016, <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/>

Riello acknowledge that objects 'point at the affective social, cultural and economic relationships that form our lives' and argue that there are multiple ways for the historian to approach the history of what Daniel Roche calls an 'histoire des choses banales'.¹¹ In their introduction to a collection of essays on a broad range of subjects, from Qing Imperial porcelain to the history of Lycra and a 16th century handbell, Gerritsen and Riello take care to point out the material, conceptual and practical limitations of material culture-based histories. As we discovered in working with our partners to assemble this exhibition, what we were able to offer here was a partial history with significant gaps and absences, often reliant on complicated negotiations with a variety of gatekeepers and affected by the fragility of some of the key objects we wished to draw into our narrative. As Gerritsen and Riello acknowledge, objects have a 'lifespan, or what has also been described as a "career" and "biography" that the present-day object bears physically (it might have lost one of its parts, been chipped or broken) and in its meaning (for instance: Who owned it? Where did it go over time? How was it used?).¹² They argue, therefore, that artefacts are 'complex entities whose nature and lifestory can only partially be understood and recovered... [and which] raise a series of question marks for researchers about their origin, use, value in the past and in the present.'¹³ This question of the contested value of objects in the past and the present is particularly significant in relation to the material histories of television production (and, in our case, the history of UK children's programming). Objects in this collection were often made with very limited time spans in mind: sketches and maquettes used as part of a design process, a means to an end; puppets made to last the duration of the production of ten or twelve episodes of a programme; toys and books to last the short period of childhood interest. At the moment of their production, the future value of these objects to historians, collectors, and, by extension, visitors to this exhibition, probably could not have been conceived. They represent, literally and metaphorically, the transitory and ephemeral nature of television culture, and, particularly, children's television culture. And yet the story of their collection, preservation, veneration, even, suggests that programme makers, archivists, curators and enthusiasts alike also anticipated the cultural and economic value of these artefacts beyond their initial use-value, and their eventual incorporation into public-facing exhibitions such as this. This exhibition gathered together, momentarily, a set of disparate and fragile objects associated with childhood and a history of television, and in that gathering the affective power of that history was revealed.

1 Childhood, Media, Memory and Nostalgia

From the writing of Proust to the recent Netflix sci-fi drama series *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-), we have seen that the relationships between childhood, media, memory and nostalgia are multiple and various. Dominant understandings of nostalgia itself are intertwined with specific historical and cultural constructions of childhood, seen, for example, in those tropes of a nostalgia rhetoric identified by Stuart Tannock as 'the notion of a Golden Age and a subsequent Fall, the story of the Homecoming, and the pastoral.'¹⁴ These tropes are clearly deployed to shore up a construction of a specific version of childhood that is based upon the division between the worlds of 'adult' and 'child' as a pre- and post-lapsarian view of the world. This version of nostalgia is further layered by the lamentations and proclamations of the 'death of childhood' (for which electronic media is regularly blamed) creating a secondary division between childhood then versus childhood now. These divisions are both historical and generational.

In his account of the 'death of childhood' discourse, David Buckingham argues that writers like Marie Winn and Neil Postman 'explicitly draw on one of the most seductive post-Romantic fantasies of childhood: the notion of a pre-industrial Golden Age, an idyllic Garden of Eden in which children could play freely, untainted by corruption.'¹⁵ This 'innocent garden world' as Stephen Kline argues in his *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV and*

11 Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, 'Introduction: Writing Material Culture History,' in Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, *Writing Material Culture History*, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 2; Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*, Fayard, 1997.

12 Gerritsen and Riello, 'Introduction,' 2015, p. 9.

13 Ibid.

14 Stuart Tannock, 'Nostalgia Critique,' *Cultural Studies*, 9, 3, 1995, 454.

15 David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media*, Wiley, 2000, p. 35; Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Vintage, 1982; Marie Winn, *The Plug-In Drug: Television, Children, And The Family*, Viking Penguin, 1977. It should

Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing is one characterized in Victorian picture books by 'children who communed with one another and the things they found in the garden (animals, butterflies, sticks, rivers) through pretending. They did not rely upon toys as a tool for projecting their imagination or on television narratives to script their imaginary adventures.'¹⁶ Within this discourse, television is a seducer and corrupter of childhood innocence – exposing unprepared tiny minds to the ills, vices and dangers of the world. As Joshua Meyrowitz wrote – 'television now escorts children across the globe even before they have permission to cross the street.'¹⁷ Postman's notion of television as the 'total disclosure medium' in which 'everything is for everybody' results, within this discourse, in an anxious blurring of modern categories of 'childhood' and 'adulthood': children who grow up too soon and adults who remain infantilized by popular television culture.

It should be noted that such anxieties are founded on particular assumptions about age and development as a clearly defined path from 'childhood' to 'adulthood', one that is linear in its trajectory and measured by a series of developmental milestones. As our reference to the work of geographer Gill Valentine suggests above, we are interested here in thinking about the role of memory in challenging uni-directional notions of age, growth, development and competency – to think about intersubjectivities and interdependences across the life course. This isn't simply about switching the roles of adult and child but imagining subjectivities as more complex and relational. Writing about adult memories of childhood, cultural geographer Chris Philo speaks of the 'thread of connection' that comes from the fact that we were all children once and that this connection with the child might be imaginatively explored through memory and reverie (Philo is writing here about the adult researcher attempting to access the 'otherness' of the child).¹⁸ What we hoped, in setting up the exhibition, was that it would allow us to bear witness to those reconnections and disconnections (to follow Owain Jones) that emerge in intergenerational encounters via a history of children's television.¹⁹ In drawing out the associations between nostalgia and childhood our intention was also to harness the comparative function of nostalgia as a form of engagement and its potential for helping us in understanding the affective dimensions of television history. To make visible (or perhaps material) the role of nostalgia in 'the negotiation of identities, communities and forms of historical connectivity; of who we were then, who we are now and where we want to be'.²⁰



Figure 3. Adult visitors raid the dressing up box and pose within a giant frame of a television screen.

be noted that both Postman and Winn are writing specifically in the context of US television in the 1970s and 80s.

16 Stephen Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys, TV and Children's Culture in the Age of Marketing*, Garamond, 1993, p. 144.

17 Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 238.

18 Chris Philo 'To Go Back up the Side Hill': Memories, Imaginations and Reveries of Childhood, *Children's Geographies*, 1, 1, 2003, 7-23.

19 Jones, "Endlessly Revisited and Forever Gone".

20 Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, 2011, p. 103



Figure 4. Two younger visitors pose with hand puppets of Sweep and Sue from *The Sooty Show* (BBC, 1955-67; ITV, 1968-92).

We were particularly interested in thinking about how television can work in the museum setting to engage inter-generational audiences through memory work, and to look at the kinds of encounter facilitated via the history of a popular media form. We did research at the exhibition using a form of participant observation to capture visitor interactions with the objects and images that had been gathered together to tell the story of British children's television. Our observations in the exhibition space, field notes in the style of an ongoing conversation with each other gathered by following people around the space, listening to their conversations and reactions, mainly documented repeated forms of interaction with the exhibits. In particular, we noted that visitors to the exhibition often came in family or friendship groups of differing sizes and generational spread; what follows are some of our key findings, an analysis of the responses of these intergenerational audiences, and a reflection on their significance.

2 Observations from The Story of Children's Television Exhibition

The design of the exhibition expressly invited visitor interaction, and the space of the exhibition was punctuated with invitations to recall, recognize and remember. A "guess the catchphrase" game was positioned at the start of the exhibition, and elsewhere, interspersed between the artefacts, visitors were invited to identify theme tunes and share other recollections through feedback cards prompted by a series of questions about their memories of children's television and the value attached to these remembered programmes. These interactive exhibits established memory, recognition and recall as central to the experience of the exhibition and a key mode of playful engagement. They led to visitors testing each other on what they could remember or summoned memories and objects they'd misplaced or long forgotten, provoking bursts of joy, recognition or familiarity, as captured in our opening example.



Figure 5. The “guess the catchphrase” game mounted on the wall at the entrance to the exhibition.

We also witnessed significant moments of visitor surprise - for example about size and scale of the objects in the exhibition (e.g. “I had no idea it was THAT big” (Makka Pakka’s Og Pog, a kind of bike, from *In the Night Garden* (Ragdoll for CBeebies, 2007-9); “Sooty’s a lot smaller than I thought”²¹). Such reactions to the objects on display revealed the fact that our re-encounters with children’s culture are informed by the memory of once being small; of the previous bodies we occupied. What seemed to coalesce in the exhibition is the play of children’s culture with nostalgia and its variable pay-offs and pleasures (the pleasures of recognition or the disappointments of mis-remembering) that are often ‘driven by curiosity and anticipation: will it be how I remembered? Is this how we once were?’²²

The museum setting allowed us to pursue an inquiry into the material cultures of television memory. In the case of *The Story of Children’s Television* exclamations were frequent; a commonly heard phrase was ‘I had/still have one of those!’, exclaimed in relation to memorabilia, toys, records and other material paratexts of the television of a visitor’s childhood. These are moments where connection with television is expressed through ownership and possession, and there was an extension of this form of connection in the behaviour which took place around the exhibits. As seen above, visitors were eager to have photographs taken with/of the exhibits, proof of an almost physical connection to take home, perhaps to replace or maintain the television memory or object previously lost. This attempt to preserve retrieved memories through photography was accompanied by an evident desire to touch, to get close to the exhibits which were largely inside glass cabinets or, with larger objects, behind cordons. Children smacked and licked the glass, tried to crawl under the physical barriers; adults pored over the cabinets and leaned over ropes. The dressing up and puppet-play areas were popular across generations.

21 Sooty is a glove puppet character who has appeared in various BBC and ITV series since 1955 and up to the present day.

22 Holdsworth, *Television, Memory and Nostalgia*, 2011, p. 102.

There were sections of the exhibition where it was possible to physically interact with facsimiles of the material history of a televisual childhood (to dress up as a Dalek from *Dr Who* (BBC, 1963-); to 'work' Sooty and Sweep). The publicity for the exhibition offered another important moment where the cultural value of an encounter with the material culture of television was reaffirmed. The pleasures of this encounter were reflected in reporting from or about the exhibition; typically, journalists would dwell on the opportunity *to get close to* puppets and toys which 'unlocked' a set of memories from the past.



Video 1. BBC News item on the opening of the exhibition (*Breakfast* (BBC One), 25 May 2015).

Encounters with the objects in the exhibition, at times, inspired a carnivalesque form of play that was not common in the gallery space. Here, we intend Bakhtin's sense of this term, to suggest a world – the space of the exhibition – in which both familiar and unlikely interactions (for example, between strangers) and eccentric behavior (for example, dressing, up, performing in a 'child-like' way) felt permitted.²³ Staff at the Herbert, both during and after the exhibition, stressed a change in atmosphere in the museum, with one Front of House staff member commenting - "People are smiling! NO ONE smiles in Coventry". Chris Kirby, then Director of Collections for the Herbert, also reflected on this in a letter to the authors:

In addition to unprecedented numbers visiting *Children's Television*, it was noted that there was a considerable degree of intergenerational interaction amongst visitors to the exhibition ranging from over 60s to under 5 year olds. The level of noise created by visitor interaction in the exhibition indicated the levels of enjoyment being experienced and this was further confirmed by the 100% positive written comments made by the public.

Visitors would often perform their memories of children's television by singing theme-tunes, reciting catchphrases or miming the actions of particularly iconic puppets (this particularly the case at the front of the exhibition space where visitors would mime the jerky walk of puppets from *The Woodentops* (BBC, 1955-57)). Interactions within and between visitor groups were also facilitated by these fragmentary forms of performance and the unusually animated bodies of visitors who would often point and pull one another across the gallery space to reveal past treasures or test the knowledge of companions.

23 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Indiana University Press, 1984.

Expressions of ownership were often framed by generation, partly enabled by the chronological structure of the exhibition and its division into particular periods of British Children's Television history. Exclamations of "Ah, now this is me" or "This is more my era" were frequently heard as visitors gravitated to the sections of the exhibition that were the most generationally relevant to them. This extended to an apparent desire for intergenerational connection, with visitors, as we suggest above, dragging friends or family members to their favourite parts of the exhibition. Within intergenerational groups the sharing of knowledge and context shifted as they travelled through the exhibition, from the 1950s to the present day. We frequently saw the role of 'expert' or 'guide' shift within family groups from grandparent to parent to child as they travelled around the space of the exhibition – each taking a turn to contextualize their childhood or to make a case for the superiority of their own era of children's television. Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton have argued in their research on Mumsnet and the intergenerational sharing of children's television, the passing on of childhood television culture is understood as a profoundly affective way of making connections from parent to child, offering memories of children's television and its retro materiality as a form of inheritance.²⁴ What we saw in the exhibition was a more multidirectional form of sharing around children's television culture, facilitated by a close encounter with the material history of children's television, from production through to consumption.

There were also articulations of intergenerational connection through objects, especially around programmes and characters which have either continued across generations or have been re-made: examples include Sooty, The Daleks, *Blue Peter*; we heard parents telling their small children stories about their own childhoods prompted by the objects they encountered at the exhibition, and making comparisons and connections between past and present. For example, responses to exhibits were often integrated into familial connections and relations – "your grandma would be excited by Muffin the Mule", "Your dad loved this" – with visitors speculating on what absent family members would like or remember. Exhibits were often seen to reinforce familial relations and to work as prompts for family history and memory. Family relationships here act as a scaffold for the transfer of knowledge but we also saw how television emerged as a scaffold for stories about the family.²⁵ In one encounter between visitors, two mothers from separate families (one with her children the other without) were looking at Rosie and Jim (the puppets on display in our opening photograph). The woman without her children commented: "I'm going to take a photograph for my son who's at home revising. He loved this when he was little". The other woman was taking a photo of her daughter Rosie with the puppets. "My daughter is named after this. When I was pregnant, my other daughter – it was her favourite – and we said she could name the baby". As this encounter with the physical objects that represent television history here demonstrates, television is integrated into the fabric of every day, family life, from which it cannot be disentangled.

The same sense of carnivalesque play that we witnessed in visitor/exhibit interactions was also evident in the drawings which visitors made in response to the exhibition. Within the main exhibition space, there was a wall where visitors were encouraged to draw their favourite children's television characters. While the majority of contributions came from our youngest visitors, there were several instances of adult visitors using the drawing cards 'like children', drawing their favourite character in a child-like style with crayons and adding their age ('47') to their drawings. This is an eloquent example of the ways in which the exhibition became a carnivalesque space of role reversal and inversion of hierarchies²⁶. This might be seen as an extension of the carnivalesque in children's culture, or perhaps critiqued as part of a colonisation of childhood. The carnivalesque might thus be seen as simultaneously disrupting and reasserting the norms of 'child' and 'adult'.

24 Joanne Garde-Hansen and Kristyn Gorton, *Remembering British Television: Audience, Archive and Industry*, Bloomsbury, 2019.

25 The relationship between adult and child in processes of learning and remembering has been much explored by psychologists. See, for example, research on "instructional scaffolding" by social psychologists David Wood, Joseph Bruner, Gail Ross and David Middleton which draws upon the work of psychologist Lev Vygotsky (this research is outlined in David J. Wood, "Teaching the young child: some relationships between social interaction, language and thought", in Peter Lloyd, Charles Fernyhough, eds, *Lev Vygotsky: Critical Assessments*, Routledge, 1999). See also, Derek Edwards and David Middleton's study of the use of family photographs within this relationship (Derek Edwards and David Middleton, "Conversational Remembering and Family Relationships: How Children Learn to Remember", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 5, 1, 1988, 3-25).

26 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1984.

3 Disconnections: “Why Do We Have to Look at All This Rubbish?”

It is important to acknowledge that we also noted significant moments of generational dissent, resistance and disconnection within our observations of the exhibition as well. In particular, expressions of boredom from children being taken around the exhibition by enthralled adults. For example, one child was seen arguing that puppets were ‘pathetic’ and CGI much better, and that it’s good that there is more TV now against his parents and grandmother’s nostalgia. Later on in their visit to the exhibition, the child was observed banging his head against the *Horrible Histories* (CBBC, 2009-19) stand and the following conversation overheard:

“Matthew, all the other children are enjoying it.”

“Yes, they have their phones.”

This child, furious at being dragged around slowly by mother, father, grandmother and younger brother, leant on exhibits, cried when his displeasure was ignored, and pointedly refused to take part in conversations with his grandmother who was soliciting his memories of children’s television. As his parents played with the puppets to try to engage him, he became increasingly irate. For some children, different modes of production looked archaic, dusty, boring, slow, dated or irrelevant (“Black and white. I don’t like black and white. You can see the strings.” “That’s Sooty. He’s still on. I don’t like Sooty. It’s boring”). As discussed above, the work of Garde-Hansen and Gorton illuminates the parental desire to ‘pass down’ their own version of childhood through children’s television texts, yet, as Karen Lury has argued, our invocation of memories of or nostalgia for children’s TV may be an illusory strategy of connection:

New versions, repeats or evolutions of older programmes appeal to a generation of parents who remember the programmes and feel comfortable in letting their children watch these shows. Firstly, because they are remembered as safe; secondly it may be that they offer the promise that the unknowable interior of their children might become more comprehensible or accessible.²⁷

As we have seen, there is no guaranteed outcome for the intergenerational sharing of children’s television, but the responses either way are impassioned ones.

We also acknowledge that the lens of nostalgia, a dominant mode of engagement for those that remembered the children’s culture on display, was not available to everyone. Whilst we’ve been keen to assert the, perhaps, more democratic responses to the exhibition, the points of disconnection are just as revealing for making visible the lines of inclusion and exclusion that open up wider questions regarding the work and role of the public museum and popular engagements with television history. Whilst the exhibition brought clear changes to the atmosphere of the museum and gallery, for some child visitors, like the young boy discussed above, the institution may still be read as an ‘adult’ or ‘legitimate space’ prompting his resistance to the adult ‘ownership’ of children’s experience. And of course, not everyone grew up with British Television. Whilst visitor books and comment cards captured the diversity of responses in the exhibition, we should also acknowledge the fact it did not reach all constituents of Coventry’s diverse, multi-ethnic community.²⁸ The affective appeal of television’s material culture is perhaps, then, profoundly embedded in experience of both personal and shared cultural modes of nostalgia.

27 Karen Lury, ‘Same as it never was: nostalgia and children’s TV,’ *Flow*, 10 July 2008. <http://www.flowjournal.org/2008/07/same-as-it-never-was-nostalgia-and-childrens-tv> karen-lury-university-of-glasgow/

28 With funding from the University of Warwick, postgraduate researchers were recruited to conduct some demographic research with visitors to the exhibition over a single weekend two months into its run (first weekend of the school holidays) - a questionnaire filled in face to face during their time in the exhibition space. This was extremely revealing and helpful to both us and the museum: it showed that our visitors were overwhelmingly white and largely middle class (just under 40% of those surveyed defined their work as managerial/professional). However, it also revealed that 79% of visitors to The Herbert in that period were there specifically to see the exhibition and the vast majority of visitors to the exhibition were first time visitors to the museum – indeed several visitors on this ‘census weekend’ had never visited any museum before. So, we can say that the exhibition has had a significant impact on the local community and culture (most were from the West Midlands but some came from further afield).

4 Conclusion

The Herbert broke all their visitor number records with this exhibition, achieving their target for the whole run in the first two weeks.²⁹ The success of this exhibition could be seen to lie in the particular conjunction of television, material culture, memory work and childhood. It was in the shared encounter with the object that this conjunction was perhaps most powerfully expressed, whether through conversation, exclamation, physical response (dragging someone to a particular section or object) or reproduction and extension through, for example, knowingly naive drawings and a return to the playfulness of childhood. For us, these observations also captured some of the looping and performative sense of childhood that is conjured by Gill Valentine and facilitated here by material and memorial cultures of television. The disconnections on display are also particularly revealing – the audiences the exhibition didn't reach (particularly in relation to ethnicity), the notions of ownership that can both include and exclude, and the figure of the angry, bored young visitor, resistant to his parent's nostalgia and crystallizing the knowable/unknowable experience of the child.

Our final observation refers specifically to the exhibition of children's material culture in the museum. The nostalgia invoked is perhaps not that as described by Susan Stewart as a 'sadness without an object'³⁰ but something closer to Proust's Madeleine – the object as prop or prompt to the rediscovery of memories long forgotten. The lifeless puppet or toy preserved behind glass and remembered as an animated form also becomes a suggestive metaphor for the popularity and the pathos of childhood memory and nostalgia, to return to Owain Jones, 'endlessly revisited but forever gone' – at once material, tangible and out of reach.

Biographies

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29 Total visitors were 82,720 (the target was 24k).

30 Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 14.