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Neurath's Whale

1. Everything Leads to Man and Society

In 1933 the American magazine Survey Graphic published an article entitled "Museums of the Future", by the Viennese museum director and polymath Otto Neurath. In it, Neurath gave the example of a typical whale exhibit to explain what he saw as the limits of natural history displays:

> A huge whale hangs in the middle of the hall; but we do not learn how the "beard" is transformed into old-fashioned corsets, how the skin is transformed into shoes, or the fat into soap that finds its way to the dressing room of a beautiful woman. Nor do we learn how many whales are caught per annum, or how much whale-bone, fat and leather are produced by this means. And yet many people surely would be interested to know what this means for the balance of trade, how it relates to economic crises, and so on. Human fortunes are connected with this exhibit--starving seamen, hungry families of fishermen in the north of Norway. And so, everything leads to men and society.1

Neurath's whale is a hypothetical, not a particular whale. He invokes it to suggest how a display might undo the separation between human society and nature that museum displays reinforced

and that were rooted in the separations between the human and natural sciences. His view was that the museum's purpose was to help the visitor to understand his or her own place in social processes. In 1933 whaling was still big business. In Neurath's proposal, visitors' dependence on whales is made visible, and the animals appear as part of the technical and industrial systems of modernity, via semi-industrialized whaling practices and modern trade. It is a vivid and interesting example of Neurath's museological approach, and one of the few times he describes an object-based museum display in his writing.

Yet it is not clear exactly what kind of object Neurath meant by "a huge whale." He may have been thinking of the exhibits of whale skeletons he had seen in the Naturhistorischesmuseum in Wien, or in the central hall of Berlin's Museum für Naturkunde, or that he had seen on visits to Britain and the United States. Few examples of Cetacean taxidermy exist because, as Michael Rossi explains, "...whales have the temerity to discolour, bloat and disintegrate rapidly."2 Models were increasingly used in exhibits too. Neurath's essay predates the blue whale model at the British Museum (Natural History) that was completed in 1938, but in the United States there was the 76 foot long papier mâché model of a blue whale, suspended since 1907 at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

This hypothetical whale is not entirely imagined then, but based on the experience of visiting whale halls and seeing suspended specimens or models. It is invoked, not to criticize a particular display, but to question the practice of separating natural history from society. Neurath proposes a re-orientation: the whale may be at the centre of the hall, but the real centre of the exhibit becomes "man and society" rather than the whale. This proposal raises interesting questions about the museological display of whales, and about the relationship between objects and contextual information in displays. Could this huge object simply slip into the background, quietly allowing us to move from the contemplation of it to the contemplation of the human uses of whales? What, in the context of an exhibit about whales' social uses, would visitors see? Would the whale even be visible as "a whale" still? And, if it could succeed, would Neurath's proposed exhibit connect us more closely with the whale, as he seems to suggest?

Consider what Neurath wants the exhibit to do. He wants it to make visible a "network" of human and non-human relationships and dependencies. He wants to overcome the splitting of nature from society. We might expect, from what he writes, that this split be expressed in the separation of museum natural history from the whaling industry. Yet the two worlds were already linked. Exhibits that showed whaling were prepared by museums,

including the Smithsonian, which produced fishery exhibits for a succession of international expositions in the 1870s and '80s. These exhibitions were so frequent that the Museum Secretary, Spencer Baird, complained that the task of producing them was hindering the museum's usual work. Baird's combined roles as Secretary of the Smithsonian, Director of the United States National Museum, and Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries suggests that political and industrial interests and scientific concerns were very much entangled. 3

In the Smithsonian exhibit for the 1883 Great International Fishery Exposition in London, scientific and museological concerns mixed with the vested interests and propagandistic purposes of industry and state. The exhibits promoted national identity and progress, aggrandized U.S. industry, including whaling. It would, the New York Times predicted, explain "the gradual march of the fisheries" in the U.S. to the present day, in which "the value of our catch exceeded that of any other country." The Times noted that the exhibit concerned itself not only with industry but also with the scientific classification of fish (and whales). It also included some of the things Neurath would describe as absent from the whale hall: harpoons, guns and other weapons used in hunting were to be shown but also the "archaeology of whaling", alongside a perfectly equipped whaling boat, whaling log-books, and "all the makeshifts of the

whaler"--"such as strange lamps manufactured out of tumblers" and "rough skates fashioned out of files, which some ice-bound sailor has made and used." In addition there was a lifesize model of a harpooner standing on the bow of a whaling ship. The article concluded that this exhibit would certainly be "in the highest degree creditable to our country."4 Indeed, the Americans came away from the 1883 exposition with 18 gold medals.

The Smithsonian example does not necessarily suggest that Neurath's idea was unoriginal. Neurath's aim was politically very different from the propagandistic aims of the International Expositions. He set out to facilitate democratic participation in social planning, which meant first that museums were an educational tool to help visitors understand their relationship with a wider world. The museum should aim to make knowledge relevant and coherent, a process he later described as the "humanization" of knowledge.5 In Neurath's imagined exhibit, the aim is not to aggrandize whaling, but to show the interdependence of man and animal. Neurath's text proposes bringing natural history home, making the whale not simply an object of curiosity or academic interest but something of direct personal concern to visitors. Thus, Neurath makes the whale social and political.

However, the Smithsonian exhibits do point to a problem

with Neurath's critique. For Neurath it is the separation (of whales from us) enacted by natural history that is the problem. For the French sociologist Bruno Latour, separation is only part of the problem. In his book, We Have Never Been Modern, Latour describes "the modern divide between the natural world and the social world", but he is also interested in the ways in which the divide is continually overcome and re-instated. Through a process he calls "translation", modern science produces "entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture". Another process, "purification" then reinstates the separation: "two distinct ontological zones, that of human beings on the one hand, that of nonhumans on the other."6 In the 1883 Smithsonian exhibit, the inclusion of whales (mammals) as fish demonstrates the priority of social, industrial classifications over scientific ones, yet at the same time, science and the museum lend the exhibit authority. Even the whaleman appears as an anthropological subject through his ingenious inventions. Scientific knowledge and industrial interests are simultaneously mixed (translated) and kept apart (purified), since rigor, disinterestedness and objectivity assure scientific authority. The whale appears caught up in human activity, part of culture, and yet the translation of the whale into a social being is also denied through purification, since whales are reduced to "nature" in the form of raw material to be exploited by humans.

The whale is pushed out, assigned its place as non-human, in the same moment as it seems to be being accepted as part of the social. The same could be said for Neurath's whale, which also appears primarily as a human resource.

Nevertheless, Neurath's envisaged whale exhibit also invokes beauty, hunger, starvation. The dismembered whale connects peoples across the globe, connects my desire for beauty with your hunger. If "everything comes back to man" it is not to rational, scientific man, but to the diversity of feeling, living, eating humans. Human attachment to the whale, human dependence on the whale is not "happiness neutral" to use Neurath's own phrase.7 At the same time the feelings evoked here are all to do with the use of the whale and with the hunt.

We can read Neurath's explanation of what is missing from the whale hall as indicative of what whales were to people at the time. The whale was industrial material, often described in terms of the number of barrels of oil it yielded. Philip Hoare's recent book Leviathan or, The Whale, inspired by Moby-Dick, shows vividly how, at the height of the industry, and for those directly involved, the whale was known primarily as a calculable, disassembled object.8 Fortunes depended on it, far-flung lives were connected by it. In another context the art historian Michael Baxandall has written very eloquently about the way the merchant classes viewed paintings in fifteenth

century Italy. Trained in calculation and volume, they saw in a very different way to the present-day admirer of a Renaissance painting.9 Similarly, whalemen and whalers looked at the animal with trained eyes: they estimated and described its size and strength with a view to its capture, in relation to volumes of oil and blubber, with an eye on market prices.

Yet the whale is also a fearsome creature, and the encounter with a living whale is an encounter with another conscious being which orients itself towards you, which responds, acts and reacts. Encounters with these creatures would have evoked strong feelings, however much the whalemen were trained to see the whale as an object, as potential commodities, or in terms of the work they would undertake on its dead body. They saw the whale as an industrial object, labored on the whale's body, and also could be inspired to terror and awe as they faced the creatures they slaughtered. As the literary theorist Philip Armstrong expresses it, nineteenth century whalemen had an experience that, "routinely alternated between dangerous encounters with the vast materiality of the living animal and its reduction to dead and partial resources, a commodity to be measured by the barrel, reified by the factory ship's technological procedures and its specialization of labor."10

This vacillation between the two perspectives may have

diminished by the time Neurath was writing, as the industrialised mass extermination of whales was underway. New technologies and forms of industrial organization meant an end to the struggle between man and whale, and perhaps to the sense of the whale as an awe-inspiring "monster." Whales were slaughtered on sight and en masse, and the huge corpses were processed on factory ships in ever-more efficient ways, weighed, measured and reduced to saleable units with no chance for either side to step back and wonder at the other. Whales were now a war resource, for use in the manufacture of nitro-glycerin. As John Berger's famous essay "Why Look at Animals?" suggests, modern industrial society sets animals at a distance from us, making it hard to see the animal as co-dependent, to relate to it as more than an object.11

Berger's essay also suggests that this detachment of humans from other animals also proliferates new symbolic, emotive and sentimental attachments to animals. The whale remained, and is still, a powerful creature in myth and symbolism. We do not need any actual encounter with a whale, life-size whale model or whale skeleton to develop strong, even passionate, feelings toward it. The possibility of love for the whale, of fear, empathy, awe may be provoked by narrative accounts, by fictions, rumours, pictures, and our capacity to imagine. These feelings are variable and historically specific. Few people now face a

whale knowing they have to kill it or may be killed by it. Moreover, I cannot say whether the tears that come to my eyes whenever I see film footage of a whale's tail rising and sinking below the surface of the ocean, might have any of the same emotive content as the tears in a nineteenth century sailors eyes, when he saw the same sight for real. A gulf lies between us, in which a photographic cliché has been born, whales have been driven to the edge of extinction, and environmentalism has become a popular cause. Even so, in the 1930s as now, most people's relationship with whales was with imagined whales. These do not possess the same certainty, the same calculable quality as "the balance of trade" and "economic crises" but they affect us just as much.

2. The Properties of the Whale

Although he ignores other emotional and meaningful attachments to the whale, Neurath is not arguing that we need see the whale solely in instrumental terms. He simply suggests we restore the social character to something that has been misconceived, and misrepresented, as purely nature. This is consistent with the Marxist perspective that Neurath knew well. Marx used the example of a cherry tree to argue that objects we conceive of as "nature" are the product of human activity.

Commerce enabled the cherry tree to appear before us as an immediate, natural thing. As Marx wrote, “the sensuous world is not a thing given from all eternity, ever remaining the same, but the product of industry and the state of society...a human product.”12 Similarly for Neurath, “everything leads to men and society.” In his proposed exhibit there is therefore no sense of the whale as a creature existing regardless of, and outside, human society and human work on it. Yet the whale as an animal does exist regardless of us. Alive, it is a beast with its own purposes, its own intentions, its own unfathomable world. To encounter a living whale is, as Berger suggests, to encounter something that looks back, but across a gulf: it is to encounter an “other”, similar and different from oneself.13 The whale exhibit is a different case. After death, after its technological transformation into a museum exhibit, what is shown to us as “a whale” is, like Marx’s cherry tree, the product of human labor, social transactions.

One way of explaining how the whale exhibit becomes a whale for us is to consider how the apparently innate properties of entities may actually be cultural impositions. We impose meaning onto the things of the world by bringing a certain “baggage” to any encounter--so that for example, certain kinds of illustrations and written encounters of whales may have predisposed the nineteenth century museum visitor to view the

whale as a "monster." No museum models or specimens are ever neutrally exhibited. They do not appear before us as simple matters of fact, but are produced by various exhibition practices, contextual framings, institutional conventions. To see the whale as something that is socially and culturally constructed means attending to how such practices, frames, and institutions actually produce the object as a whale. The emphasis here is not on the actual process of construction (the cleaning and processing of bones, the measurements, the papier mâché and wood) but on the discourses or scripts which make it possible to see and act towards the display in one way and not another. The ways we perceive, represent, and classify the whale are imposed cultural ideas.14

The whale-object is not simply sensuously given to us, nor does it appear to a viewer innocent of the discourses and context that surrounds it. Nevertheless visitors encounter it bodily, as a material thing, in actual space, and via their senses. From a phenomenological perspective we might say that the whale (object) and the visitor (subject) work together.15 The museum visitor orients her attention, and also herself toward it. The object impresses itself upon her materially, but the properties she perceives as belonging to it are not simply "in" the object but in its relation to her. If the whale model has certain material properties that she takes into account,

this is because of her particular bodily engagement with it: thus, weight becomes a felt quality of the whale skeleton only for those people assigned the task of hanging it in the hall. The workers doing this will experience it as resistant or malleable, as workable or not, just as whale oil materially lends itself to certain industrial uses and not others. Every subjective encounter with the object, even for visitors just looking, is also a material encounter. By exhibiting the whale in certain ways, and allowing visitors to engage in certain ways (to touch, or not to touch, for example) an exhibition might cross out certain properties of the whale, while directing visitors toward others.

Suspended in its great hall, the whale is a designed object, whether model or reconstructed skeleton, put together to represent a whale, and therefore like all representations, to draw attention to certain aspects, to invite us to think about whales in certain ways. Text, labels, and other contextual material also inform how visitors see it. Other informative exhibits--photographs and charts, animals of related species, and other whale remains--orient visitors towards the whale in the centre of the hall, directing them to these properties and not those. In this context, certain properties of the whale exhibit in the centre of the room become vivid, while others recede as irrelevant, go out of focus or disappear altogether.

Therefore, changing the exhibition context as Neurath proposes, would change the properties of the whale.

This process of recontextualisation, by which some of the properties of an exhibited object become perceptible and others disappear from view, may be described as the object's "social life." The notion of the "social life of things" is usually attributed to the anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, and emphasizes changeability. A good example from art historian Philip Fisher concerns a hypothetical sword that changes hands and moves from weapon through treasure and loot, to becoming a museum specimen. There, the sword is no longer lifted and swung. It becomes something of primarily visual and narrative, educational interest. Fisher takes the view that objects shape and constrain human activity and that, through their place in a "community of objects" they direct our attention, but he also argues that the traits of an object are only real within certain social scripts: "...our access assembles and disassembles what the object is." Referring to his sword example, he says, "Once it is bolted down in a display and not swung in a certain way we cannot say that balance or imbalance is even a fact about it. Without a class of warriors, trained to fight in certain ways, even the permission to lift and swing the sword could tell us nothing."16

The whale has certain traits, certain properties that

result from its material existence in the world. But, on this account, these properties only matter if visitors can access them. In altering our access, orientation and interpretation, exhibition contexts alter the properties of objects since those properties only exist in a relationship between subject and object. From a perspective like Fisher's, the whale exhibit is only a social actor insofar as it might determine how visitors can behave, and orient their attention. From a social science or cultural studies perspective, objects often appear as "mere receptacles for human categories."17 Very few social scientists or cultural theorists would argue that all reality is socially constructed. They retain a category of the natural, or extra-social, for certain kinds of objects. According to Latour, this means dividing "nature" into two kinds of things: "soft" objects which are "white screens" for projection (what we see as their natural properties are our own ideas projected onto them), and "hard" larger forces (such as biology, or laws of physics) that shape society. He argues against this division. Either we need to see things like the laws of physics as the arbitrary projections of society, he says, or we have to rethink the idea that any objects are simply white screens. Latour introduces the term "quasi-objects" to describe those things that are "much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective" than the hard forces or objects, and yet also, not arbitrary

projections, but “much more real, nonhuman and objective.” 18

If the whale hall were to include what Neurath says it does not, and if this were to make “everything lead to man and society”, the whale in the hall would have to be a “soft” object that can simply have new meanings attached to it. If we take this view, we treat the suspended whale as a white screen. Even an approach that attends to the object’s social life, conceives of it as an instrument for people, something that changes only through human attention and uses. By contrast, Latour gives a much stronger meaning to a thing’s liveliness, suggesting that material things confront us with their materiality, demand from us certain kinds of care, refuse to do some things, differentiate between us and do other things that were never intended by us. This does not make them alive but it does make them “actants”, not as active as “agents” but not simply playing a prescribed role, either. Things participate in our social lives, not simply as a means to our ends, but alongside us. We are “enveloped, entangled, surrounded” by things, passionately connected and interdependent. Latour conceives of them as “complex assemblies of contradictory issues” and as material, actual, substantive.19

Latour also suggests that the semiotic and material properties of a thing cannot be separated. The whale exhibit’s communicative aspect is part of its materiality, not a layer

superimposed on the thing that we can peel off and replace at whim. Misled by the "modernist opposition between what was social, symbolic, subjective, lived and what was material, real, objective and factual", we have tended to forget that symbols are always material and to treat the material as if this were just a medium, a carrier.20 The whale on display speaks to us (if ambiguously) through its bones, through its shape, through its vastness. Even the skeleton is produced as a signifying object. A process has been gone through to make it stand for a whale. The bones have been cleaned and processed, joined together, made into a construction that can then be hoisted up to the ceiling. Through these procedures it is made to describe aspects of the whale.

Yet a skeleton also conceals this, seeming to say "I am whale" rather than "this is what the whale is like." I have written elsewhere about how taxidermy, like photography, stakes its truth claim in the combination of its direct, causal relationship in the body of the animal it represents (its indexicality), and its visual realism.21 Because taxidermy looks like and is made out of the thing it represents, it demands that we respond to it as more than just an object. Thus children ask their stumped parents, "Is it real?" and "Is it dead?" In the case of skeletons, there is less of the visible form of the animal present, but there is still a claim to realism: we assume

this is what the animal looks like “underneath” or “inside”. Models, however, cannot root their claim to truth in the direct relationship to the thing, they have no status as scientific specimens and are purely display objects. In the case of the massive blue whale models mentioned earlier (at the Smithsonian, the American Museum of Natural History and the Natural History museum in London), the accuracy of the model was (until recently) very difficult for visitors to assess. This is because very few people have actually seen blue whales, and a living blue whale was not photographed until the mid 1970s. Rossi cites Richard Van Gelder, the chairman of the Department of Mammology at the American Museum of Natural History who was assigned the task of producing a new blue whale in 1959. Of the old model, Van Gelder stated, “so far as accuracy was concerned, I couldn’t see much wrong with it, mainly because I had never seen a blue whale.”22

However, if measurements and photographs have been taken, if various procedures have been adhered to, the scientific character of the display might be assured, and models can also count as truthful and reliable displays. The American Museum of Natural History’s 1907 whale was based on photographs of dead whales and on the Smithsonian’s whale model, which itself was based on plaster casts laboriously taken from a dead whale. What makes the whale-object a convincing whale, is not only a direct

physical connection with the animal it represents, but the rigor of the processes involved and the authority of science and objectivity that they carry with them. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison argue in relation to scientific illustration, objectivity does not simply exist, but is developed through techniques and practices, regimes and routines.23 The "mechanical objectivity" attributable to photography and the directness or indexicality of the plastercast underwrite the model's truth-claim but so does the expert knowledge and skills of the palaentologists, taxidermists and biologists who produced the models. The nineteenth century commitment to truth to nature meant that the specific singular whale had also to be generalized, to become the typical whale, by eliminating or at least playing down the anomalous or the atypical aspects of a specimen. The exhibit is the result of certain processes: technical procedures, rituals, habits, disciplines. Therefore, the whale-object, whether skeleton or model, is always already, to adopt another word from Latour, an "imbroglio"--a tangled knot of human social practices and whalishness, of material, technical thingliness, and ideas. Neurath's hypothetical whale would not be a bounded solid object, but a multiple, entangled quasi-object--already socialised, already embedded in the world of natural science and its ways of seeing the world but also concretely present before the museum's visitors. Because it is

already so, we cannot say that it has no properties, or that its properties are dependent on our access.

It is hard to imagine a whale-model as an imbroglio because the shape of certain whales (blue whales for example) that appears so whole, so streamlined. As Hoare reminds us, the earth had been pictured from space before the first underwater photographs of whales were taken: "we knew what the world looked like before we knew what whales looked like."24 Whales, that is, fully in their element. The whale models in museums preceded this, giving a sense of the whale's suspended grace, but the analogy is a good one, because somehow, the whale seems as bounded and as whole as the earth does in those pictures. Before that, whales were mostly perceived in fragments, as parts that did not add up. Those parts that surfaced were allegedly taken for islands or for other fabulous beasts. Caught, or beached, whales become formless, ungainly things. Yet now they seem bounded, self-evident, and also singular--"the whale." So much so, that when the philosopher Ian Hacking writes (in The Social Construction of What?) of how categories of people get produced as "a definite class" or subspecies in the singular ("the child viewer", "the woman refugee", "the disabled individual"), he says "like 'the whale'."25 He could have chosen any animal, but the whale is the most appropriate.

So the whale-model is already embedded within, and has

embedded within it, practices, procedures and protocols, yet it appears to us as whole and unassailable because of its shape and its sheer size. The blue whale suspended from the ceiling of the Natural History museum in London is designed to impress on me the size of a blue whale. Its 1:1 scale is obviously a material property but also a designed, symbolizing, meaningful aspect of it. To fully comprehend its size it helps if I can get my body close to the (model) whale body. Largeness is not a fact about the blue whale any more than smallness is a fact about me. Size is relational, and my experience of the difference in size between me and the whale is between the two of us. No other objects need join this community, no beautifully designed exhibits need point me to this, the main thing I need is proximity. I also need some guarantee that this is how a blue whale looks and this is its true size. How I then understand and experience my encounter with a museum whale will depend on all sorts of factors--I may have picked up from other displays and paintings a Romantic understanding of the relationship between the human body and the vastness of nature, and that might shape how I feel about this. In any case, the difference in scale is unlikely to be a neutral fact for me, and I am unlikely to respond with indifference. The Natural History museums that hit upon the idea of suspending their whales from ceilings, well knew their spectacular and emotive power.

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3. Managing Wonder

Size connects the museum experience with the experience of living whales. Even in contexts where the whale was seen primarily as an industrial-technological resource and a set of commodities, its physical presence was overpowering and had to be managed. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century port cities that prospered from the whaling industry, the whale was a symbolic presence but also very much a physical one. Ishmael, the narrator in Melville's Moby Dick, remarks of the city of New Bedford,

> "...nowhere in all America will you find more patrician-like houses; parks and gardens more opulent, than in New Bedford. Whence came they? how planted upon this once scraggy scoria of a country?
>
> Go and gaze upon the iron emblematical harpoons round yonder lofty mansion, and your question will be answered. Yes; all these brave houses and flowery gardens came from the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. One and all, they were harpooned and dragged up hither from the bottom of the sea."26

In this contrast between an airy neighbourhood and the violent activity that made it possible, houses and gardens are

shown to be whalish in scale. They become interchangeable, one by one harpooned, one house, one whale. In places like New Bedford, the physical presence of the dead whale's body was concealed in the wealthy parts of the city. The whale was transformed into a symbol, and from 1856 its city hall proudly bore the motto Lucem Diffundo ("We light the world").27 But the viscera of the whale was less easy to forget in the port itself. Very often the whale bodies were managed by being dissected and processed by the time the ship arrived in port. Nevertheless, in New Bedford, whale oil had "saturated the soil and the air was redolent with the heavy odour", as one speaker recalled with nostalgia at the 1916 opening of the Bourne Whaling Museum.28

By the time the whale's body permeated the mechanisms on which modern civilization was being built, it no longer smelt and it had been efficiently reduced to manageable amounts of raw material. It spread into fashion and commodity culture in the form of face creams, corsets, and leathers, into industry as machine lubricants, and lit the streets of the great metropolises. In these places the visceral presence of the whale could not be felt. Nevertheless, this transformation took a great deal of labour and industrial effort. Large whales, such as sperm whales, were difficult and dangerous to hunt, and transforming their bodies into useable materials was also a dangerous, physical process. The whale corpse appeared, first of

all, as a mass that had to be managed with effort.

As Marx explained, human labour is concealed in the commodity (including the cherry tree), so that the opulent displays of the department stores seem to have nothing to do with factory labour. Similarly, the whalish element was concealed in the whale-based products that appeared on the market (soaps, skin creams, umbrellas, varnish and margarine for instance). When whale products were gradually superceded by other materials, such as petroleum, spring steel, rapeseed oil, and eventually plastic, the change was hardly felt, except in those places like New Bedford where it meant unemployment and decline.29

Managing whales' vast corpses was part of exhibition culture too. A very vivid example of the unmanageability of the whale's body after death is given in an 1889 New York Times article about "a giant whale that has lately been exhibited in the Prater" (Wien). Problems with the preservation of the animal meant that "the monster has not been able to resist the laws of nature and has gradually passed into a state of complete putrefaction" resulting in an "effluvia" that "has pervaded the whole Prater." Intended as a gift to the museum, the whale instead had to be "given over to the public flayer" to be cut up and buried.30 By Neurath's time, embalming provided a partial solution to this dilemma. Traveling whale shows were big

business in the United States from 1928 (though they had existed since around 1920), and they continued until about 1937. The principal touring company was the Pacific Whaling Company, which also brought a whale to Britain in 1931. This was not part of the whaling industry, but a show business company, that had chosen a suitably nautical name. The Pacific Whaling Company's displays of hump backs and fin backs were very profitable. For their first display, they acquired a whale from a ship that usually provided whales for the soap industry and attempted to embalm it, but it exploded. Undeterred, they proceeded to exhibit it, making a great profit, despite its increasingly putrid smell.31

To manage the whale's immense body is extraordinarily difficult. That people went to such effort was because whales were profitable, and they were so because of the demand to experience them first-hand. How this kind of experience was assimilated is another question. Writing in 1940, the critic Walter Benjamin observed that newspapers prevent readers from assimilating news content into their own experience, and that this separation is perpetuated through the style, layout and journalistic practices that inform the newspaper and are part of its form.32 Latour also says of newspapers "All of culture and all of nature get churned up everyday...but the analysts, thinkers, journalists and decision-makers will slice the

delicate network for you into tidy compartments where you will find only science, only economy, only social phenomena, only local news, only sentiment, only sex."33 This compartmentalization of knowledge is partly what Neurath is challenging with his hypothetical whale. To make sense of the exhibited whale, to bring it into experience, means making connections, means bringing it closer.

For Neurath this meant overcoming the arbitrariness of modern education, the lack of connection between topics as well as the lack of relevance to lived experience. In another essay, he wrote, "The wealth of scientific detail is no longer held together by a unitary approach, and in a certain sense it is left to chance whether a man thinks about some linguistic formations in Chinese or about a medieval text, about African beetles or about wind conditions at the North Pole."34 However, if the compartmentalization of knowledge is associated with specialization, the arbitrariness of knowledge is not. The expert knowledge of whales that developed in the nineteenth century was principally connected to the pursuit of whales for profit. In other words it was motivated, instrumental knowledge. Non-motivated knowledge is more usually associated with other social classes--with the leisure practices of the aristocracy, the working and lower-middle classes. While an education left to chance could be the product of neglect (a poorly organized

museum, a badly designed curriculum), interest led by wonder, whim and curiosity is also characteristic of the dilettante, the leisured amateur, and of popular entertainments.

Whales were most explicitly made into objects of curiosity and wonder in the traveling whale shows mentioned earlier. They combined circus techniques with mortuary skills, scientific information with whalers' first hand narratives. Whales were toured on the railroads, and the success of the whale shows meant that instead of being a sideshow to the main business of the whaling industry, preparing dead whales for exhibit became an "assembly line process." More whale morticians were trained and employed. As the public became more accustomed to the spectacle, the Pacific Whaling Company adopted new techniques to draw the crowds. They advertised in newspapers, using the same publicity techniques as the circus and many of the same showmen. The whales were accompanied by lectures and sometimes other animal based attractions including (at the other end of the scale) flea circuses.35

Whales had become sensational, and the chief sensation to be had was the feeling of proximity: to get close to the whale, to touch the creature, even if it had to be dead for this to happen. A photograph from 1931 depicts a woman applying make-up while sat inside the mouth of the whale exhibited by the Pacific Whaling Company at London's Olympia.[ILLUSTRATION] Film footage

from 1954 shows a model called Anita Woolf climbing in the mouth of the 65 foot embalmed "Jonah the Whale." [ILLUSTRATION] Such images glamorized the show's promise of proximity. Mass culture brings things closer, as Benjamin observed with reference to technological reproduction, but reproduction was no substitute for the traveling whale show. Bringing whales closer involved immense effort: the newsreel of Jonah's arrival shows a 100 foot lorry negotiating London streets with difficulty, and a voiceover explains that the whale could not be taken by train because its immense weight threatened to break the rails. Proximity was also assured through the lectures that accompanied the whale shows. At their peak in the 1930s, these were delivered by seasoned showmen, using nautical language and dressed as sailors, convincing the audience they were whalemen who had "felt the mist in their faces as they harpooned the whales they were showing."36

In Neurath's time, size was the predominant property of the exhibited whale as far as its audiences were concerned, and proximity allowed them to experience this. The hugeness of the whale makes it difficult to manage and also wondrous. So, although Neurath is critical of "arbitrary knowledge", an exhibition which connects whales to its human uses, in an attempt to overcome the separation of knowledge and experience, needs also to allow for the wondrousness of whales (both whales

themselves and whale exhibits). As long as the huge whale suspended in the centre of the hall remains a thing to wonder at, it will be relevant to its audience's lived experience, not by leading us toward "man and society" but away: because wonder might unseat us, allow us to forget ourselves, even--like the women in the photograph and film--to be consumed by the whale.37

Image captions:

1. A woman retouches her make-up inside the mouth of Eric the Whale at Olympia, photograph courtesy of the Natural History Museum, London.

2. Anita Woolf climbs into the mouth of the Jonah the Whale, film still courtesy of Pathé.

3. Embalmed whale on tour in England, 1931, photograph courtesy of the Natural History Museum, London

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NOTES

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3. Smithsonian Museum website, http://vertebrates.si.edu/fishes/ichthyology_history/exhibits.html, accessed 12 November 2009.

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6. Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 10-13.

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8. Philip Hoare, Leviathan or, The Whale (London: Fourth Estate, 2008) 31.

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21 Michelle Henning, "Skins of the real: taxidermy and photography", in Bryndis Snaebjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, Nanoq: Flat-out and Bluesome (London: Black Dog Press, 2006) 25-46. The concept of indexicality comes from C.S.Peirce. For a Peircian approach to the representation of nature, see Nils

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29 J.M. Lindgren, "'Let Us Idealize Old Types of Manhood'", 167.

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37 On wonder see Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder" in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds) Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 42-56.