THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTER/NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF 1851

Mariana Verdes, Assist. PhD Candidate, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract: The paper aims to present the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 as the venue of display for all sorts of imaginable and unimaginable commodities and as a common denominator of national identity throughout western civilization. Considered by the accounts of the epoch as a benchmark for measuring the narrative of progress, the exhibition –through its sweeping modifications in the visual techniques and display -contributed to the consolidation of British national identity.

Keywords: international exhibition, identity, culture, commodity, consumer culture.

A major and unique phenomenon of its time, the Great Exhibition of 1851 was meant to reflect the development of capitalism, nationalism and imperialism. When we think of Britain as the cradle of industrial revolution, it comes as no surprise that the organization of the first *"Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations"* took place in London, the epitome of what modern commerce and technology represented in the nineteenth century. By the mid-nineteenth century Britain'slucrative economy had long been acknowledged as a focal point of the world economy. Its leading role was determined and consolidated by the astonishing results of simultaneous multiple revolutions-technological, economic, commercial, consumer, political and industrial- that generated a strong sense of national identity as reflected in the pride of detaining the supremacy in so many respects.

As stated by its organizers, the exhibition's purposewas to be a venue for British nationalism displayed at its fullest: to gather under the same roof the industrial products from around the world and celebrate, by comparison, its supremacy in industry.

The novelty impact with which the British exhibition is credited consisted not in the concept as such but in the grand scale at which it was achieved. The British cannot boast about having time ascendancy in the organization of exhibitions since they had been going on in France under the form of national industrial fairs for almost half a century. What the British can be proud of is having taken over and remodeled a concept into a spectacular show of an unprecedented scale.

Opened over a six-month period, the Exhibition was inaugurated on May 1st by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in the impressive building made up of 84,000 square metres of glass and 3,500 tons of cast iron. The revolutionary building, that Joseph Paxton constructedbetween 1850-1851and *Punch*coined as the Crystal Palace, was a unique invention in itselfsince it helped reflect, refract and magnify the image of Britain's identity as a leading nation in industry, science and art. The exhibition's architecture took after the traditional line of British conservatories; it had impressive high halls, flooded with light that housed, in a surprising juxtaposition, an abundance of vegetation and large industrial equipment in full operation.

The exhibition consisted of a three-layered building dominated by a 20 metre high and 563 meter long transept. 14 metre high side naves were distributed on its sides. Galleries were built into the sides of the main transept. A barrel roofed cross nave divided the transept and

allowed the preservation of three large elm trees from Hyde Park in its interior. The architectural idea combined with the technical solution added to the uniqueness and popularity of the Crystal Palace. The building structure, erected entirely of cast iron and glass, offered "sensationally, strength without mass. In ferrovitreous architecture light flooded interiors through glass roofs, annihilating the simple gradations of shadow, rising out shade. Spatial boundaries became indeterminate as wall mass manifested itself as a simple translucent marker.'(Armstrong 2008:9)

The unprecedently large-scale use of glass as a building material in the exhibition ushered a modern visuality where interior and exterior spaces are dissolved and become interchangeable, where the traditional sense of interiority and exteriority is stripped away to be replaced by the fragmentary and confusingexperience of seeing.

Thomas Richards considers the impact of the Exhibition as a unique moment which *'inaugurated a way of seeing things that marked indelibly the cultural and commercial life of Victorian England and fashioned a mythology of consumerism that has endured to this day"* (Richards 1990:19). Referring to the design made by Joseph Paxton who favoured a 'terraced pyramid of successively receding stories of glass and iron' (Richards 1990:19), Richards points out the architectural innovative design that embodied the contradictory desires and aspirations with which people in the Victorian age started to invest the manufactured things.

Considered to have a double nature, the Crystal Palace was seen as a museum and a market at the same time. Paralleling the principles of classification and comparison illustratedin museums, the objects were arranged into four categories pointing to the cycle of production: Raw Materials, Machinery and Mechanical Invention, Manufactures, and Sculpture and Plastic art. Taken together, this array of exhibits constituted an experiential moment for the viewersdue to their new display style: *„Under a single ceiling, surrounded by trees and flooded with light, commodities appeared to have come out of nowhere radiant and ordered into departments that fixed the place of each article and gave it a caption and a number place in the catalogue".*(Richards 1990:20).

As to the market side, the superabundance of the articles in the Crystal Palace made the Exhibition exult the sense of prosperity, of economic miracle in the making, the undeniable mark of British identity at that specific time in the history.

Having as an organizing criterion the idea of the nation, the exhibition was divided into two halves with Britain occupying the former, while the latter was distributed to foreign exhibitors. One could easily infer from this distribution of space that one half for one nation alone reflected the British imperial might and economic supremacy.

The 100,000 exhibits that bordered the central transeptof the Crystal Palace together with its side courts and galleries ranged from state of the art industrial products to sculptures, paintings, ornamental gardens, fountains or entertainment equipment, to name but a few.

Their amassment under the same glass building could account for a metonymicinterpretation in that they were meant to represent not some heterogeneous, solitary objects but a totality of what progress claimed to be at the time.

The image of surplus projected by the Exhibition and enforced by Prince Albert's speech on the opening day that*'the products of all quarters of the globe are placed at our disposal, and we have only to choose which is the best and cheapest for our purposes*'(quoted

in Wesemael 2001 :700), is one of the many ideological endeavours of the organizers who were keen on rendering the idea of unlimited productive capacity of the capitalist system. Though many commentators have received this ideological strategy with a critical eye and contested its truthfulness with counterarguments from the social and economic realities of the insecure and often unhappy years of the 1830s and 1840s (Richards 1990:28), the Great Exhibition actually succeeded both in creating the sense of surplus and igniting the dream that one day "there would no longer be not enough, but too much, and too much for everyone" (Richards 1990:29).

The exhibition was instrumental in creating the distinction between representation and reality that came to define the way in which we interpret the modern world. The building of the exposition had the main role in creating and feeding a utopian atmosphere for the visitors. To a very large extent the message and meaning of the Exhibition were embodied in the building. The building may have produced the impression that commodities have over flooded the country but this impression was the result of a cleverly staged spectacle.

As vast as it was in execution, the Great Exhibition of 1851 got its root from a single conception: that all human life and cultural endeavours could be represented by exhibiting manufactured items. The Exhibition is considered one of the most influential representative body of the nineteenth century for not only did it enthroned the commodity as the ruling power of modernity but it also delineated the rituals by which consumers worshipped the commodity for the century to come (Richards 1990:1).

Relying greatly upon the idea of spectacle, the Great Exhibition succeeded in creating a visual rhetoric for the commodity that encapsulated the emerging consumer culture. Following Debord's interpretation, the concept of spectacle refers to abstract representations and images that carry meanings entirely separated from the material qualities of the objects and phenomena represented (Debord 1983:60). The case with the Crystal Palace substantiates this theory: the spectacle staged forthe display of objectscaused the divorce of theses commodities from their materiality and their permutation into a world of fantasy which ushered the modern mythology of consumption.

Various commentators ofthe event consider it as a defining moment in the history of consumer culture since it conceptualized "the becoming world of the commodity which is also the becoming commodity of the world" (Debord1983:66) - a process in which the commodity loses its significance of usefulness and acquires the symbolic meaning of the display spectacle/fantasy surrounding it. The visitors that entered the kingdom of objects were swept by the unprecedented display of goods. They were part of a momentous time in history when all sorts of imaginable and unimaginable things had been gathered and put for public display. From huge industrial machines to mass-manufactured objects of everyday use the Crystal Palace was a Promised Land of industrial products. Richards contends that one of the praiseworthy achievements of the Crystal Palace consisted in the systematization of commodity representationdone through its focus on spectacle: the Exhibition constituted the locus of aesthetic representation and open display of goods where visualitybetween objectand viewer turned into a new experience. Displaced from their original place and devoided of their origin and use value, the objects were artistically staged so that to predominate their exchange and aesthetic value. In this line of thought, the exhibition was a precursor of the new

consumerist paradigm based on the consumer-spectator dyad: it absorbed the crowds inside mesmerizing them under the beautifully-choreographed glass interiors.

In Richards words: *"The Great Exhibition began by creating an official rhetoric of public representation for the commodity and ended by making the commodity into the one rhetoric of all representation. The rhetoric, which has been designated spectacle, epitomized an emerging commodity culture and contributed materially to fashioning, for the first time in history, "a dominant machinery of specifically capitalist representation"* (Richards 1990:1).
The exhibition was documented extensively at the time when it took place. As it is expected with such events, on one hand, the supporters seemed to compete with one another in their panegyrics written to show their bewilderment in front of such a grand-scale, impressive spectacle while, on the other hand, the detractors and the sceptics lamented over the incongruous, confusing, chaotic organization and object display.

In spite of these conflicting views, the Great Exhibition has continued to be consideredas a breakthrough in the orchestration of large-scale, manipulative, spectacles that came to be paradigmatic for the 20th century. The space of the exhibition, flooded in light reflected by the glass architecture, echoed the Paris Arcades andheralded the soon- to be developed department stores and offered its visitors the opportunity to stroll around and become, unwearyingly, the window shoppers of the coming age. This prophetic public space made of translucent glass walls and iron frame, through its transparency, dissolved the borders between public and private space and turned into an area of private dream and fantasy, an experience that defines the then-nascent mode of consumer contemplation. As Audrey Jaffe says: "*The exhibition transformed its visitors into window shoppers oriented towards consumption even when there was nothing immediately on sale: visitors were spectators of consumable goods, the machine involved in their production and distribution, and, of course, one another"* (Jaffe).

The glass-enclosed Great Exhibition provided an ambiance akin to an amusement park: a spectacular place of concentrated commodity display that waswatchedby a continuously moving crowd, whose passagewas, in its turn, organized and controlled by authorities for the sake of safety; a place that encouraged gazing at static objectsthat were staged against a dramatic background and ornament; a place that, in Jaffe's words, "*moved spectators from object to object, never allowing their gazes to rest or remain uninterrupted for a period of significant duration; it articulated the visitor's movement as a series of pauses before spectacular objects and displays*. "(Jaffe)

The Great Exhibition ushered the randomly assembled urban crowd gathered around the mesmerizing power of commodity which was to become, in Richards' words, "the centerpiece of everyday life'.

Far from conflicting with national identity, the commodity display at the Great Exhibition contributed significantly to the shaping of mid-nineteenth British identity: the prowess of having erected a palace which produced a commodity world, an imperial spectacle, a picture of productive power of new industrial technologies, an emblem of the emerging modern industrial society. The event was a perfect venue for nations to display the image they wanted to project to the world and to strengthen their national identity by endorsing the idea of progress and development through the products exhibited.

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