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**Crossing the Boundaries, Blurring the Boundaries:  
The Museum of Jurassic Technology as a Postmodern American  
Space <sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The Museum of Jurassic Technology, located in Los Angeles, California, is one of the weirdest, yet thought provoking, museums in the world. Visitors encounter objects mainly taken from nature, science, and art, clearly labeled and explained with Latin terminology and detailed scholarly descriptions, which, at second glance, invite the questioning of reality, actuality, and plausibility, as well as history, science, art, culture, and ultimately, the museum as a concept. The museum looks like a typical museum: banners, signs with gilded letters, polite reminders concerning museum etiquette, thematically-curated exhibit halls with subdued lightning, glass and wooden showcases, velvet display cloths, microscopes, explanatory labels, backlit graphics, diagrams or audiovisual presentations, catalogues, apology cards for temporarily missing objects, the labyrinthine architecture, a rest room, and a museum shop. As this article argues, despite the fact that the Museum of Jurassic Technology satisfies all conventional stylistic expectations, it is subversive, blurry, amusing, and tricky. A postmodern space which displays the merging of subjective and objective knowledge, it transforms ephemeral artifacts into valuable sources of American history, science, art, and culture, blurring the line between enlightenment and entertainment as well as constantly

crossing the boundaries between reality and fiction/imagination/play/fantasy, regardless of being unsure of their borders.

**Keywords:** The Museum of Jurassic Technology, David H. Wilson, American Culture, Museum Studies, Postmodernity

**Sınırların Kesişmesi, Sınırların Bulanıklaşması:  
Postmodern Bir Amerikan Mekânı Olarak Dinozorlar Çağı  
Teknoloji Müzesi**

**Öz**

Los Angeles, California’da bulunan Dinozorlar Çağı Teknoloji Müzesi, kesinlikle en garip ancak en düşündürücü müzelerden biridir. Ziyaretçiler çoğunlukla doğadan, bilimden ve sanattan, her biri Latince terminoloji kullanılarak açıkça etiketlenmiş ve detaylı bilimsel tanımlarla açıklanmış pek çok nesne ile karşılaşır; ancak aslında dikkatlice bakıldığında bu nesnelere gerçekliği, hakikat ile akla yatkınlığı, tarihi, bilimi, sanatı, kültürü ve sonuçta bir kavram olarak müzeyi sorgulamaya vesile olur. Afişler, yaldızlı harflerle yazılmış işaretler, müze kurallarını kibarca anımsatan notlar, loş aydınlatma, cam ve ahşap vitrinler kullanılarak konularına göre tasarlanmış sergi salonları, kadife sergileme kumaşları, mikroskoplar, açıklayıcı tasnif etiketleri, grafikler ya da görsel işitsel sunumlar, kataloglar, geçici süreyle sergilenemeyen nesnelere için özür kartları, dolambaçlı mimari, umumi tuvalet ve hatta bir müze mağazasıyla, Dinozorlar Çağı Teknoloji Müzesi, tipik bir müzeyi andırır. Bu makalenin öne sürdüğü gibi, her ne kadar Dinozorlar Çağı Teknoloji Müzesi alışlagelmiş biçimsel beklentileri karşılarsa da, altüst edici, zihin bulandırıcı, eğlendirici ve şakacıdır. Öznel ve nesnel bilginin iç içe geçişini gösteren bir post-modern mekân olarak, barındırdığı gelip geçici nesnelere Amerikan tarihinin, biliminin, sanatının ve kültürünün değerli kaynakları haline dönüştürerek, aydınlanma ve eğlenme arasındaki çizgiyi bulanıklaştırır ve hakikat ile kurmaca/hayali/oyun/fantezi arasında nerelerde olduklarından emin olunamayan sınırları mütemediyen keser.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** The Museum of Jurassic Technology (“Dinozorlar Çağı Teknoloji Müzesi”), David H. Wilson, Amerikan Kültürü, Müzecilik, Postmodernite

Museums are institutions that carry out the missions of collecting, conserving, exhibiting, studying, and accommodating world's artistic, cultural, historical, and scientific achievements and heritage. Traditionally, museums are classified into five basic types—general, history, art, natural history and natural science, and science and technology. Even if the world's earliest known cultural history museum can be traced to the private collection of a Babylonian princess and her father who lived over 2500 years ago (Grande x), *Homo sapiens* has always been interested in collecting and gathering animals, plants, and objects. Likewise, visiting the museums has always been well-liked. Human beings visit museums “out of curiosity; for education, inspiration, entertainment, distraction, comfort, safety, a sense of community; to see beautiful things, new and different things; to have their view of the world enlarged, feel a part of something important—the long and richly textured history of human existence” (Cuno 2).

Early museums are typically the private collections of affluent individuals, aristocratic families or exceptional art institutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Characteristically, such exhibits are relatively small collections that contain oddities, rare, extraordinary or interesting objects and artifacts, and even preserved human body parts, skeletons or organs, taxidermied small-size animals and plants. “The collections sometimes blended fact and fiction, featuring faked mythical creatures (e.g., unicorns, mermaids, dragons, and gryphons) made from parts of real animals stuck together by barber surgeons”<sup>2</sup> (Grande xi). These collections are displayed in “cabinets of curiosities”<sup>3</sup> where the items are categorized and stored, and, in addition, their respective stories are preserved. These private museums mirror not only individual choice and taste but also personal wealth and power.

Public museums, on the contrary, reflecting consolidated choice and taste, are institutions systematically collecting, classifying, preserving, and exhibiting historical, archaeological, botanical or cultural (aesthetic) items. They have been constructed since the Renaissance and acquired their modern form during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Bennett 19). Since then, museums, as places capable of transmitting accumulation of ideas and experiences as well as improving both the inner lives and the physical health of humans (Bennett 18), have become among the most critical symbols of Western society. Ironically, though museums are considered to be spaces of enlightenment and entertainment, they are additionally

considered to be places embodying Western hegemonic and imperial characteristics reflecting exploitation and domination. Explicitly, “museums are symbols of unequal power relationships and exclusive enclaves of privileged, hegemonic culture” (Rice 78). Therefore, in short, both private museums and public museums, as collecting and displaying institutions, are not only ideological symbols of power relations but also sources of diversion and information that stimulate wonder.

For Michel Foucault, museums, just like libraries, are “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time” and “are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century” (26). For him, museums are totally contrasting the individualistic mentality of selecting, collecting, and exhibiting behind the creation of cabinets of curiosities. According to Foucault,

the idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. (26)

Even if the most essential mission and goal of the wellbeing of museums is to preserve the times past, they have been subjected to transforming and adjusting themselves according to the current trends in terms of style, architecture, expectations, and innovations, new fields of sciences, recent findings, and fresh interpretations. Matching the changes and challenges in societies, museums, as evolving institutions, have been adapting themselves according to the zeitgeist.

“Since the beginning of museums, their display, architecture and presence have been a means to communicate the identity of the place and people at their core” (Crooke 7). However, the last two decades have witnessed not only a tremendous growth in the number and status of museums around the world but also the debate between those who argue that museums need to change and those who defend the traditional practices (Witcomb 1). Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, museums have been undertaking unremitting

endeavors to re-orient their ideologies, practices, projects, activities, designs, spatiality, and even purposes. “Until recently, museums could be described as repressive and authoritarian symbols of unchanging solid modernity and indeed there are still some museums that cling to this out-dated identity, but across the cultural field many others have moved with nimble flexibility and creative fluidity to respond to the conditions of post-modernity” (Hooper-Greenhill 1). The postmodern is “the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations of human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is skeptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism, and celebrates pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity” (Eagleton 13)<sup>4</sup>. The evolution of museums can be related to the alteration from modernism to postmodernism because museums, as institutions where Foucauldian power dynamics<sup>5</sup> are inherent, are established during the modern era and they have been subject to change during the postmodern era. In consequence, as a recent approach in museum studies, the term “post-museum” is used to refer to the creative re-imagining, experience, and reworking of the identity of the museum (Hooper-Greenhill 1).

Museums in America have been public spaces for research, education, and entertainment since the eighteenth century. “Museums have helped shape the American experience in the past, and they have the potential to play an even more aggressive role in shaping American life in the future” because they are the essential places of community development, communication, and renewal (Skramstad 109). Gradually reflecting more of the multicultural, multiethnic, polyglot, diverse, distinctive, and complex features of the USA, American museums are conventionally community anchors as significant places in promoting national identity and pride. “American museums have come to epitomize American life in many ways. Indeed, there are more undoubtedly many other, perhaps more subtle, ways in which American museums influence society” (Ragsdale 150). At the annual conference of the American Alliance of Museums, Susan H. Hildreth, the director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)<sup>6</sup>, remarks that there are around 35,000 active museums in the USA. According to the museum data file<sup>7</sup>, there are various types of museums categorized in relation to disciplines: “arboretums, botanical gardens, nature centers; historical societies, historic preservation organizations, and history

museums; science and technology centers; planetariums; children's museums; art museums; general museums; natural history and natural science museums; and zoos, aquariums, and wildlife conservation centers" (Frehill 1). Hildreth further explains, "Americans love their museums. Museums of all types . . . are a vital part of the American cultural and educational landscape. They are places where Americans go to pursue the discovery of art, history, science, technology, and the natural world" (qtd. in Widener 4). For Hildreth, museums in America "are powerful drivers of educational, economic and social change and growth in their communities" (qtd. in Widener 4). Hildreth suggests that museums have a vital role in preserving "collective cultural heritage, they provide the rich, authentic content for a nation of learners. Museums respond to the needs of their communities and are recognized as anchor institutions. They are valued not only for their collections and programs but as safe, trusted places that support the ideals of our democratic society" (qtd. in Widener 4). For Americans museums are places "for tactile, emotional, and intellectual contact with people, ideas, or objects that have the potential to inspire" (Skramstad 127). Shortly, Americans enjoy visiting museums because those instructive places have so much to contribute to American life and they serve as places of public or collective memory<sup>8</sup>.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology, founded in 1984 and located "along the main commercial drag of downtown Culver City in the middle of West Los Angeles's endless pseudo-urban sprawl" is one of the weirdest, yet thought provoking, museums in the world. In stark contrast with the gigantic creatures it supposedly displays, the museum building is extremely small in size and unpretentious in appearance with its "fading blue banner facing the street" and can be easily passed right by next to an eye-catching bus stop and glamorous stores around (Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* 10). However, in the recent years more and more Los Angeles city guide books as well as sources on interesting museums or places around the world cite this postmodern American space that illustrates the contemporary American zeitgeist<sup>9</sup>.

To enter the Museum of Jurassic Technology, one will be welcomed only after pressing the buzzer on its brass door according to the sign<sup>10</sup> which is placed "at a facade that evokes a Roman mausoleum" (Perrottet 56). A banner revealing the museum's motto "non-Aristotelian, non-Euclidean, non-Newtonian" hangs over the entrance. "The museum's logo uses the superscript line, signifying

negation, over the letters symbolizing canonical thinkers” (Roth 102). On the entrance of the museum, there is a small admission desk with “a pleasant and seemingly preoccupied staff member” (Roth 102) or David Hildebrand Wilson himself, the founder, proprietor, and director of the museum. As of summer 2019, general admission “donation” costs \$10 for adults, \$8 for students and seniors. The museum also encourages membership for the sustainability of this unique place which offers an exceptional museum experience, “an extensive habitation,” a space in which inconceivable questions can be asked. The museum<sup>11</sup> survives on “a combination of admission fees, a few grants, and modest donations” (Roth 102) and among the essential grants is MacArthur Foundation grant given exclusively to creatively genius people and effective institutions. Evidently, it is worth paying for and visiting the museum since, as one reviewer states that “indeed from the moment you cross the threshold of this hidden Los Angeles treasure it is clear you have stepped sideways in the slipstream of perception” (Wertheim 35).

Again on the entrance, which is puzzlingly also the exit, there is a very small museum gift shop which, as explained by the museum, is “conducted under the careful supervision of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Information, as well as the trustees of the Museum itself”<sup>12</sup>. Visitors can purchase collectibles and commemorative objects, typically the replicas or adaptations of the items displayed in the museum, many of which are produced by and for the museum only. Most of these objects can appeal exclusively to those who have visited the museum and thus learned their contextual and fundamental stories and have really enjoyed the museum; otherwise many of them would be just creepy, weird, and expensive items. The gift shop also sells books: world classics for adults and children, books published by the museum, such as the tenth year catalogue of the museum, and specifically the only book about this museum—Lawrence Weschler’s<sup>13</sup> *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*, which is the finalist for “National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction” and “Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction” in 1995.

The oxymoronic name of the museum is perplexing because the Jurassic period, which was 199.6 million to 145.5 million years ago, is obviously not known for its technology. However, the museum, according to the audiovisual presentation on display at the entrance of the halls, claims to be “an educational institution dedicated to

the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic” (“Introduction and Background”). The introductory audiovisual presentation describing the mission and goal of the museum welcomes the visitors, and, as the visitors would sooner or later realize, it is, in fact, instructive about the characteristics of the museum. This audiovisual presentation confuses the minds rather than clarifying them because it primarily refers to the Jurassic as a geological period of history, and then, almost in seconds, as a geographical region in Egypt on a map in which the north and south regions of Egypt are called Upper and Lower Jurassic. So, what then? Does Jurassic refer to a period, or a place, or both, but, what exactly is their connection, if there is any? Are these terms used only to explicate a setting where scientific language is utilized to be convincing? Or, is this audiovisual presentation a perfect example of the power of stories and storytelling in this post-truth era? Consequently, keeping these questions in mind, even those visitors who have not previously thought about the puzzling name of the museum could immediately speculate and “reconsider the issue of veracity” (Wertheim 35) as well as deception. As one reviewer speculates: “When we enter the hallowed halls of museums, how much are we influenced by the aura of authority which surrounds the glass cases? What artifacts and stories do we accept because they are accompanied by scholarly descriptions and Latin names? What ancient or foreign cultures are convinced of purely on the strength of relics and writings identified for us by unseen ‘professors’” (Wertheim 35)? Questions would inevitably multiply as visitors navigate around the halls of this exceptional museum, but they would eventually detect that the museum, through blending fact with fiction, makes a parody of authoritarian discourses and challenges them by (re)production. Despite the fact that the Museum of Jurassic Technology satisfies conventional stylistic expectations, it is subversive, blurry, amusing, and tricky. As a postmodern space which displays the merging of subjective and objective knowledge, it transforms ephemeral artifacts into valuable sources of American history, science, art, and culture, blurring the line between enlightenment and entertainment as well as constantly crossing the boundaries between reality and fiction/imagination/play/fantasy, regardless of being unsure of their borders.

The museum’s name deserves more attention and consequently necessitates research to better comprehend the goal of the museum. Obviously, “the phrase ‘Jurassic technology’ is not meant literally.

Instead, it evokes an era when natural history was only barely charted by science, and museums were closer to Renaissance cabinets of curiosity” (Perrottet 56). As such, the Museum of Jurassic Technology is based on the cabinet of curiosities, the typological prototype of the museum of natural history. The Museum of Jurassic Technology traces its origins back to the earliest days of the museum as an institution and accordingly the primary example of museums of natural history is Noah’s Ark. Claiming that “no treatment of the museum would be complete without mention of Noah’s Ark in which we find the most complete Museum of Natural History the world has ever seen,”<sup>14</sup> the museum firstly displays a scale model of Noah’s Ark. Attached to this model is a statement which can be considered as the mission statement for the museum: “The learner must be led always from familiar objects toward the unfamiliar . . . guided along, as it were, a chain of flowers into the mysteries of life.” Accordingly, the exhibits look back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Renaissance and early enlightenment collections just started to be looked at with scientific and systematic interests, and began to be considered as precious museum items.

On the surface, the Museum of Jurassic Technology looks like a typical traditional museum: banners, signs with gilded letters, polite reminders concerning museum etiquette, thematically-curated exhibit halls with subdued lightning, glass and wooden showcases, velvet display cloths, microscopes, explanatory labels, backlit graphics, diagrams or audiovisual presentations, catalogues, apology cards for temporarily missing objects, the labyrinthine architecture, a rest room, and a museum shop. Yet they function in a totally different way that they had done in typical museums. As Ralph Rugoff, an L.A. art critic, explains, the museum “deploys all the traditional signs of a museum’s institutional authority—meticulous presentation, exhaustive captions, hushed lighting, and state-of-the-art technical armature—all to subvert the very notion of the authoritative as it applies not only to itself but to any museum” (qtd. in Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder* 40).

At first, besides the connotations of the name of the museum, what seems strange can be the employment of very old fashioned telephone receivers near the typical natural history museum style glass showcases. The telephone receivers, once picked up, voice the recorded entire extremely long history or the detailed rambling narration of each specific item on display. The voice in the telephone receiver, “the same

voice as in all the other receivers” is in fact a familiar voice, “the same bland, slightly unctuous voice you’ve heard in every museum slide show or acoustiguide tour or PBS nature special you’ve ever endured: the reassuringly measured voice of unassailable institutional authority” (Weschler, “Inhaling the Spore” 50). The voice immediately brings to mind other familiar vocalized indisputable sources of knowledge and truth, such as documentaries, art galleries, audio text books, and, naturally, other museums, which are all authoritarian, convincing, and instructive sources. However, in this museum, the same voice is intentionally utilized as a manipulative force both to reinforce the credibility of the institutional discourse and to eliminate probable mistrust of the narrations related to the items on display. Clearly, this voice has a controlling and influencing impact upon the visitor’s response primarily on the authenticity and value of the uncommon items on display, and then on the perception of this specific museum. In other words, the museum, reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on the absolutism of singularity, challenges and subverts monologic and authoritarian discourse by other kinds of language which parody or deflate the central, official language and values (Webster 40). Near many of the showcases soft benches are placed so that visitors can sit down comfortably in order to listen to the whole of the carnivalesque audio guides. Juxtaposed to the glass showcases are wooden boxes which enclose holographic displays. Even if they cannot be counted as representatives of the Jurassic technology, all these viewer-activated telephone receivers and viewing devices, indisputably build a bridge between the past and the present, assuring visitors that they are surrounded with once technological but now nostalgic yet still usable and valuable objects from a relatively distant past. Moreover, touching and even using these objects, almost enable metaphorical time travel and encourage participants to engage with the museum.

Lighting in museums is among the most essential issues that require attention. Actually, in buildings like museums, both color temperature and intensity of illumination are adjusted. Generally, rational, optimized, “controlled, diffused natural light” is usually applied, primarily because it prevents possible damage from direct sunlight on museum items (Serafim 35). When one wanders around the Museum of Jurassic Technology, it becomes clear that dim lighting is the preference here. In this museum, dim lighting is not utilized for a single room; all halls and exhibit rooms, except for the roof garden, are

dark, relatively obstructing the view of the explanatory signs, pictures and other framed documents, such as reports of scientific or historical events. This almost fuzzy vision, as an example of the postmodernist architecture feature, creates a spatial disorientation since visitors wander around the museum “without a clear sense of location” (Harvey 301). Furthermore, apparently, in terms of lighting, no great care is taken to avoid any potential damage on museum items because they are, in fact, all created, artificial, simulated objects with no historical or architectural value that necessitate intensive protection.

Visitors encounter objects mainly taken from nature, science, and art, clearly labeled and explained with Latin terminology and detailed scholarly and authoritative descriptions, which, at second glance, invite the questioning of reality, actuality, and plausibility, as well as history, science, art, culture, and ultimately, the museum as an institution and a concept. Despite the fact that the museum seems to meet the conventional stylistic expectations, it is confusing, frolicsome, and absurd when the items on display are considered. For the museum “guides the visitor through a critique of Western thought since the Renaissance, especially of the great divides between objective materialism and the subjective mind and between the realm of quantifiable science and the dominion of spirituality and belief” (Roth 104).

Entering into the halls of the Museum of Jurassic Technology is, in fact, reminiscent of a ride on a ghost train because the hallways and galleries are very dark, dense, and full of surprises, adding to the feeling of dizziness and the uncertainty of what is real or what is fake. Real items are exhibited alongside invented artifacts both in permanent collections and special exhibits. What further perplexes the viewer is that “some things are invented but seem true; others are true but seem invented. And it is not always clear which is which” (Rothstein 1). Since all items on display are grouped according to certain criteria, and they are explained in details, just as in all well-established museums, it is not easy for the visitors to clearly distinguish whether they are real items or invented artifacts, as well as simulations or replicas that look more real than the real, reminiscent of how Jean Baudrillard defines the postmodern condition<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, the descriptions, which are naturally informative for the visitors, are broadly vocalized or briefly written. Since the language employed is remarkably scientific, instructive, and scholarly, the visitors are impressed by and convinced

of the truth of the descriptions. However, for the conscientious visitors there are multiple conflicting and disputing points on the educational texts. For instance, the descriptions of items include various scientific terms, Latin terminology, well-known place names, and familiar important concepts as well as confusingly “elaborate citations, some of which lead to nonexistent sources, others pointing to extraordinary historical figures” (Rothstein 1). However, similar to the intricacy in figuring out the traits of the displayed items, it is not easy to differentiate the actual from fiction because the explanatory texts are made principally to be convincing. Many, if not all, of those texts are in fact narratives just pretending to be academic texts. Listening to narratives or reading explanations and observing objects on display, the visitor constantly crosses the boundaries between information and imagination, i.e., fact and fiction. In addition, the cyber search of the researcher, fascinated by the museum’s “scientific” collections, end up at the museum’s webpage after being directed to many prestigious scientific web pages. Thus, the museum also shows the power of language and storytelling. As such, it demonstrates that each exhibit is a narrative, and all the items/artifacts of each exhibit are merely representative objects of those narratives. Therefore, the museum offers its visitors not only an imaginative interaction with the artistic artifacts on display but also a literacy/vision/audition-based interaction with the narratives of those artifacts. Consequently, each exhibit is in fact a fictional creation, and, on the whole, the museum is more than a construct of merely exhibiting items, it is a meta-narrative for it embraces narratives about both national and international history, art, and culture, and even science.

The term Jurassic, actually, refers to one of the earliest collections of pre-historic fossils but the Museum of Jurassic Technology has evolved over the years to include many different exhibits of art, natural history, the history of science, history of medicine, industry, anthropology, and philosophy among many others<sup>16</sup>. Collections and exhibits include a study of the stink ant of Cameroon of West Central Africa, a ghostly South American bat called Deprong Mori, or Piercing Devil, which seems to fly through solid objects, fruit stone carvings under the impact of Christianity, a horn collection, including both human and animal horns, for example, a horn from 1688, supposedly one of the four horns from a woman’s head, the telegrams and letters sent to astronomers at the Mount Wilson Observatory in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

vulgar remedies, healing traditions, pharmaceutical innovations, pseudo-scientific cures, superstitious beliefs, paranormal thoughts, miniature habitats depicting Los Angeles area mobile home and trailer parks, a magnetic oracle as part of the exhibition titled: “The World is Bound with Secret Knots,” the interesting narrative on dramatically decomposing celluloid dices, the painted sculpture of Disney’s Goofy or Snow White with the dwarfs standing on the head of a needle that can only be seen looking through a magnifying glass, micromosaics made of numerous butterfly wings of multiple species from all over the world, floral stereo radiographs, and a gallery of portraits of cosmonaut dogs sent into space by the Russians in the 1950s, all conflicting with the technology of the Jurassic era or region.

As seen from this exemplary panoramic list (“Collections and Exhibitions”), exhibits are weird, mesmerizing, and baffling. Additionally, these displays generally have a twist. For instance, a gray fox head in a glass cage, growling and barking but in fact vocalized by a man blur the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman or the real and the unreal. In short, “the bizarreness of the contents of the museum . . . asks the viewer to question every traceable fact, yet believe every outlandish claim” (McKay 66). “Clarity is obscured” McKay argues and further claims that many visitors, even if they had been the most persistent and skeptical prior to their visit, leave the museum fully believing the theories about or features of the items on display (66).

It is worth noting that in the Museum of Jurassic Technology almost all exhibits are juxtaposed to their counters. For example, the exhibition of Geoffrey Sonnabend’s *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter* presents his theories on human memory, which is the intersection between consciousness and experience, is followed by another exhibit: an empty cup of tea near a little dish with madeleines, one partially eaten, reminiscent of Marcel Proust and his classic novel entitled *In Search of Lost Time*, also known as *Remembrance of Things Past*. A quote from Proust’s novel is also attached:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent,

more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection (51).

With this quote, the authentic charge of the museum becomes relatively apparent: The museum seems to preserve the already gone past by keeping our memories fresh. No matter how impossible to find outside the museum those representative items of their respective eras and exhibits, they can only be attained at a cognitive level, in memory. For Sonnabend, however, memory is an illusion. He explains that “what we experience as memories are in fact confabulations, artificial constructions of our own design built around sterile particles of retained experience which we attempt to make live again by infusions of imagination” (“Obliscence, Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter”). Therefore, the museum plays with the idea of reality and fictionality on many instances. Besides, it underscores the fictionality of another dualism—remembering and forgetting, both of which are individual frolicsome experiences as human memory always has the potential to play with the mind—to store, collect, forget, distort, alter, retrieve, suppress, etc. Furthermore, the museum ostentatiously becomes a visitor-centered institution rather than a site of the curators’ authority because each visitor experiences personal memories triggered by the items on display. The memories each item calls to her or his individual mind are private experiences.

The function(s) of memory are closely linked to the function(s) of meaning. As Stanley Fish claims, the making of meaning is also a personal account, “meaning and interpretation are primarily in the mind of the viewer and the influence of the object (or text, for Fish) and its qualities are markedly diminished or absent in the analysis” (qtd. in Dudley 4). From this postmodernist standpoint, meaning is a construct and producing meaning is an ever going engagement. Furthermore, since the concept of objective truth is rejected in the postmodern epoch, only personal meanings are valid. In other words, postmodernity rejects the modernist view on the singular knowable objective meaning. Hence, each visitor of the museum has the potential to produce a variety of authentic meanings, adding to the multiplicity or pluralism of audience/visitor responses. The museum thus invites its visitors to willingly enjoy the museum in order to engage in the

construction of meaning(s) process. Taking Roland Barthes's stance in "The Pleasure of the Text," the visitor, just like the reader who has engaged in a process-oriented-interaction with the text, becomes a major component of the museum.

Additionally, the Museum of Jurassic Technology recalls the (oral) culture tradition of storytelling, which fosters also a sense of shared identity and belonging and where memories are restored, preserved, and transmitted to others through individual stories. Moreover, the ephemeral objects on display become as precious and untimely as non-ephemeral items only because of the (hi)stories/narratives attached to them. In addition, visual and audio elements enrich the items on display, adding to detail and "knowledge." Therefore, the museum constructs a space where visitors have to mediate between the items and hypertexts. The museum thus becomes a venue where stories are collected—stories equally important as the artificial items, both products of the imagination and creativity. The museum, consequently, becomes a metanarrative as each item the museum houses also has its own narrative. In other words, the museum stores items within items, stories within stories, and, consequently, always multiplies worlds, realities, layers, and constructions. With each story narrated for each of the items on display, reality is reconstructed for each item embraces an authentic vision of reality. Thus, reality is questioned, subverted, and recreated since the items do not just reflect the actuality. In this sense, the museum becomes an autonomous fictional enterprise echoing Fredric Jameson's definition of postmodernist spatiality<sup>17</sup>.

The Museum of Jurassic Technology is one of a kind museum; it is a meta-museum, a museum about museums. Here, I am not exactly referring to the meta-museum movement which is currently a growing trend in American museums. "The meta-museum blends virtual reality and artificial intelligence technologies with conventional museums to maximize the utilization of the museum's knowledge base and to provide an interactive, exciting and educational experience for visitors" (Mase 107). According to this innovative approach, the meta-museum staff engages with the community by explaining what they do or how they present collections and take care of items or even by taking visitors to behind the scene museum tours where visitors can also take active role in engaging with the duties of the staff, such as artifact labeling, image scanning, archive managing, and even creating their own art. Consequently, the meta-museums enable mutual dialogue

and are eligible for interaction as they call for willingly participating, performing, collaborative visitors rather than distant mere spectators. Therefore, the meta-museums are more democratic places than the conventional museums, which are repressive and authoritarian places. However, I am rather using the term meta-museum to mean “a museum about museums” in which visitors mainly interact with the museum mentally, i.e. engaging with the curators’ idea behind each exhibit, or in figuring out the play behind the typically disturbing or bizarre items on display, rather than engaging in the organization of the exhibits or engaging with the staff. Therefore, the Museum of Jurassic Technology is not a meta-museum in the former sense but it is a meta-museum as it is a museum about museums and the very idea of the museum. As Weschler plainly puts, the museum is “like a museum, a critique of museums, and a celebration of museums—all rolled into one” (“Inhaling the Spore” 54).

The Museum of Jurassic Technology, as a prototype museum that subverts the very idea of the museum, invites the questioning of the very idea of museum and contributes not only to encourage to “rethink what a museum is and what its potential might be” (Crooke 7) but also to this heated debate whether museums need to change or stick to their traditional practices. This debate “has raised issues on the nature of historical interpretation and questioned the clear orientation of these museums towards market forces, their use of multimedia and attempts to engage with popular culture” (Witcomb 1). More specifically, the contemporary discussion on museums reflects a “series of oppositions between traditionalists and renovators, objects and multimedia, objects and ideas, education and edutainment” (Witcomb 2). As such, the current debate even includes whether museums still need objects<sup>18</sup>. By integrating objects that stimulate thinking and promote ideas even if the objects on display are not tangible, absolute and factual, the Museum of Jurassic Technology subverts the belief that museums are “guilty of a high art bias” (McClellan xv). As a postmodern space, the museum opposes elitism in culture and weakens the high/low divide. Moreover, the museum challenges the hegemony of high and serious aesthetics by questioning and widening the definitions of art, entertainment, and aesthetics. The contents of the museum are tricky, nonconventional, and reminiscent of the existing debates on museum collections for they almost simultaneously contradict and ensure the notion that “museums in the past often displayed some objects at least,

principally to captivate or inculcate a sense of wonder rather than or as well as to educate” (Dudley 2). Thus, the museum also challenges and subverts the museums’ institutional obligation of telling the truth. Not surprisingly, museums have gained new roles within a post-industrial and postmodern society, and thus changes in museums, whether architectural, technological, organizational, ideological, philosophical, etc. are inevitable. “Depending on which set of values and practices a museum chooses it is then characterized as either elitist or popular, hierarchical or democratic, old and musty or new and exciting, irrelevant or relevant to contemporary concerns” (Witcomb 2). However, the Museum of Jurassic Technology destabilizes the chronological, cumulative, and linear evolution of museums. Even if it is a contemporary museum, it surprisingly resembles the former museum establishment called the cabinet of curiosities. Thus, this similarity calls to mind the term “postmodern turn,” for the Museum of Jurassic Technology can also be interpreted as a place where the parody of well-established, authoritarian, institutionalized museums can be observed. Further, the museum offers a simulation of both private and public museums. The museum is in fact a simulation of the museum as an institution, and it looks more real than the real museums, creating a hyper reality. Additionally, the museum illustrates how postmodernists playfully blend fact and fiction, and, combine high and low cultural or aesthetic forms. Moreover, the museum valorizes the ephemeral items and objects of everyday life rather than despising them as examples of kitsch and popular culture. As a paradoxical form of space, which can be noticed even at the entrance—also the exit—the museum challenges and deconstructs spatial relations of order. Also, the appropriation of past styles, such as the Roman mausoleum styled façade and the Moorish terrace garden, are among the features of the postmodern turn. For the postmodern turn necessitates a close relationship between theory and culture, the museum can be scrutinized as a model place to discuss the postmodern mentality and practice.

Walking through the halls of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, the visitors can deconstruct many museum-related issues such as the naturalized assumptions, power mechanisms, set of norms, and systems of knowledge. This exhausting yet exciting and exceptional experience is challenged as the perplexed visitor reaches the soothing top floor of the Museum of Jurassic Technology which hosts a beautiful white dove garden. The garden, rich with various flowers and green plants

encircling a fountain, has a style reminiscent of Moorish architecture, where visitors can either freshen up or reevaluate or settle their recent museum experience as they enjoy drinking complimentary tea obtained from the museum's Tula Tea Room, and, listening to live nyckelharpa or accordion music performed "not in a brash, attention-grabbing way, but in a discreet, almost wistful style" (Wertheim 35) by David H. Wilson<sup>19</sup>. Tula Tea Room is among the permanent collections of the museum and hosts a traditionally specifically Georgian (Russian) Tea Ceremony complimentary for all visitors. Climbing up the stairs and reaching the top floor garden can be like seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, evocative of the calming closing experience of a ghost train ride. The museum, including the air of the garden, reminds its visitors of the term 'museum' in its original sense: "a spot dedicated to the muses— 'a place where man's mind could attain a mood of aloofness above everyday affairs'" ("Introduction and Background"). It is, therefore, no coincidence that the white dove is preferred because, typically and universally the animal is the symbol of peace, tranquility, fidelity, prosperity, and new beginnings. Moreover, the dove serves as the messenger, echoing the museum's role in carrying sparkling new ideas.

All and all, the Museum of Jurassic Technology has a unique aura. "It thrives on all the essentials of that proto-museum form: bizarreness of content, authority of tone, and the ability to create and maintain, for those who stumble upon it, an impeccable balance between awestruck credulity and disorienting uncertainty" (Price 77). The museum offers a new sort of relationship between museums and public for it is designed for people to come and explore, evocative of Johan Huizinga's theory of *homo ludens*, the player who engages in playing the game of believing in make-believe curiosities. Additionally, rather than explicitly mentioning how museums are also the places where ideologies, colonialism, historical artifact smuggling, Foucauldian power relations, and distribution of powers among hierarchic societies are detectable, the museum calls for a subversive exceptional experience known as Bakhtinian carnivalesque as it also demonstrates the "appeal to voyeuristic curiosity" and the "aesthetic of clutter" as well as the "play on popular ideas about what real science (or real art or real history) looks like (Price 78). In this context, the museum provides possible evaluations of "postmodern sensitivity to questions of identity, authority, and the potential for alternative

forms of legibility within museum spaces” (McClellan xvii). Further, the museum can be considered an art gallery which houses David H. Wilson’s own art installation and performance<sup>20</sup>. Each visitor that comes through the museum acquires an experience exclusively her or his own and sees and discovers something different, as a postmodern spectator, negotiating between pre-existing knowledge and cultural context(s). Therefore, the museum converts the traditional understanding that museums foster collective identities and memories by enabling an individualistic experience. Consequently, in the Museum of Jurassic Technology, theory and practice meet. “The visitor to the Museum of Jurassic Technology continually finds himself shimmering between wondering *at* (the marvels of nature) and wondering *whether* (any of this could possibly be true)” (Weschler, *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder* 61; emphasizes original). Unlike the traditional museums where visitors, through the representation(s) of reality, acquire a lot of knowledge which can be transferred and utilized in everyday practice, this museum fundamentally demonstrates how reality can be narrated, remembered via narratives, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Briefly, the museum fulfills its mission by being informative in many ways: the visitor leaves the museum enlightened as long as s/he trusts in whatever is seen, heard and read; additionally and conversely, the visitor leaves the museum enlightened as long as learns to distrust whatever is seen, heard and read.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to extend my appreciation to my precious colleagues Charles M. Tung, PhD, Kenneth Allen, PhD, and Aaron Jaffe, PhD, who graciously encouraged and organized an optional visit to the Museum of Jurassic Technology during The Study of the U.S. Institute for Scholars on Contemporary American Literature in 2017. Thank you for giving me the inspiration to write this article. I would also like to thank the editor of this issue and the reviewers for their meticulous evaluation and valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> Grande further reminds: “At that time, surgery was the charge of barbers rather than physicians” (Grande xi).

<sup>3</sup> Cabinet of curiosities (Cabinets of Wonder, wonder-cabinets or wonder-rooms) as a term is also known in German loanwords like Wunderkammern, Kunstkammer or Kunstkabinett.

<sup>4</sup> For the scope of this article I preferred referring to Terry Eagleton’s definition although various other scholars have written significant works to define postmodernity.

<sup>5</sup> For Michel Foucault, museums, just like schools and hospitals, are among such institutes which have disciplinary power, i.e., the power to discipline the mindset of people, the power to control the actions of individuals. For a comprehensive reading on Foucault, power dynamics, and museums see Ka Tat Nixon Chen’s article “The Disciplinary Power of Museums,” *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, Vol. 3, No 4, July 2013, pp. 407-410.

<sup>6</sup> The data file can be accessed at: <https://www.imls.gov/research-evaluation/data-collection/museum-data-files>.

<sup>7</sup> The graph of museums by discipline can be accessed at: [https://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/MUDF\\_TypeDist\\_2014q3.pdf](https://www.imls.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/MUDF_TypeDist_2014q3.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to these values, museums especially those that do not ask for admission fee, just like public libraries, offer comfortable

and safe zones even for the homeless, enabling to have some quality time that heals both mental and moral health of the visitors.

<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, the introduction of Norton's comprehensive anthology entitled *Postmodern American Fiction* correlates the features of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, postmodernity and contemporary American narratives by asserting analogies. The introduction states "[i]n introducing this anthology of postmodern American fiction, it seems fitting to begin in the halls of this museum, in its own way an anthology of the postmodern spirit" (Geyh et al. x).

<sup>10</sup> The sign says: "Ring buzzer once for admittance." Rules concerning the museum are shared with the visitors via signs. For instance, a sign specifies that cell phone usage and taking photographs of objects or exhibits are strictly forbidden but photographs can be obtained from the museum or be seen through the official webpage of the museum.

<sup>11</sup> For a current list of contributions from foundations, see <http://www.mjt.org/donors.html>.

<sup>12</sup> This description is taken from the online gift shop that is accessible via the following link: <https://www.mjtgiftshop.org>.

<sup>13</sup> Weschler's book results from his personal occasional visits to the museum and embraces his chronicles of these visits, his firsthand personal, emotional, and sensory responses to the exhibits, and, his conversations with David Hildebrand Wilson and his wife, Diana Wilson who also has an active role in the museum as its treasurer and keeper of accounts.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.mjt.org/intro/genborch.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Baudrillard suggests that postmodern societies are organized around simulation—the cultural modes of representation that simulate reality. For him, reality has begun to imitate the model which then precedes and determines the reality. As such, the Museum of Jurassic Technology can be considered as a simulation of museums.

<sup>16</sup> About how the materials for collections in the Museum of Jurassic Technology gathered together, see Weschler’s article entitled “Inhaling the Spore: Field Trip to a Museum of Natural (Un) History”, pp. 52.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson claims that comprehending the contemporary social and cultural contexts is impossible without an understanding of space. He analyzes space as a text and makes a distinction between modernist and postmodernist architecture as he considers the latter as a set of texts, which enables him to discuss intertextuality as he reads all postmodernist architecture in relation to others.

<sup>18</sup> For a further comprehensive reading on the current perspectives in museums, see the series of books titled *Leicester Readers in Museum Studies*, specifically *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things* edited by Sandra H. Dudley and *Museums in the Material World* by Simon J. Knell and *Museums in a Digital Age* by Ross Parry.

<sup>19</sup> As mentioned previously, David Hildebrand Wilson, the founder and director of the museum, is also a filmmaker, artist, designer, and curator. As this variety reveals, he is engaged in many interrelated fields of artistic creativity and depiction. Born in Denver, CO, USA, in 1946, Wilson has been attracted to museums since his childhood.

<sup>20</sup> In recent years, there is more news about people who ask for the refund of admission fees of art performances, an uncommon manner that leads to the discussion on whether art performances are commodities that secure customer rights concerning their appreciation. Some visitors of the Museum of Jurassic Technology “demand their money back insisting that they’ve been duped” (Patt 71).

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