The Anatomy of Memory Politics: A Formalist Analysis of Tate Britain's 'Artist and Empire' and the Struggle over Britain's Imperial Past

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose a new approach for understanding the meaning of memory politics, which draws upon the archetypal literary criticism of Northrop Frye. I suggest that the four archetypes elaborated by Frye – comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire – can be used as a heuristic device for interpreting the contested historical narratives that are associated with the politics of memory. I illustrate this approach through a case-study of 'Artists and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past', an exhibition held at Tate Britain in 2016, amidst increasing contestation over the meaning of the British Empire. In sum, I find that the exhibit narrated Britain's imperial past as a comedy, in which a key theme was the progressive cultural mixing of the British and the people they colonized. To conclude, I discuss the implications of such a narrative for constructing an inclusive, postcolonial British identity. As an alternative, I draw on Aristotle to suggest that a tragic narrative would have been more propitious.

Key Words: collective memory; formalism; Northrop Frye; British Empire; national identity; Tate Britain

Introduction

The past is very much in the present. From slavery in the United States to the "Nanjing Massacre" in China, around the world, struggles over the meaning of the past – the politics of memory – have become increasingly salient. I propose a new approach for understanding this phenomenon, which draws upon the archetypal literary criticism of Northrop Frye (1957). I suggest that the four archetypes elaborated by Frye – comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire – can be used as a heuristic device for interpreting the various contested historical narratives that are associated with the politics of memory. I illustrate this approach through a case-study of *Artists and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, an exhibition held at Tate Britain in 2016, amidst increasing uncertainty and contestation over the meaning of the British Empire. The central aim of this paper is to provoke a new approach to the meaning of memory politics through the use of Frye's formalism. By applying this approach to *Artist and Empire,* I seek to also provide a new interpretation of the meaning of the exhibit and the struggle over Britain's imperial past.

The use of Northrop Frye's schema not only entails an acknowledgement that the politics of memory is, at its core, a contest over different stories about the past, it also shifts the focus away from the content of those stories towards their form. Focusing on the form of memory politics holds the potential of uncovering meanings that might otherwise have been ignored. This is because there is "content in the form", as Hayden White (1990) puts it in reference to the writing of professional history. Notwithstanding historians' efforts to report objective truths, White points out that the way in which they do so – through the writing of historical narratives – tends to follow certain prescribed literary patterns. The use of these patterns, in turn, imbues historical narratives with meaningful content. Frye's literary archetypes – which, in large part, informs White's analysis – provides a heuristic for identifying this content.

Frye was hugely influential in literary criticism in the middle of the twentieth century. However, his work fell out of favour in the latter decades of the twentieth century as a part of the general decline of formalism. Nevertheless, his work has continued to inspire a smaller group of literary critics and historians (such as Hayden White and his followers). Recently, his work has made some headway in sociology, particularly among cultural sociologists associated with Jeffrey Alexander's strong program (see Alexander and Smith 2003; 2010). Not only is the strong program a defender of formalism, or what is more commonly referred to as structuralism in the social sciences, but it also calls for a more serious engagement with insights from the humanities. Here, several cultural sociologists have turned to Frye to shed light on how social life itself is emplotted according to literary archetypes (see Jacobs, 2000; Smith, 2005; Smith and Howe, 2015). I seek to extend this work into the study of memory politics.

Tate Britain's 2016 exhibit on the art of Britain's imperial past provides an intriguing case from which to illustrate how Frye's schema can be deployed in the politics of memory. Tate Britain is the foremost museum in Britain for British art – the self-proclaimed "home of British art". Its permanent exhibit, which showcases British art from 1500 to present, focuses almost exclusively on the people and landscapes of Britain. Few works indicate that this period coincided with the rise and fall of the largest empire in history. In recent years, the Tate has sought to address this through several "spotlight" exhibits, such as the 2007 exhibit on slavery, *1807: Blake, Slavery, and the Radical Mind*, and the exhibit in 2008 on British orientalism, *The Lure of the East*. *Artist and Empire* was the first time that the museum explicitly focused on the British Empire. It therefore provided a unique opportunity for analysing how an important organ of British culture and identity envisioned Britain's imperial past.

Britain has not escaped the global spread of memory politics. Indeed, *Artist and Empire* was staged amidst heightened contestation over the meaning of Britain's imperial past. This contestation is related to wider debates over British identity and the significance of its ethnic diversity. This is because many of Britain's most significant communities of ethnic minorities are from its former colonies. As the popular slogan among immigrant activists wryly puts it: "We are here because you were there." The curators of *Artist and Empire* sought to navigate the contested landscape by adopting a neutral position. However, the fact that the works in the exhibit were arranged historically and thematically suggests, to the contrary, that it was emplotted according to a particular narrative. Indeed, close reading of the exhibit using Frye's schema reveals this to have been the case.

In sum, I find that *Artist and Empire* narrated Britain's imperial past as a comedy, in which a key theme was the progressive cultural mixing of the British and the people they colonized. As I discuss further below, comedies focus on the possibility of a better future. The narration of Britain's imperial past as a comedy therefore enabled the exhibit to side-step debates over the deleterious consequences of its past to focus on a better future, envisioned as an integrated postcolonial Britain at ease with its ethnic diversity. However, I argue that such a future is unlikely without accounting for the past. As an alternative, I draw on Aristotle to suggest that a tragic narrative would have been more propitious.

Approach and Methodology

Collective memory refers to a shared historical narrative about how a group came to be. Put simply, it is a group's biography. As such, collective memory is a central component of collective identity. Notably, collective memory is distinct from professional history. While the ostensible aim of history is to provide a truthful account of the past, collective memory need

not tell the truth. It is subjective, believed, felt. In this regard, collective memory is more akin to myth than professional history. Maurice Halbwachs (1992 [1925]), author of the foundational text in the field, suggests that collective memory is critical to a group's endurance and unity. For Halbwachs, not only does collective memory link a group's present with its past, but it also provides the overarching framework within which individuals make sense of their own biographies and identities.

Recent research has done much to uncover how collective memory occurs. Rather than something that exists "out there" in the cultural ether, collective memory is generally approached as a representational practice; it is something individuals and groups *do* (see Olick and Robbins, 1998). The practice of representing collective memory encompasses many sectors of society, such as: central organizing bodies, cultural producers, and ordinary people. The range of mnemonic practices that contribute to collective memory are diverse, including, to name just a few examples: remembrance ceremonies, museums, monuments, architecture, films, books, fashion, and cooking. Emphasis on collective memory as practice makes clear that it is a process. In turn, this raises the possibility that it is contested. Indeed, current research on collective memory is much less sanguine than Halbwachs about its unifying function. Rather, it is common to refer to a "politics of memory," in which multiple historical narratives vie for predominance. This type of contestation tends to coincide with struggles over the meaning of collective identity, in which proponents put forward different historical narratives to defend their vision of collective identity.

The phenomenon of memory politics makes clear that *how* it is narrated matters. There are several lines of research in this area. I will mention just a few. Collective memory is of particular interest to students of nationalism. Anthony D. Smith, in particular, has done much to shed light on the significance in national historical narratives of themes relating to origins, divine election, homeland, golden ages, sacrifice, and destiny (Smith, 2009: 90-99). For Smith, the commemoration of these myths and memories draws the national community together and instils a sense of pride in the nation. Indeed, the tendency for national communities to narrate the past with pride has been much observed. However, there has also been research on the significance of defeat in collective memory (Mock, 2011; Hashimoto, 2015). A related line of research on cultural trauma examines how traumatic, rather than triumphant, events become instantiated in collective memory. This process tends to engender a memory politics between progressive narratives (which focus on the future) and tragic narratives (which focus on the past) (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2001; Woods, 2016). Another important area of related research is on difficult pasts. This area of research examines the commemoration of contested histories (Conway, 2009; Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2007; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, 1991; Zolberg, 1998). Finally, others have observed the rise of a new kind of historical narrative, which looks upon the past with regret (Olick, 2013). The emergence of this new narrative relates to burgeoning research on historical justice, which discusses the possibility that collective identities can be made more inclusive through the acknowledgement of historic wrongdoings (Brooks, 1999; Gibney et. al 2008; Torpey, 2006).

These lines of research highlight several patterns and trends in the content of collective memory. However, as yet, there has not been sustained investigation of its form. Research on the types of narratives that are involved in cultural trauma processes is the most promising in this regard, but there has not yet been an effort to abstract the formal aspects of those narratives, such that they could be applied comparatively and connected to other forms of storytelling. Indeed, this is where a focus on form would be especially useful – by facilitating greater awareness that the narration of collective memory is related to the wider world of storytelling.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the first step to uncovering the meanings that inhere in the form of collective memory is to recognize that it is a type of storytelling. If narratives of collective memory are a type of storytelling, then it follows that they also must conform to basic conventions of plot that are found in all stories. Here the archetypal literary criticism elaborated by Frye (1957) is useful. Frye owes much to Aristotle's (1996) famed investigations of the meaning and function of different forms of Greek drama. Expanding on Aristotle's work, Frye seeks to establish a scientific basis for literary criticism, which focuses on uncovering foundational, recurring patterns in literature. Frye (1957: 17) argues that "just as there is an order of nature behind the natural sciences, so literature is not a piled aggregate of 'works', but an order of words".

According to Frye, there are four "primal" archetypes or *mythoi* in western literature. Following the cycle of seasons, these are: comedy (spring), romance (summer), tragedy (autumn), and satire (winter). In literary terms, each of these *mythoi* are distinct from how they are now popularly understood (for example, a romance for Frye is not necessarily a love story). I summarise Frye's (1957: 163-239) discussion of the characteristic of the four *mythoi*, and their significance for society, below.

- The comic mythos is classically about a young man's successful pursuit of a young woman, against parental and societal objections. It typically concludes with a wedding, in which all the characters, including the blocking characters, come together to celebrate the union of the young lovers. Comedies are imbued with a hopeful vision of the future, characterised by the arrival of a new kind of unified society.
- The romantic mythos recounts a quest, in which the hero embarks on a perilous journey to vanquish an evil foe. It is a story about the salvation and redemption of society in the face of evil. Like comedies, the romantic mythos concludes on a triumphant note. However, it seeks to return society to a past version of itself, before the spread of evil, rather than look forward to a new kind of society.
- The tragic mythos is a story about the fall of a hero. This is often depicted as the restoration of balance in the social order, which had been disturbed in some way by the hero. Thus, while a tragedy may invoke pity at the fall of the hero, it also provokes a sense that it was necessary.
- The satirical mythos describes a fallen society where evil prevails – it is a society turned upside down. Thus, the hero of satire is often presented as a parody of the romantic hero. Through wit and humor, satires seek to demonstrate the absurdity the situation. In doing so, they function as a reminder of how society ought to be.

I suggest using these four ideal-typical archetypes for shedding light on the underlying meanings of narratives of collective memory. Although no individual case will ever conform completely to an ideal type, they are useful as an interpretive framework; they provide a window from which to see particular aspects of a social phenomenon, and to see where the phenomenon converges and diverges from the ideal. More generally, they can provide a new way of interpreting a phenomenon, to "see" elements that may have otherwise been missed. It was with these aims in mind, that I embarked upon an analysis of Tate Britain's *Artist and Empire*.

I approach *Artist and Empire* as a multivocal text that intervened in debates over Britain's history and identity. National museums, such as the Tate Britain, are widely recognized as key protagonists in a national politics of memory. Through the presentation of material culture,

they convey particular perspectives on the nation's past and on its identity (see Coombes, 2004; Duncan, 1995; Levitt, 2015; Prosler, 1995). These perspectives are lent legitimacy through their often close relationship with the state. Indeed, the origins and spread of national museums throughout the world occurred alongside the consolidation of the nation-state as the preeminent form of political organization (Prosler, 1995). The creation in 1897 of the Tate Britain (formerly the National Gallery of British Art) was a part of this global process; the Tate was designed to have an explicitly "British" remit (see Fyfe and Macdonald, 1996).

Artist and Empire exhibited a mixture of objects produced by former colonists and the formerly colonized. In doing so, it entered controversial terrain. In recent decades, national museums in the West have been the object of intense debate over the representation of ethnic minorities and formerly colonized peoples. Curators have responded by attempting to disrupt the long-established moral binary that informed their predecessors, which distinguished between the "art" objects of white, Western artists (symbolic of the nation's aesthetic achievement) versus the "cultural" objects of non-white, non-western artists (symbolic of a primitive "other"). These efforts have often been met with controversy (Dubin, 2006), although they sit well with new ideologies of nationhood that celebrate diversity (Levitt, 2015). Where curators have continued to employ the now discarded binary, they will often seek to convey an awareness of new norms through the use of irony (Riegel 1996). More generally, curators have sought to minimize the degree to which national museums impose a perspective. The aim is to provide a forum for debate, rather than an intervention (Lavine and Karp, 1991: 3). As we shall see below, all these strategies were discernible in *Artist and Empire.*

Ivan Karp (1991: 14) observes that the very decision to exhibit certain objects already constitutes an intervention. Moreover, as I seek to demonstrate through my analysis of *Artist and Empire*, the arrangement of those objects in particular ways suggests an underlying narrative. To uncover this narrative, my analysis is pitched at what might be termed a meso-level of analysis. I was concerned with how the exhibition as a whole was designed to present an overall narrative about Britain's empire and its identity. My analysis thereby followed the route of a typical visitor, similar to the way that James Clifford (1995) in his seminal work approached an exhibit on the New Guinea highlands at London's now defunct Museum of Mankind. In doing so, I paid attention to the choice and arrangement of the objects, and their written descriptions. Following Mieke Bal (1994), I also paid attention to the design of the rooms. This was complemented by expert interviews with three members of the curatorial team.

Analysis

Background

The end of the British Empire initially incurred surprisingly little debate within Britain. For several influential historians this was evidence that the Empire's impact on British society had been "minimal" (see Ward, 2001: 2-4). Writing from a different perspective, cultural theorist Paul Gilroy argued that it was because the loss of empire was so catastrophic that public reflection was so difficult (Gilroy, 2005). Whatever the reason for this initial silence, it has now lifted. Recent decades have witnessed a growing controversy over the meaning of the British Empire. This controversy has occurred alongside the resurgence of several interrelated disputes – on the status of Britain's constituent nations; on its increasing ethnic diversity as a result of migration; and on its relationship with Europe and the wider world – all of which have

thrown into question the very meaning of Britishness. Much of this has come to the fore in the fractious debates over Brexit.

Many of Brexit's supporters seem to be buoyed by imperial nostalgia. On the day following the vote to leave the European Union, the cover of the Brexit-supporting broadsheet, *The Daily Telegraph* (2016), boasted in bold letters: “The Empire Strikes Back.” A common refrain among Brexiteers is that leaving the European Union will enable Britain to re-establish closer ties with its former colonies, which now comprise The Commonwealth of Nations. Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt argued recently that Britain would be able to draw on its cultural and historical connections (i.e. colonial) throughout the world to become a leader – "an invisible chain" – in the support of the "international rule-based order" (GOV.UK). A sense of imperial nostalgia is also apparent in the writings of several public intellectuals and historians (e.g. James 1994; Ferguson 2004; Roberts 2006). Among them, celebrity historian Niall Ferguson is the most visible. Former Education Secretary Michael Gove controversially consulted Ferguson for a new history curriculum designed to "celebrate" Britain's historical achievements, rather than focus on, as he put it, "post-colonial guilt" (2013).

However, the apparent rise of imperial nostalgia has been met with significant criticism by several high profile journalists who decry Brexit on precisely these grounds (Jones, 2016; Younge, 2018). They are joined by several public intellectuals and historians who caution against nostalgia for the empire, highlighting by contrast its deleterious consequences on its former colonies (Brendon, 2008; Paxman, 2011; Gott, 2011; Tharoor, 2017). Michael Gove's proposal for a "new history" was met within this camp with furious criticism. Historian Richard Evans (2013) called it a "little England version of our national past". Author Pankaj Mishra (2011) similarly wrote a blistering critique of Ferguson's "neo-imperialist vision".

The debate over Britain's imperial past has not just occurred among journalists and intellectuals. Recently, a student-led campaign to remove the statue of infamous imperialist Cecil Rhodes from Oriel College, Oxford University, touched a raw nerve. In 2016, the BBC televised a public debate on the topic of the British Empire, asking, "Should we be proud of the British Empire?" On that question, recent research suggests that a majority of the public would answer in the affirmative. For example, a government survey carried out in 2014 found that 53% of respondents agreed that the British Empire was "something to be proud of" (YouGov, 2014). These results were a dramatic change from the findings of a qualitative study published less than ten years previously, in which the respondents were generally anti-imperialist on the grounds that it was a sign of "excessive nationalism" (Condor and Abell, 2006).

Artist and Empire was reviewed widely in the press (e.g. Thornhill, 2015; Hudson, 2015; Jaggi, 2015; Collings, 2015). The exhibition provoked countervailing reactions, with commentators seemingly divided over whether it was an expression of pride or shame in the empire. *The Guardian* even published two, opposing reviews (Jones, 2015; Cumming, 2015). Scholarly reviews of the exhibit, including the contributors to the online forum in the journal *Third Text* (2015) and the recent article by Catherine Hahn (2016) largely echo the camp of reviewers who suggest that it was overly positive about empire.

The ambivalent response to the exhibit was, in part, due to the curators' efforts to ensure that it was "neutral" – to be a forum for debate, rather than an intervention. Lead curator Alison Smith elaborated:

"…This term 'neutral'… we used this term and people kept saying that 'you can't be neutral, you can't be neutral' but we felt that we can't come up with the interpretation, we just had to present the facts and then it's up to the visitors… Now some people have criticized the exhibition on that account. As a team, we felt quite strongly that we were not there to judge. We were there to curate the exhibition and we wanted to attract a broad audience and people bring their own experiences and memories of empire to that and if we were being too didactic, then that might alienate a certain section of our audience so that was quite a tricky one…"

Alison Smith, interview by the authors, April 14, 2016

Theorists of how the commemoration "difficult pasts" occurs would likely interpret this effort for the exhibit to be neutral – to allow for different sections of the audience to interpret it in their own way – as resembling a typical form of multivocal commemoration that occurs in a context where the past is contested (see Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2007). In such cases, the commemoration of the past will give expression to the contestation. This is an important area of research, but it tends to assume that the meanings associated with the commemoration are necessarily fragmented. This downplays the possibility that there is a degree of cohesion in the design of the commemoration. Indeed, in the case of *Artist and Empire*, I will show that there was an underlying narrative connecting the exhibit. As such, despite the intentions of the curators, I find that it did seek to intervene in debates, rather than merely provide a forum. This approach to the exhibit should also provide a new perspective on those debates, which are largely focused on the content of the exhibit rather than its form.

The Exhibit

On display throughout the exhibition were a wide variety of objects by artists from Britain and its colonies from the 16th century to present day. The walls were hung with paintings, drawings, photographs, maps, posters, and other objects, and the floors were dotted with installations, sculptures, and much else. All objects were accompanied by a descriptive label. The exhibition comprised seven rectangular rooms. With the exception of the last room, each room was painted a different color, and at the entrance to each room was a short, written description. The rooms were organized thematically, as well as roughly following the history of the empire.

The fact that the exhibit was arranged historically and thematically belies that it was an exercise in story-telling. This is done by adopting a vantage point, by making choices over what to include, and by submitting it to a unified structure, which at its most basic, comprises a beginning, middle and end (Aristotle, 1996: 13). In presenting a narrative about Britain's imperial past, the exhibit went beyond simply including a beginning, middle and end. By making decisions over what to include and what to emphasize, the curators also provided a narrative of *how* the Empire began, endured and ended. This suggests that the exhibit was structured according to a particular kind of narrative. In this regard, I argue that of the four types of narrative discussed by Frye, the exhibit most closely approximated a comedy.

I mentioned that a conventional comedy is about two young lovers who overcome attempts by an older generation to block their union (see Frye, 1957: 164-7). It is also a story about the arrival of a new society. Initially, the older society is ascendant. This society is often personified by the parents, who play the part of the blocking characters. However, by the conclusion of the story (typically involving a wedding), a new society has crystallized around the young lovers. A comedy is therefore, as Frye suggests, the *mythoi* of spring, as young replaces old. As such, it is forward looking; from the outset, the story looks ahead to the union

of the lovers. The conclusion also typically ends with an eye on the future – finally together, the young lovers can now embark on the next phase of their lives.

A comedy will generally construct a moral binary between the ideals of the young lovers and those of their parents' generation, and it will make clear that the audience should identify with the former. Frye (1957: 169) suggests that the society represented by the older generation is usually shown to be "illusory". By contrast, the young lovers represent the "real" society – *our* society. However, even as comedies represent the replacement of one society by another, they also often contain a degree of circularity, much like the progression of the seasons. The first part of a comedy will often recall a "golden age" before the main action begins, and the new society that crystalizes at the conclusion will therefore appear as a restoration of that golden age, before it was corrupted. Frye writes: "Thus we have a stable and harmonious order disrupted by folly, obsession, forgetfulness, 'pride and prejudice', or events not understood by the characters themselves, and then restored" (Frye, 1957: 171). As for the central characters in a comedy, the main ones that are of relevance to the exhibit are the hero and the heroine, or *eiron*. The blocking characters preventing the lovers' union are the *alazon* (Frye, 1957: 172-73).

In Tate Britain's narrative of the British Empire, the lovers were represented by two collective characters; colonist and colonized. The colonists, who were depicted as initiating the action as they travelled outward from Britain, played the part of the hero. The colonized, who were depicted as responding to the overtures of the colonists, played the part of the heroine. In representing British imperial history in this way, the exhibit followed longstanding practice in the representation of European colonialism, in which colonists are associated with masculinity and colonized people are associated with femininity (McClintock, 1995). Of course, it makes sense that the hero would be played by British colonists; this was an exhibit in the Tate Britain and, as such, would normally take the British perspective. In this regard, Britain itself can be seen to have played the part of the hero.

Mapping and Marking

The first room was entitled "Mapping and Marking". The room, painted deep blue, contained works by British and non-British artists. The former depicted the British men (the "hero") who ventured out to discover and map new lands. There were historic maps denoting the scope of the British Empire at various phases, as well as paintings and lithographs of ships, adventurers and officers. Although many artworks in the room were produced at different historical periods, their placement at the beginning of the exhibit under the themes of exploration and information-gathering suggested that this room was meant to depict the initial phase of the empire. Indeed, the description of the room noted that "mapping and marking" laid "the foundations" of the Empire. Moreover, the types of works that were included the room, and the way that they were presented, suggested that this was an exciting phase of the British Empire, which was motivated by the spirit of adventure and discovery. The room seemed to also suggest that this phase of the empire was relatively innocent – when the "hero" merely wanted to explore, not necessarily to conquer.

Even though the description of the room asserted that the practice of mapping was a way of asserting power, and that the British were "often suspect, resented or opposed", it nevertheless cast them in a positive light, notably describing them as "buccaneering Elizabethan mariners" and "scientific gentlemen", who were possessed of "skills and technical inventiveness" (Tate Britain, 2015a). The largest painting in the room, by John Everett Millais (1874), featured one

of those "buccaneering" mariners. Entitled *The North-West Passage 'it might be done and England should do it'*, the painting shows an elderly man seated in his study looking ahead with a steely gaze and clenched fist, while a younger woman reads from a logbook. At the center of the painting is a map of the north coast of North America. Despite his age, and despite the suggestion of repeated failures, the painting shows that the elderly man is resolved to find a way through the icy waters. What is his motivation for such an undertaking? Absent from the painting is any suggestion the "hero" was motivated by desire for resources or power. Nor was this mentioned in the label that accompanied the painting. As a visitor, I was left with an impression that he was simply motivated by a desire to chart new routes for the pure sake of discovery.

How did the other central collective character in the exhibit – the "heroine" – respond to the initial advances by the "hero"? Generally, the artworks and their labels suggested that the "heroine" was initially open to collaboration. The *Asafo Flags* by unknown Fante artists, which were hung from the room's ceiling, and which depict the British and their technologies alongside variants of the union flag, suggest curiosity and even admiration, rather than fear or distrust. The label accompanying the *Asafo Flags* supported this impression by emphasising that the creation of the flags was initially approved by the British colonial administration. A theme of collaboration rather than rivalry was also encapsulated by James Brandard's 1835 *Ikmallik and Apelagliu, Interviewed aboard Victory*, a large painting hung on one of the walls, in which two Inuit men are shown aboard the ice-bound *Victory*, drawing maps for arctic explorer John Ross and his crew. The exchange between the groups appears to be voluntary and open.

Trophies of Empire

The second room, painted light beige, was entitled "Trophies of Empire". The room contained portraits of British adventurers and collectors, representations of the people and things they encountered on their travels, and a sample of the kinds of objects that they brought home – their "trophies". These last items were characteristic of the kinds of objects that can be found in a conventional ethnographic museum. The room's description stated that these objects were "natural" and "artificial curiosities" collected by "artists and experts" during the "discovery voyages" (Tate Britain, 2015b). Upon entering the room, I was immediately faced with a painting of a typical "collector", and the kinds of objects that would have interested him. Hung on the wall across from the entrance was Benjamin West's (1771) painting, *Sir Joseph Banks*, in which a youthful, smirking Banks is posing in a studio, pointing to a Maori cloak he is wearing while surrounded by various Maori armaments and tools. For added effect, a quarterstaff (*taiaha*) and paddle (*waka hoe*), created by an unknown Maori artist, were hung on either side of the painting.

The key emphasis at this point in the exhibit's narrative of the Empire seemed to be the pursuit of knowledge. As such, the "hero" of the narrative was represented by "artists and experts", rather than the "buccaneers" of the first room (Tate Britain, 2015b). Following the initial phase of venturing out that was represented by the first room of the exhibition, in the second room, the "hero" was now shown to be driven by curiosity and excitement – in the different peoples, plants and animals encountered during "his" travels. As such, the "heroine" in this room was represented as an object of desire, to be understood, possessed, and displayed. Notably, "she" was also depicted as a passive recipient of the "hero's" desire. None of the works in the room, nor any of the descriptive labels, showed any resistance on the part of the "heroine." Neither

did the room depict the "heroine" to have engaged in reciprocal behaviour, in the sense of documenting the would-be colonists and their objects.

As with the first room, the second room provided an overall characterization of the motivations for Empire in these phase as relatively benign; the colonist was depicted to be motivated by a desire to know and possess, rather than violently subjugate. While the description of the room and many of the labels accompanying the words suggested that these other motivations were also present in this phase of British imperialism, these written descriptions were secondary to the sheer brilliance of the drawings and paintings of new lands, objects, and peoples that were presented in the room. This suggested that the overarching intent of the room was to recreate the feelings of desire and excitement that were felt when the objects were originally displayed. It was difficult to ignore, for example, the Maori roof gable figure placed high on the far wall and tilted downwards so that it faced the visitors below. The gable figure, made in approximately 1834 by an unknown artist, was a carving of a male figure with a wide, fearsome smile. The placement of the gable figure seemed designed to conjure feelings of wonderment at the foreignness of Maori people, just as the object might have done in previous times, whether displayed in a gentleman's curiosity cabinet, or as part of an ethnographic display.

To view the objects in a different light required that the visitors gaze upon them from a critical distance and, more specifically, to see their presentation as an exercise in irony. Visitors needed to enter the room knowing that they were not merely viewing a presentation of the "trophies" that Britain had acquired during the Empire, but that they were experiencing how these objects *would have been* presented at the time of their acquisition. As Riegel (1995) shows, this is a tall order to ask of visitors. Further, Riegel (1995) notes that visitors to museums rarely read all the labels – they focus more on the visual material. Curators are therefore unlikely to succeed in presenting objects ironically if the irony is only conveyed by the labels; the objects also need to be displayed ironically. Hence, if the curators had wanted the visitors to view the Maori gable figure ironically, it needed to be displayed as such. Without doing so, this room largely presented a narrative of this phase of the British Empire as characterized by relatively benign discovery and gathering of fascinating objects.

Imperial Heroics

In the third room, entitled "Imperial Heroics", the "hero" seemed to lose his innocence. With walls painted deep red, the room revealed a violent side to the British Empire. The "hero" was transformed in this room from a curious collector who would possess the 'heroine' into a violent warrior demanding her submission. The bulk of the objects in the room were history paintings commemorating some heroic or great event, especially in relation to warfare, whether winning a battle or losing bravely. According to the room's written description, these kinds of paintings functioned as a form of propaganda in order to create favorable perceptions of Britain's adventures overseas (Tate Britain, 2015c). Of the paintings of this type that were included in the room, several depicted a lone British officer or a small group of soldiers calmly facing a larger group of enemies, such as *The Death of General Gordon*, a painting by George William Joy (1893), which depicts General Charles George Gordon shortly before his death in 1885 during the Siege of Khartoum. In the painting, the general is standing calmly atop several steps, gun in hand, staring down at several of his would-be killers as they climb ominously towards him. Also included in the room were a series of military photographs, which, like the paintings, were described as being used for propaganda purposes. At the center of the room was a life-size installation by Scottish artist Andrew Gilbert, entitled "British Infantry Advance on Jerusalem". The installation depicted four shrunken, wraith-like imperial soldiers in full

military regalia with teeth and hair dangling from their necks. The figures are drawing ranks, while one of them holds an open umbrella, and another one plants the Union flag. According to its label, the installation was part of a series of works by Gilbert, which sought to "exorcise Britain's imperial past" (Tate Britain, 2015d).

The subject of "Imperial Heroics", with its focus on violence, alongside the sudden change of color from the blue and beige of the previous rooms to a deep red, and the fact that it was put in the midpoint in the exhibit, all suggested that the room was designed as a critical juncture in the exhibit's narrative of the Empire. It was at this point that tension was incorporated into the exhibit. Yet, it was difficult to interpret how the room narrated the meaning of the Empire's apparent turn to violence. Like the previous room, it was possible that this room was, at its core, unironically celebrating Britain's "Imperial Heroics". Yet, the inclusion of the Gilbert installation suggested otherwise.

If the previous rooms presented the empire as relatively uncontroversial, with their association of Britain's imperial past with adventure and curiosity, the emphasis on violence in "Imperial Heroics" complicated that depiction. This was further complicated by the way the room was curated. I mentioned that the previous room on "Trophies of Empire" put all the work of placing the objects in historical context, and thereby conveying a sense of irony, into the written labels accompanying the artworks. The effort to convey a sense of irony was therefore lacklustre at best. By contrast, in "Imperial Heroics", the curators *visually* complicated the possibility of a straightforward, unironic interpretation of the room by including the Gilbert installation at its center.

The Gilbert installation was the first piece in the exhibition until that point that was made in the present-day. It therefore represented a break in how the exhibit narrated the history of the Empire. If the first two rooms invited visitors to experience the spirit of the age as it occurred, the Gilbert installation distanced them from that era. It had the effect of placing the other objects in the room in historical time. Moreover, by providing a critical counterpoint to the heroic depictions of the British Empire found in many of the history paintings in the room, the Gilbert installation suggested that those depictions were no longer appropriate in the present. I therefore suggest that this room invited the visitors to consider that the British colonists had become corrupted. No longer was the "hero" merely a guileless adventurer or scientist who often collaborated with distant peoples. Instead, "he" was now depicted as a violent warrior whose actions against those distant peoples, the Gilbert Installation suggested, were not wholly justified.

In terms of the exhibit's overall comic narrative, the moral tension that was introduced in this room was therefore an internal one – it occurred inside the "hero". As I will demonstrate in the following sections, by locating the central moral tension of the exhibit within the "hero", the exhibit implied that the main impediment to the union of 'hero' and 'heroine' (and, hence, the arrival of a new society) was to be found within the 'hero' himself. Thus, rather than a conventional comedy, in which the parents of the young lovers play the part of the "blocking characters", in the exhibit, this part was played by the violent version of the "hero." This suggested that "he" would firstly need to overcome his "bad" side before the union with the "heroine" could proceed. Of course, this is a common trope in comedies, wherein the hero must overcome his raw and unrefined traits in order to recognize the heroine's qualities, and the true love that exists between them.

Power Dressing

The fourth room, entitled “Power Dressing”, was painted royal purple. The room, according to its description, was focused on artworks that depict “trans-cultural cross-dressing” (Tate Britain, 2015e). The largest, most striking works displayed in the room were several full-length portraits of British colonial and military elites adorned in the clothing of their subjects, such as James Sant’s (1842) portrait of Captain Colin Mackenzie wearing Afghan dress. There were also several paintings depicting the inverse, with local elites wearing Western dress. Also in the room were several busts, photographs, and a headdress by an unnamed Kainai artist, which was gifted in 1936 to Governor of Canada John Buchan in recognition of his support for First Nation traditions.

After the critical juncture of the previous room, “Power Dressing” represented a new direction in the exhibit’s narrative. In this room, a key theme of the exhibition was introduced, that of cultural mixing between the British and the people they colonized. While “Power Dressing” focused on the colonists and colonized adopting each other’s fashions, we shall see that subsequent rooms focused on mixing among the artists and in their works. From the perspective of the underlying comic narrative of the exhibit, this was the beginning of the process towards the union of “hero” and “heroine”, after the false starts of the previous rooms. This process was depicted quite literally as the fusion of the cultures of the colonist and colonized, which transformed both characters in the process. In this regard, the coming together of colonist and colonized, and the emergence of new forms of art, resembled the arrival of a new kind of society.

The exhibition generally cast the mixing of cultures in a positive light. This is in keeping with a comic narrative, in which the emergent new society is represented as an improvement on the older generation’s corrupted society. It is telling in this regard that the description of “Power Dressing” did not use terms such as appropriation to describe how colonist and colonized adopted each other’s fashions. Instead this process was described with words such as “adaptive” and “hybrid”, suggesting a more egalitarian, organic process:

> "Trans-cultural cross-dressing appears in many colonial and imperial portraits, embodying the sitters’ careers, travels and interests, and identification or confrontation with other cultures. Not fashioning, but self-fashioning, it represents the adaptive, hybrid aspects of its wearers experiences between homeland colony and imperial center."
>
> Tate Britain, 2015e

To be sure, this description also mentioned that the British sitters adorned themselves in the fashions of their subjects to project an “aura of power”. Even though it was represented as an almost organic process, the curators nevertheless acknowledged that the apparent hybridity characterizing this phase of the British Empire continued to be marred by asymmetries inherent in the colonial encounter. Recall, however, my suggestion that the exhibit presented the central tension of its narrative as an internal one occurring within the “hero”, and that the “he” therefore needed to purge the corrupted elements of “his” character to truly appreciate the “heroine’s” qualities and enable their union to flourish. “Power dressing” showed the “hero” moving in that direction. In this room, “he” was no longer merely interested in possessing or subjugating the “heroine”. Instead, by adorning “himself” in “her” fashions, we find the “hero” beginning to appreciate the “heroine’s” qualities, even if this appreciation continued to be stunted by a concern with power.

Another key theme introduced in "Power Dressing" was the beginning of colonized peoples becoming more active rather than merely providing a passive foil for the actions of the colonists. As such, from this room onward, the "heroine" was depicted as increasingly taking an active role in the direction of the narrative, as "she" assessed aspects of British culture. Thus, colonized people were described as "adopting", "modifying", and "resisting" Western expectations. A key example of this perspective was Gilbert Stuart's 1785 portrait of Mohawk leader and British ally Thayendanegea (Joseph Brant), in which he wore a near seamless mix of Indigenous and British finery.

Moreover, as the mixing of "hero" and "heroine" proceeded in the exhibit, they increasingly resembled the very first versions of themselves, as depicted in the first room. In the first room, recall that the "hero" was largely shown to be a relatively guileless adventurer. It was also the last time that the exhibit depicted the "heroine" as an active character in plot, who was at that point seemingly open to collaboration with the "hero". In this regard, the exhibition seemed to contain a hint of the circularity that Frye (1957: 171) observes in comedies, in which the new society contains elements of an even older (and presumably purer) society.

Face to Face

The fifth room, entitled "Face to Face", returned to a more neutral, light brown. The room featured a wide range of objects, including paintings, photographs and sculptures. The balance of works between those created by colonist and colonized was roughly equal. Unlike the previous room on "Power Dressing", many of the works in this room also featured everyday people rather than elites. The theme that began in the previous room, on cultural mixing between colonizer and colonized, was continued in this room. As a whole, the room was designed to demonstrate how itinerant artists from both metropole and colony represented each other's cultures, and drew upon and mixed each other's styles and practices – described in the room's description as 'the hybrid style in which subjects were represented by artists across cultural divides' (Tate Britain, 2015f).

Whereas the works by colonized people that were included in the other rooms would have been likely classified as ethnographic objects of "culture" at the time they were originally taken, the works in 'Face to Face' would more likely have been defined as "art", given that they drew upon European styles and practices. Correspondingly, the names of the artists responsible for the works were also known, as opposed to previous rooms, in which they were generally recorded as "unknown". *The Houseboy* (1878), a painting by Indian artist Manchershaw Pithawalla, was an exemplar of this type of work. Pithawalla, the label (Tate Britain, 2015g) noted, was trained in a British-run art school, and was the first Indian artist to have a one-man show in London.

The fact that the works in this room were created in a context of unequal power relations was hinted at in the room's description and on several of the labels. Even the room's description mentioned that some of the subjects depicted in the works may have been "slaves or captives", and therefore coerced to sit. A key piece in this room, which also figured on promotional materials for the exhibit, was the 1616 portrait of Matoaka (popularly known as Pocahontas) in European dress. As the label (Tate Britain, 2015h) noted, Matoaka herself came to Britain as a hostage. Nevertheless, despite such acknowledgement, the cross-cultural mixing of aesthetic styles and practices was clearly the main focus of the room. The overarching emphasis in the objects and their labels was on the process of appraisal and mixing that was occurring as a result of colonizer and colonized coming "face to face". Indeed, the very title of the room

suggested a movement towards a more equal relationship; colonizers and those colonized do not generally square up face-to-face.

Both collective characters were depicted as undergoing further transformation in this room, as they moved towards unity. By depicting itinerant artists from Britain documenting what they found in the colonies, the "hero" was depicted as having further moved on from the naiveté, violence and arrogance that characterized him in earlier rooms, towards an appreciation of the "heroine". Alongside this, there was a further emphasis on the "heroine's" assessment of the "hero". As such, the "heroine" was depicted as having grown in stature. As I remarked upon above, not only did the room present works by colonized artists who made use of Western styles, but they were also named in the labels.

Out of Empire

The next room, with walls painted in a light beige, was entitled "Out of Empire". The room brought visitors further forward in history; art works contained within the room were created from roughly 1900 until 1970, a critical phase in British imperial history that included the period of decolonization. Yet, despite the context of an empire that was unravelling, in keeping with the theme of the previous rooms – on the increasing hybridity of colonist and colonized – "Out of Empire" emphasized cross-cultural interconnections among the artists and their works. This was described as emerging from an intensive global process of collecting, learning, display and experimentation (Tate Britain, 2015i). Indeed, it is in "Out of Empire" where the process of cultural mixing that began to be described in "Power Dressing" reached a climax.

Among artists from the colonies who trained in British art schools or travelled to London, the room showcased works that sought in various ways to combine European modernist styles with those of their cultures. For example, the label accompanying Nigerian artist Uzo Egonu's 1964 painting, *Northern Nigerian Landscape*, suggested that the "texture, patterns and earthy colors recall ancient Nigerian Nok sculpture as well as Western contemporary abstract art" (Tate Britain, 2015j). Other works in the room showed an attempt to transcend such binaries, such as Rabindranath Tagore's (1939) *Head of a Woman*. Tagore, observed the label accompanying the piece, sought in his art to transcend "political and national division" (Tate Britain, 2015k). The pieces by White British artists seemed to mirror those of their counterparts. Thus, *Three African Figures* (1961), an oil painting by Isabel Rawsthorne, in which three black figures in white robes are painted in wide, quick, brush strokes against a grey backdrop, similarly combined the representation of Nok culture with a European aesthetic. Rawsthorne, the label noted, studied modern African art at the College of Arts in Zaria, Nigeria.

At this juncture in the exhibit's narrative of the British Empire, the "hero" and "heroine" were as close to an open and equal relationship as ever. Each collective character was shown to have a high degree of agency, as they explored themselves and each other. Even the 'hero' – as represented through artists such as Rawsthorne – seemed to finally truly appreciate the "heroine's" qualities. The "bad" aspects of "his" character, which had been depicted in earlier rooms, seemed to have faded. In sum, "Out of Empire" seemed designed to convey that, as the British Empire began to unravel, opportunities for closer union and collaboration emerged. The room further suggested that the artworks produced during this heady phase in the history of empire provided clues as to the new kind of society that was beginning to take shape, which reflected the combined influences of both colonizer and colonized.

Legacies of Empire

The seventh and final room, “Legacies of Empire”, was smaller than the other rooms. Its design suggested that it was more an extension of ‘Out of Empire’ than a separate room; the two rooms were separated by a partial wall that was roughly two-thirds of the height of the ceiling. Both rooms were also painted in the same light beige. As the title indicated, in *Legacies of Empire*, the visitor was taken further forward in history. All of the works in the room were produced from the 1960s onwards, after the “break up of Empire”, in the words of the room’s description (Tate Britain, 2015l). According to the description, after a period of neglect, it was only “recently that a post imperial generation of artists has felt able to engage more directly with the visual culture of Empire” (Tate Britain, 2015l). Each of the works also reprised “a theme or type of art presented elsewhere in the exhibit” to show “the ways in which objects and images continue to speak to us about the histories and legacies of empire” (Tate Britain, 2015l).

Many of the works in “Legacies of Empire” emphasized painful legacies of coercion and violence, such as the recently acquired *Trophies of Empire* (1972) by Donald Locke, which recalls the British Empire’s role in slavery, or Rita Donagh’s 1983 map of the six counties of Ulster cloaked in shadow, evoking the history of violence that continues to mark the territory. Other works emphasized the ways in which the British Empire contributed to the formation of Britain. Among the most well-known pieces in the room exemplifying this theme was the 2009 poster by The Singh Twins, entitled *EnTWINed*. Its label noted that the Singh Twins “have consistently used their art to explore the impact of imperialism on the political, social and cultural formation of modern day Britain”, and that the poster details “the entwined histories of two cultures stemming from the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and successive waves of the Sikh diaspora” (Tate Britain, 2015m). The last piece in the exhibit was a large quadriptych by Sonia Boyce (1986), in which fragments of imperialist posters and a portrait of a black woman were placed alongside designs redolent of sumptuous Victorian wallpaper. The label (Tate Britain, 2015m) noted that this was an adaptation of Victorian wallpapers commemorating the Golden Jubilee, and that the woman was a self-portrait of Boyce, who in the work replaced the Queen. Much as with *EnTWINed*, this piece highlighted the role of colonised people in British history.

The emphasis in this room on works that recall the injustices of Britain’s imperial past suggested a tragic turn that did not square very easily with the rest of the exhibit. As we saw, the subjugation of colonized people was peripheral to the exhibit’s central theme of cultural mixing. There were many allusions to the Empire’s deleterious impact throughout the exhibit, but it was never confronted directly as a key theme. Even the room on “Imperial Heroics” was focused more on the perspectives of the colonists, than the impact of their violent actions. I will return to this issue in the conclusion. Before doing so, however, I will discuss how the exhibit concluded its narrative of the British Empire.

It is clear that the exhibit’s narrative ended before the ultimate union of the “hero” and “heroine”; the last room on “Legacies of Empire” made clear that the painful legacies of the British Empire needed to be resolved first. Nevertheless, the last room also suggested that such a union was on the horizon. This was presented as a process by which the two histories – of colonist and colonized – would be incorporated into the history of Britain. This was exemplified not only by the inclusion of pieces such as *EnTWINed*, but also by the photographs of Hew Locke’s (2006) installation, “Restoration”, in which he covered the statues in Bristol of key civic figures with gold and jewels, thereby recalling the imperial provenance of their wealth and, indeed, that of the city. Finally, Boyce’s quadriptych, the last work in the exhibition, paints formerly colonized people directly into Britain’s history. In all these works, ‘Legacies of Empire’ hinted at the new kind of society – the new kind of Britain – that would

emerge from the eventual fusion of 'hero' and 'heroine.' This was presented as a multicultural, 'hybrid' Britain, in which the painful legacies of the Empire were acknowledged.

Conclusion

My first impressions of *Artist and Empire* were similar to those of the reviewers in the journal *Third Text* (2016) and Catherine Hahn's (2016) recent article. Like them, I was struck by the fact that the exhibition did not directly consider the deleterious impact of the British Empire. Why did the exhibit not at least include a room that focused on objects relating to the racist subjugation – indeed, the enslavement – of colonized people? Why was there not a room on the struggles and the violence that attended the end of empire? How, for example, could there not have been anything in the exhibit on the terrible violence that accompanied partition of India? And yet, the exhibition was clearly not a wholesale apologia for Empire. My interviews with the curators reinforced this point – none of them suggested that the exhibit was intended to recall the "good" aspects of the Empire. Rather, as I mentioned earlier at the outset of this article, they emphasized that it was designed to be a "neutral" presentation of art objects.

Inspired by the argument that no historical narrative can be neutral, I set out to uncover the exhibit's underlying narrative form using Frye's framework. I hoped this would help me to make sense of the exhibit's absences and emphases. With respect to the latter, I initially had great difficulty interpreting the exhibit's central theme of progressive cultural mixing between colonizer and colonized, particularly in relation to wider debates over whether the empire should be remembered with pride or shame. Frye's framework was useful here because it shifted that debate into the background, in order to see the exhibit from a new perspective. Ultimately, I found the exhibit to be strongly redolent of a comedy.

My interpretation of the exhibit might be criticized on the grounds that it is merely my own personal perspective, conjured up through a creative reading of the exhibit. Michael Schudson (1997), for example, makes a similar criticism of Donna Harraway's interpretation of African Hall. However, this genre of criticism misapprehends the interpretative enterprise in sociology, particularly in relation to the role of theory and creativity. Theory structures the interpretative process; as well as providing a lens through which to "see" specific meanings, it limits what can be seen. The use of theory should therefore prevent researchers from overly indulging their personal perspective. The creative element of the interpretative process occurs when the researcher is faced with a "forest of symbols", to use Victor Turner's (1967) phrasing, and must find an appropriate theory and, if necessary, refine that theory in relation to the findings. Through this process, the researcher reconstructs the meanings of social life. If a critic is willing to firstly accept this endeavor, then they might proceed with a more targeted criticism on the use of theory and its relationship to the object of study.

Is the use of formalist literary theory to analyze the politics of memory via an art exhibition appropriate? Formalism's search for universal elements of narrative, much like structuralism in the social sciences, fell out of favor at the end of the twentieth century. This was not just a philosophical changing of the guard, but literature itself increasingly changed shape, such that the search for universalisms seemed to be an anachronism. But it is increasingly apparent in the humanities and the social sciences that deeply and widely held forms of culture do not change very easily. It is probably not an accident that literary formalism has recently made headway in historiography. Experimentation in the writing of literature might have made formalism less useful to its study, but the writing of history is much less experimental. The existence of professional conventions means that history writing tends to rigorously follow

certain forms, making a formalist approach more apt. The study of collective memory is even more so. Narratives of collective memory are often tied to long-held definitions of collective identity. As I wrote earlier, this makes them resemble myth more than history. As such, even more than history, narratives of collective memory are a form of story-telling. Moreover, effective myths are affective; they speak to us emotionally. This makes them more resistant to change. For these reasons, I see much potential in the field of collective memory for the use of literary formalism.

The point about the emotional nature of collective memory suggests a further use for formalism beyond identifying the underlying forms of narratives of collective memory. From Aristotle onwards, formalism has been used to help make sense of the emotions embedded in texts; certain narrative forms are linked to certain emotions. Thus, Frye (1957) suggests that each of the four foundational *mythoi* are associated with differing emotions, which roughly correspond to their 'seasonal' position, from the uplifting spirit of comedies, which conjure feelings of empathy with the young lovers and happiness at their ultimate union, to the wry humor of satire, which fuels feelings contempt for the protagonists. In this regard, literary formalism holds much potential for analysts of collective memory as a tool for understanding why particular narratives trigger certain types of emotions.

The interpretation of meaning is not only an empirical endeavor. By uncovering meanings that might otherwise have been ignored, it also has the potential of contributing to normative debates. As such, I conclude this essay with a normative discussion of *Artist and Empire*. I will argue that the exhibit ought to have narrated Britain's imperial past as a tragedy rather than as a comedy. In doing so, I join several others who have similarly argued for a tragic reading of suffering and difficult pasts for its potential in triggering understanding and reconciliation (e.g. Alexander 2004; Baker 2014; Euben 1990; Muldoon; 2005). I am particularly inspired by David Scott's (2004) argument that postcolonial states ought to narrate their histories as tragedies. The following discussion is a modest effort to extend Scott's discussion to a case of how a former metropole – Britain – ought to relate to its past.

It is clear that by focusing attention on cultural mixing and the possibility of a hybrid future, the narration of Britain's imperial past as a comedy was at least partly designed to enable it to side-step wider debates over the impact of the Empire. But it is worth considering whether this vision, however laudable, can be achieved without first confronting the past. On this score, I am doubtful. Comedies often gloss over obstacles to unity. Recall Frye's observation that obstacles are often shown in comedies to have been illusory. There is a sense that the protagonists merely need to see the illusions for what they are in order to achieve unity. In my view, this approach will not work in the case of Britain's imperial past. Historical grievances need to be properly accounted for - 'worked through' - in order to understand the present and thereby construct a better future. The exhibit's reluctance to do so partly explains the confusing disjuncture of the last room, in which visitors were suddenly faced with artworks dealing with painful legacies without foreknowledge of the reasons for that pain. It simply is not possible to gloss over that history if the vision of unity is to be achieved.

A tragic narrative of Britain's imperial past would have been more apt. To illustrate my argument, it is useful to return to the inspiration for Frye's work: Aristotle's (1996) discussion of tragedy in *Poetics*. Aristotle (1996) observes that successful tragedies invoke fear and pity in an audience; fear at the tragedy itself, and pity for the characters involved. However, for Aristotle, tragedies should do more than merely invoke these emotions, they should also enable their release. Aristotle refers to this process as *katharsis.* The trigger for *katharsis* is described

by Aristotle as the moment of *anagnorisis*. *Anagnorisis* is the moment of recognition, or understanding, when the tragedy is revealed and the hero realizes in horror what he or she has done. If properly presented, this moment should provoke an outpouring of emotion, thereby enabling *katharsis* to occur (Aristotle, 1996: 18-19). Because of the possibility of *katharsis*, Aristotle assigned a social role to tragedy. Through *katharsis*, he suggested that tragedies can provide "relief" and "healing." (cited in Heath, 1996: xxxiv). Thus, a tragic narrative of Britain's imperial past would have been superior to a comic narrative because of its ability to provoke understanding (*anagnorisis*) of the injustices of empire and, possibly, release pent up emotions (*katharsis*), and in this way provide a mechanism for 'working through' the past and pave the way for a more inclusive, postcolonial British identity.

But is this a moot point, given ongoing debates over the meaning of the Empire? If Tate Britain had sought to narrate the British Empire as a tragedy, would it not have provoked further contestation, particularly among visitors who look upon the empire with pride? Here it is useful to return to Aristotle once again. According to Aristotle, successful tragedies are not based on simple binaries between good and evil, hero and villain, or perpetrator and victim. Instead, Aristotle argues that the protagonists of a tragedy should be slightly flawed, not wholly one type or the other. In this regard, we should be able to recognise our inherent human flaws within the tragic hero. This is what makes an effective tragic narrative; it must give the impression that *it could have happened to us* (Heath 1996: xxxiv). Correspondingly, Aristotle uses the concept of *hamartia*, or 'error', to explain how the best tragedies represent the fall of the hero. In a successful tragedy, the fall of the hero does not occur because of an innate moral flaw, but because of an error, whether it was poor judgement, ignorance, or otherwise (see Heath, 1996: xxxi-xxxiii).

A tragic narrative of Britain's imperial past, properly constructed, should therefore emphasize that it is not a uniquely British moral deficiency that caused them to subjugate other peoples, but rather that it was underpinned by a historically-constituted racist understanding of humanity, which resulted from a complex set of circumstances. Acknowledgement of this fact could enable a more productive encounter with the consequences and legacies of imperialism. For Britons to understand the tragedies of imperialism – for them to experience *anagnorisis* – they need to see that British imperialism was not a uniquely evil endeavour, but that they too could have perpetrated similar injustices as their predecessors.

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