

Museums and popular culture revisited: Kevin Moore and the politics of pop

Tara Brabazon

Media Studies, University of Brighton, Watts Building, Lewes Road, Brighton BN2 4SG, UK

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Abstract

This article recognizes the (soon to be) tenth anniversary of the publication of Kevin Moore's *Museums and Popular Culture*. An assessment of this book is made in relation to Moore's work in the National Football Museum and the International Football Institute. Included in the article is an interview with Moore, evaluating what he believes were the successes and failures of the project he instigated in *Museums and Popular Culture*.

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In the academic context of Research Assessment Exercises and a university sector where scholarship is defined as that which we are paid to discover, there are still remarkable monographs emerging from publishing houses. As I get older, I increasingly admire the gift that writers give readers. They take three, five or ten years from their lives—and their family's lives—to gift innovation, creativity and rigour to the body of knowledge. When looking back, I rarely periodize my writing career in terms of who was in political power at the time, or who was my current employer. Instead, what I was reading shaped not only how I wrote, but how I thought about the world.

We rarely acknowledge our debts to the great books that transformed our lives. Footnotes never seem sufficient. Through a remarkable synergy of events, involving a husband, a postgraduate and a conference, I had the opportunity to thank a fine writer and thinker whose book changed my views and ideas. Kevin Moore's *Museums and Popular Culture* is about to reach its tenth anniversary of publication. This monograph developed a

E-mail address: t.m.brabazon@brighton.ac.uk.

theory of how and why popular culture is deployed in museums. In balancing practical and philosophical concerns, he traces the museum—as an institution and idea—through history, demonstrating that their value must not be assumed, but discussed, debated and explored. He asked dangerous and provocative questions.

Given the choice, would the public prefer that their taxes are spent on public museums or something else? What would attract those that currently do not visit or come to museums? If museums reflected popular culture more fully, would this attract more visitors? Museums have generally acted on the assumption that there is no need to ask such fundamental questions, perhaps from a fear that it might be disturbing or even dangerous to do so (Moore, 1997, p. 15).

Even before he gained his appointment as the curator of the National Football Museum in Preston, he recognized the range of benefits offered by a museum to regions and cities, through employment, tourists and day trippers. However, he was also conscious that museums may “just be papering over the cracks, actually helping to mask deprivation (Moore, 1997, p. 22).” Through this disquiet, he remained convinced of the democratic potential of material culture, working against the dominant ideologies of written sources. Through his research, he deployed cultural studies theories and modes of reading and interpretation as a way to revalue popular culture, not as trivial and light, but as a political battleground.¹ His belief in the power of sport to instigate public discussions about class also resulted in an evocative commentary about the role of university academics in public discourses about culture, creativity and value.

The academics have failed to touch the public’s consciousness; if their goal is ultimately to enable us all to understand the significance of popular culture, then they have failed miserably. Museums offer a unique forum to succeed where the academics have failed (Moore, 1997, p. 105).

It was perhaps inevitable that life presented Moore with a way to align his commitments to popular culture, sport, museums and changing universities. He became the curator of the National Football Museum in Preston in August 1997 and Co-Director of the International Football Institute at the University of Central Lancashire in October 2004.² He has aligned the public service imperatives of museums with the educational role he outlined in *Museums and Popular Culture*. The goal is “to create the Institute which is designed to promote the study and development of football through research and higher education provision” (Bay, 2004). *Museums and Popular Culture* became the template. Moore’s career has applied many directives of this complex and innovative book.

With the alignment of these academic, research and professional roles through 2004 and 2005, and with *Museums and Popular Culture* reaching its tenth anniversary, it seemed an ideal moment to reflect and assess how the arguments he presented in the book are applied

¹Moore expressed this concern as, “trading popular culture, defined as leisure, almost as light relief ignores the politics of the subject. Academic studies of leisure and popular culture emphasize that such activities are often the battleground between competing ideologies and class interests” (Moore, 1997, p. 78).

²The International Football Institute (IFI) was launched at the National Football Museum Hall of Fame Dinner on November 30, 2003. It was a partnership between the University of Central Lancashire and the National Football Museum. Its aim is to encourage and develop the study of football through research and teaching. Refer to “International Football Institute—University of Central Lancashire,” <<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/host/ifi/index.htm>> (accessed 30 April 2005).

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