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Rocking the Museum: New Model Army as Host-in-Residence

Kathy Doherty and Daragh O'Reilly

The NMA Project

This paper discusses work from a broader project exploring the factors involved in creating and sustaining a popular music project: that of the English rock band New Model Army (NMA) who have survived in the music business for over thirty years. In exploring the factors that might account for their longevity, we point to the significance of NMA's ability to stage experiences with the power not just to entertain but also to activate and sustain desired identities, social relations, and subjectivities. Indeed, defining and experiencing one's connection to NMA goes way beyond occupying the identity category of 'fan'. In their communication with fans, NMA mobilise the metaphorical use of 'family' to conceptualise the band-fan collective. Specifically, the band uses a repertoire of arguments and images that construct family as a hospitable place of acceptance, protection, and comfort. The family construct offers a framework for encounters with the NMA project, implying a set of positively evaluated relationships and experiences. In this 'family-as-sanctuary' interpretative repertoire, family is constructed as an antidote to feelings of dislocation and alienation from modern life. NMA's offer is thus attractive for those in pursuit of home, and fans do talk about association with the NMA family as a homecoming.

The case study on which we focus here is NMA's free-of-charge touring exhibition entitled *One Family – One Tribe: The Art & Artefacts of New Model Army*, curated by Joolz Denby, the band's long-term artist and collaborator; and Nina Baptiste, a NMA fan and a museums audience development officer. The exhibition brought together a collection of the band's art and artefacts, reflecting twenty-five years of the band's visual culture. We explore the exhibition as an opportunity for NMA to extend some family hospitality, focussed on the display of family treasures and souvenirs.

Now, from our theoretical stance rooted in discourse theory, we see the mobilisation of a family trope to define the NMA collective as both constitutive of a reality and as consequential for social action in the here and now, with the potential for strategic impact on interpersonal, cultural, and commercial levels. NMA's version of family conjures up the notion of a comforting sanctuary, but this version is arguable, and could be countered by constructing family life as essentially constraining or controlling. This realisation prompts us to interrogate the ethics of the exchange between NMA family members on the band and fan sides. Specifically, what do the band stand to gain by nurturing *their* version of family life in relation to the NMA project, and what is in it for the fans?

We start by outlining our theoretical framework for understanding encounters with the NMA exhibition then offer an analysis of some of its elements, in particular drawing out discussion on representations of the NMA family.

Encountering the Exhibition: Visual Culture and Identity

Our theoretical starting point is that encounters with NMA take on meaning in a 'circuit of culture' where identity, representation, regulation, consumption, and production are considered as interconnected nodal points around which cultural meanings are formed.¹ The production and consumption of music is articulated by cultural texts of different kinds including musical sounds, lyrics, artwork, merchandise, publicity photographs, live performances, DVDs, and so on, all of which are available as inter-textual cultural resources for the management of identities and emotional states.

Stephen Greenblatt argues that exhibitions have an ability to engender subjective states of wonder (which he defines as the aesthetic power of an object to stop viewers in their tracks and convey an arresting sense of uniqueness), or to create resonances (reaching out to a larger world beyond the museum including the history of the object and its conditions of use).² He holds these two possibilities in opposition and indeed, as we shall see, the NMA exhibition is arguably more

concerned with creating resonances, with its presentation of ‘memorabilia’ and its strongly nostalgic vibe. It is this aspect of the encounter with NMA heritage that we focus on here, drawing out its significance in relation to the identity work of the visitors. Russell Belk suggests that possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of identity and that an accumulation of possessions offers a sense of past: telling us who we are, where we have come from and offering suggestions for where we are going.³ The collective possessions in the exhibition help to define the NMA family and what it means to be a family member, and as such act as a resource for fans in elaborating a sense of self. The symbolising power of the objects on display in this exhibition also lies in their ability to connect the visitor to a range of sometimes eclectic ideological, lifestyle, and spiritual values, at the same time as triggering nostalgic interconnections between the artefacts and personal memories.

The exhibition space is thus primed for *remembering*. In discourse theory, remembering is viewed as a socially occasioned activity and ‘rememberings’ are re-configured as reports or discussions of past events that occur in the context of communicative action and rhetoric, playing a key role in ‘formulating a sense of identity, of one’s place in [...] the wider world’.⁴ Encounters with the exhibition are thus significant in providing opportunities for *re-membering*: renewing or heightening a sense of membership to the NMA family, accomplished by the telling of individual histories and of allegiance to the values signified by the visual culture on display (‘what NMA means to me’), and in turn reactivating feelings of belonging and family loyalty. Encounters with the exhibition are therefore hospitable, working to consolidate rather than disrupt the subjectivities of visitors. Indeed we suggest that the objects in the exhibition are encountered as ‘containers of sympathetic magic [...] by which we announce our allegiance’.⁵

One Family: One Tribe



Figure 1

Figure 1 shows the view from the main entrance to the exhibition space at Cartwright Hall in Bradford. There are five mannequins, which one can imagine represent the five members of the band. They are dressed in early New Model Army stage costumes with a military look, providing a reference to the band’s name and to the history consciously invoked by the band in adopting this name.⁶ The range of exhibits include original cover artwork and associated items (e.g. an iconic leather jacket photographed for the band’s third studio album *The Ghost of Cain*), original lyric notebooks written

in cheap school copybooks, stage clothes and accessories, musical instruments played by members of the band, examples of merchandise and a mocked up merchandise booth, photographs, press-cuttings, a 'family album', and an altar (which we discuss below). The band itself, apart from some members' performances on each of the opening nights, are not physically present at the exhibition, although a DVD of the band performing live is projected – playing at a low volume as 'background music' – onto a large wall in a side room adjacent to the main exhibition space at Cartwright Hall. The relative silence of the museum and the absence of live performance contrasts sharply to an encounter with the band at a gig, offering a space for dialogue and reflection.



Figure 2

Against the trend towards spectacular design in museum and gallery spaces,⁷ this exhibition employs traditional display cases to channel and focus engagement (low-tech displays of course being entirely consistent with independent music ideology).⁸ The contents of the cases refer to NMA's creative practice; for example, figure 2 above shows a case containing guitars on stands used by NMA front man Justin Sullivan. A hat worn by Sullivan over ten years before the exhibition, is balanced on top of one of the guitars. At one time it was a distinctive feature of his appearance and would therefore be of particular significance to longstanding members of the NMA family. This case also contains a number of laminated access passes, showing the location of particular gigs and to whom the pass belongs, marking his or her status as a 'Main Stage Artist'. Access passes are potent signifiers of artistic capital, with the capacity to construct a sense of boundary between the creative members of the NMA family and the fans as audience, but in this context they can act as a bridge or device with which to imagine crossing the threshold into the intoxicating world of rock music – the inner circle of band life and the musical creative process – normally hidden backstage and behind the scenes.

Representing Family

On the walls of the museum, and providing a framework of interpretation for the other exhibits, were a series of panels reproducing a text entitled 'What is the NMA Family – Some Thoughts by Joolz Denby'.⁹ This essay is significant because it is an attempt from the side of the band to

provide a framing account for the social relations between the band and fans. The piece is in part a fierce polemic, a retrospective essay and a manifesto communicating core band values. The fans are constructed as strong-minded and independent in their refusal to be influenced by negative evaluations of NMA. They are characterised as possessing a strong psychological and emotional connection with the band, transcending any attempt to sabotage the NMA project and engendering a desire to defend and protect it as if it were a family member. The band-fan relationship is constructed as one of ‘mutual pride and respect’.¹⁰ Words such as ‘loyal’, ‘devoted’, ‘camaraderie’, and ‘support’ are used to depict a strong sense of identification with NMA, and in turn the band are positioned as ‘never [having] manipulated or lied to the fans for financial gain’ and ‘a creative force that intelligently addressed and examined the ideas and beliefs [the fans] held dear’.¹¹ The picture of mutual caring and honesty in the NMA family sits alongside claims to authenticity (NMA articulate against so called contrived ‘plastic pop’), creating an offer of sanctuary, an antidote to feelings of alienation and dislocation in modern life:

There are those who say NMA is now much more than just a rock band, that it has slowly metamorphosed into a kind of Movement: not resembling accepted forms of conventional religious or political movements, but rather a new kind of consciousness derived from archaic tribal roots and the most basic human need for a sense of belonging, transplanted into the fragmenting twenty-first century to create stability and a sense of collective power via NMA’s music, ideas and creative endeavours.¹²

We have argued elsewhere that ‘Some Thoughts’ is interesting for the way in which the NMA family construct is detached from the musicians in the band and from a hard-core group of fans.¹³ The family is imagined as ‘more than just a rock band’, with values and shared experiences holding them together that extend beyond the appreciation of music. The ‘family’ construct subsumes a simplistic producer-consumer dichotomy and backgrounds the commercial exchange between the band and the fans.

The exhibition actualises the band-fan collective as ‘family’ in several ways, for example, via the *Family Album*. Fans were invited by the curators to write testimonials giving reasons why NMA are worthy of a publicly funded exhibition, and these testimonials formed a strategic element of funding applications to stage the exhibition.¹⁴ A selection of these testimonials was subsequently pasted into a ring-bound scrapbook, each speaking of NMA’s importance to the author personally, as well as making claims for the band’s wider cultural significance.

Family ties are invoked and sacralised in the altarpiece (see figure 3 below). The altar is fashioned using a dais raised roughly twelve centimetres above the ground, on which stand two elevated candlesticks wrapped in white fabric and holding thick red candles. Midway between them, against a white-painted emulsion back panel, is a framed copy of *Celtic Knot*, the original artwork for the *Thunder and Consolation* album, which is a reproduction of a Pictish stone carving.¹⁵



Figure 3

The text panel to the left of the knotwork symbol describes the symbol as ‘a charm to protect us all from the evil eye of materialism and negativity [...] a window to another place and time’. ‘Celticity’ and ‘Celtic spirituality’ are terms used to describe the use of ‘Celtic’ references in contemporary culture, as Marion Bowman writes:

The term ‘Celtic spirituality’ in contemporary parlance covers a huge variety of belief and praxis and involves a wide range of spiritual seekers. Celtic spirituality is used broadly to describe pre-Christian Celtic religion, the Celtic Church and contemporary religiosity inspired by the ‘Celtic spirit’ [...] inherently spiritual and intuitive, in touch with nature and the hidden realms, epitomising in many ways that which is lost but longed for in contemporary society.¹⁶

This resonates strongly with the appeal in ‘Some Thoughts’ to archaic tribal roots and a desire for a sense of belonging in dislocated modern life, and inflecting the nature of identities and relationships on offer in the NMA family. ‘Celticity’ is symbolised throughout the NMA circuit of culture by the *Thunder and Consolation* knot, providing a rich cultural resource to define the NMA family, a set of values for fans to identify with (of eclectic religiosity consistent with a New Age perspective) and an iconic method for fans to display their membership of the NMA Family. Celtic knot is a potent symbol of the ties that bind the NMA family, what the family stands for, and is exhibited here as an object of veneration in the altarpiece.

The folklorist Kay Turner has conducted research on women who make altars in different traditions as part of a spiritual practice. She sees altars as ‘in essence thresholds between realms and, as such, a place to resolve dichotomies’,¹⁷ further explaining:

In making their altars, women assemble images that represent the power of and need for good relationships and positive affiliations [...] the altar specifies a context for building and sustaining relationship [...] the altar is both a model of and an instrument for relationships.¹⁸

This is consistent with our reading of the symbolic significance of the altarpiece in the exhibition. The image of the Celtic knot at the altar represents NMA family relationships – their power and positive affiliations – and the creative integrity of NMA as a context for building and sustaining those relationships.

Discussion: the Ethics of NMA Family Hospitality

Occupying a museum space is at first glance an odd move for a rock band, inviting perceptions of the project as calcified and of questionable relevance to a dynamic, innovative present. Furthermore, the quiet, contemplative exhibition space could be accused of perversely dismantling live musical performance: a central element of the NMA project. Statements on the NMA website, however, position the exhibition (and musical retrospectives) as a pause on a continuing journey, a moment of nostalgia and expression of pride for what has been created. Furthermore, reminiscing and thinking nostalgically are normative, mutually defining activities in this community. Evidence of this can be seen in current discussion board threads on the NMA website entitled ‘What is Your Best NMA memory?’ and ‘What is your First NMA Experience?’. The exhibition thus adds a unique and productive extra dimension to NMA family culture by providing opportunities for reflection about encounters with the band, elaboration of associated meanings and a space where feelings of belonging and group allegiance are activated.

There is a risk of troubling the inclusive model of ‘family’ that permeates NMA rhetoric in the use of the glass cases to display artefacts that signal the band as distinct from the ‘average’ fan, objects which define the NMA as a distinctly musical project. One version of what museums do is the positioning of the material culture of the ‘other’ as objects of curiosity. In this sense, the glass case has the capacity to create divides by ‘othering’ the owners of the objects behind the glass from the visitors who gaze on them. However, the possibility of perceiving the presentation as elitist and even divisive is delicately balanced by the sacralisation of the NMA family collective in the altarpiece, the framing of the exhibition by the family manifesto, and the display of fan testimonials in the *Family Album*. The potential for alienation is also balanced by the pleasure to be had in gazing upon objects that have the seductive power to connect fans to the world of live performance.

To return to the question posed at the start of the paper, it would therefore seem that NMA family hospitality offers something for everyone. For the fans, the very existence of the exhibition can be invoked to justify or defend involvement with and loyalty to the band. There is intrinsic value in the hedonistic experience of encountering the exhibition, mediated through the nostalgic interconnections to be made between the artefacts, self-narratives, and resonances with the world outside the museum. The exhibition works as a platform for *re-membling*, making salient social identification as a NMA family member, with associated psychological pay-offs in terms of self-esteem. For the band, the exhibition represents NMA as a respected and credible creative project.

But is this an entirely fair exchange? The NMA project has after all the commercial power to generate CD and ticket sales and to sell a range of merchandise including *Thunder and Consolation* celtic knot T-shirts, mugs, jewellery, hats, and even gym bags, to be purchased by the fans as signifiers of family identity and allegiance. This surely raises the question of whether fans feel exploited by the band benefiting commercially from the market value of the fan’s cultural and affective work which, if so, could in turn undermine a sense of collaboration and trust.

Adam Arvidsson notes that the ability to attract and make public affective relations to a brand is a key source of long-term market value.¹⁹ However, affective investments can only be attracted and maintained through creating the right kind of ethos for this activity to flourish. Arvidsson argues that consumers can and will voluntarily make a gift of affective investment (in return for immaterial rewards such as enriching identity projects), but that this gift will come with terms and conditions. As a counter-gift they expect their investment to be handled responsibly and respectfully and for it to be recognised and appreciated. In this context, the band must remain credible in the eyes of the fans and ensure that fans maintain an authentic ‘family feeling’ against the possibility of disgruntlement or feelings of exploitation. The band cannot be seen to be self-promoting prima donnas, in it for the money, or ready to distance themselves from their fans. Family members in turn are ascribed the power to praise or chastise band behaviour which they think aligns with or flouts their expectations. The creation of and ability to sustain a project like NMA, which at its heart relies on a delicately balanced ‘ethical economy’, thus depends on the ability to manage the fans’ investments of affect in ways that will be *acceptable to them*. It is on this level that the exhibition operates so effectively: as a symbolic celebration of NMA ideology, with the hospitable power to reward and position the visitors as valued members of the extended NMA family.

NOTES

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2. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Resonance and Wonder', *The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. by Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, pp. 42–56.
3. Russell Belk, 'Possessions and the Extended Self', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 15, September, 1998, pp. 139–168.
4. Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and David Middleton, 'Toward a Discursive Psychology of Remembering', *The Psychologist*, vol. 5, 1992, p. 444.
5. Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, London: Hamlyn, 1982, p. 30.
6. The band's name was inspired by the parliamentary, anti-monarchist New Model Army formed in 1645 by Oliver Cromwell and led by Sir Thomas Fairfax during the English civil wars.
7. Charity Counts, 'Spectacular Design in Museum Exhibitions', *Curator*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2009, pp. 273–288.
8. Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.
9. Joolz Denby, 'What is the "NMA Family"? Some Thoughts', 2004 <<http://www.newmodelarmy.org>> [accessed 31 May 2007]
10. Denby, 'What is the "NMA Family"?', 2004.
11. Denby, 'What is the "NMA Family"?', 2004.
12. Denby, 'What is the "NMA Family"?', 2004.
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15. *Thunder & Consolation* is NMA's fourth and most successful studio album, released in 1989. The album stands as a landmark in the New Model Army back catalogue, employing fiddles to create a rock-folk fusion.
16. Marion Bowman, 'Arthur and Bridget in Avalon: Celtic Myth, Vernacular Religion and Contemporary Spirituality in Glastonbury', *Fabula, Journal of Folktale Studies*, 48(1/2), 2007, pp. 16–32.
17. Kay Turner, *Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women's Altars*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 63.
18. Turner, *Beautiful Necessity*, p. 79.
19. Adam Arvidsson and Nicolai Peterson, *The Ethical Economy*, New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming <http://www.amazon.com/ethical-economy-towards-post-capitalist-Capital/dp/B0027YU0BG/ref=sr_1_4?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1293721630&sr=1-4>