

# Dispelling the Myth of the 'Positive Legacies' of Empire

**Emilia Terracciano**

Tate Britain's *Artist and Empire* brings together a large number of artefacts (sourced from British collections), made by British and colonised artists, spanning globally from the sixteenth century to the present. The curatorial aim – implied by the ethical (vaguely Levinasian) solicitation of the exhibition subtext – is to prompt viewers to 'face' Britain's imperial past. Walking Tate's themed rooms, I asked myself: What could it mean for Britain to face empire? But also, which one? For at its height, Britain represented the largest empire in history, and for more than a century, the most powerful on the globe. Tate's lumping together of various artworks did little to increase my understanding of how, when and where, the expansion of empire came about. 'Empire' is presented as an elastic, seemingly organic unity comprising crown colonies, protectorates, dependencies and dominions in which the liberal principles of freedom, equality and equity (along with the institutions of private property, free trade and the rule of law) were made global and effectively disentangled from the idea of statehood. A nominal post-imperial template of international hierarchy is posited, obfuscating the racial hierarchies, violence and exclusions of the British Empire (where is the Middle East?) Perhaps one way to help navigate the viewer across empire's terrain, would have been to separate artworks produced in lands that were conquered and those that were settled, with India and the African colonies on the one hand, and old white dominions on the other. The important distinction permeated all aspects of governance and of course, culture and art-making, but was overlooked by curators. Settler territories were deemed 'terra nullius' with inhabitants forcibly removed through treaties or exterminated; not so in the case of India and some African colonies. It is unclear whether the Tate selection was entirely unintentional, evoking John Seeley's notorious claim that 'we seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind', or governed by a desire to induce a selective form of amnesia in relation to events which would fit awkwardly or even seriously upset, the woven narrative pattern. In the catalogue's compelling foreword to the show, historian of black Britain Paul Gilroy writes that

Britain remains ambivalent about its imperial past, which was long a matter of national pride and a source of prestige as well as a litany of exploitation, famine, cruelty and slaughter.<sup>1</sup>

This ambiguity is registered in a recent YouGov poll in which fifty-nine per cent of respondents felt pride rather than guilt towards the British Empire, while thirty-four per cent claimed that it would be a good thing if Britain still had an Empire today.<sup>2</sup> Surely, Tate's mission should be guided by a desire to remove such nostalgia and melancholia, not to foment it. For my part, it is difficult to see how the uncritical showcasing of the theatrics of official propaganda, where the excessive flashiness, pomp and swagger of empire abounded, could in any way remove such feelings. The tedious processions of rulers, governors and military officials (intrepid, benevolent and of course, always enlightened) and scenes of epic (sentimental and almost kitsch) defeat and triumphal one-last-stands became the litany of the show. The litany referred to by Gilroy – that of 'exploitation, famine, cruelty and slaughter' – remained virtually unsung.<sup>3</sup> 'There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism,' wrote Walter Benjamin in a provocative passage that has now become commonplace.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin's wrenching critique of historical reason prompted him to view progress and civilisation, not as the ultimate goals of human efforts but rather as a series of victories in which the oppressor brandishes cultural heritage as spoils.<sup>5</sup> These victors, continued Benjamin, have sunk victims into oblivion so that the latter may no longer be considered as being part of 'culture'. Benjamin proposes that any genuine historian cannot but contemplate with horror the origins of the 'cultural treasures' (plunder, the loots and thefts), which he surveys.<sup>6</sup>

Horror essentially compels the historian to survey with criticality the forms of barbarism on display and to brush history against the grain. Museum curators have become increasingly uncomfortable about the origins of ‘cultural treasures’, especially those which can be traced back to the global south. Scraping up against its own parochial complacency Tate faintly nodded to the rich and spectacular histories of colonial cultural resistance but at the same time refrained from re-interpreting the imperial collections from the standpoint of the ‘defeated, the excluded, the pariahs’ (consider for example Rasheed Araeen’s brilliant exhibition *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, (Hayward Gallery, 1989). In so doing, it did not display the brutality of empire – ‘exploitation, famine, cruelty and slaughter’ – although this continued well into the twentieth century in several of Britain’s colonies (just to name a few – in the case of colonial India – the Massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh of 1919 and the Bengal Famine of 1943–1944, in which more than 3 million Bengalis died). The real tragedy of *Artist and Empire* is that it deliberately refrains from leaving viewers horrified. As we are turned away from the ‘face’, we may have to ask ourselves: what scenes of pain and violence do these images paper over? It is possible that in representing British triumph these images unwittingly and ambiguously incite future military triumph: are these ‘the spoils of war or they are the targets of war’?<sup>7</sup> Let us hope, as pointed out by Gilroy, that this exhibition will provoke future conversations about Tate’s colonial archive. Conversations that will dispel all myths surrounding the ‘positive legacies’ of empire (whether railroads or paintings) and the nostalgic need to ‘celebrate’ or bemoan the end of the ‘imperial museum’.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilroy, ‘Forward’ in Alison Smith, eds, David Blayney Brown and Carol Jacobi, *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain’s Imperial Past*, Tate Publishing, 2015, p 8

<sup>2</sup> See Amia Srinivasan, ‘Under Rhodes’, *London Review of Books*, vol 39, no 7, 31 March 2016, p 32.

<sup>3</sup> Gilroy, ‘Forward’, op cit, p 8

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in Harry Zohn, ed, *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p 256

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London, New York, 2004, p 143

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