



**Geschichtstheorie am Werk**  
**Theory of History at Work**  
**La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre**  
**La teoria della storia all'opera**

# The life span of a light bulb. Thoughts on the preservation and decay of a changing object

*Marcus Wystub*

**Cite as:** Marcus Wystub, "The life span of a light bulb. Thoughts on the preservation and decay of a changing object," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 31/01/2023, <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/11821>.

**ISSN:** 2750-7165

**URL:** <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/11821>

**License:**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

## The life span of a light bulb. Thoughts on the preservation and decay of a changing object

Is a new light bulb on its way to replace the broken one seen in the photograph of the sewing room at the *Wäschefabrik* Museum in Bielefeld? The lamps in the background apparently provided the workstations of the seamstresses with light until the 1980s. A look at the room suggests they were part of and a prerequisite for the process of producing linen and clothing. Today, in contrast, they lit up the room for me as a museum visitor. What you see here is a “time capsule” – that’s how it was explained to me on the guided tour of the museum. The factory was built in 1912 and (re)discovered in a back courtyard in 1986 by a photographer. It looked as if the factory, which had ceased operating in the early 1980s, and its inventory had been left for the day by those who worked there. The building was merely waiting for the staff to return. The museum was created against this backdrop to “preserve the history of the company as if under a glass bell”.<sup>1</sup> The place was found in a “sleeping beauty” state<sup>2</sup> and in 1997 converted by the local people of Bielefeld into a museum (later: *Förderverein Projekt Wäschefabrik e.V.*) that would make “social and technical history tangible and even smellable.”<sup>3</sup> The museum description also states: “What fascinates the visitor is the unique authenticity.”<sup>4</sup>

Is the light bulb still in its “sleeping beauty” state, untouched and slumbering? Did it break in the final years of the company at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s? Does that make it an (authentic) object that has remained unchanged since the company went out of business? Or is the light bulb part of the conservation effort that makes “time travelling” to the sewing room possible and assigns it the role of showing the working conditions of the time? Is it a historical object on display or a means to an end, shedding light on something to be seen? So when the museum opened in 1997, was the light bulb’s museological function replaced in order to make the sewing room visible in the first place?

In the following, I would like to explain the broken light bulb and its significance as a historical object and/or exhibition display technique in the museum context. We are talking about the consequences of something that is broken. The lamp that no longer functions is all the more irritating when the museum’s communicated concept, namely, that everything has been left as it was at the beginning of the 1980s, is taken into account. If this is the case, then time travel begins at the threshold of the entrance to where I am confronted with an authentic place. The above-mentioned metaphors should be understood in this context as advertising,

whose illusion is well known.<sup>5</sup> As a figure of speech (trope), however, metaphors are not simply decoration,<sup>6</sup> but also refer to a way of making something present. We are dealing here with a linguistic framework to support the claim of not being a “museum in the conventional sense.”<sup>7</sup> The metaphors illustrate the possibility of attributing the historically authentic.<sup>8</sup>

Without attempting to determine the historical authenticity of the lamp or question its originality, I would like to point out that the linguistic structure – created by metaphors – is tempting: it suggests assuming the temporal continuity of the lamp. This, however, negates its historical otherness. The metaphors allow what has changed to be overlooked. Think of the dust on the surface of the lampshade, possible colour changes (e.g., due to sunlight), and the technical condition of the light bulb mentioned earlier. The metaphors indicate that temporal decay can and should be withstood. This may have happened as a result of the desire to preserve the factory in the state it was found, which brought the “sleeping beauty” period to an end and gave meaning to the ‘missed existence’ of the factory between the death of one of the owners in 1981<sup>9</sup> and its discovery by the photographer in 1986. The “glass bell” that preserves the location and its history “similar to archaeological layers,”<sup>10</sup> keeps it visible and points to the notion of being unchanged and protected from outside influence.<sup>11</sup> And the less accurate “time capsule” narrative<sup>12</sup> also testifies to the fact that the preserved conditions of the exhibition rooms and their objects stem from an immediate past and that precisely this past can be seen or smelt upon opening the capsule. The authenticity indicated by the metaphors and the associated preservation of a state – things left just as they were – comes into question when the *ghosts of decay*<sup>13</sup> enter time – at the very moment when something is to be preserved. This will to preserve is expressed in the metaphors in question. The prerequisite for the intended authenticity is a functioning light bulb: at least in its role as an exhibit, which, like the other lamps, lights up the former workstations beneath them.<sup>14</sup>

The *ghost* metaphor I use, on the other hand, indicates something undesirable in the preservation process. The *ghosts* will only disappear if the desire to display the continuity of a past and a present is abandoned. Assuming that the lamp is meant to show a bygone work process and its conditions in the overall context of the sewing room, the *ghosts of decay* are a disruptive factor, since the light bulb has reached the end of its life span. In due time, it is safe to say, other lamps will be affected. This also holds true for other exhibition objects such as sewing machines, tables and chairs. It could be phrased in the future perfect: the lamp will have broken.<sup>15</sup> The limited life span of the light bulb is reflected in the future perfect

tense: inevitable failure in an (un)determined future.<sup>16</sup> This failure, however, is only disruptive if the *ghosts of decay* are challenged, as explained above. *Ghosts* are a disturbance because, metaphorically speaking, they are unwanted and, at the same time, hard to elude. Preserving the light bulb as a functioning exhibit is diametrically opposed to decay. The disturbing *ghosts of decay* are noticed not because the object has altered, but because the lamp and its attribution of authenticity can no longer meet the expectation of being part of a past on display in the exhibition space.<sup>17</sup> What would happen if none of the lamps in the sewing room worked? Would visitors to the museum explore the place with a torch? Preserving the object as an exhibition technique seems a sensible consequence. At the same time, the light bulb must be preserved if it is to fulfil its purpose as an exhibit and serve the staging as an authentic object.<sup>18</sup>

Conservation practices, however, and the metaphors addressed by the museum, such as “time capsule” or “glass bell”, are in opposition to the decline of the light bulb. The intention to represent the ideal past state of an object has – to remain in the semantic field of metaphor – “summoned” the *ghosts*. But the technical condition of the lamp has changed over time and consequently its function and meaning in the museum context. It no longer has a function in terms of working conditions in the past. While it has not been removed from its *original* context in the factory building, allowing its significance for the worker whose workspace it illuminated to be understood, it is essentially a means of staging authenticity with the claim of continuity in materiality and meaning. The light bulb is supposed to show what was by remaining the same as it is presumed to have been. At the same time, it will have become something else, which inevitably contradicts this claim. It no longer carries the meaning of an authentic object. If the light bulb was ever part of the working process at all, the illustrations in the exhibition catalogue reveal that the entire lighting system had at one time been replaced.<sup>19</sup> And in the future, perhaps LED lamps will light up the room (if this is not already the case). The object will have changed and been different. If the expressed intention is to remember, change becomes tricky. As soon as there is an intention to leave the light bulb in a desirable state, the disturbing *ghosts of decay* appear on the scene. Whether the light bulb is broken or has been replaced would be entirely irrelevant if it were not for this attribution of meaning to the desire to remember.<sup>20</sup> The light bulb can no longer carry the meaning it may have once had. The *ghosts of decay* exhaust the metaphors of “time travelling,” “time capsule,” “glass bell,” or “sleeping beauty state.”

In my interpretation, the concept of the *Wäschefabrik* Museum should be understood as an effort to preserve something past and to render visible its continuity up to the present. It could also serve to exemplify the memory boom and the presentism time regime (François Hartog). In addition, I believe the most compelling questions arising from the simultaneity of preservation and decay are: How does meaning change? And why fight the *ghosts* in the first place? Is it the urge to create something imperishable – the desire for supposed authenticity?

Perhaps it would suffice to show the decayed as decayed – and not insist on conquering the *ghosts*. There is no real need to replace the light bulb. True, this could mean that the “glass bell” disintegrates and the former factory approaches a “not-yet-ruin” state.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of its one-time replacement, the broken light bulb offers the potential to reflect on change and decay. *Ghost* traces are in evidence. They allow for discussion on how the light bulb has become and is becoming different. The narrative, triggered by the irritating disturbance (of the light bulb), is my attempt to accommodate the inevitable decay of the material and its ascribed meaning. Although the desire to make a past appear present may be intriguing, it bristles at the becoming and being different and is eclipsed by the *ghosts of decay*. While this allows for the staging of authenticity, it also makes culture “synonymous with preservation, not production.”<sup>22</sup> Perhaps one could interpret my argument here as the offensive presentism proposed by Lars Deile and come to the conclusion: “[T]he past should be allowed to remain the past.”<sup>23</sup> For the attempt to prevent a past from decay is doomed to failure.

But what would that mean for the museum – or more precisely, for the light bulb? I find the concept of the *Wäschefabrik* Museum and its use of metaphors fascinating. On the one hand, the idea of preserving the exhibits is to render a past state present (knowing that this is impossible). At the same time, this concept refuses to reflect change. Maybe the light bulb needs to be changed to keep the staging of authenticity alive. But the *ghosts* remain. And maybe the lamps will have stopped working to allow for change. The lamp in the picture is just the beginning!<sup>24</sup>

---

Marcus Wystub has been studying History, Social and Educational Sciences in the Master of Education at Bielefeld University since the winter semester 2017/18 and has worked as a student/research assistant at the History Department since April 2020. In March 2021, he also became an assistant to the editorial team of the "Geschichtstheorie am Werk" blog. Email: marcus.wystub@uni-bielefeld.de

---

**Tags:** Authenticity / Continuity / metaphors

---

<sup>1</sup> Website: *Textielefeld. Museum Wäschefabrik*, URL: [http://textielefeld.museum-waeschefabrik.de/Objektliste/1\\_Museum\\_Waeschefabrik/Museum\\_Waeschefabrik.html](http://textielefeld.museum-waeschefabrik.de/Objektliste/1_Museum_Waeschefabrik/Museum_Waeschefabrik.html) (06.11.2022). Own translation.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Own translation.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Own translation.

<sup>4</sup> Website of *Museum Wäschefabrik*, URL: <http://www.museum-waeschefabrik.de/Museum.html> (03.11.2022). Own translation.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jürgen Büschenfeld, "Ein begehrtes Denkmal – auf Zeitreise im Museum Wäschefabrik," in *Museum Wäschefabrik. Zeitreise in ein Stück Bielefelder Industriekultur*, ed. Förderverein Projekt Wäschefabrik. Bielefeld: Verl. für Regionalgeschichte, 2012, 19–20, here 19.

<sup>6</sup> As Charlotte Lerg has recently shown in her analysis of the time travel metaphor, metaphors do not merely fulfil aesthetic functions in historical scholarship. Cf. Charlotte Lerg, "Are We All Time-Travelling Detectives? Why Metaphors Matter in Talking About the Work Historians Do (Part 2)," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (11.10.2022), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/8390> (06.11.2022).

<sup>7</sup> Website of *Museum Wäschefabrik*. Own translation.

<sup>8</sup> Object authenticity, as Achim Saupe explains, attests to material authenticity. Historical authenticity extends this to include the value attribution of originality, which is of particular importance in the museum case, since this is where these 'genuine' objects are on display. Cf. Achim Saupe, "Authentizität (3.0)," *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* (25.08.2015), URL: [https://docupedia.de/zg/Saupe\\_authentizitaet\\_v3\\_de\\_2015](https://docupedia.de/zg/Saupe_authentizitaet_v3_de_2015) (03.11.2022).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Rüdiger Uffmann, "Historischer Schatz im Hinterhof," in *Museum Wäschefabrik. Zeitreise in ein Stück Bielefelder Industriekultur*, ed. Förderverein Projekt Wäschefabrik. Bielefeld: Verl. für Regionalgeschichte, 2012, 7–15, here 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Own translation.

<sup>11</sup> Although it implies to perfection the fragility of the protective glass, which is prone to breakage.

<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to speak of a time capsule here, as this not only entails the preservation of cultural objects. "They can be defined as items deliberately sealed in containers and scheduled for retrieval on a specified target date." William E. Jarvis, *Time capsules: a cultural history*. Jefferson, N.C./London: McFarland & Co, 2003, 12.

<sup>13</sup> I understand *ghosts* here to mean something unpleasant that befalls the present. They should be seen as the result of wear and tear. The use of metaphor is inspired by Ethan

---

Kleinberg's Haunting History. See: Ethan Kleinberg, *Haunting History. For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. Although, contrary to the *ghosts* of the past, the idea of using this figure of speech here is to focus on the invisibility of changes and the way in which they are revealed.

<sup>14</sup> At this point, I at least assume that the lamp's main purpose is to be an exhibit. After all, the rationale behind the museum concept is to preserve a meaningful context between place, building and objects.

<sup>15</sup> See for this syntactical idea: Lars Deile. "Favoring an offensive presentism," in *Historical Understanding: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile. London: Bloomsbury 2022, 57-68, here 62.

<sup>16</sup> The light bulb life cycle varies in accordance with technology.

<sup>17</sup> If it were not for the irritation, I might have failed to notice the broken light bulb and this photograph would never have been taken.

<sup>18</sup> The other way round could also be considered, whereby the lamp would have to be preserved in its non-functional state. This would be much easier if the original object had ceased to function during factory operations. In this case, the material the bulb is made of would probably last a long time.

<sup>19</sup> The current lighting most likely represents conditions after the factory ceased operations. Cf. Förderverein Projekt Wäschefabrik (ed.), *Museum Wäschefabrik. Zeitreise in ein Stück Bielefelder Industriekultur*. Bielefeld: Verl. für Regionalgeschichte, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> At this point, reference should be made to the monument paradox that Lisa Regazzoni describes. The intention to make a certain memory or meaning eternal through the monument is overridden once it is presented to the public. Cf. Lisa Regazzoni, "Response to Today#2 (Oggi#2)," *Geschichtstheorie am Werk* (07.01.2022), URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/1877#comment-510> (03.11.2022).

<sup>21</sup> Zoltán Somhegyi, "Précis of the Book: Reviewing the Past. The Presence of Ruins (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020)," *Philosophia*, 50/4 (2022), 1517-1522, here 1518. Somhegyi's three qualifying criteria for a ruin would not be fulfilled in their entirety, but in the case of the light bulb would be achieved: "functionlessness, absence and time." For the quote: *ibid.*, 1517.

<sup>22</sup> Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories. History, Technology, Art*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Deile, Favoring an offensive presentism, 63.

<sup>24</sup> Upon enquiry, I was informed that the light bulb had probably been replaced by now.