

The Star of the Show:

Display, Ideology and Controversy in the *Almost Human* Display at Maropeng

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Abstract

This study explores the *Almost Human* exhibition at Maropeng Visitor Centre, an exhibition which details the discovery, analysis and interpretation of new ancient human ancestor, *Homo naledi*. Previous research on the Maropeng Visitor Centre has not dealt with the *Almost Human* exhibition, nor the specific ideologies promoted through exhibitionary devices at Maropeng in general. In this study, I examine the exhibitionary strategies employed by the scientists, curators and exhibition designers, to promote ideologies regarding the nature of science, to communicate the prestige and value of the *Homo naledi* discovery, as well as utilise the museum space as a place of entertainment and authoritative knowledge. Through detailed visual analysis of the construction and presentation of the display, as well as interviews with experts involved in the discovery and display, this study reveals notions regarding the current objectives of scientific displays, as well as museum displays dealing with human evolution. These devices are seen at the *Almost Human* exhibition, where contemporary as well as conventional strategies of inclusion, control over visitors, strategies of persuasion, and elements of hype, celebrity and theatricality, are employed in order to create a successful exhibition. The actual evolutionary significance of the *Homo naledi* find is carefully excluded from the exhibition to allow for engagement of a wider audience of visitors. This exhibition is successful in its aims of creating an exciting display showcasing the *Homo naledi* fossil find. Many people can engage with the exhibition owing to the multitude of modes of representation. The exhibition may serve as a local example of how museum spaces are tackling controversial issues like human evolution and public understanding of, and involvement in, scientific discoveries, at a time when these spaces are increasingly in competition with other forms of knowledge dissemination and entertainment.

Key words: Keywords: *Homo naledi*; Maropeng; museology; human evolution; display

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Chapter One: Introduction

The discovery of *Homo naledi*

On the 13th of September 2013, two cavers, Steven Tucker and Rick Hunter, entered into a previously-unexplored part of the Rising Star cave system, just outside the Cradle of Humankind in Gauteng. Professor Lee Berger, a *National Geographic* Explorer-in-Residence in South Africa, had discovered another distant human ancestor, *Australopithecus sediba*, close by, several years before in 2008, in the Malapa cave system (Shreeve, 2015). Tucker and Hunter went further into the cave system than had been done previously, squeezing their way down into impossibly tight crevasses and up razor-sharp inclines. Tucker stuck his foot down into a gap in the rock at one point, and found that the gap continued into air below him. The slightly-built caver pushed himself down and found there was another lower cave.

It was in this deep cave that the skeletal remains of several ape-like creatures lay. Tucker and Hunter contacted Pedro Boshoff, “a caver and geologist Berger had hired to look for fossils” (Shreeve, 2015), and they rushed to Professor Berger’s home to apprise him of the discovery. When shown photographs Tucker and Hunter had taken, Professor Berger believed that these remains had the potential to be something interesting. He set about assembling a team to get back down into the cave, and to bring up and analyse these remains. Thanks to Facebook and the funding grant given to Berger by *National Geographic* as part of his role of Explorer-in-Residence, two weeks Berger later had assembled six slim cavers, all women: Hannah Morris, Marina Elliott, Becca Peixotto, Alia Gurtov, K. Lindsay (then Eaves) Hunter, and Elen Feuerriege, to go back down into the cave. These young women were from America, Canada and Australia, and were experts in the fields of anthropology, paleoanthropology and archaeology.

The overall team consisted of 50 scientists from 15 countries, as well as 60 field workers, support teams and safety cavers (Berger, YouTube 2016). As well as this, hundreds of

kilometres of military-grade audio-visual cables and technology were deployed to enable the discovery to be broadcast live to the world, as well as the remains to be scanned and 3D images created out of them in-situ (Berger YouTube 2016). The team was called the Rising Star Expedition team. The team of cavers, nick-named ‘the underground astronauts’, removed 15 partial skeletons from the Dinaledi chamber. This chamber is the final cave in the Rising Star cave system, 30 meters underground, where the remains of *Homo naledi* were discovered. The name means ‘chamber of stars’ in seSotho (Dirks *et al.*, 2015: 4). The remains found ranged from neo-natal remains to those of advanced age. The group of scientists worked at the site itself, or back at Wits University’s fossil vault (Shreeve, 2015), or at both locations.

Through scientific analysis involving endocast analysis, skeletal analysis (Kuljian, 2017: 277), sediment analysis, tooth analysis (Dirks *et al.*, 2017) and Uranium series dating methods (Wits, 2018: online), Berger and his team concluded that the remains were all of the same new species, which was named *Homo naledi*. The Rising Star team assembled a near-complete skeleton composed from several individuals’ remains. This composite individual was named Neo. Professor Berger published the findings regarding the discovery of a new species of ape-like human ancestor in the *eLife* journal in September 2015. That same year, *National Geographic* magazine released a feature entitled *Almost Human*, which details the discovery of these skeletal remains. In these publications, Professor Berger and the Rising Star team, provide evidence that these remains belong to a new species of ape-like creature. The scientists involved (Berger *et al.* 2017: online) argue that there are skeletal similarities to modern humans, as well as more primitive characteristics. Added to the skeletal evidence is the put forward by Professor Berger and his team, of evidence of social behaviour similar to that of modern humans. The hypothesis asserts that these ape-like creatures practiced a form of ritualised burial behaviour, which would explain how the remains got into the deep cave.

The skeletal remains and theorised social behaviour led the team to conclude that *Homo naledi* is a new distant human relative (Dirks et al, 2015: 4). The species name, *naledi*, centred around the seSotho word for ‘star’, was given owing to the remains being found in the Rising Star cave system. The new ‘species’ was thus named *Homo naledi*.

Homo naledi is a significant discovery because the remains were dated to be between 335 000 and 236 000 years old, and this date positions them long after much larger-brained and modern-looking hominin, or human ancestors, had already developed (Berger and Hawks et al. 2017: online). *Homo naledi* is most likely an offshoot of the genus *Homo*, and not directly related to modern humans (Berger, Hawks, Dirks, Elliott & Roberts 2017: online). This discovery supports the theory that human evolution has not followed a linear, progressive trajectory, as portrayed in many natural history and human evolutionary displays, but rather illustrates the complex and varied lineages of hominin-like creatures that lived long ago (Berger et al., 2017: online).

Maropeng Visitor Centre

The Cradle of Humankind is a paleoanthropological site outside Johannesburg, Gauteng, declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1999. The site encompasses 47 000 hectares of land and a complex of limestone caves, the most well-known being the Sterkfontein Caves. There have been several internationally important human fossil discoveries in and around the Cradle of Humankind, and which have contributed to an increased understanding of humans’ evolutionary journey.¹ The Maropeng Visitor Centre itself was opened in 2005 and consists of a large building (The Tumulus) where displays of the beginnings of life on Earth are on view, and allow visitors to journey through time via a range of conventional and interactive exhibits. The visitor centre also has conference facilities, a nearby hotel, as well as a restaurant and souvenir shops.

¹ Some significant discoveries found within the Cradle include *Australopithecus* remains, nicknamed Mrs Ples, Little Foot, and the Taung child.

In 2017, the newly discovered *Homo naledi* went on display to the public in Johannesburg, South Africa, in an exhibition entitled *Almost Human*. The display first opened at the Origins Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and was then transferred to its more long-term placement at the Maropeng Visitor Centre at the Cradle of Humankind, where a wider public had access to the display

The Maropeng website states that the aim of the UNESCO Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, which encompasses the Maropeng Visitor Centre and the Sterkfontein caves and surrounds, is to “establish geo-spatial tourism destinations in the north-west and the north-east of the Gauteng province, close to the densely populated metropolitan areas of Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni” (Maropeng, 2018). Furthermore, the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site aims to promote “economic growth and social upliftment, relieving the burden of poverty, particularly for historically-disadvantaged communities living in and around the two destinations” (Maropeng, 2018).

In addition, Maropeng is branded as “a place of *pilgrimage* for all humankind” (Maropeng 2018: online, author italics). The Cradle of Humankind is a site of scientific discovery of human evolution, as well as “a place of contemplation – a place that allows us to reflect on who we are, where we come from and where we are going to” (Maropeng, 2018: online).

The use of the word ‘pilgrimage’ implies a deep spiritual journey. This is an interesting choice of words, one that appeals to emotions and spirituality, and perhaps implying that visitors will seek to visit Maropeng to find answers that link to history, faith and identity. In many of the world’s faiths, it is mandatory to undergo a pilgrimage during one’s lifetime: the use of the word ‘pilgrimage’ in the Maropeng marketing material is thus a deliberate tactic to insist that everyone must make that journey to Maropeng.

Maropeng exists in a large part to tell the story of human evolution, a concept that by its nature is in conflict with fundamentalist creation beliefs in a number of global religions. This could in part point to what Lindsay Marshall, the curator of Maropeng, said about Maropeng aiming to share knowledge about human evolution, without conflicting with religious beliefs (Marshall, 2018: pers comm.). It is important to keep in mind that Maropeng and The Cradle of Humankind serve as a multi-faceted tourist destination, and so must remain non-confrontational in the way that human evolution is presented.

The inclusion of ‘science’ and ‘pilgrimage’ in the same section of ‘blurb’ doesn’t promote the scientific aspect as overriding other concerns, although puts it as an important factor. This decision to represent science like this could point either to a positive strategy of inclusion of all people regardless of one’s beliefs, or as a way of not ‘rocking the boat’ so that more visitors will come because their religious convictions are not challenged. Maropeng is also called a place of ‘contemplation’ and ‘reflection’ (Maropeng, 2018: online), which are soothing, non-confrontational terms and images which invite one to come and relax, and form one’s own conclusions about human evolution.

Spaces for contemplation and reverence are usually the domain of religious buildings, and yet are being promoted in a museum space, which is paradoxical when looking at how scientists may be against the inclusion of religious iconography in a science exhibition, and yet employ the same strategies to get audiences to be reverent and contemplative in the museum space.

The viewer is persuaded to connect to *Homo naledi* in ways other than the physical, because *Homo naledi* is not human. However, connecting to this ancient hominid through emotion, a sense of shared humanity, and a sense of reverence, sounds very similar to religious devices of persuasion and faith, in the absence of being able to physically connect with another entity or being.

Maropeng is a prominent tourist and school-tour attraction. A visit to Maropeng, even prior to the *Almost Human* exhibition, will form a gentle introduction to human evolution. On the one hand, this ‘gentle’ non-controversial approach can be useful to familiarise people with the fundamentals of human evolution. With this practice serving as context in which the *Almost Human* exhibit is situated, is the same Maropeng blueprint followed? If Maropeng’s goal as an establishment is to boost tourism in the area, get paid visitors ‘through the door,’ as well as gently introduce a potentially sceptical audience to the concept of human evolution, these objectives were considered when designing the *Almost Human* exhibition, as interviews with the experts involved attest.

It is important to look at the promotional material on the Maropeng website because it is potentially the first content local visitors, foreign tourists, tour guides and school teachers will look at, and will use to form their first opinion of The Cradle of Humankind. The website is also important for the science behind the discoveries in that it shows that The Cradle of Humankind is a large area of land where some of the most compelling evidence for Southern Africa’s place in the story of human evolution has been discovered. According to Brand South Africa, “‘Maropeng’, Setswana for ‘the place where we once lived’... is designed to help tourists, schoolchildren and others explore the rich fossil heritage of the area” (2005 online). The above text from the Maropeng Visitor Centre website offers insights into the site’s branding as a socially responsible, innovative visitor centre. This is in line with Hannigan (1998) and Hooper-Greenhill’s (2000) observations that museum spaces are under pressure to be fun and ‘a great day out for the whole family’ with offers of a range of entertainment. Those involved with the branding of Maropeng intend to offer the impression of a more inclusive and exciting day-trip out of Johannesburg, rather than the typical museum space which visitors sometimes think of as ‘boring’.

Lindsay Marshall, the curator of Maropeng, states that “for so long we didn’t know how much we had to be proud of. Now we have the opportunity to highlight and showcase the richness of our palaeontological and archaeological heritage, and Maropeng provides the platform where we can get the public interested” (Maropeng 2017 online). Marshall “plays the precarious role of making scientific information accessible to the general public, but at the same time upholding the scientific integrity of that information” (Maropeng 2017 online). In interviews with both Lindsay Marshall (2018 pers comm.) and Dr Marina Elliott (2018 pers comm.), a researcher at the Evolutionary Studies Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, one of the ‘underground astronauts’ in the Rising Star expedition team, and the first team member to access the cave and see the fossil remains, this interplay between showcasing the science and providing entertainment to visitors was mentioned frequently. This tension between science and entertainment will be looked at in depth in Chapter Four of this study.

In an interview, Dr Marina Elliott (2018: pers comm.) said that the exhibition is important because “it generates public interest, it generates excitement, [and] it gets kids involved with science at whatever level”. In addition, Dr Elliott (2018: pers comm.) also said that people at whatever level of society “can still be engaged in scientific research as someone who is simply part of a society and thinking critically about the questions that get asked around you”. So, the exhibition in part helps to develop scientific literacy within South Africa.

Marshall emphasises the importance of continually making people, particularly children, aware of our common heritage and African origins (Maropeng, 2017: online). Marshall says that “What Maropeng does is to help us understand that if we look at our diversity, and strip away the exterior, we have characteristics that bind us all together – we are, essentially, all the same. And this heritage belongs to all of us.” This is important considering South Africa has had inadequate or incorrect information regarding human evolution in the past.

A museum display in a visitor centre context

Marshall (2018: pers comm.), states that Maropeng is not a museum. “If you talk about a typical museum centre, with a collection that is curated, we’re not that”. Marshall adds that her role at Maropeng is of a facilitator of “a tourist space” which incorporates scientific content (Marshall, 2018: pers comm.). For Marshall, motivation for agreeing to host the exhibition and help create its content was “we need to make it accessible, make it exciting, make it a drawcard for people to want to come and visit because we are operating in a tourism space, not a classical museum space... [and so] we are driven by revenue”. Tourism was a large factor that influenced the ways in which the exhibition was presented, as well as an understanding that Maropeng’s function is also to highlight the research work being done in the Cradle of Humankind (Marshall, 2018: pers comm.).

While there is some disparity about when the exhibition will be taken down - Dr Elliott (2018: pers comm.) said November 2018 and Marshall (2018: pers comm.) said October 2018 - there are at the time of writing at the end of 2018 no concrete plans to relocate the exhibit, or send it on tour or anything like that. Eventually the remains will be sent back to Wits University and the display will be dismantled to make way for a new exhibit with other content.

Elliott (2018: pers comm.) mentioned that in order to get repeat visits, new content might be added and the exhibit updated, but as the exhibit was likely to be coming down by the end of 2018, updating the exhibition in its current iteration seems unlikely. For the moment, the remains are going back by the end of 2018 (Marshall 2018: pers comm.). Marshall (2018: pers comm.) also said *Almost Human* “was always meant to be temporary, so it was May last year, so [the exhibition has been up] nearly 18 months”. While Marshall does state that there is “the potential that we’re going to see this material here in a permanent capacity” (2018: pers comm.), at the time of the interview in September 2018 there are no plans beyond

returning the remains in October or November. The fact that the exhibit is temporary confirms the problematic nature of some of the aspects of the display, such as the unresolved of ritual burial, to be discussed in Chapter Four. Elliott (2018: pers comm.) and Marshall (2018: pers comm.) have indicated there are no definite plans to have the display on public view either at Wits or at Maropeng in a permanent capacity, presents challenges. Contrary to what the two experts have said regarding the material in the display being updated as new developments arise, thus acknowledging for audiences that the science and conclusions formed regarding the species and its importance may be revised or challenged, as part of the process of science, this may not be the reality. If *Homo naledi* is proved in future research to *not* have practised ritual burial behaviour, the discovery might be a less exciting species to the public and to funders, because then the new species does not disrupt what we think and know about *Homo sapiens*' capacity to conceive of our own mortality and the possibility that a less sophisticated creature could do it too. If *Homo naledi* does not have anything of distinction about it, the public will not be interested in it. If there is no ongoing public interest, the resources being expended on virtual tours of the Dinaledi caves, and Professor Berger maintaining such a prominent platform for his work may be questioned.

According to Kuljian (2017: 249-250), Professor Berger has been accused by some members of the paleoanthropological community of perpetuating “tabloid palaeoanthropology”, and “sweeping aside scientific accuracy”. While factual inaccuracies are inexcusable, what these attitudes point to are an affront at the way Professor Berger is able to successfully utilise the media by presenting a charismatic presence. Charismatic figures with the ability to weave exciting narratives and tell interesting stories on multiple platforms, like Professor Berger, often get more media coverage and thus the most public exposure (MacDonald 2010: 8).

Marshall (2018: pers comm.) said that Professor Berger does work in a collaborative way, and he believes in bringing all kinds of people with various expertise in to work on a

discovery, which enables the fossils to be processed quickly, and findings published quickly. Once this has been done, articles and exhibitions for public consumption can be produced. He invites the public to read and come see for themselves while the excitement of the initial discovery, along with the well-attended media briefings and unveiling of the skeletal remains, has just happened. The ‘strike while the iron is hot’ approach means that public and media interest does not wane, and that it builds from one opportunity to see and hear about the remains to the next. The pace feels exciting, and the audience may feel like they are really a part of and experiencing history unfolding, along with the scientists.

At odds with the science behind the *Homo naledi* discovery is the large painting by Jon Foster, on display at the *Almost Human* exhibition (see Figure 18). This artwork depicts *Homo naledi* carrying a dead individual into the Rising Star caves. The scientists interviewed are opposed to this artwork because they do not like the cultish, emotionally manipulative overtones of the religious iconography in the painting. However, Professor Berger’s cultural capital as a charismatic figure, utilising the imagery of the ‘cult of the explorer’, is utilised as one of the ways in which the experts get the public to engage with this fossil discovery, and to ensure it gets its way into social media and the popular imagination.

It could be argued that *not* utilising this publicity-driven approach speaks to the ways in which museums and public knowledge, especially regarding human evolution, is old-fashioned and dating from an era, where knowledge about human evolution and other scientific discoveries was the property of a select few. It is now seen as elitist and exclusionary to withhold scientific discoveries and information about human ancestors from the public. Professor Berger has been accused of overdoing the publicity-driven approach by presenting theatrics over “substance” (Kuljian 2017: 250). My own opinion is that if curators and scientists need to show material in a theatrical way to get viewers to come and see these important discoveries and feel included in the process of science, and come away with a

sense of ownership over human evolution and South Africa's place in the development of human beings, this is acceptable. Nothing presented in the *Almost Human* exhibition is factually incorrect: it has just been presented in a way which largely encourages inclusion and understanding for a wide variety of audiences with varied social, educational and belief backgrounds.

The criticism of the inclusion of the artwork by Jon Foster could point to an unwillingness by other scientists in the field to adopt a more vibrant and popular method of sharing information because they want to keep the science exclusionary and elitist. This populist approach reflects the tensions between unyielding scientific purists who conform to old models as sole disseminators of official knowledge through channels imbued with irrefutable scientific and cultural authority, like museum spaces, and those scientists who embrace popular science and its various modes of dissemination, like Professor Berger.

Teaching human evolution in South Africa

Kuljian's (2017) work charts the trajectory of museum and educational displays featuring human evolution in South Africa, as well highlighting the complicated past of studying and teaching human evolution within the South African context. Kuljian's work explores many of the challenges faced in teaching human evolution in South Africa, many linked to the difficult past of racism and racial exploitation masquerading as science. As a result, many people are sceptical about displays featuring human evolution. This and other challenges will be explored in this dissertation in relation to the *Almost Human* exhibition, and how the exhibition attempts to counteract, or ignore, the issues highlighted by Kuljian (2017). These challenges largely involve persuading viewers to engage with theories and facts of human evolution.

Museums featuring human evolution, have also had a contested history, with opposition from religious groups in South Africa (Kuljian, 2017: 266), and because of a history of

discrimination and racism under the guise of genuine evolutionary science where racial characteristics were linked to supposed inferiority (Kuljian, 2017: 284).

Human evolution is a subject which is not taught adequately in schools in South Africa, and was not included in South African schools' curriculums until 2006 (Kuljian, 2017: 225). Even when taught after 2006, the knowledge imparted to learners is often insufficient. This is because teachers are either ill-equipped to teach human evolution, or the subject conflicts with their religious or traditional belief systems and they do not want to teach it. Visitor centres like Maropeng are thus important to address gaps in 'evolutionary literacy' in South Africa, and begin to address the topic of human evolution after years of the subject being excluded from public spheres under apartheid education systems. As well as this, "South Africa has a rich fossil record, making the study of evolution a more authentic, interesting and relevant experience for students in the country" (Saunders, 2018: 409).

Also, "South Africa is a world-renowned source of fossil evidence, which makes learning about the topic more relevant, fascinating and motivating for South African students, especially those living near fossil sites and museums they can visit" (Saunders, 2018: 416). Maropeng, which is an hour outside Johannesburg, with its population of four million people, is such a venue.

One must note that "South Africans tend to be strongly religious" (Saunders, 2018: 410), with eighty per cent of South Africans being Christian, and many of those holding "fundamentalist beliefs about creation" (Saunders, 2018: 410). In addition there have been several school curriculum revisions which have taken place over the past twenty years which means that teaching human evolution has often been disjointed and frequently disrupted (Saunders, 2018: 412).

Added to these issues with the education system, there still exists the shadow of the shameful history of racism and discrimination in South Africa, where prominent and respected paleoanthropologists and scientists participated in grave-robbing and other unscrupulous cadaver collection methods, which according to Kuljian (2017: 284), have made people resistant to and suspicious of engaging with material relating to human origins.

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSA) released a statement in 2008 which said that “no one [has] the right to prevent students access to learning about an explanatory framework that is crucial for understanding aspects of the modern world (eg. HIV/Aids, disease pandemics, agriculture, and environmental sustainability), so that people can make informed decisions about matters affecting their lives” (Saunders 2018:415). More pragmatically, “they also pointed out that without such knowledge students would be prevented from entering certain professions” (Saunders 2018: 415). Finally, human evolutionary development is knowledge which belongs to everyone.

Using non-confrontational methods to get people to understand new fossil discoveries is important so that a new generation of people can have some understanding of human evolution. According to Elliott (2018: pers comm.), this is one of the aims of the exhibition, “to engage people”. It is especially difficult to strike this balance and engage people when human evolution is already a controversial subject. While human evolution might be accepted among the scientific community, misconceptions and conflicts with belief systems mean that the general public are not always totally accepting of concepts of human evolution. Preconceptions need to be taken into account when creating displays and exhibits. This can be a challenge when their audience consists of such a wide variety of age, gender, race, nationality, and cultural or religious beliefs, especially when involving controversial subject matter (Lelliott 2016; Saunders 2010; Scott 2007).

Introduction to the study

This study investigates the exhibitionary devices used in the *Almost Human* display at Maropeng Visitor Centre, at the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site, in order to assess ideologies that are communicated by aspects of the display, and how the curatorial choices were made to promote these ideologies. These ideologies reflect changing attitudes towards communicating ideas around human evolution, and around museum curatorship. In particular, the study looked at the devices and methods that deal with displaying and explaining difficult or controversial knowledge, in this instance, the controversial subject of human evolution. The central research question is, how have the curators displayed the find of *Homo naledi* to the viewers, and have they been successful in their aims of an inclusive, exciting, accessible display to an audience?

This investigation is nuanced by posing several more nuanced questions to give direction to the analysis later in the research. Namely, what methods are used in the *Almost Human* display to impart information to viewers? What ideological messages are transmitted to visitors through the *Almost Human* display? How do Maropeng's curatorial display strategies in the *Almost Human* exhibit fit in with current international thinking regarding museum visitors, displays and the ways that museum displays present controversial knowledge? What could be done differently to disrupt or challenge these ideologies if they are unhelpful, and better communicate the controversial subject of human evolution?

Rationale

Exhibitions like *Almost Human*, while in competition with other forms of entertainment and platforms that disseminate knowledge, still serve an important didactic function, and are designed to teach viewers about the content contained within the space and the relation of the content to the visitors and their outside world, or world views.

Tony Bennett (1995) uses the idea that museum spaces in general use several methods in which visitors become regulators of their own behaviour as well as of others, through the act of watching and being watched. Bennett (1995) states that museums in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were created to order and place significance on the objects contained within. They are a place of instruction, and creation of social order, and a phalanx of acceptable behaviours. Objects and viewers' relationships to them were defined through the museum space, as well as viewers being conditioned as to how to respond to these objects. Through this conditioning, certain objects and their narratives were given prestige and value, while others were silenced or ignored. The museum thus stood as a marker as to which narratives and representative objects are worthy of value and societal respect (Bennett 1995: 101).

This study investigates the *Homo naledi* exhibition, *Almost Human*, because it is a relatively new addition to Maropeng, and there has been no research specifically pertaining to the *Almost Human* exhibit and its elements of visual material. The discovery of the *Homo naledi* remains in South Africa is contemporary and ground-breaking, and has prompted a re-evaluation of human evolutionary history (Shreeve 2015). There is ample material regarding the discovery and its scientific and taxonomical implications for evolutionarily trajectories in human ancestors (Berger et al, 2015; Dirks *et al.* 2015), but the exhibition has received no critical analysis.

While *Almost Human* is a relatively small exhibition, analysis of its conception, its displays and intended messages yields rich content about changing museum practice, as well as about ways of sharing knowledge about human evolution. Scientific displays still serve as authoritative disseminators of knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 105).

The material presented in the *Almost Human* display, however, is not neutral, as science is generally thought to be. Varied modes of representation, good storytelling, charismatic

figures in both the scientists and in *Homo naledi* itself, persuade viewers of the point of view as set out by the curators of the exhibition. These persuasive devices are used to convince the viewer of the validity of their claims, made to ensure *Homo naledi*'s place in the human ancestral lineage, as well as the excitement of the discovery.

After exploring the various museum exhibition devices developed and implemented by the Maropeng curatorial team for the *Almost Human* display to present human evolution in a non-confrontational, yet exciting, manner, I investigated evolutionary iconography and applied this theory to the examination of the painting by Jon Foster titled simply '*H. naledi*'. This painting was put on display in the *Almost Human* exhibition at the request of the *National Geographic* expedition funders, and perhaps would not have been included by the scientific advisors of the exhibition. This painting is at the crux of my research because its analysis can be used as a springboard for understanding complex and controversial issues and relationships, many of which are hegemonic and unquestioned, relating to ideologies about humanness and human evolution communicated by other aspects of the *Almost Human* exhibition.

While the *Almost Human* exhibition has many subtle devices for allowing ideological content dealing with human evolution and the human evolutionary past to be presented in a non-confrontational way, the painting by Jon Foster goes much further into an imagined ideological content, almost into the kind of 'science fiction' art that creates a fantasy world which many might assume is 'real'. One of the challenges of this study is to understand how the painting either contributes to, or contradicts, other ideological messages within the *Almost Human* exhibition.

I have also chosen Maropeng Visitor Centre because it is the largest and most prominent museum space in South Africa containing displays concerning human evolution. It is important for the South African public to learn about human evolution because it situates

human beings in relation to the natural world, and promotes a sense of belonging and responsibility within our environment (Scott 2012). The importance of learning about evolution, particularly human evolution, in a South African context, using museum displays, will be expanded on in this study.

Aim

This research questions the ideologies that are communicated by certain aspects of the *Almost Human* exhibition, and how these curatorial choices reflect current attitudes towards curating exhibitions of human evolution in a South African context. I hope to create and understanding of the ways in which exhibitionary devices are used in museum settings. In particular, I am interested in the devices and methods that deal with displaying and explaining controversial knowledge, in this instance, knowledge of human evolution.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative study that adopts a mixed-method approach in which I engage in critical visual analysis of a case study, and conduct semi-structured interviews with a number of agents involved in the creation of the exhibition being investigated. I begin by describing each of the displays in the exhibition and drawing attention to aspects of each display which warrant explanation and analysis.

A qualitative visual analysis methodology was used for this study, within a postmodern paradigm. Postmodernity for the museum space involves a rejection and rethinking of universal values and totalities, grand narratives and the notion of objective knowledge (Eagleton 2003: 13). There is also a new need for a shift towards the inclusion of gender, environmental, ethical, and racial foci.

Moxey (2001), working within this postmodern paradigm, includes the assumption that there are multiple realities and ‘truths’ which depend on meaning and interpretation, often through “local” or individualised lenses (Moxey, 2001: 3). This type of methodology operates under the assumption that research is interesting because of individual contexts, and consists of contradictions and complexities. As such, the texts I have chosen to support my chosen methodology lend themselves to the assertion that reality and ‘truth’ are constructs, often made by those who hold positions of influence, power and authority which enables them to argue their point of view more persuasively than others. In the context of this research, this notion of power and persuasion in the scientific context becomes interesting and complicated in an ostensibly scientific exhibition designed for the public, such as the *Almost Human* exhibition, where there are still academic negotiations and interpretations regarding interpretation. Curators and scientists within the scientific and museum sectors are able to determine what is seen and what is ignored, who benefits and who is silenced (MacDonald, 1998: 1).

A visual analysis methodology regards images as coded texts that can be read and decoded for meaning, where the interpretation of the reader is the source of meaning (Moxey, 2001: 3)

A qualitative visual analysis methodology involves the investigation of how the *Almost Human* display allows for a personal, immersive experience at the same time that scientific opinions, individuals and persuasion presented by the display create meaning for the public, particularly about the research process and the production of scientific knowledge. Meaning is subjective and actively created, and in the museum context, is significantly determined by the strength of one’s persuasive skills as both a scientist and a curator.

The first theorist to lend weight to this is Baxandall (1991) who asserts that “it is not possible to exhibit things without putting a construction on them” (Baxandall, 1991: 34). This construction and intended meaning is then formed out of a variety of agendas and ideologies.

These agendas and ideologies are determined by the joint and sometimes contradictory input of the scientists, any expedition leader and his goals, the curator of the exhibition space, the exhibition designer, the tour guides, and the audiences themselves. Nothing in a museum display is haphazard or careless, and even when elements of displays appear so, and so it is necessary to unpack and scrutinise any ideological messages are being ‘covertly’ presented. My research on the *Almost Human* display thus involves developing a sensitivity towards, and unpacking of, the motives of the various agents who have had a part to play in the construction of significance and meaning in this exhibition.

Baxandall (1991:41) argues that there are several actors invested in the creation of meaning within an exhibition, with different goals and desired outcomes to be produced by the information within the exhibit. These are the exhibitor, the maker, and the viewer (1991: 41). Bal (2002), in her chapter on ‘framing’, lends weight to the notion of display and knowledge operating under the influence of individual contexts, contradictions and complexities. Bal (2002: 134) proposed the process of framing as an alternative to ‘context’, a static part of the creation of meaning which involves “a collection of data whose factuality is no longer in doubt once its sources are deemed reliable”. Framing, on the other hand, involves an active process “performed by an agent who is responsible [and] accountable” (Bal 2002: 135), and that the framework of understanding from which a display must be understood is an actively created set of scaffolding with visible authorship, which carries with it accountability and ownership. This sense of accountability is brought about because “the act of framing is framed in turn” (Bal 2002: 136).

Bal (2002: 141) accounts for objects being framed by several elements including “dogma, paradigm, or discipline”, all of which involve principles laid down as ‘truth’. This is an important consideration in relation to the display of human evolution, which has a contested history, as stated previously by Kuljian (2017: 225). In addition, physical and financial

constraints and restrictions of the museum space and the objects themselves account for framing considerations (Bal 2002: 144).

In addition, framing's active nature implies change and revision (Bal 2002: 136), arguably done by the act of persuasion as escribed by Moxey (2001) and explored below, and this process in turn implies the active creation of meaning. Framing involves assigning meaning and significance with the understanding and acceptance that they are arranged in a certain way for the present, but will, and must, undergo change and revision in the future, if not for this understanding of change, we go back to mere 'context', which is made up of the unchanging and incorrectly irrefutable set of scaffolding which exists to help understand and interpret objects and displays. The construction of the scaffolding on which we are directed to meaning and value must be an active and accountable process.

As mentioned above, Moxey (2001: 3) argues that "a limited conception of knowledge must, by definition, tolerate a plethora of different and competing voices [which] places an exceptional importance on the rhetoric of persuasion". If we are to place importance on individual experience and its universal and equal validity, where "different forms of knowledge... may at last find their voices" (Moxey 2001: 3), interpretation and personal value creation is worthy of examination.

Moxey (2001: 7) believes that "if there is nothing necessary about the shape of our knowledge, then the future will be determined on the basis of argument. In the absence of a consensus about meaning, truth-claims can be established, challenged and debated only by persuasion". The more open-ended and conceptual 'meaning' and 'truth' is, the more eloquently and persuasively one needs to argue their particular stance. In addition, Moxey (2001: 3) calls for interpretations to be more responsive to actively produced, constantly revised values, aspirations and truths. Moxey's (2001) work offers me a framework with which to approach my research, through a 'rhetoric of persuasion' rather than a discourse of

truth as the mechanisms which informs art history. This ‘practice of persuasion’ is a method used by critical art historians working within a postmodern paradigm. With individual interpretation and meaning creation in mind, I conduct a visual analysis of the *Almost Human* display, as well as hold open-ended interviews with those involved in the conceptualising and construction of the display.

Hooper-Greenhill believes in a shift to the post-museum (2000: 162) in which museums are no longer a building imbued with authority, but rather an experience not confined to the place in which the exhibition is held. While it is true that knowledge within the *Almost Human* exhibition needs to be taken out, employed and spoken about in the world, the space’s status as a place of authority and a producer of knowledge, and ‘correct’ interpretations’, still remain intact, and is not yet fully a ‘post-museum’.

The conscious effort involved in this process implies desired outcomes. In the case of *Almost Human*, the ‘makers’ of knowledge can be seen as the scientists involved along with their commercial affiliation, *National Geographic*; the ‘exhibitors’ involves the curator, exhibition designer and the commercial interests of Maropeng, and finally the audience involves the visitors to the exhibition and the public at large. Published literature (Scott 2007, Lelliott 2016) has already explored about how audiences feel about museum exhibits, and how their understanding and meaning of exhibits is unpredictable and varied. Thus, an investigation of visitor responses to this exhibit is beyond the scope of this research, although remains open to future study.²

This study will not conduct viewer interviews because the purpose of my research is about the methods that Maropeng uses to impart information to viewers, and not about how the viewers react to that information. In this study, I am more interested in exploring, identifying

² See Lelliott (2016) for his work on visitor perceptions of the Cradle of Humankind and Maropeng Visitor Centre.

and critiquing how meaning, value and knowledge is constructed in relation to human evolution in South Africa, by those with a vested interest in this knowledge, for example the paleoanthropologists and museum curators. Because I did not do a visitor survey, I relied on my own impressions as an informed ‘visitor’ to analyse the set of displays at the *Almost Human* exhibition.

The *Almost Human* exhibit is made up of several displays to which the viewer is directed through an S-shape galley by means of numbered sections. The exhibit chronologically charts the discovery, retrieval and analysis of the *Homo naledi* skeletal remains. From the exhibit, I will be analysing the set of several displays as texts.

Evolutionary iconography, discussed by Moser (1996) as the sets of repeated and familiar images of human evolution that are recycled and reused over and over again in depictions of human ancestors, is an important aspect of the visual displays to be analysed here, because these kinds of imagery are often a point of contact or common ground. These are familiar and often-used icons which establish and reinforce popular ideas of human evolution, and certain species’ position in the human evolutionary tree. For example, the use of fire and tools, wearing clothes, and burying their dead in depictions of human ancestors are used as a shorthand to denote advanced social and cognitive behaviour, thus signalling to the audience that the human ancestor being represented is more closely related to modern humans and thus worthy of interest and empathy.

Curators and artists use familiar conventions and recognisable motifs to bridge the gap between what audiences are already familiar with, and new knowledge in the museum space. The museum display is a text and uses conventions of communication like all texts do. Bal (2008: 166) says that visual analysis involves an understanding and evaluation of “the viewer’s tools and methods of making sense of what there is to see” and to develop an awareness of “the social meanings for viewers”. Visual analysis is culturally and

philosophically bound, where the “political consequences of cultural expressions” are of interest. Furthermore, “visual analysis emphatically seeks to incorporate affect and ideology” (Bal 2008: 170), where the goal of all involved in the creation of an exhibition is to insert value-laden objects to affect those that interact with them. Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 104) says that in visual analysis, nothing exists in a vacuum, every object and decision has a culturally and socially-bound set of thoughts, feelings or actions attached to them. Objects stand for, and are seen as, the intention of the curator, scientist, or exhibition designer – what you want the viewer to think, feel or do, based on what they are seeing.

In *Almost Human*, the curators use objects and conventions involving anthropomorphism and authenticity to make viewers comfortable with what they are looking at. This assists with the viewer accepting the narrative they are presented with, as well as the significance of the narrative offered about the discovery of *Homo naledi*. The exhibition makes use of several existing museum display conventions, such as theatrical lighting, a snaking, numbered display route, and reconstructions of several kinds, interspersed with authentic objects from the discovery, to create a persuasive display.

I chose semi-structured interviews for further information-gathering because I wanted the experts I had identified to tell me the story of the discovery and the construction of the exhibition in their own words. I found that the open-ended style of interviews allowed the experts to speak openly, and they spoke in expansive, sometimes anecdotal ways that revealed more about the desires and motivations behind the individuals, than more structured questions would have allowed. I hoped that the experts I interviewed would feel less like they were being interrogated about their work and more that I was there to learn and listen. I feel the material I from the interviews reflects a more informal approach through which interesting insights were revealed. When I interviewed Dr Marina Elliott, Dr Bonita de Klerk and Professor Lee Berger, I started off with simply asking “what was it like?”, and allowed

these experts to re-tell the story the way they saw it unfold, and in doing so, they pointed out things that they found interesting, important or distasteful. This was important for me to understand the ways in which multiple influences work together and against each other in an exhibition, to fulfil the agendas of each. With the experts I interviewed, there was an overall consensus that the exhibition was focussed on ‘telling the story’.

Paleoanthropologist Professor Lee Berger, of the University of the Witwatersrand, tells how he sent two cavers to explore an unknown cave site on a ‘hunch’. This professed hunch is disputed by Marshall (2018 pers comm.) and Elliot (2018 pers comm.), who instead say that the site is in an area, the Cradle of Humankind, in one of the richest fossil sites in the world. In 2015, Professor Berger had discovered a distant human ancestor, which was named *Australopithecus sediba*, not far from the cave site where *Homo naledi* was then discovered. Yet, to claim that he was acting on a ‘hunch’ is more exciting, and portrays Berger as a risk-taker with an explorer’s intuition, already starts the discovery narrative as something involving risk and the potential of failure. The narrative of the *Homo naledi* discovery is woven into a range of texts not only in the *Almost Human* museum display but also social media posts, press statements and interviews and unveilings, and live coverage from the field – these all may work together to increase hype and exposure and public interest, as well as potentially sustain public interest throughout the various stages and processes of the scientific discovery. The exhibition makes use of the aesthetics of hype, including public unveilings, as well as the perceived worth and prestige involved with media coverage.

Structure of this research report

This research report is divided into five chapters. The first chapter dealt with the discovery of *Homo naledi*, an overview and context of the Maropeng Visitor Centre, the teaching of human evolution in South Africa, and an overview of the general museum space, and some of the challenges the contemporary museum space faces. Chapter One also covered the

rationale, aims, and methodology of this study. Chapter Two details the structure and layout of the *Almost Human* exhibition. In this chapter, each numbered display is described in order to focus attention on aspects of each display, for further discussion in Chapter Three and Four. Chapters Three and Four will discuss aspects of all of the displays thematically, as the exhibitionary devices often overlap. Chapter Three deals with exhibitionary devices that propel the viewer through the exhibition, and to create a sense of expectation and emotional investment in the viewer. Chapter Four entails a discussion and analysis of other devices of display used in the exhibition, involving the authenticity imbued in the museum space, the physical layout of the exhibition and its implications, issues of inclusion and exclusion, anthropomorphism as relates to the *Homo naledi* remains, as well as the varied modes of representation employed to bring about an exciting and inclusive display which appeals to a wide audience. In Chapter Five, the conclusion involves considering all the exhibitionary devices and reflecting on the exhibition's intentions, successes and shortcomings, for the people and organisations involved, as well as for broader ideas concerning the South African understanding of, and involvement in discoveries relating to human evolution.

I have chosen this structure for this study because it highlights how, even in a small exhibition like *Almost Human*, complex ideological messages are transmitted to visitors through several methods, and involving decisions on behalf of the curators, funders and scientists involved. This study thus highlights how a multitude of methods are employed throughout the display in order to reinforce messages and ideologies. When these ideological messages are grouped together they become more compelling and may be seen as 'the truth'.

Chapter Two: The *Almost Human* exhibition

The *Almost Human* exhibition

I begin by describing the exhibition and its context in detail in this chapter, in order to set up a case study for analysis in the subsequent chapters. In this chapter I discuss the history of the *Almost Human* exhibition, and the contents of the exhibition. I will thematically analyse these contents in the subsequent chapter, focussing first on narrative devices and how these have been deployed in the exhibition space, to demonstrate how narrative works in this exhibition to construct a compelling story around the discovery of *Homo naledi*, to give the curators and scientists more public engagement and widespread exposure of their work.

The media unveiling of *Homo naledi* was held on the 10th of September 2015, at Maropeng. The media and assembled audience was welcomed by Professor Zeblon Vilakazi, the University of the Witwatersrand Deputy Vice-Chancellor for research, as well as University of the Witwatersrand Vice-Chancellor Professor Adam Habib. Also in attendance was the then-deputy, now current, president of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa. There was also extensive media-coverage, the unveiling of *Homo naledi* being covered by major local and international news outlets. Furthermore, breaking news about the discovery as it emerged had been broadcast on social media and YouTube.



Figure 1 Entrance to the Almost Human display. Image from Maropeng.co.za.

<https://www.maropeng.co.za/news/entry/almost-human-exhibition-opens-its-doors> Accessed 12/05/2018

Subsequently, on May 25th, 2017, the *Almost Human* display at Maropeng Visitor Centre was opened to the public in this particular exhibition format. The exhibit takes visitors on a journey through the discovery, analysis and interpretation process of the remains found in the Dinaledi chamber in the Cradle of Humankind. *National Geographic* and the South African National Research Foundation had funded the research costs, and helped to fund the exhibition. The Almost Human exhibition stands apart from the main Maropeng displays, which follow the evolution and development of life on Earth. The theatrical flair with which the launch was conducted is present in the exhibition itself. At the Tumulus building (see Figure 1), which is where the main exhibition space at Maropeng is situated, visitors enter the *Almost Human* exhibition through a triangular doorway. Above this entrance is a banner with a photograph of the Dinaledi cave system entrance, and a sign over it saying ‘No unauthorised entry’. This entrance to the exhibition is made to look like the actual entrance to the Rising Star cave system in the Cradle of Humankind where the *Homo naledi* remains were found (Maropeng online: 2017) (see Figure 2 below). Once inside, visitors and their belongings are put through a metal-detector system by a security guard.



Figure 2 The actual entrance to the Rising Star cave system. Image from enca.com. Accessed 03/03/2019.

This was possibly done to prevent people defacing or breaking any of the objects inside, despite the fact that every display is protected behind glass. Placing the security guard and metal detector could also denote that the remains on display inside are valuable, and therefore worth being protected. Already, by the inclusion of a security guard, the museum space is policing the viewers.

The exhibition itself winds past the various displays that chronologically detail the discovery, analysis and interpretation of a new hominid ancestor named *Homo naledi* by the paleoanthropologists who worked on the discovery, led by Professor Lee Berger. It is acknowledged that there could be other interpretations of the *Homo naledi* find, but the display at Maropeng is not the venue for such debates.

The exhibition has dark walls and carpets, with spotlights to highlight key elements of the displays, and which create a sense of drama and expectation. All of the displays, numbered

from one to six, are behind glass. Nabeel Essa (2018 pers comm.), head of architectural firm Office 24/7, who designed the exhibition, explains that these ‘six steps’ are used “to convey the message of the display, [and that] tableaux help to unpack various issues, without text”, and which he says helps “convey information in a modern way, without having to explain everything”. The displays consists physically of layers to add a sense of depth to relatively shallow display cases, and this layering is achieved by having photographs on the walls, props in the case itself, and vinyl transfers on the glass. Essa (2018 pers comm.) said that creating a diorama, “using vinyl and layers of vinyl and objects is a good way to create a scene, and engage with the visitors”. Essa (2018 pers comm.) goes on to say that having actual objects and photographs gives himself the ability to create and use layers to create context, rather than creating text. There is also a physically interactive element, where viewers are invited to squeeze through a foam replica of one of the narrow passages in the Dinaledi chamber (see Figure 3).



Figure 3 Foam replica of the size of the spaces the cavers had to squeeze through, which visitors can try. Image <https://twitter.com/throckman/status/996733412244443136> Accessed 03/03/2019

The stakeholders and players involved in the *Almost Human* exhibition

There are challenges for both the curators and exhibition designers in designing an exhibition like *Almost Human*, as well as in museum displays more generally. For example, making the theoretical nature of some of the conclusions clear, to a variety of audiences. Balancing these different elements is a challenge because visitors want to be presented with one coherent story line, yet are drawn to charismatic leaders or experts and their messages. Another challenge is that modern exhibits have to compete with other forms of knowledge dissemination and must also form a component of the ‘experience economy’ (Hannigan, 1998: 13).

Educators and general members of the public have their own religious beliefs, but I feel because of the strong storyline and presentation of the scientific methods, the *Almost Human* exhibition at Maropeng is a plausible and convincing exhibit, in which audiences are ostensibly allowed to come to their own conclusions, although the pervasive and seductive deployment of selected visual material implies that audiences may largely reach the conclusions intended by the curator and designer, which is the goal.

Structure of the exhibition

The *Almost Human* exhibition layout

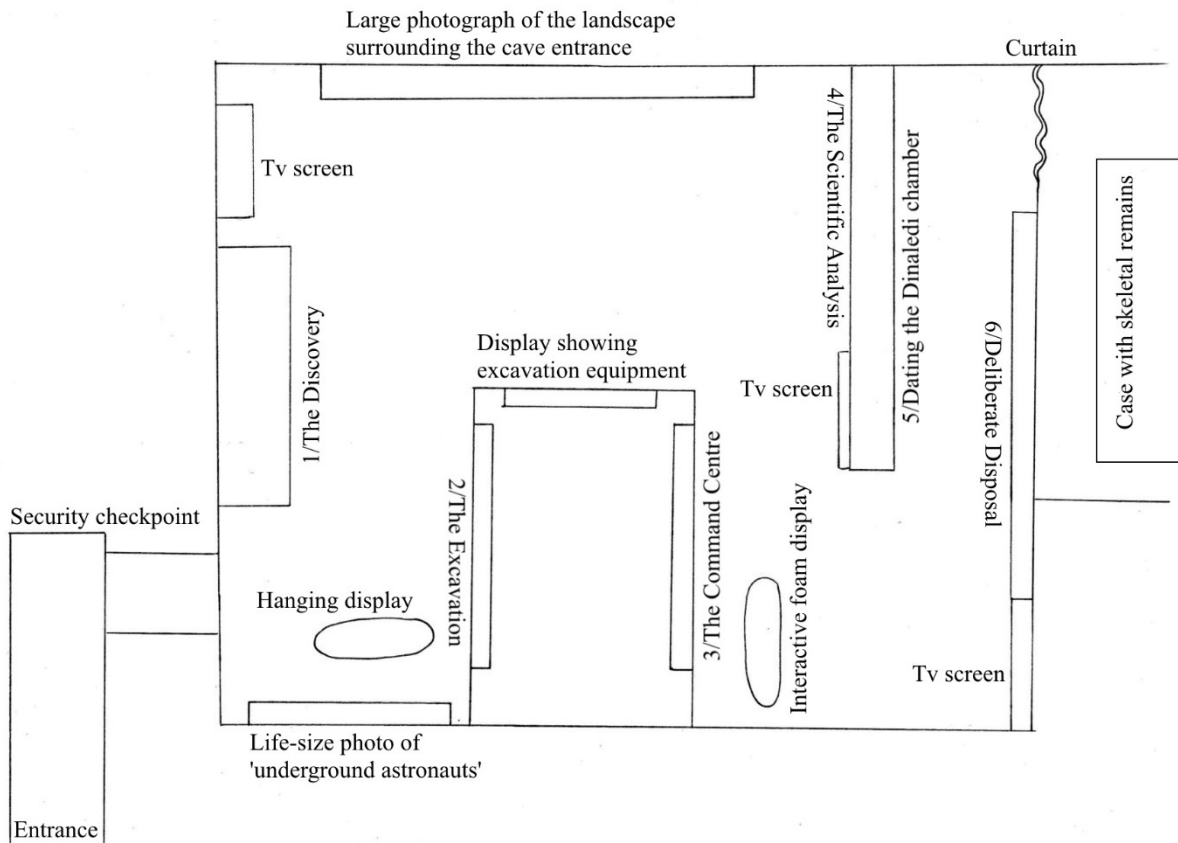


Figure 4 Layout of the *Almost Human* exhibition, where the viewer moves from left to right through the exhibition. Photograph by author 2019.

The exhibit is divided into six displays which provide the viewer with a chronology of the discovery, the scientific methods of analysis, and the implications of the remains (see Figure 4). The exhibit culminates in a room, on the right hand side of Figure 4, where a set of actual bones from several individuals of *Homo naledi* lie. Moving from left to right, the viewer moves through the numbered display. This structure is important as it reinforces the sense of a linear, prescribed narrative.

Display 1: The Discovery details cavers Rick Hunter and Stephen Tucker going down into the Dinaledi chamber and discovering bones in the chamber. Display 2: The Excavation details the assembly of a team of scientists and cavers who went down into the chamber again

and began to retrieve the remains. Display 3: The Command Centre shows Berger and his team watching anxiously as the cavers, via cables laid in the cave system, unearth and carefully collect bone fragments, while Berger directs them from a phone. Display 4: The Scientific Analysis shows the remains and the scientific team in the fossil vault at Wits University, analysing and recording the hundreds of bone fragments found on the Rising Star expedition. Display 5: Dating the Dinaledi chamber shows a picture of the cave structure and the scientific methods like carbon dating used to prove the age of the skeletal remains. Display 5 also includes a picture of the *Homo naledi* reconstruction by renowned paleoartist John Gurche (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 Scientific reconstruction of *Homo naledi* by paleoanthropologic artist John Gurche for National Geographic. Image from <http://gurche.com/homo> Accessed 2019/03/09

Display 6: Deliberate Disposal is made up of a large reproduction of a painting by artist Jon Foster (see Figure 18), and is an impression of how the *Homo naledi* remains might have got

into the cave. Finally, at the end of the display, the remains themselves are on display in a dim room.

Display 1: The Discovery



Figure 6 The first display case in the exhibition. Image from <https://twitter.com/throckman/status/996726278752473090> 2019 Accessed 2019/12/12

As the viewer walks into the exhibition from the outside, on the left hand side there is Display 1: The Discovery (see Figure 6). On the back walls inside the glass case, as well as on the 'floor' there is a reconstruction of the cave, with casts of bones scattered on the floor. On the wall a screen is mounted, which plays video material on a loop. This video material features the two cavers, Steven Tucker and Rick Hunter, who discovered what is now the Dinaledi chamber. Professor Berger, walking through the long grass near the cave site with his two Rhodesian Ridgeback dogs, speaks about the area in which the fossils were found. Pedro Boshoff, riding a motorbike through the countryside, explains in a voice-over how he and the two cavers rushed all the way to Professor Berger's house when Tucker and Hunter found bones in the cave they had just been in. The vinyl on the glass of the display case

details the discovery of the remains. All the display cases, have a numbered, titled section of the display, along with text describing briefly to the reader which aspect of the process is being illustrated in the particular display.

Display 2: The Excavation



Figure 7 A close up of the excavation display. Image from <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/pics-almost-human-exhibition-showcases-homo-naledi-9354942> Accessed 12/12/2019

The route through the *Almost Human* display at Maropeng then directs viewers to Display 2: The Excavation (see Figure 7). This display is L-shaped. On the left is a reconstruction of the scientists, nicknamed the ‘underground astronauts’ crouched low, slowly excavating the remains and packing them into bags to be taken back up to the surface.

On a television screen next to the excavation in Figure 7, Professor Berger explains the selection process for those scientists who went down first as part of the Rising Star expedition. He posted a Facebook status in 2015, asking if there was anyone qualified, small in stature, and ready and able to come to South Africa on their own funds and help him on a new excavation project.

The bottom half of the display cabinet is glass and shows the cavers digging, while the top half is dark panelling. This means the viewer has to crouch or bend to get a better look at what is happening inside the display. The viewer has to crouch a little and strain their eyes a bit, like the actual cavers might have done. The display is also encased in glass, to give the objects an air of value, of needing to be protected.



Figure 8 The hanging torso at the beginning of the exhibition. Image from https://www.tripadvisor.co.za/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g4959638-d1452045-i273652909-Maropeng_Visitor_Centre-Cradle_of_Humankind_World_Heritage_Site_Greater.html Accessed 18/11/2019

The viewer is further involved in the display by the life-size torso suspended above this display (see Figure 8), as though the rest of the figure is still trying to squeeze through the crack in the rock. The torso, dressed in blue overalls and boots, is suspended by caving equipment like carabiners (metal clips used for climbing) and rope, and dangles dramatically from a tight chasm in the rock. The cave 'rock' is made of dense foam for the display. The entire display represents the chasm that Rick Hunter initially slipped his foot into, which led to the Dinaledi chamber being discovered, and in which the remains of *Homo naledi* were found. Below this hanging torso, and to the right, is a life-size photographic cut-out of the

five women ‘underground astronauts’, standing side by side in blue overalls and hard hats (see Figure 22).

Display 3: The Command Centre

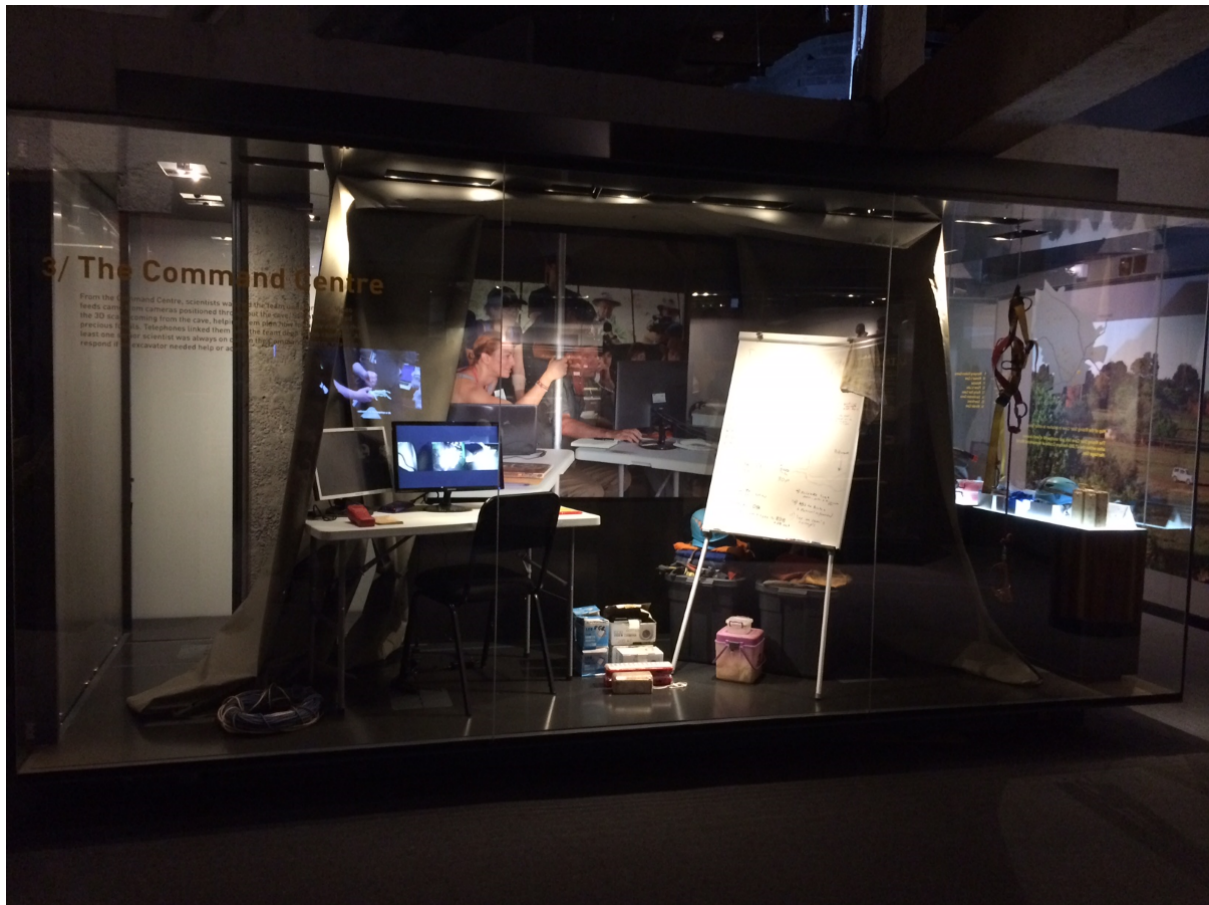


Figure 9 View of the Command Centre display case showing the explorer paraphernalia. Image from <https://twitter.com/throckman/status/996733412244443136> Accessed 03/03/2019



Figure 10 View of the Command Centre display case, with a panorama of the site in the background. Image from <https://twitter.com/throckman/status/99673341224443136> Accessed 03/03/2019

Moving from Display 2: The Excavation, viewers will have gained a sense of what expedition conditions were like underground. By means of a panoramic shot of the land above the cave system (see Figure 10), where the expedition camp was stationed, visitors are then led to Display 3: The Command Centre (see Figure 9). Before reaching Display 3, there is a smaller section which contains equipment related to the discovery and expedition (see Figure 23).

The display so far makes use of “implied spaces” (Bogle 2013: 263), where the exhibition designers create “a sense of distance that in reality does not exist” (Bogle 2013: 263). Creating this sense of depth is important in small or shallow spaces which “might otherwise appear flat and tight” (Bogle 2013: 263). As in the previous display, The Command Centre section has been set up to invite viewers to ‘look in’, and have a look into what the expedition above ground was like. On the back wall of the display case, there is a photograph Professor Berger sitting at a camping table, surrounded by the ‘underground astronauts’ and other

members of the Rising Star expedition team. The group watch a computer monitor, on which was being shown live footage from what the excavators were uncovering in the Dinaledi chamber at the time. Everyone in the photo leans forward eagerly, with expressions of rapt attention. One of the ‘underground astronauts’ grips the tent pole in front of her as she strains to get a better look at the monitor. There are books and notepads on white plastic tables. In a TEDtalk (YouTube 2016: online), Professor Berger speaks about the decision to broadcast the excavation live by *National Geographic*, and in the background of the photograph one can see several cameramen.

A green tent flap has been attached to the wall in the display, which partially obscures all those in the tent, as though it has been pulled aside for viewers to take a peek inside (see Figure 11). The figures in the photograph are at eye-level and life-size, which emphasises feelings of inclusion, as though the viewer is there with Professor Berger and his team, as if one only has to take a step inside the tent to be able to see the first images of a new ancient human relative.

This feeling of inclusion is enhanced when the viewer looks at the real tools and furniture in the display cabinet, in front of the background image. On a white plastic table identical to the tables in the photograph, is a computer monitor showing images from underground. Next to it sits folders and a notepad. To the right of this plastic table there are overalls and hard hats, placed there as if ready and waiting to be used. On the floor sit containers and plastic boxes. The physical objects have been arranged to mirror the image in the photograph (see Figure 9), so that when the viewer stands and looks at the image of the Rising Star expedition team, they suddenly find themselves placed behind a similar desk looking at similar images. It is as if the viewer has been transported to that day of discovery and excavation, and that they are the ones on the phone to the scientists below witnessing the retrieval of these historic fossil remains. This sensation of being present with the people in the photograph was strengthened

when, during an interview with Dr Bonita de Klerk (2018 pers comm.), operations manager of the Malapa cave system³, who informed me that all the equipment in the *Almost Human* exhibition is authentic gear from the expedition.

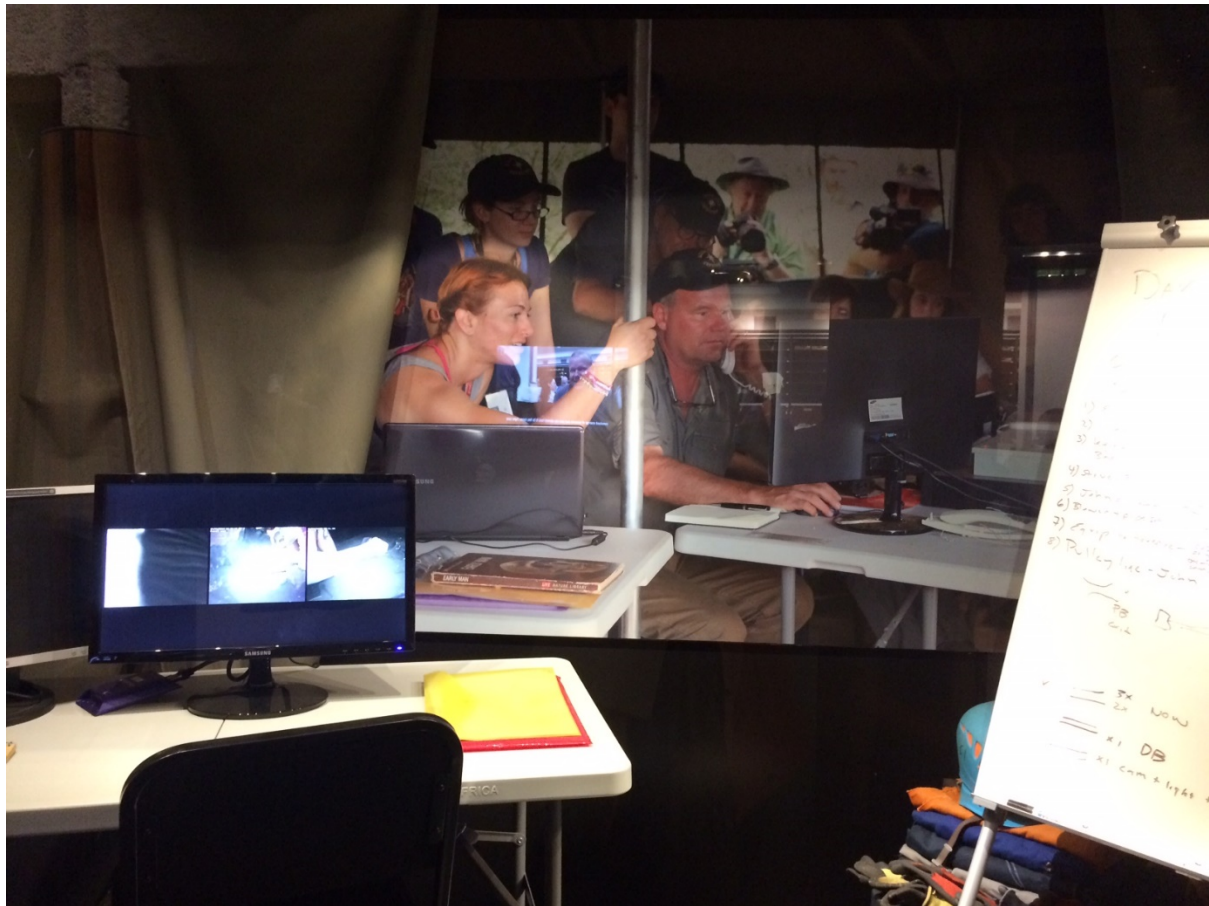


Figure 11 A close-up of the display showing authentic equipment and intimate portrayals of the excited scientists, which are intended to involve the viewer. Photograph by author 2018

As seen more prominently in Display 4: The Scientific Analysis, physical depth has been created in the display cases (see Figure 11), by having a combination of photographs on the back wall, video material, physical props on the floor, and vinyl on the glass front of the display cases. In my analysis in Chapter Three I discuss exhibitionary devices which include the effects of different modes of representation, as well as the value of tangibility and authenticity, reality and reproduction.

³ A rich fossil-bearing site where Professor Berger discovered the remains of an ancient human relative now named *Australopithecus sediba*.

Display 4: The Scientific Analysis



Figure 12 A close-up showing scientists working on *Homo naledi*. Photograph by author 2018.



Figure 13 The space inside the Display 4 case, with the chair and jacket draped over it. Photograph by author 2018.



Figure 14 The left-hand side of the display. Photograph by author 2018.



Figure 15 The display case with layers and vinyl transfers. Photograph by author 2018.

Across from Display 3: The Command Centre is Display 4: The Scientific Analysis (see Figure 12). As mentioned in my description of Display 3: The Command Centre, Display 4 has also been designed to create a sense of physical depth. This has been done by creating layers within the display case. The first background layer consists of an image of the fossil vault at Wits University, with ten scientists seated at computers or desks analysing the remains and data gathered from the Dinaledi cave system (see Figure 13). In the picture, there are cables running all round the floor, some scientists unintentionally pulling faces as they concentrate. Behind the scientists appear shelves lined with hominid skulls and labelled boxes, all seeming very realistic.

When I interviewed Dr Elliott, it took place in this fossil vault pictured in Figure 12, and having only seen the fossil vault from the images in the *Almost Human* display, visiting the actual room demonstrated for me how effective the reproduction of it at Maropeng was. Even though I had never been to the physical space I could orientate myself around it based on the sense of depth and realism created in the display of the scientists in the fossil vault.

The second 'layer' of Display 4: The Scientific Analysis is inside the display case, and about a meter in depth (see Figure 14). Inside on the floor, there is a table with casts of the reconstructed remains of *Homo naledi*, namely the skull, hands and feet, which are the species' most human-like traits. There is also a chair with a blue jacket hanging from the back of it. The third layer is an image of three scientists working over some of the remains (see Figure 15). In addition, there is text explaining the process of analysis, all printed on vinyl.

Display 5: Dating the Dinaledi Chamber



Figure 16: A close-up image of Display 5, showing the scientific reconstruction of *Homo naledi* by John Gurche. Photograph by author 2018.

As viewers move towards Display 5: Dating the Dinaledi Chamber, they are confronted with a close-up photograph of John Gurche's reconstruction of *Homo naledi*, focusing mainly on the eyes, serves as the backdrop to this display (see Figure 16). A hominid family tree, and text explaining the methods scientists used to date both the cave and the fossil remains, is printed in vinyl on the glass.

Display 5 is however tucked away at an awkward angle, and not as brightly lit as the other displays. Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) did say that this display being located where it was points to the constraints they had when putting in an exhibition in an existing space with fixed display cases. The photo of the reconstruction by paleoanthropological artist John

Gurche, which featured on the cover of *National Geographic* when the discovery of *Homo naledi* was published in 2015, does not occupy a prominent position in this exhibition. That artwork, which is arguably more grounded in scientific conventions of hominin reconstructions than the John Foster painting, does not offer much visual impact. The photograph doesn't quite relate to the information printed on the glass case. Instead, this display appears to act as a filler, so that Display 6: Deliberate Disposal, becomes the last image viewers see before entering the room beyond with the remains of *Homo naledi*.

Display 6: Deliberate Disposal



Figure 17: An image of Display 6, with Jon Foster's image showing *Homo naledi*'s possible burial behaviour. Photograph by author 2018.



Figure 18: *H. naledi* by Jon Foster. Image from <https://www.jonfoster.com/blog/archives/09-2015> Accessed 17/10/2018.

As the viewer moves towards the end of the exhibition, the viewer is confronted by a large artwork. This artwork and an accompanying video make up the display for Display 6: Deliberate Disposal (see Figure 17). This artwork, called *H. naledi*, was commissioned by *National Geographic* from artist Jon Foster⁴. Next to the painting, paleoanthropologist Professor John Hawks is featured on a monitor describing the of ritualised burial behaviour. Professor Hawks describes how the bones may have been carried into the Dinaledi chamber, and explains that this is a “very controversial thing to say” (*Almost Human* video material, 2018) The artwork is a digital painting (see Figure 18), created using computer software rather than physical paints and canvas, which first appeared in *National Geographic* in 2015 alongside an article on the *Homo naledi* discovery. This artwork is significant in this exhibition because it’s the last image the viewer see before they enter into the room with the

⁴ The artist was contacted several times and could not be reached for comment.

Homo naledi fossil remains. The final piece of staging before the finale is important because it prompts, along with the rest of the display, how the audience will respond to the remains.

In Figure 18, multiple figures crowd around an amphitheatre of rock, passing down a dead companion to those waiting below. Others gather round the periphery of the cave, and one figure climbs down ahead of the others carrying the body. It is theorised by the scientists that *Homo naledi* may have dragged their dead down through the Rising Star cave system into the Dinaledi chamber. The artwork is rendered in warm colours, like a late afternoon glow, and reminiscent of Africa, with visible brushstrokes. The creatures are straining with the weight of the corpse, and the rocks around them look treacherous and sharp.

Paintings can offer authority, in that perhaps a theory could appear more convincing if a painting was commissioned to explain it. With other mediums of representation like photography and digital illustration, having a two- by three-meter, seemingly conventional artwork in the *Almost Human* exhibition adds an air of grandeur and prestige. The figures are anthropomorphised by being given recognisably human facial expressions and poses. These expressions and poses are seen in several ‘Christ descending from the cross’ images, as shown in the analysis in Chapter Four. In terms of the actual act of painting the artwork, the intended effect of naturalism, but deliberately visible brush-strokes, is that of a skilled painter, like some Old Master. The impression is that of an artist working with oils and canvas, while in reality using all the benefits and advantages of working digitally, using easy-to-deploy layers, erasing, backing up files, having multiple edits, and being able to send the image digitally instead of physically transporting or storing it.

Multiple modes of representation work together to make a very convincing display. In the *Almost Human* exhibition, these modes have been employed at almost every conceivable point of representation to create the most impact, and to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

The remains themselves

The final display within the *Almost Human* exhibit consists of a section separated from the rest of the display, as well as the rest of the visitor centre. This section is entered through a black curtain which is pulled back for visitors by one of the exhibition staff. In the centre of the room there is a large, shallow two-meter long case with a clear plastic domed lid (see Figure 19). The lighting is dim and funereal.

There are stanchions which form a barrier to prevent one from leaning on the lid, although the visitor is still able to lean close enough to get a good look. Inside the case, which is made of dark red-stained wood, the bottom is lined with blue velvet. The display case has a broadly coffin-like shape. The plush velvet material also is reminiscent of coffin linings, as well as the muted wood of the frame. Positioned with small pieces of double-sided tape lies the skeletal remains of the *Homo naledi* individual Neo, a composite of several skeletons found in the chamber (see Figure 20). The skeleton lies almost fully assembled, with additional bones lining the skeleton. The teeth are laid above the head in a circular layout. The remains are laid out as if in a state of rest. To the right of the remains there is another display, which contains additional pieces of remains of the skeletons found in the Dinaledi chamber. Marshall (2018, pers comm.) stated that this dim lighting and muted display is “about building up a sense of anticipation” and is “muted because something is coming”, which is a look at the actual bones. The dim lighting in this section of the exhibition also conveys a sense of reverence and respect to the contents of the display. In Chapter Three, narrative devices throughout the exhibition are discussed, which add structure to the ways in which this ‘story’ of discovery is communicated and understood.

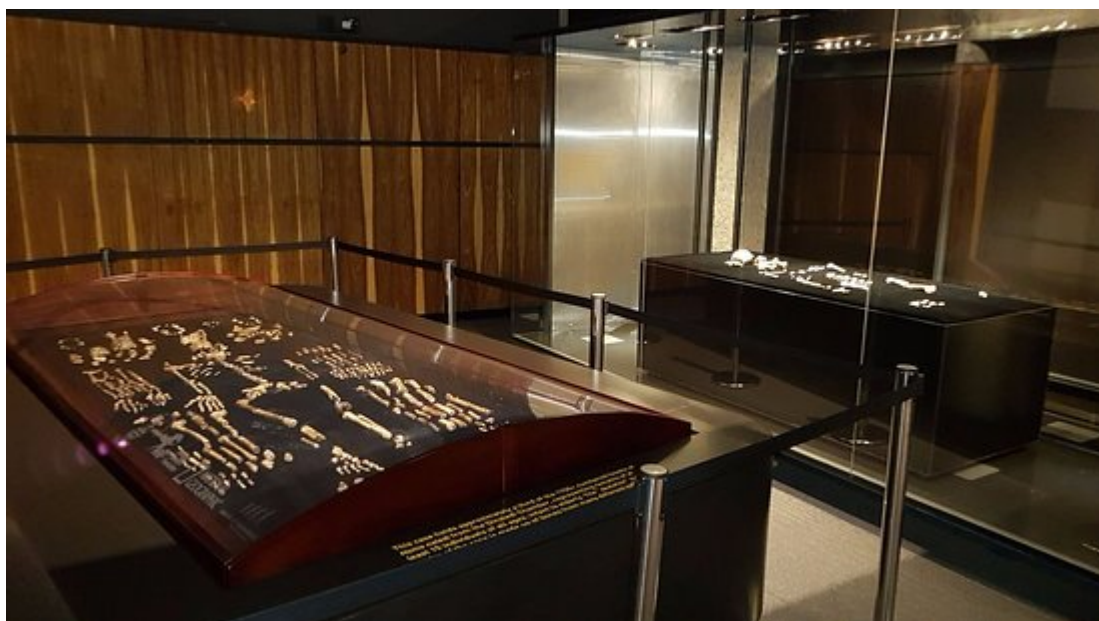


Figure 19: The remains of *Homo naledi*. Image from https://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g4959638-d1452045-i273652848-Maropeng_Visitor_Centre-Cradle_of_Humankind_World_Heritage_Site_Greater.html Accessed 02/02/2019.



Figure 20: The jaw and teeth of *Homo naledi* attached to the display case with tape. Image from <https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/almost-human-exhibition-showcases-homo-naledi-9356081> Accessed 24/12/2018.

Chapter Three: Narrative Devices

Almost Human is constructed as a series of ‘scenes’ through which audiences move in anticipation of the next part of the story. This narrative of discovery and investigation is what drives the viewer through the exhibition. In addition to the story being told, the layout of the exhibition is such that the audience needs to physically follow the story. Exciting ‘characters’, the cavers and scientists, are introduced early on in the exhibition. Lighting and colour is used to heighten the sense of drama and theatricality of the story. Telling the story of discovery, and using other devices propel the viewer through the display to its conclusion, the remains of *Homo naledi*.

According to Forrest (2014: 30) “spatial channels guide the physical journey; narrative channels guide the conceptual journey, and semiotic channels guide visitors in their sense-making of different interpretive media”. The creation of a narrative, with a story-line that is easy to follow, featuring visually exciting visual aids and driven by charismatic characters, is effective because this form of story-telling is familiar, and not knowing what is literally around the corner is exciting to viewers. A sense of anticipation is built up throughout the exhibition, culminating in the display of actual bones of *Homo naledi*, and this anticipation is an effective exhibitionary strategy to move visitors along physically, as well as creating a desire to see the next ‘scene’.

Pragmatically, encouraging viewers to move along the exhibition is also because of a time-constraint. According to Dr de Klerk (2018 pers comm.), when school groups come, one of Maropeng’s largest sources of revenue (Marshall 2018 pers comm.), the group is allocated twenty minutes to move through the display. Thus, the structure of the narrative, the physical devices like the numbering of the displays, and the snaking layout, and the exciting ‘scenes’ that makes the viewer want to see what comes next, ensure that the viewer engages with the

content of the exhibition, contemplates the displays and the final display of the remains, and then moves on with the tour of the rest of Maropeng. This enables many people to be able to get through the exhibition efficiently.

Having a narrative is a familiar device in films and novels. Narrative also forms part of museum convention (Allen, 2004). Moving through the exhibition is more comfortable when visitors understand that this is a story they are being told, and that they must move in a chronological order to its conclusion.

The content of the *Almost Human* exhibition is perhaps not something that everyone is comfortable with, and thus the layout and story is simplified so that people can grapple with the discovery and its implications without getting lost or confused in technical or scientific details. However, a set story can also be limit alternate interpretations and perspectives, but “making a narrative too explicit or prescriptive can provoke resentment amongst visitors who don’t like the feeling of being dictated to” (Forrest 2014: 31). Ultimately “it’s a fine line to walk between the two: one visitor’s reassuring guidance may be another’s annoying constraint” (Forrest 2014: 31).

Abbott (2002: 1) asserts that human beings have been using stories to communicate events and ways to learn for thousands of years. Bedford (2001: 33) notes this as well, saying that stories usually have a familiar structure that encourages learning, discussion and reflection. Stories inspire feelings of “wonder and awe” (Bedford, 2001: 33), and allow the listeners to feel part of a collective identity. In terms of the *Almost Human* exhibition, this is important to get audiences to feel comfortable with a familiar structure of storytelling, as well as feeling included and inspired by the characters and events shown in the exhibition. Under these conditions, viewers may also come to know more about the human evolutionary past.

Telling a good story

Holtorf (2010: 1) argues that people demand stories and exciting characters as part of the twenty-first century experience economy. The experience economy involves selling the feeling consumers get when engaging in the ‘product’, in this case, a new scientific discovery relating to human evolution. Importantly, visitors to museum spaces in particular are looking for engaging, immersive, interactive and memorable experiences, as well as to be educated by their experience (Hannigan 1998: 13). Holtorf (2010: 2) argues that in order for their work to be of lasting significance in the contemporary experience economy, archaeologists have to become performers who work as “sophisticated storytellers”, constructing memorable and immersive narratives about their discoveries for viewers who are no longer satisfied with mere facts. Contemporary museum spaces are developing increased awareness about the benefits of creating exciting, inclusive, theatrical displays which encourage visitors to attend, at a time when visitors no longer rely on museum spaces or exhibitions for entertainment or knowledge. In the experience economy, “exhibit planners/designers are in essence ‘selling’ these items and concepts to the public” (Bogle 2013: 78). Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) says that those involved in the exhibition design used “discovery stories to tell the story of *naledi*. [Berger] found that the public is very engaged by discovery stories, and the advantage of discovery stories is that they are true and they don’t change”.

The messages that are being ‘sold’ to the Maropeng audience through the story-telling devices are that this discovery of *Homo naledi* is exciting. This benefits those involved with the creation of the exhibition, because an exciting exhibition means more visitors are likely to come to Maropeng. This also means that the scientists’ work will gain exposure and public repute, and perhaps secure further funding from organisations like *National Geographic*. *National Geographic* benefits from supporting scientists who can bring back exciting stories that their readers and viewers will like and thus read and watch and buy. For the curator and

exhibition designers, a successful project could mean other similar ambitious collaborations in the future, and further launches of prestigious discoveries. A successful, exciting exhibition also means more revenue for the Maropeng centre and surrounding area, and keeps investors interested in funding Maropeng. Maropeng would continue to be promoted as a desirable local and international tourist destination.

It is this tension between entertainment value and an educational experience that makes certain museum spaces lean towards the ‘edutainment’ model (Hannigan 1998: 13). Edutainment is described by Hannigan (1998: 98) as “the joining together of educational and cultural activities with the commerce and technology of the entertainment world”. Cultural and education centres are having to employ “new media, new techniques of interactivity and new styles which have more in common with the funfair or theatre than with a traditional museum” (MacDonald 2010: 7). Furthermore, according to Lepouras and Vassilakis (2005: 96), “a shift has taken place in the museum’s identity, from simple holders of cultural objects to educational and... entertaining institutions”. Hannigan (1998: 89) agrees, saying that “educators and cultural institutions” are increasingly turning to ways of ‘adding value’ to the exhibit, using memorabilia and exciting technological add-ons.

The “urban entertainment industry... [has] deliberately designed activities, venues and technologies which could be counted on to both dazzle and reassure” (Hannigan 1998: 7). This fits into Maropeng’s model of gentle reassurance about human evolution, in which *Almost Human* presents a slick and exciting display without being too prescriptive about human evolution. The reassurance mentioned by Hannigan (1998: 7) could come from the use of iconography within the exhibit that people are comfortable with, like religious references from the *H.naledi* digital painting, the theatrical layout, the bold and risk-taking scientists like something out of popular culture. Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) stated that discovery stories are “incredibly safe in terms of a story telling medium”, because the

facts of discovery do not change. It may make it a more comfortable exhibition for viewers if conclusions about the species are left open-ended, or discussed in a non-confrontational way through the story of discovery.

Maropeng is run on a public-private partnership model (Tomose 2008: 2), and museum spaces operating under this model are “having difficulty in striking a balance between their social obligations and their economic viability” (Tomose 2008: 2). According to the Tomose (2008), social responsibility in the South African museum context involves “museum access by people of varied social and economic backgrounds, educational access, equity and redress considerations, ticket prices [and] social responsibility in display” (Tomose 2008: 2). Maropeng Visitor Centre charges R120 per adult, and R65 per pupil on a school tour for entrance (Maropeng 2018: online). Tomose (2008) also asserts that museums are run using “profit making mechanisms”, and that there exists the increasing commoditisation of “cultural heritage institutions” (Tomose 2008: 22). This could be said of Maropeng, where stakeholders want to be invested in exhibitions and displays that generate revenue to the visitor centre itself, but also for the surrounding areas.

In the video material of Display 6: Deliberate Disposal, Professor Hawks discloses that claiming *Homo naledi* practiced ritual burial behaviours “is a very controversial thing to say” (*Almost Human* video material 2018). It was a deliberate decision to include this statement in the exhibition. However, having controversy and mystery in an exhibition heightens the theatrical nature of the displays, and attracts visitors. The curators of this exhibition have included Professor Hawks’ statement above, as part of a good story that visitors are drawn to. Professor Hawks appears to divulge insider knowledge, a little bit of a taste into the background in-fighting, and academic drama, and that, seemingly against the odds, the *Almost Human* exhibition is here for the viewers to contemplate and enjoy.

There is great value in archaeologists and paleoanthropologists adopting the attitude of ‘storyteller’. Holtorf (2010) says that “advocating archaeology as story-telling does not mean to ‘dumb-down’ or ‘vulgarise’ academic research by emphasising the lowest common denominator of interest among a mass audience” (Holtorf 2010: 3). There is a huge “potential of archaeological stories to move people and interest them in a particular aspect of... the past” (Holtorf 2010: 3). Stories have an indisputable universal appeal (Abbott, 2002: 1), and this appeal should be capitalised on and shared with audiences. There is currently a need for researchers to communicate their findings to a wider society, something that many scientists and specialists resist.

It is not this vulgar, reprehensible thing to tell a good story that will get people interested, and “archaeologists who strive to tell good stories thus do not necessarily... ‘sell out’ their discipline in order to gain that extra bit of attention” (Holtorf 2010: 3). It is important that we spend effort “celebrating the magic of practicing archaeology and ... imagining what the past was like” (Holtorf 2010: 4). Human beings have a desire to see what the past looked like, and in the “metaphorical meaning of heroes overcoming adversity, solving mysteries through meticulous analyses” (Holtorf 2010: 4).

The *Homo naledi* palaeoanthropology can be seen as a Sherlock Holmes investigation, a 300 thousand-year old mystery, using logic and the scientific method to solve. “Various hominan [sic] species play out plots of increasingly becoming human in physical, behavioural, social and cultural ways” (Holtorf 2010: 4). This links to the persuasive ‘human’ power of the *Homo naledi* painting by Jon Foster, and the reconstruction by John Gurche, as discussed in Chapter 4.

According to Holtorf (2010: 4) “all human origin research is ultimately an engagement with human concepts of humankind. This statement implies that these things are a matter of who says them, on what grounds, and by what specific set of standards. Often, who can argue

better, who has the better platform, the more compelling personality, who performs well under public attention or the limelight, is the one who will gain a widespread audience. Shapin (1994: 65) shows that the use of dramatic and charismatic personalities linked with discoveries hasn't actually changed from explorations 200 years ago. This sense that charismatic personalities have long been the ones who get more public exposure, is linked to the concept of the cult of the explorer, discussed later in Chapter 4.

Speaking in relation to Maropeng specifically, (Holtorf 2010: 4) argues that “famous discoveries like ‘Lucy’ are not only meaningful in relation to finds of other human ancestors that lived millions of years ago but also in relation to each of us today who may share some of her genes, anatomy and behaviour. This perspective places contemporary audiences as characters inside the story of human evolution” (Holtorf 2010: 4). This is important because as well as the devices and decisions within the *Almost Human* exhibit that include the viewer in the discovery process, the viewer is also being placed, by the reconstruction, the painting, and the theorised burial behaviour of *Homo naledi* given to be similar to modern human behaviour, as a character inside the story of human evolution. This is a powerful device as well as a subtle ideological message, that the *Homo naledi* discovery is part of the entire human race's evolutionary heritage.

In addition, “even very limited knowledge about distant hominan [*sic*] species... [is] sufficient for telling stories that evoke distinct collective identities” (Holtorf 2010: 8). It could be argued that when we do not have a lot of facts, the room for interpretation and construction of personal meaning is very large, which could be beneficial in certain situation. Using forms of story-telling in archaeological contexts connects with audiences' “most common fantasies, needs and desires” (Holtorf 2010: 10). Furthermore, these exhibition narratives benefit society “by making people reflect on what it means to be human and what they share with others” (Holtorf 2010: 10). However, “archaeologists need to evaluate

carefully the social consequences of their actions, including those of the stories they tell” (Holtorf 2010: 10), as archaeologists and paleoanthropologists, they have social and academic capital and authority to influence perceptions of their discoveries. However, while Moser (1996: 213) argues that elements of these stories, like the inclusion of scientific illustrations, are powerful and persuasive forms of argument that can be used to influence the nature and significance of a particular discovery, Holtorf (2010: 10) goes on to say that “many audiences are not actually after the truthfulness of all elements of archaeological stories, but rather after the larger benefits these stories... provide with them... [to give] meaning and perspective to their lives”. Benefits like excitement about our shared biological and evolutionary heritage, the field of paleoanthropology, visiting the Maropeng centre, drawing attention to a South African discovery, are likely to outweigh the problems of potential gaps in the science.

In Display 1: The Discovery, viewers begin their journey to uncovering *Homo naledi* through video footage played in the display. A sense of place is first provided in Display 1, to ‘set the scene’ for the saga that will unfold for the viewer in the exhibition. The footage presents the rolling hills and tawny grasslands in the background of the Cradle of Humankind and gives the viewers a sense of place (see Figure 21). The warm colours of the ground and plant life will be familiar to local visitors, and are stimulating and engaging to foreign visitors, perhaps as the ‘colours’ of the African landscape. There is also video footage of Hunter and Tucker going into the cave and this gives viewers a sense of the Rising Star cave system and the skilled speleological manoeuvring it takes to get down into it. There is excitement in Professor Berger’s voice as he recounts a visit from Boshoff, Hunter and Tucker, who drove directly to Berger’s house when they realised that there were potentially unique hominid fossil finds down in the Dinaledi system.

In the first set of displays, the story of the discovery starts gaining momentum. Within the exhibit, excitement is built by allowing the viewer to follow the story of what *was* an exciting journey. In a way discovering something and extracting and analysing and transporting it safely, with precise planning and tight deadlines, is exciting. In parts, the expedition has the feeling of a military operation, with the ‘hundreds of metres of military-grade fibre optic cables’ (YouTube, 2016: online). The process of discovery and exploration is shown to their viewer through this equipment and the jargon, and as the enduring success of the *Indiana Jones* and *The Mummy* franchises will attest to, visitors love these tropes. It is also a useful message to visitors that science is fun, come and be involved and look at what we do and how exciting it is. If visitors indeed come away understanding this, the *Almost Human* exhibition would be a success.



Figure 21: Young viewers watch Professor Berger survey the landscape as he recounts the discovery of *Homo naledi* in a voice-over. Image from Maropeng.co.za, accessed 03/03/2019.

Professor Lee Berger’s image is as one possessing an ‘explorer’s instinct’. He cultivates an image of an explorer out in the field, khaki working clothes on, and a tan, and his brown

leather hat. This outfit helps project an image of a hands-on, involved researcher, someone who is a discoverer, a pioneer, as well as promote the idea of an explorer-archaeologist. The *Almost Human* display centres prominently on Professor Berger, the University of the Witwatersrand palaeontologist who discovered the *Homo naledi* fossils in the Cradle of Humankind, South Africa. The display brings into focus the ‘cult of the explorer’. Museum displays often highlight those who have the power to create and reinforce agendas through the museum display. This feeds into how museum displays potentially promote the ideology of one man, in this case Professor Berger, supported by his international reputation and connection with *National Geographic* (the funder of much of Professor Berger’s research) as their explorer-in-residence. Berger and *National Geographic* are promoted as conveyors of the ‘truth’ about human evolution. It is interesting that this approach was used in *Almost Human*, even though the international trend is that museum displays within a postmodern paradigm are changing to become more democratised and inclusive, and to promote a multiplicity of views (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 103).

Theatrics/theatricality

Forrest (2014: 28) mentions that “over the past 20 years, exhibitions have had an increasingly theatrical quality in their attention to detail of design, lighting and staging”. These aspects can help enhance visitor experience, as well as persuade the visitors to act and feel in particular ways toward the content of the exhibition.

There is a highly theatrical element to the exhibition. Lighting has been used to spotlight the different displays against the black walls of the exhibition space. Each display gives off the impression of a scene, or a set, another act in this drama of discovery. Each ‘set’ comes with its own set of ‘props’. Props are designed to give a sense of place to the rest of the set, as well as to enhance the performance and sense of authenticity within the set. Props assist the viewer with engaging with the rest of the contents of the display, or set.

Employing props which promote authenticity, establish *mis en scene* (Bryson 2013 :9) and foster viewer engagement links to the museum space competing in the experience economy with theme-parks and other disseminators of edutainment. Viewers want to be entertained as well as educated, and being shown authentic objects which help provide a vivid sense of place helps audiences imagine what it was like to be out there in the field discovering a new human ancestor. Viewers could almost imagine what it would be like if they were actors in this discovery. Many exhibition spaces infuse their displays with interesting and authentic props and interactive elements to encourage first-time and repeat visits (Pine and Gilmore, 2007: 4). The presence of the black curtain at the end of the exhibition is a continuation of the theatricality of the exhibition. It implies the bones are the finale, and as if the viewer is entering a tent at a fairground to see some oddity or have their palm read. In Chapter Four, other devices of display are shown to have been used in less significant but still present ways, to promote the ideologies and goals of those involved with the display.

Chapter Four: Other Devices of Display

Authority of the museum space

Museums were once the most authoritative disseminators of knowledge about the world and the people in it (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 3). Museums also served to promote agendas regarding humans' place above all else. Museums were also spaces which influenced visitor behaviour both physically and psychologically, as well as informing the viewer as to which information was worthy of knowing (Bennett 1995: 59). While now in competition with other forms of entertainment and disseminators of knowledge, museum exhibitions still serve important didactic functions. Exhibitions still project and help shape ways of seeing the world, and create memorable narratives around important scientific finds like *Homo naledi*. Current audiences still look to museum displays as 'official' channels of knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992: 3).

Everything within a museum space is curated, positioned and explained to carry out certain agendas of those involved with its creation. The content of an exhibition is carefully considered to highlight a certain point of view, and to silence or downplay others (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 162). Another layer of complication arises when the exhibition features scientific content. Even in a small exhibition like the *Almost Human* exhibition, it becomes apparent that scientific knowledge and the narratives created around it are not neutral (MacDonald, 1998: xii). While science is widely held as being an impartial method of understanding and measuring our world, how that information is used and presented to further particular agendas by those who hold positions of influence, is of interest to this research (MacDonald, 1998, Hooper-Greenhill, 1992).

One of the ways in which the creators of the *Almost Human* exhibition is attempting to persuade the viewer that, as Moxey (2001: 3) outlines, the *Homo naledi* discovery and the

processes involved are exciting and valid and worthy of public attention, is through the use of compelling visual material. The use of compelling visual material in museum displays is powerful in promoting a version of knowledge or truth (Hooper-Greenhill, 2002: 162). At Maropeng, the *Almost Human* exhibition includes visual material like ‘live’ video footage taken during the actual discovery. Other visual material includes the skeletal remains, reconstruction of the research laboratory at the University of the Witwatersrand, a forensic reconstruction of a *Homo naledi* individual by John Gurche, as well as an artist’s impression of the purported burial of the dead by members of *Homo naledi*. This links with the multiple modes of representation within the exhibition, and what they contribute to the success and messages of the exhibition.

Behind the compelling visual material in the *Almost Human* exhibit, much research by a variety of scientists and organisations has been carried out and published. There is much debate about the implications of this hominin find, and whether it is justifiable to include the remains as worthy of inclusion into the genus *Homo* (Randolph-Quinney, 2015). The combination of a formal display of a museum-type venue, along with the inclusion of a display of scientific processes in the *Almost Human* exhibition, would lead the public to believe that reliable and objective ‘scientific’ information was being presented. However, the presentation of scientific knowledge, as well as the museum space itself, is influenced and shaped by several actors, each exerting their own ideological agendas on the information. Western scientific method has status and power, and is revered as a provider of truth, as illustrated in several of the *Almost Human* displays. Ideological messages concerning the status and validity of the claims made about *Homo naledi*, as well as the significance of their implications, are made via the displays. The visual material and display set-ups are important in communicating these ideologies, which speak to issues of power and influence in the museum space (Bennett 1994: 98). Science and the scientific method is a potent tool to be

used to further ideological agendas of several players involved in the discovery of *Homo naledi*, and the *Almost Human* exhibition. Each of the displays within this exhibition is engineered to promote the values of those who have created the displays, and who will benefit from successful displays. With this creation of these displays, certain narratives regarding the discovery, and the team who discovered it, are made prominent, and other interpretations of the remains or the people involved in the overall debate about *Homo naledi* are less conspicuous. This is done by emphasising or downplaying aspects of the discovery, which is important because the museum space does still in some respects stand as a repository of knowledge through which visitors can construct conclusions about their worlds from the narratives presented within the exhibition. To do this, the *Almost Human* exhibition has to be precisely and carefully constructed, evidenced by the final exhibition.

The importance of physical exhibition design

As I have mentioned, *Almost Human* is laid out in displays in a numbered, chronological order. When I asked Dr Elliott (2018 pers comm.) about the choice of layout for the exhibition, she said that the display cases were already installed from previous exhibitions and could not be moved, and thus the exhibition team had to work with that they had. Forrest (2014: 29) supports this, saying that when confined by space, choice of layout is sometimes less ideological than pragmatic. However, I disagree. Even in a small and confined space with a set budget, there are always ideological agents and decisions which are made manifest in the exhibition. Even that which appears unfinished or haphazard has ideological underpinnings. In most exhibition spaces there are spatial and budget constraints, but are pushed very hard so that even under these pressures, the message desired by the creators is put forward. Other than physical space, narrative and multiple modes of representation are utilised to project desired messages from the exhibition.

Nabeel Essa, head of architectural firm 24/7, who worked to design the *Almost Human* display, said in an interview (2018 pers comm.) that the immovable layout was a design constraint. However, the way the exhibition space was structured lent itself well to the narrative of discovery and excitement. Forrest (2013: 201) argues that exhibition design “has a greater role to play than the creation of a mere container, backdrop or decoration”, and that the physical display space can “in themselves be considered another form of interpretive media, one which has many layers of complexity and interactions with other media [and] exhibit content” (Forrest 2013: 201).

Despite the interviewed experts’ claims that the layout was already like it was and thus couldn’t be changed, the layout was deliberately constructed within the available space and infrastructure. There could have been changes made if the curators needed it, evidenced by the fact that the exhibition starts at a place which is actually the exit. The curators turned the entire space around to accommodate the narrative of visitors entering through a ‘cave’ similar to the explorers (see Figure 2), and ending with the remains in the large curtained room at the end, which was originally designed as the entrance to the space. The curators may have been disingenuous about the challenges they faced putting the exhibition together. This idea of it appearing challenging further enhances the notion that the entire process of discovery, excavation and display of *Homo naledi* was one of solving challenges and overcoming problems. This also enhances the impression the viewer gets of the process being one of risk and creativity, which is more exciting than the exhibition being a standardised, easy thing to achieve.

The physical layout of the display appears not to be a hindrance, and lends itself to a ‘Hansel and Gretel’ approach, revealing information to the viewer by dropping “bits of tantalising information” (Bogle 2013: 80), which not only ensures viewers are subconsciously propelled through the exhibit, a subtle method of control by the museum space over its audiences

(Bennett 1995: 100), which also prepares the visitor to anticipate “a major happening and spark their interest in a subject that would be addressed later on” (Bogle 2013: 80). This ‘subject’ is in the form of the remains of *Homo naledi* at the very end of the exhibit. Jon Foster’s *H.naledi* artwork in Display 6: Deliberate Disposal also creates this sense of anticipation, with its dramatic and memorable imagery acting as a visual primer for what the viewers will see in the next room.

The physical layout of the display

The *Almost Human* exhibit is situated away from the main Maropeng displays, to the side of the main Tumulus building, and this adds to a feeling of being intimate, conspiratorial and adventurous (Forrest 2014: 30), like stumbling upon a hidden cave, much like the original cavers did with the actual cave. The entrance to *Almost Human* is a repurposed emergency exit. The physical space is designed so that the ‘official’ entrance to this section of Maropeng is where *Almost Human* ends. While this is innovative, it can also be confusing to visitors.

Inside the *Almost Human* exhibit, visitors cannot at first see round all the corners of the exhibition. Forrest (2014: 32) states that having “exciting views of what lies beyond can help propel visitors along”. Even though the displays are numbered and the narrative is straightforward, the small display space has been designed as an interesting and engaging journey of discovery, instead of it being a single open-plan room where visitors can see everything laid out in cases and thus experience no surprise or suspense. Furthermore, the layout of the *Almost Human* exhibition, lends itself to the notion that “regular rhythm is an excellent tool to use when there is a need for the visitors to understand quickly how to proceed when looking at a graphic layout, viewing a series of displays, or entering an exhibit area” (Bogle 2013: 279). Bogle (2013: 247) also adds that “shapes, forms and spaces are surrogate storytellers that can inform visitors about an exhibit’s theme, time, place, mission and aims”.

In retail, theme park and museum settings, “several atmospheric variables, including layout, crowding, product location, music, colour [and] lighting... have been tested for their impact on consumers’ affective responses, perceptions of value and quality, and behavioural responses, such as time spent, traffic flow, and purchasing patterns” (Forrest 2013: 203). Museum curators create and use physical signals to prompt “affective, cognitive and behavioural responses to the physical cues of the exhibition environment” (Forrest 2013: 202). This is one of the tangible aspects of exhibition design. Within the broader leisure and entertainment industries all of the various iterations borrow from each other to create memorable experiences that will attract visitors.

Bogle (2013: 285) discusses scale in relation to the messages that displays impart. Life-size or “normal scale” adds an air of expectedness and normality (Bogle 2013: 285). Added to this, I claim ‘normal scale’ also adds approachability and familiarity. In the *Almost Human* exhibition, the backgrounds, artefacts and tools involved are all ‘normal size’. “Eye level is a further factor in trying to achieve a bond between the viewer and the person depicted in the image” (Bogle 2013: 294), which is evidenced in displays of the scientists at work throughout the *Almost Human* display; them being at eye-level contributes to immersing the viewer in the process and make the viewer feel included.

The display of the bones of some of the *Homo naledi* individuals at the end of *Almost Human* present an impressive climax, in a space where, after 20 minutes of being in the exhibition the viewer has been primed with exciting, authentic objects and emotive imagery, and finally get to see the real thing, the objects that all this fuss was made about. Bogle (2013: 319) believes that even small exhibitions require this ‘wow-factor’, something that “will excite the visitor and be remembered” (Bogle 2013: 319). The bones, in the final piece of storytelling in the exhibition, offer a dénouement of sorts. All the pieces of information audiences have been given can now be drawn together and resolved in the contemplative space. The matter of

resolution could be whether the audience thinks *Homo naledi* is a valuable addition to the human evolutionary tree, and how closely this creature resembles modern humans, primed by the Jon Foster illustration seen moments before.

The large and uncluttered final room, about five by six metres big, in which the remains are placed is important in emphasising the space as contemplative and respectful. The curators have created a space where the viewer is encouraged to feel respectful and contemplative, and where the viewer is thus more likely to really consider this long-dead creature and its implications. Elliott (2018 pers comm.) stated that this decision was very deliberate, and that the viewer has nevertheless been provided with information throughout the exhibition, and that this final room has been created to “simply leave you with your own thoughts about what you’ve just been reading and what you’ve seen, and what you see in front of you, which is this massive collection of material that looks a lot like you, but isn’t really”.

The offering of an open-ended conclusion is important because visitors may be slightly resistant or unsure of the content. Maropeng Visitor Centre wants to introduce people to human evolution and get visitors to experience our joint evolutionary heritage, rather than be prescriptive and overbearing in terms of the facts. Giving people the appearance of just presenting certain factual information, for them to make their own minds up, is another exhibitionary device, because the selection and presentation of these ‘facts’ in *Almost Human* has been done in a way to nevertheless engineer and persuade the viewer of the response and conclusion desired by those involved in the displays. They want to encourage first-time and repeat visitors, and so to give the visitor a certain degree of familiarity and the impression of control, and allow them to feel more relaxed (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 110) and thus likely to engage readily with the content and be more open and receptive to the ideas presented. This makes for a successful exhibition.

The more isolated, or the more space surrounding an object or display, gives the indication that the object or display “should be examined separately” (Bogle 2013: 257). For example, “a large space that surrounds an object or display will... emphasise its rank, value and importance; create attention; and attract the visitor” (Bogle 2013: 259). The display case for the *Homo naledi* remains, and surrounding room, is large to offer visual impact and confer respect on the remains, which are small in stature but large in their implications for human evolution.

The significance of lighting and colour in museum exhibits

Lighting and colour are significant in *Almost Human*. The display case of Display 1: The Discovery has been constructed to look like red earth with bones lying on a cave floor (see Figure 6), much like the actual sight of discovery. A sense of authenticity is created, and the colour makes the display come to life with rich red tones, bringing character and excitement to the cave floor which is usually in complete darkness, until perhaps being lit up by the torch of an intrepid caver. Here, in Display 1, the creators of the exhibition begin involving the viewer, positioning them as paleoanthropologists discovering the fossils, while listening to Professor Berger and Pedro Boshoff recount with excitement in their voices, how the remains of *Homo naledi* were discovered. This is done to bring the viewers into the process of discovery, to show them the mechanisms of discovering our human heritage. It also shows exciting aspects of archaeology and discovery, which may encourage young viewers to want to study and get involved with archaeology and paleoanthropology. According to Marshall (2018 pers. comm.), the purpose of the exhibition is to make this science “accessible, make it exciting, make it a drawcard for people to want to come and visit”. Elliott (2018 pers. comm.) stated that this was one of the foci of creating this exhibition; to show the processes involved with the discovery of distant human ancestors. According to Elliott (2018 pers

comm.), this discovery has “all the great components, it had heroes, it had danger, it had an exotic locale”, which has proven to be “extremely useful to us in terms of exciting people about engaging with science, exciting people about engaging with human origins research”.

In between the brightly lit displays, the walls, ceiling and flooring of the exhibition space are black. According to Bogle (2013: 200), “visitors react instantly and intuitively to a particular colour so those selected for an exhibition must support the exhibit theme”. Black can be used to convey mystery, sophistication, authority, dignity and elegance (Bogle 2013: 197). In the case of *Almost Human*, the choice of black conveys a sense of hushed, anticipatory intimacy. The sense of oppression given by the black walls emphasises the cave setting, conveying a sense of closeness and density. The feeling of involvement, intimacy and exclusivity is thus enforced. At the end of the display, the room with the bones of *Homo naledi* is also black, with the only light coming from the two cases housing the remains. Here, the use of black reflects a funereal aspect. This may have been done to encourage respect for the dead one sees before one, noting that the *Homo naledi* bones are being presented as (almost) human ancestors. In *Almost Human*, there is the interplay between the black walls and the brightly lit displays, reminiscent of the theatre. The interplay adds contrast, spotlights the object and images, and makes them more attention-grabbing and holds the viewer’s focus because there is nothing around it distracting them.

At the entrance of the exhibition, next to Display 1: The Discovery, there is a large (20m x 2m) photographic panorama of the expedition camp site (see Figure 10), taken by Dr Marina Elliott. From here, the ‘journey’ of the paleoanthropologists and cavers began. In the museum context, “design decisions such as positioning of directional signage, the presence of contextual ‘scene setters’... have been shown to affect visitor orientation” (Forrest 2013: 203). The panorama creates a sense of the outdoors, in contrast to the ‘indoors’ of the cave

environment where the fossils were found, and possibly subtly readies the visitor for a visit into the world of caves, and the world of science.

Physical layout and its implications in the *Almost Human* display

The ordering and numbering of displays

Another device used within the *Almost Human* exhibition is that of the numbering of the displays, as part of designing the flow of the exhibit. Tony Bennett (1994: 101) talks about the ways in which museum spaces control visitors bodies and movement within the display. This can be done by guiding the flow of people through numbered displays. Elizabeth Bogle (2013) writes that it is important within some exhibitions to number the displays. She claims that ‘museum visitors... do not want to be assaulted by a confused and disorganised exhibition. We desire to have an orderly experience, both visually and physically, where the information, display objects, structures, and spaces have continuity and are compatible, and where there is an orderly arrangement of shapes, forms, colours and spaces’ (Bogle 2013: 279). My argument for the benefits of numbering the displays of this particular exhibition pertains to the scientific aspects of analysing human evolution, and that numbering emphasises the logical and scientific rigor that was used to form the scientists’ valid conclusions. The numbering in the display is a representation of the logical steps taken in the scientific narrative and process, and not merely a means to help the audience get through the display. The snaking design of the whole exhibit (see Figure 4) breaks the monotony and creates dynamism and a sense of excitement to go and see what’s around the next corner. There is merit and sense in knowing at the very least where an exhibition starts.

Despite the fact that there might be incomplete control over the audience’s actual movements within the exhibition, an “exhibition is still usually guided by an idealised ‘story-line’ (Forrest 2014: 28), as well as other devices like numbered displays. Going to an exhibition and being in a museum space is an activity which engages the visitor in multiple ways.

“Visiting an exhibition is an embodied experience” (Forrest 2014: 28), and it is through activity involving mental and physical engagement “that the exhibition manifests itself” (Forrest 2014: 28). “Sometimes the subject matter lends itself to a particular storyline that suggests a certain layout. For instance, stories with a clear beginning, middle and end may lend themselves to a linear structure” (Forrest 2014: 28). The *Almost Human* display has been constructed in a format familiar to audiences, that of an adventure story, which is easy to follow and audiences are thus primed with what to expect from each section based on outside knowledge of popular adventure stories, as well as how to react and behave. Indicators of how to react and behave are also being exerted from the museum space itself, and so despite the exhibition being purported as inclusive and allowing audiences to come and see it for themselves, there are several layers of influence physically and ideologically exerted over them. Forrest (2014: 28) also then argues that these kinds of “linear, chronological storylines” can present “an oversimplified or triumphalist perspective of history”, and this device can be seen in this exhibition. Also, the number of people involved in the discovery, I was told by everyone I interviewed, has been whittled down to one or two charismatic people who are the only ones given the opportunity to speak. This is contradictory to the inclusive message intended or purported to be communicated by the exhibition.

Involving the viewer

After a narrative has been established, and elements of physical layout and colour have been incorporated to tell an exciting story to viewers with a familiar form of presentation, an exhibitionary strategy has been used in the *Almost Human* exhibition to position the viewer as one of the explorers or scientists, taking the viewer through the processes involved with the discovery and analysis of *Homo naledi*.

This strategy of inclusion is apparent in Display Two: The Excavation. Viewers have to crouch down low to look inside the display, and crane their necks up to look at the ‘caver’ squeezing his way through the ‘rock’ above. The height of the displays makes the viewer crane their necks and inspect the tiny holes the cavers had to crawl through. Having interactive elements in an exhibition is a mechanism employed to involve the viewer in the struggle to get down to these remains, which is discussed specifically in relation to Maropeng by Leujes (2013). Bennett (1994: 97) notes that the museum space is frequently designed by curators to exert physical control of people’s bodies “through a variety of routines and technologies requiring a shift in the norms of bodily comportment”, in order to vividly convey a desired outcome, because audiences are given a more effective, memorable and striking impression of the display if they are physically and mentally engaged.

There are two potential reasons for wanting to make a vivid impression through interactive displays. Firstly, interactive exhibits are always popular, but are especially enjoyed by younger visitors (Sayre and Wetterlund, 2008: 85), because it breaks the monotony of merely reading and looking, and gives the viewer a chance to imagine the process more vividly, thus being able to imagine themselves as moving from mere ‘viewer’ to explorer alongside the scientists. Giving the viewer this experience imparts a sense of involvement, intimacy and participation. According to Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 1), “museums today are seeing ways to embrace their visitors more closely” after fostering a rather distant and discrete relationship of public and display in the past. This feeling of inclusion, especially with younger people, allows the curators to realise the exhibition’s objective, which according to the experts I interviewed, is to get young people excited about science and discoveries like these, so that one day they might consider taking up paleoanthropology as a profession. Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) believes that scientists “should engage the public, show the public the scientific processes, rather than telling them about the findings”. While it is impossible to

take people down into the actual cave (Elliott 2018 pers comm.), by visiting *Almost Human* audiences can have a memorable experience of dipping into the discovery of *Homo naledi*. Involving people in the displays imparts a sense of involvement with the discovery.

With this sense of involvement in the discovery, there is a sense of anticipation created, because the viewer feels directly involved by having been let in on the journey, with the invitation created by the displays to crouch down and look up to see what went on in the Dinaledi chamber. There is a certain playfulness in participating in interactive elements which make the viewer feel they're part of an exciting journey. This jovial atmosphere could reflect part of Hooper-Greenhill's (2000: 6) argument that the museum space is in some respects changing, where "the formal, authoritative appearance of museum[s]... has been replaced as the methods used to communicate with visitors have become more informal, more lively, and offer more possibility for mental and physical interaction". This type of inclusive, creative approach is beneficial to Maropeng, which largely relies on school tours and tourists for its revenue (Marshall 2018 pers comm.). Students have twenty minutes to get through the exhibition (de Klerk 2018 pers comm.) and thus a strong, positive impression needs to be made quickly. This is the same for tourists on a day out, who want to be entertained as well as educated (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 2).

The generation of revenue is an important factor when looking at how the exhibition has been constructed, and how viewers are drawn in. If the exhibition, and the discovery it is centred around, purports to be exciting and informative, more visitors will attend. From a revenue perspective, the Cradle of Humankind was established to draw visits and investment to the area (Marshall 2018 pers comm.). Most museum spaces benefit from having exciting new offerings to constantly attract new and repeat visitors, to generate revenue and justify their existence.

This sense of making the viewer feel part of the discovery continues in Display 3: The Command Centre. In this display, the viewer looks in with the scientists as the excavation unfolds, replicating the excitement involved in the actual discovery, and thus getting people to feel it for themselves. In Display 3, there are no objects outside the display case for the audience to physically touch. However, the display is structured to still give the viewer the feeling of involvement in the discovery, as if the remains were being extracted from the Dinaledi chamber for the first time with the viewer standing there with the team. All of these physical objects are angled in a triangle towards Professor Berger and the team, inviting the viewer in. This could be seen as an exhibitionary device to give viewers the impression of being let in on a secret.

Colour, lighting and a numbered, snaking layout have been effectively utilised. An exciting adventure narrative is introduced, in which audiences are made to feel included. Through these aspects, knowledge of the *Homo naledi* discovery and of human evolution is communicated in ways that are likely to be familiar, exciting, and visually appealing to viewers. This benefits the curators of the exhibition because it brings visitors into the exhibition and Maropeng as a whole, which helps them realise their objectives of teaching people about human evolution, as well as generating revenue.

The above demonstrates how the exhibition is set up from the outset to engage and include the viewer, and is a trend which runs through the exhibition as a whole. This speaks to current international thinking regarding the changing role and strategies of museums to help them remain current as a place of entertainment and knowledge. The *Almost Human* exhibition is made exciting and inclusive by all these devices. This excitement and inclusion is important in the context of South Africa and more generally to make South Africans feel included and informed about this discovery, and about South Africa's place as a significant human ancestor fossil repository. This inclusion and sense of intimacy speaks to my problem

statement, in which I state that museums have historically been exclusionary spaces which controlled knowledge and viewers. While the exhibition encourages the viewer to get involved and appear included, it is still influencing the viewer in certain ways to realise objectives set out by the curators.

I therefore agree with Hooper-Greenhill (2000: 7) when she states that other aspects of museum display have not undergone changes. The author mentions the concept of the modernist museum, the “nineteenth-century European institutional form” (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 8), aspects of which still persist 200 years later. This museum form was created to “speak to the eyes” (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 14), which used the idea that visual, tangible objects could communicate and teach effectively to a wide audience of differing educational levels. Subjects in museums “were presented in formal and authoritative ways” (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 2). At the same time as this, “museums were also charged with demonstrating and thereby transmitting the basic principles of citizenship through their clean and ordered spaces where controlled behaviour could be observed” (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 14).

Both Elliott (2018 pers comm.) and Marshall (2018: pers comm.) have spoken about the way in which Professor Berger works, which involves collaboration and inclusivity, bringing in the most highly-qualified or experienced people onto his team to do the work at hand. This more inclusive approach is in opposition to other prominent paleoanthropologists who “sit with their small team and take 20 years” (Elliott 2018 pers comm.), Berger decided that “the whole thing from expedition to publication would take 2 years” (Elliott 2018 pers comm.), and that if the work needed an expert on a particular aspect of the analysis, an expert would be sought out and sourced. Although, it is worth taking into account that other paleoanthropologists may take longer due to funding constraints, an issue which Professor

Beger might not have. If one can create a with the evidence available and get it into the public and the media and get people aware and involved, arguably this is a positive thing.

Scientific knowledge was developed initially through visual observation and comparison as collectors and natural philosophers began to explore and order the natural world. It was through this process of visual observation that the curiosity cabinet convention was established⁵, where self-professed natural philosophers and experts ostensibly invited ‘anyone’ in to “survey the evidence of science” (MacDonald 2010: 8) within their collections. Charismatic, persuasive and wealthy personalities influenced the production of scientific knowledge about the natural world. This contributed to “the establishment of authoritative knowledge via personal nobility” (MacDonald 2010: 9) which may have relevance with regards to branding and reputation in museums to this day. Museums and scientific displays are supposedly doubly reputable because museums are supposedly authoritative, and Maropeng brands itself as a reputable place to learn about our ancestors.

⁵ For more on the concept of the curiosity cabinet see Impey and MacGregor (2000). *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe*. London: British Museum.

The ‘underground astronauts’



Figure 22: A life-size image of the cavers. Image from <https://twitter.com/throckman/status/99673341224443136>
Accessed 12/08/2019

A significant part of the display is the life-size cut-out of the ‘underground astronauts’ (see Figure 22). This display reveals insights into the webs of influence in an exhibition. It was Professor Berger’s strong wish that this cut out be included in the exhibit. The cut out is also supposed to be a ‘selfie-station’ (Elliott 2018 pers comm.), where viewers could take a photo of themselves with the explorers, although when I went on several occasions no one seemed to see its intended function. The selfie station was intended to make the viewer feel like ‘one of the gang’, getting the viewer to feel comfortable and engaged with the ‘characters’ (Elliott 2018 pers comm.) early on, and thus have an attachment to them and their discovery. It is not known if this approach achieved its goals. There was no sign inviting visitors to ‘take selfies’ with the poster cut-out and when I visited the display on several occasions, most people just walked past this display.

As discussed above, the order in which things appear throughout the exhibit are significant in how the exhibition is intended to be read. The story portrayed in the exhibit of how these

women were selected is a narrative of heroism, and shows a sense of community and a sense of sacrifice. These six selected women self-funded their travel from Canada, Australia and the United States, to be a part of an expedition to confirm Professor Berger's scientific 'hunch' about hominid fossils in the Rising Star caves (Marshall 2018 pers comm.). Promoting the sense of inclusion intended to be produced in the exhibition was attempted by having the life-size photograph of the six women at the beginning of the exhibition. There may have been an attempt to show that women could be involved in this 'exciting and dangerous' exploration, but this attempt backfired somewhat because all the women were Caucasian. The poster showing the five women appears exclusionary, with exclusionary signals including factors linked to non-African participation, including expertise, wealth, race and non-African origins. This part of the *Almost Human* exhibition might not have achieved its goal of inclusivity.

In South Africa, there is a sensitivity to racial issues of exclusion and marginality. South Africa is a race-conscious society, and is wary of information which appears to equate black people to apes (Kuljian 2017: 266). It is thus pertinent when setting out to create an exhibition on human evolution to appeal carefully to a wide and diverse audience. Thus the supposed intention of inclusion and involvement is at odds with what the cut-out image is actually saying. While Berger and team might have intended it to say 'here are these amazing women who did this amazing thing, come stand among them', in South Africa where this exhibition purports to be aimed at students from underprivileged schools in the area (Marshall 2018 pers comm.), as well as local demographics where people of colour make up more than 90% of the South African population (*Stats SA* 2018), the received impression of a 'whites only' caving team might not have been prudent. By not being sensitive to local dynamics, there is a danger of alienating viewers the instant they walk in the exhibit. Garoian (2015: 235) argues that while it is impossible to control what viewers ultimately read from an

exhibition, it is possible to consider a ‘model’ viewer and what they are likely to expect. This display of the all-female cavers, and the exhibition as a whole, makes statements about who can be scientists and make exciting discoveries. Not taking into account the reality and context within which the *Almost Human* exhibition will be placed indicates that both the curatorial team and the scientific team might have been somewhat out of touch with their audience, and that this might influence how the display’s ‘message’ is received.

The large picture of the ‘underground astronauts’ potentially contradicts the inclusive message to encourage South African children to go to university and become paleoanthropologists. As Professor Berger insisted on the selfie-station, and his spirit of, and maybe insistence on, collaboration and being involved with the entire process of discovery and excavation, and the museum display means that he interferes with processes which museum display experts may have done differently, and that it becomes “complicated in that we were designing someone else’s vision” (Essa, 2018: pers comm.). This oversight by Professor Berger might show how individual aims for the exhibition are at odds with that of the exhibition designer who might have considered suitable practice based on his experience designing exhibits elsewhere. This is an example of what happens when the ideologies and practices of the players involved with designing an exhibition conflict with each other. Professor Berger’s decision could have been downplayed somewhat by moving the cut-out to a less conspicuous spot in the exhibition. It could also have been more clearly articulated on the part of the others involved that this cut-out in its prominent position potentially contradicts the inclusive message of the exhibition, and could undermine important messages. Later in this research, this disparity between the players involved and the funders is discussed in relation to the inclusion of Jon Foster’s artistic depiction of *Homo naledi*.

According to the people involved with the display I spoke to, the exhibition is “about the people, and about the story” (Marshall 2018 pers comm.). Within a South African context,

“it is important to reinforce both that common ground, for all of humanity, and to really celebrate and promote that South Africa and Africa generally is the cradle of humankind, and that people in this country should be proud of that”. However, having one race feature prominently in such a large image could be perceived as a reminder that the engagement with human origins isn’t for everyone. Added to this, if one of the aims of the exhibition was to promote pride in all humans’ African origins, it is problematic that these scientists are all from elsewhere in the world. This display unintentionally reinforces who can be a scientist. From the narrative being told and the presence of the large and prominent cut-out, there is the impression that with extensive personal funds and qualifications, one can be a scientist, and from the cut-out, it appears that only foreign white women will have these.

However, it is certainly not scandalous or uncommon to simply source the best people for the job. The cavers had to pay for themselves, which could have been to prevent ‘chancers’, because Professor Berger wanted genuinely committed persons. Professor Berger did put out an international call for small, qualified people to come to South Africa using their own funds and assist him on an expedition. With Facebook having over two billion users worldwide (Statista 2018: online), and with over 5000 people who follow Professor Berger’s Facebook page (Facebook, 2018: online), the selection process was democratised and fair, that anyone, from anywhere on the planet, if they fit the criteria and had internet access, could apply. From a practical point of view, any successful expedition needs those who are physically capable, as well as qualified in relevant subject matter. A death or damaging of the fossil material is still likely with trained and highly qualified people, but obviously less so than with those who are not. However, suitable black persons could have been brought into the team through a local networking approach. The choice of the whites-only ‘underground astronaut’ team might have just been an unfortunate oversight, but might be at risk of seeming to resonate with older museum practice, which saw the museum space as exclusive and

reproducing a pre-determined and hegemonic social order (Bennett 1995: 100) instead of acknowledging and valuing difference and drawing people together.

The fact that the women are all white non-South Africans does however speak to broader issues of lack of South Africans, particularly black South Africans, being qualified for the work required. Elliott (2018 pers comm.) said why the exhibition is important is because “it generates public interest, it generates excitement, it gets kids involved with science at whatever level”. Exhibitions like *Almost Human* could be utilised to introduce accessible, exciting scientific material to the South African public, which could potentially spur young people on to take this, or other sciences, up as a profession. The fact is that Professor Berger and his team were able to successfully navigate the Rising Star cave system, bring up the remains, analyse them, and help create an exhibition which excites and interests the public on the subjects of human evolution and paleoanthropology.

Anthropomorphism

It has become scientific convention to give new species individual names. For instance, most recently the *Australopithecus sediba* skull found in 2008 was named ‘Karabo’. The composite skeleton at the end of the *Almost Human* exhibiton, is named ‘Neo’. According to Epley *et al.* (2008: 144), “perceiving humanlike characteristics in either real or imagined nonhuman agents is the essence of anthropomorphism”, and which can include both physical characteristics and “emotional states perceived to be uniquely human”. Assembling the remains found in the Dinaledi chamber into one composite individual, and giving it a name, emphasises the individual creature, and prompts a reflection as to what this individual might have been like. Imagining the heroism and effort individuals of *Homo naledi* performed to bury their dead becomes more vivid, and could resonate with viewers’ experiences of burying their loved ones. Epley *et al.* (2008: 144) support this, saying “anthropomorphic representations are important determinants of how a person behaves towards these agents”.

Getting a sense of individuality influences the ways in which visitors relate to, sympathise, empathise with, and think about this creature. It provokes a stronger emotional response from visitors, and leave a more lasting impression, if they remember an individual rather than a species, which can be harder to forge a connection with because a species seems a more distant, abstract concept. However, a memorable individual with an interesting story could contribute to a more widely recognised and thus prestigious species as a whole. By creating a memorable ‘character’ of Neo lying in his final resting place, a sense of reverence and respect and contemplation is fostered around this individual. Audiences are able to reflect on and connect with him as an individual, which may in turn allow viewers to connect with the species as a whole. Naming the specimen also provides it with an element of charisma and individuality.

Epley *et al.* (2008: 145) continue to say that anthropomorphising an ancient human relative is an example of people reasoning about an “unknown stimulus based on a better-known representation of a related stimulus” (Epley *et al.* 2008: 145), in the case of *Homo naledi* being a “nonhuman agent based on representations of the self or humans [in general]”. That is to say, humans relate new, unknown things to that which they know and understand.

There is no definitive proof that *Homo naledi* deliberately disposed of their dead, not least because of the fact that this happened about 300 thousand years ago. However, modern humans generally go to great trouble to bury their dead (Lieberman 1991: 161), and so viewers may infer that this creature, dimly related to us, may have performed similar behaviours. From a secular perspective, “Seeing a nonhuman agent as humanlike not only entails the attribution of humanlike characteristics, but it also carries the consequence of moral agency” (Epley *et al.* 2008: 152). If *Homo naledi* may have humanlike characteristics, it turns these creatures into those worthy of dignity, respect, and closer study.

Anthropomorphising *Homo naledi* by means of an individual's name, Neo, as well as vividly illustrating the ritual burial behaviour in Jon Foster's artwork *H.naledi*, creates an accepting response to familiar behaviour on the part of the viewer. This acceptance allows audiences to be persuaded by how like modern humans *Homo naledi* was, and therefore the importance of the discovery in terms of having to rethink human evolution.

Linking to the religious iconography in the artwork *H.naledi*, elements of the artwork bear a resemblance to elements in Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ* (see Figure 24). Thus, it can be inferred that just as Christ was being carried to his tomb, Neo also appears then to have been laid to rest in his 'tomb', with reverence and respect and mourning. This image and sense of reverence is recognisable and familiar to those of religious backgrounds who are not fully accepting of the idea of human evolution. Indeed, Lieberman (1991: 162) states that deliberate burial may be one of the earliest forms of religious practice. However, the link to religious practices related to respecting and caring for the dead is also a more romanticised view of *Homo naledi* for audiences, the alternative being that bodies are merely buried to hide the processes of decay, or to contain the diseases they died from.

The creators of this exhibition have used established and recognisable forms of representation which are familiar and acceptable to a wide audience, in order to get viewers to engage with *Homo naledi* as a creature which was related to modern humans, and may have practiced sophisticated rituals. The anthropomorphising process "includes attempts to correct, adjust, or integrate less accessible information" (Epley *et al.* 2008: 145) into a set of already established reference points. By naming the creature, by reconstructing its face, by saying it could conceive of its own mortality and practice ritual burial means that in an exhibition setting visitors are encouraged to understand, care and become invested in the creature and its relation to modern humans. To get that to happen, naming an individual helps appeal to a sense of humanity, and that it would be natural to assume it was buried, according to the

long-held and sacred practice of caring for, respecting, and burying the dead (Lieberman 1991: 162). Visitors understand names, and believe in the value of individualism and personal identity. In the absence of scientific absolutes, appeals to what visitors *do* know and understand effectively persuade audiences of *Homo naledi*'s significance in human ancestral history.

According to Forrest (2013: 204) "in designing museums, the general objective is to create settings where visitors feel comfortable and in control, on the premise that this will maximise the possibility of learning". This idea of being in control links to the idea of anthropomorphising the remains so that visitors feel in control of the information they are receiving.

Modes of representation

Physical, authentic objects

There are several instances where the *Almost Human* exhibition features original, authentic objects used in the discovery of *Homo naledi*. These authentic objects include furniture and caving equipment, but the most significant piece of authenticity is the remains of *Homo naledi* at the end of the exhibition. Having physical objects in displays featuring scientific content are invaluable in creating compelling displays which facilitate understanding of the scientific principles and processes being illustrated in the exhibition. In addition, having physical objects within the exhibition brings about a powerful sense of immediacy and authenticity.

In Display 1: The Discovery, casts of bones are strewn on the printed replica of the Dinaledi cave floor. Casts of the remains are also in Display 4: The Scientific Analysis. Dias (1998) asserts that when curators place objects on public display, they are provoking scrutiny. Inviting people to scrutinise one's facts and conclusions implies that one has complete

confidence in one's material (Dias, 1998: 41), and the objectivity being displayed. This approach is especially important when the curators are attempting to persuade the viewer that this discovery is worthy and exciting, and worth visiting and talking about. In addition, this might be important for sceptics, who doubt the claims made by the scientists both within the *Almost Human* exhibition and in published papers. Those with the appropriate scientific qualifications can apply to physically examine the remains for themselves for research purposes, and those who aren't appropriately qualified and still sceptical, the remains are right in front of the viewer for them to look and see for themselves. The fact that the bones are real, and not casts (Elliott, 2018: pers comm.), emphasises this apparent transparency and invitation to scrutiny on the part of the curators.

Furthermore, authentic objects are visually compelling. They stimulate interest, and trigger "meaning-making-related communication" (Hampp and Schwan 2015: 162) among groups of viewers, which in turn facilitates better understanding of "scientific findings and research principles" (Hampp and Schwan 2015: 162). In addition, viewers consider looking at "renowned authentic objects as a particularly satisfying element of their museum trip" (Hampp and Schwan 2015: 162), and that "taking a closer look at authentic remains of important scientific endeavours helps visitors in developing a more elaborate understanding of science" (Hampp and Schwan 2015: 162). Thus, having the remains laid out in a way that enables audiences to lean in and look at the skeleton, allows them to develop a better understanding of *Homo naledi*, and in turn human evolution. Through being able to look at the bones mere centimetres away, the audience can scrutinise the remains, and potentially come up with their own meanings out of the remains, and the *Almost Human* exhibition in general. Having the bones laid out for examination gives the impression that there aren't hidden tricks or bit of information being kept secret from the viewer. There is the appearance of complete transparency from the curators. This could have been done to ensure visitors that

they are able to make up their own minds, and contemplate the remains on their own terms, with the raw evidence available. However, this isn't strictly the case, as audiences have been primed throughout the exhibition beforehand, through the various displays, most notably being Display 6: Deliberate Disposal.

From a philosophical perspective, “confronting audiences with sites or objects evoking death, decay and forgetting provokes existential reflections” (Holtorf 2010: 5). In the case of looking at *Homo naledi* laid out, audiences may contemplate what these remains mean in terms of humans’ evolutionary heritage, as well as how significant these remains are, and thus the Rising Star team’s contribution to science. By emphasising anthropomorphic aspects of *Homo naledi*, the exhibition is more effective through powerful connections made between the viewer and the subject (Bogle 2013: 306).

Explorer and science paraphernalia



Figure 23: The actual equipment used in the expedition on display near Display 3. Image from <https://twitter.com/throckman/status/996733412244443136> Accessed 15/08/2019.

In Chapter Three, I spoke about strategies of inclusion, and then mentioned how scientific equipment and other ‘paraphernalia of the explorers’ (see Figure 23), equipment which is used to make the exploration and discovery more interesting. This in turn paves the way for the next display, detailing the scientific analysis. According to Bunce (2016: 230) “authentic objects are associated with increased curiosity and engagement”. In an interview with Dr de Klerk (2018 pers comm.), she mentioned that the objects have “genuine dust from the field” still on them. Authenticity and real objects strengthen credibility of the whole expedition. If it is a vivid experience, the audience really feels like they’re right there during the actual discovery.

Authenticity

The illusion of tangibility creates a sense of authenticity and believability, while appearing to involve the viewer because they are able to look at actual material used on-site. Genuine objects are used to persuade the audience of the reliability and worth of the objects on display, and thus in turn the work that was done on them, and the scientists who were involved.

The fossil vault at the University of the Witwatersrand, its contents and the people working in it are displayed in Display 4 (see Figure 12) for scrutiny. A sense of transparency and viewer inclusion is conveyed in being able to look at what the scientists are doing. There is a combination of scientific equipment, scientists dealing with the actual remains, and pedestrian aspects like a hoodie slung over the back of a chair. This combines excitement with familiarity. Displays like these are valuable because it offers a view into a world people might never otherwise have the opportunity to see. According to MacDonald (1998: 232), “public debate about science should entail a proper understanding of the nature, workings and achievements of science. It should also, however, enable the public to evaluate its validity and consider its implications and politics” (MacDonald 1998: 232). In this display’s transparency, and offering a glimpse into the discovery process, helps instil a sense of wonder in the scientific processes used to uncover *Homo naledi* and its potential significance.

While viewers might not know the name and function of every calliper and archival glove and scanning electron microscope, peoples’ general visual language regarding science are remnants from other sources outside the museum space, as discussed by Scott (2007: 11). Viewers may have watched series and films like *CSI* and *Jurassic Park*, involving science and similar objects, and possibly have a perception that science is interesting and mysterious, and that the people who use science and scientific tools are potentially searching for justice and ‘truth’, or bringing long-dead things back to life. The *Almost Human* display makes use

of that perception of science as exciting and slightly mysterious. This is in order to make the discovery itself more exciting, and confer more prestige on the people involved in the discovery.

The assumption that museums and displays concerning science are neutral and impartial is being challenged and overturned internationally. Displays are mobilised to tell stories of progress, citizenship [and] racial and national difference. It is acknowledged that science museums and displays are “sites in which knowledge and truth are defined and offered up (MacDonald 1998: xii) to audiences, instead of neutral presentations of factual evidence. These notions of ‘science’ and ‘objectivity’ are mobilised to justify particular representations (MacDonald 1998: 1), as is seen in the *Almost Human* display. The appearance of transparency and the showing of the processes of science are mobilised to get the viewer willingly to accept the conclusions they are encouraged to reach, having ostensibly been shown the process every step of the way. MacDonald (1998: 1) probes the “political nature, uses and consequences of representations of science”, and goes on to say that “exhibitions of science are productive arenas in which to investigate questions of cultural production and knowledge”, which has been mentioned previously in this study. This means that through the inclusion of scientific objects throughout the exhibition, as well as input from the scientists involved, which are both imbued with authority, there is influence as to how *Homo naledi* is remembered, along with the people who discovered it. Through the use of science and accompanying apparatus, knowledge has been created in the exhibition specifically for the public.

Looking at how the dynamics of an exhibition featuring scientific content “seeks to highlight the changing relations between museums, science, publics and power” (MacDonald 1998: 2), science is not ever presented in a neutral way, and is framed to further agendas and promote ideologies. Those involved with an exhibition are presenting a curated set of scientific facts.

In addition to the curated scientific facts, other exhibitionary devices like lighting, positioning, leading the audience, music, juxtaposing of certain objects, can encourage the viewer to make certain links, develop certain impressions, and reach certain conclusions.

“Museums of science are widely conceived of as ‘scientific’ institutions in the sense that they are regarded as organised according to orderly and authoritative principles - principles conceived of as separate from power and politics” (MacDonald 1998: 3). Like all exhibits, however, museums and displays of science are closely involved with power and politics. “The production, distribution and consumption of knowledge has always been political” (MacDonald 1998: 3). The very nature of display itself involves choices, and the selection of some narratives over others, ostensibly for the sake of clarity, readability, comprehensibility, and space. It is important to remain critical of the *Almost Human* exhibit, and acknowledge and investigate that there are certain agendas more pointed and ideological than those innocuous and practical constraints and considerations mentioned above.

“Judgements about the reliability of scientific knowledge and assessment of risk are made at least in part on the basis of estimations about the personal and institutional qualities of those providing the information” (MacDonald 2010: 5). This could tie in to Berger’s significant previous discovery of *Australopithecus sediba*, in that Professor Berger is now more likely to be able to use his cultural and scientific capital as a discoverer of important fossil evidence, to garner more support and exposure for work that comes afterwards, as in the case of *Homo naledi* and other future discoveries.

***H. naledi* by Jon Foster**

When the viewer rounds the final corner of the exhibition, they are confronted with a large artwork and an accompanying screen with video material. In this video, Professor Hawks tells the viewer that the scientists working on this discovery have theorised that the only way the remains of one species, *Homo naledi*, could have been deposited there over a period of

time with individuals of vastly differing ages (Berger and Hawks, 2017: online), was if they were deliberately put there. The fact that individuals ranging from infants to those of advanced age, from multiple depositions, and only *Homo naledi* remains being found, has led the scientists to put forward the idea that the remains were put there by other members of *Homo naledi*. The scientists have proposed that these creatures who lived 300 thousand years ago were able to mourn their dead and conceive of their own mortality in sophisticated ways not evidenced by any other hominin discoveries prior to *Homo naledi*, with the exception of modern humans (Berger and Hawks *et al.* 2017: online).

The artwork is by graphic artist Jon Foster, and was first published in the October 2015 edition of *National Geographic* magazine to accompany the publication of the cover story “Almost Human: A new ancestor shakes up our family tree”. In the artwork, a group of *Homo naledi* appear to be struggling over the grand rock formation in the artwork, in an attempt to bury their dead. The image appears to be one of heroism and great effort. The figures, captured in poses of toil, are handling the body with reverence. The artwork features soft lighting in the background, a romantic, celestial late afternoon glow, perhaps symbolising the end of the day corresponding to the end of a life. Audiences are also almost at eye-level with one of the figures, who is looking out of the cave at the scene above, and this creates the sense as though the viewer is one of the figures waiting to help carry the corpse. The sense of drama is heightened by the chiaroscuro effect on the rocks and the figures.

Evolutionary iconography in a human evolution context involves frequently used and recycled images of human ancestors, which become familiar and iconic, and used widely and without criticality to describe or represent human evolution, despite the fact that the imagery may be incorrect. Images are often copied from previous paintings or renderings and have no actual links to the physical specimen and how it may have looked or lived, but instead serves as almost propaganda imagery as to what this creature is and where it fits into the great

twisted tree of human evolution. I examined the images in the Jon Foster painting, and how these impact the message of the painting, and how the species may come to be conceptualised in this artwork. I was not able to contact Jon Foster to learn more about his aims and influences.

The presence of *National Geographic* as a funder and partner in the *Homo naledi* discovery is important to take into consideration when looking at the *Almost Human* exhibition. According to Lutz and Collins (1993: 15), the National Geographic Society “is a scientific institution, yet dependant on the sales and popularity of its magazines”. The images in the magazine are always realistic while remaining highly stylised. In addition, *National Geographic* has “strategically deployed realist codes and has fashioned claims to objectivity in order to secure its position as both ‘scientific’ and ‘popular’ (Lutz and Collins 1993: 15). However, these authors do claim that *National Geographic* leans towards beautiful images over strict scientific accuracy. It is interesting that the publication occupies an “ambiguous status somewhere between science and entertainment” (Lutz and Collins 1998: 33), and this status also is reflected in the *Almost Human* exhibition.

During interviews conducted with Dr Elliott (2018 pers comm.) and Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.), both scientists communicated that they did not endorse the inclusion of this artwork into the exhibition. Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) said that the decision to include it was *National Geographic*’s, and that “the idea of them doing a religious iconic image of this [was] deliberately provocative”, and a challenge to other experts in the wake of the *Australopithecus sediba* and *Homo naledi* discoveries. Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) believes that the artwork was a compromise by *National Geographic*, where the scene “doesn’t really portray anything” and is not intended to be an accurate portrayal of “the event our science is describing”, and that this was done in order to play it safe between

illustrating ritual burial, but not illustrating definitive proof that this behaviour was actually conducted by *Homo naledi*.

Dr Elliott (2018 pers comm.) stated that she did not approve of the overtly religious imagery in the artwork, and said “do we really need to invoke that kind of imagery for this? Surely there was another way that could have been depicted?” The scientists may then believe that there are better, less problematic ways of transmitting information to viewers than using religion. Could the artwork make them feel like their science is being trivialised? However, I counter that using familiar iconography does not necessarily trivialise or undermine the scientific aspects.

There are elements of this artwork which can be considered in relation to its function in *Almost Human*, in terms of the ideological messages being transmitted to viewers about *Homo naledi*, but the elements mentioned here are problematic. I draw on Moser (1996) and Teslow (1998) to frame my argument regarding the problems of including interpretation and artistic realism in a scientific display. Teslow (1998) explains the complications caused by equating artistic realism with scientific fact. This is because artistic liberties taken to convey a convincing and compelling overall image is taken as fact, especially by viewers, when the painting is placed in a science display. The interplay between science and art is discussed later in the thesis. Moser (1996: 201) states that in archaeological illustrations, “even when there are signs to the contrary, certain images are still believed to show what really is”. So even though the artist couldn’t have known what the landscape looked like 300 thousand years ago, the artwork’s scientific title lends authority to the image in its entirety. Using illustrations and artists’ impressions to illustrate human evolution are an accepted part of museum display conventions. However, by giving the painting a scientific title, the artist has framed the artwork in a way which implies it is factual evidence. The artwork also makes links to religious imagery which the scientists don’t endorse, possibly because it produces

links to certain imagery which may undermine the science, or make connections that aren't scientifically sound.

Moser (1996: 213) continues with the notion of background detail in artworks like *H.naledi*. In the genre of prehistoric art, background details like lighting and physical environment are based on conjecture and artistic licence, and yet serve as an important frame in which audiences will then interpret the creatures the artist is portraying. According to Moser (1996: 213) in artistic portrayals of hominin, “the details of the environment serve to reinforce the validity of the claim” because “they serve to make the picture continuous with our world”. The trees, rocks shaped like a dramatic gorge in soft light, are all scientifically superfluous. However, these elements are ideologically and environmentally familiar. Moser (1996: 213) states that “these elements become more than circumstantial evidence; they become integral to the behavioural interpretation that is being made in the reconstruction”. For example, the rock formation surrounding the cave entrance is far grander than it appears in photographs of the site. This amphitheatre-like circle of rocks emphasises the exertion and hardship *Homo naledi* endured, to clamber over these rocks while carrying a dead family member. The ‘behavioural interpretation’ can be that *Homo naledi* was a noble, complex creature willing to go to extreme lengths to make sure its dead were laid to rest properly. These perspectives inform the validity and uses, and pitfalls of an artist’s impression like Foster’s *H.naledi*, and helps draw some conclusion about its implications for the exhibition, the remains, and teaching human evolution.

In the background details and the figures themselves, it is unclear what Jon Foster used as a reference image. Jon Foster is not a paleoanthropological artist, and his other works consist of science fiction subject matter. These science fiction works are dramatic and atmospheric,

featuring alternate worlds⁶. Foster does a lot of science-fiction and speculative artworks, and so in some ways he is well-suited to speculating what *Homo naledi* might have looked like and what world they inhabited. Jon Foster has used theatrical, dramatic imagery of the human ancestral story to make an artwork that is exciting to look at, which Baxandall (1991: 33) argues is one of the main reasons visitors come to exhibitions. However, this raises questions as to why the John Gurche's scientific reconstruction, which is more naturalistic, was not featured more prominently within the exhibition space.

The second problematic element is the title of the Jon Foster artwork. The title is small and stark, simply *H.naledi*. This name is how the species would be named scientifically. However, there are details added to the painting such as the surrounding rock, number of individuals, musculature, and late afternoon-lighting, which have no basis in scientific fact. They are superfluous details aimed at producing a more compelling image, but when coupled with a scientific label, are interpreted as fact

This all means that Jon Foster's artwork is doing particular work in this display. It is the final piece of staging before the finale, and is important because it informs, along with the rest of the display, how the audience will respond to the *Homo naledi* remains. The artwork helps the viewer imagine the science, and turns the scientific content into the language of images, which may be easier to understand. In addition, images are more adept at drawing on viewers' emotions, and thus provoking a human connection with *Homo naledi*. The naturalistic rendering forms a familiar landscape and is thus more persuasive, and bridges the gap between the emotional response the viewer has, and the science being presented. The painting is thus used to persuade the audience of the validity of the depicted content, and to encourage audiences to understand and accept the of deliberate disposal, which some might find unlikely or impossible.

⁶ See <https://www.jonfoster.com/editorials.html>

Another issue that arises from the artwork is that of the painting style, in that the artwork is rendered through realism. There is a danger with realism in paintings because even though the subject may seem an accurate rendition of that which is based in nature, or based on fact or truth, the fact is that “artists, even those working in a realistic, naturalistic style, [are] translators, whose personal and artistic vision would shape [their ultimate final product]” (Teslow 1998: 57). *National Geographic* needed to pick an artist whose “artistic sensibility coincided with their scientific and dramatic needs” (Teslow 1998: 58) for the release of this feature discussing the new human ancestor. This leads to a consideration about what the scientists’ ‘scientific and dramatic needs’ were, and why weren’t they fulfilled by this artwork, as mentioned by Berger (2018, pers comm.) and Elliott (2018, pers comm.). The religious, Christian iconography was not something the scientists wanted to be included. The overt references to Christian iconography, and the message these references send out regarding *Homo naledi*, is detailed below through a comparison with a religious painting, Caravaggio’s *The Entombment of Christ* (1603).

The Entombment of Christ



Figure 24: Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ* (1603). Image from <https://www.caravaggio.org/the-entombment.jsp> Accessed 28/02/2019.



Figure 25: A section of Jon Foster's *H.naledi* (2015) Image from <https://www.jonfoster.com/blog/archives/09-2015> Accessed 14/08/2018.

In Figure 24, Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ*, the group tenderly carry Christ's body, supposedly to his tomb in a cave, after his crucifixion. The woman at the back of the group, Mary, looks up and extends her arms as if seeking divine guidance from the light source above. The other figures in the group have expressions of grief and strain, both physical and emotional. The group of people in this artwork is compact, which gives the image a dense, sculptural quality. The moment depicted in this artwork is that just before the corpse is to be carried into the cave for burial. Dynamism is created by the diagonal slant of the assembled figures, which keeps the viewer's attention fixed on the subjects. The viewer is placed below the figures, as if waiting at the entrance of the tomb to take Christ's body inside.

In Figure 25, a section from Jon Foster's *H.naledi*, several figures carry a body, perhaps of one of their family members. The figure is limp and painted in slightly cooler hue to imply that it is dead. The figure on the left of the corpse looks away from the cave into the light behind them, which falls on its face and chest, also as if seeking divine strength. The figures'

muscles strain with the weight of the body, and their faces are also sombre and focused. The grouping of the figures carrying the body also give this image a compact, focused element. The light-source in the artwork also creates a diagonal, pointing the viewer's attention to the mouth of the cave, and also other members of the group waiting to help carry the body down into the cave. The viewer in this image is also positioned below the creatures, in the mouth of the cave, as though the viewer is one of the creatures helping carry and bury their dead comrade.

The artworks featured in Figure 24 and Figure 25 bear significant similarities to each other. The diagonal direction of the bearers holding the bodies in both Caravaggio's *The Entombment of Christ*, and Foster's *H.naledi*, draws the viewer's eye from the dead body down towards where the body is to be buried. Both images depict heroic effort being taken to lift the bodies down into their respective 'tombs'. The comparison could also imply that just as Jesus was resurrected, *Homo naledi* was brought back to life in the discovery and the creation of this artwork. Around 80% of South Africa's population is Christian, and so it could be that viewers may find the imagery familiar and thus more acceptable. While experts interviewed said that they do not approve of the artwork's religious references, Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) understands that scientists "need to acknowledge that most people are spiritual, even if not religious [and that] scientists need to engage with their religious ideas, but try and draw them into the processes of science and process of the human experience". There is perhaps some advantages to employing certain kinds of religious or spiritual iconography, so that viewers are confronted by something which may not be completely foreign and conflicting with their current beliefs.

Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) acknowledged the presence of "some kind of religious iconography like Jesus being taken from the cross [and] medieval paintings". Equating *Homo naledi* with Jesus Christ is at odds with the measured, evidence-based content of the rest of

the exhibition, but it could be speculated that the artist is recycling and incorporating historically vivid imagery, to achieve a set purpose in the *Homo naledi* debate. There are other artworks in the Western canon besides Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ* that feature burials, and similar iconography to the two images in Figure 23 and Figure 24. The recycling and incorporation of aspects from other artworks featuring burial scenes could be part of romanticising the *Homo naledi* burial. Death and burial is implied, the body is not seen in the grave. Professor Berger (2018 pers comm.) pointed out that it is unclear what the *Homo naledi* group in the Jon Foster painting is actually doing with the body. Lacking contextual information about the Rising Star cave system, it could easily be assumed that these creatures are about to throw this corpse into a pit. It would have been difficult to actually show the mechanics of dragging a corpse in the pitch dark through the tiny crevasses and razor-sharp inclines in the Rising Star cave system. The artist may have thought it was best to leave the rest to the audience's imagination, or leave how the remains got into the cave, open to further speculation.

However, while there are issues with the *H.naledi* painting which might discomfit the scientists, there are several aspects to the artwork that are interesting, and are beneficial to the goals of the scientists in this exhibition. These include the drama of the artwork, which while created a visually arresting image, prepares the viewer and offers them something memorable before they encounter the actual bones of *Homo naledi*.

H.naledi as an artwork also relies in part on standardised icons of human evolution (Moser 1996: 189), which consist of elements like posture, skin colour, hirsuteness, tool-making, clothes-wearing and, as pertains to this research, burial of the dead, contribute to the assignment of various ancestors' place in human evolutionary history (Moser 1996: 189). In *H.naledi*, *Homo naledi*'s human-like status is denoted by its upright stance, straight posture supported by human-like musculature, as well as the assertive handling of the corpse in the

painting, not dragging it, but carrying it as if to show respect. These icons “serves to further enhance the human quality of those ancestors” (Moser 1996: 196), while the ape characteristics include the amount of body hair, and lack of clothes. These traits are juxtaposed to show a creature occupying a liminal space between human and ape (Moser 1996: 193), and make a statement as to whether *Homo naledi* should be considered a human ancestor from the image. The artist seemingly thought that having a nude body covered in hair is enough to distinguish *Homo naledi* from modern humans.

One can denote from the artist’s portraying *Homo naledi* carrying the body, and not dragging or pushing it, that these creatures were sensitive and intelligent and courageous enough to clamber over all the rocks holding a dead family member aloft. This familiar behaviour can be identified with by audiences, and forges a sense of connection and pride that our ancient ancestors looked after each other. What this artwork does is further the notion that what distinguishes modern humans from ancient ancestors, and other animals, is becoming less definitive. This ties into what Elliott (2018 pers comm.) said about constantly having to shift the goalposts of the characteristics of what makes us modern humans and supposedly ‘more superior’ because of these ‘sophisticated’ behaviours thought only to be exhibited by modern humans. I argue that was the reason the scientists emphasised the burial behaviour in the first place, and why this discovery is thus so exciting. Jon Foster’s artwork is then useful in that it bolsters the scientific .

In addition, these kinds of images are highly significant because “they act to prepare both the professional and wider community for... the acceptance of the theory” (Moser 1996: 196). Images are easy to remember and understand by a diverse audience, and act as a primer for things to come. As well as this, visual interpretations are still a “primary means of presenting new and extremely ancient hominid fossil discoveries to the wider public” (Moser 1996: 188). Audiences will be intrigued and invested in seeing the actual remains of *Homo naledi*

because they have been exposed to this artwork which evokes an emotional response and investment in varying degrees. The implications and influence of these images has significant and lasting consequences for the way certain hominin ancestors are remembered in the story of human evolution.

Knowledge about the discovery and the of ritual burial behaviour portrayed in *H.naledi* will be remembered via the *Almost Human* exhibition. Academic revisions and new discoveries regarding *Homo naledi* will be made, but ultimately an “idea, translated into this visual form, has a far more profound impact” (Moser 1996: 210) on the viewer’s conceptualisation of *Homo naledi* and their position in human evolution. Visual interpretations like Jon Foster’s *H.naledi* are an important and highly influential facet of a display on human evolution. Firstly, these types of illustrations draw on familiar icons and symbols. Secondly, the format in which they are presented, which is naturalistic, is also a familiar form of representation (Moser 1996: 213). This familiarity and drawing on understandable forms of representation is an exhibitionary strategy to make visitors accept the content and therefore the , message and ideologies, because they are able to understand and interpret familiar icons and symbols. In addition to these deliberately recognisable symbols imbedded in the artwork, audiences bring their own complex and varied sets of icons and symbols from their own lives, into their interpretation of the artwork (Scott, 2007: 11). In fact, the authority and transparency communicated by real, authentic objects and ‘lifelike detail’ is discussed in relation to the whole exhibition in Chapter 4.

In addition to this artwork being a powerful method of persuasion in its own right, it is not actually that different from the ways in which other modes of representation have been used in the exhibition, to achieve the same goals. The artwork, as well as the rest of the displays which were endorsed by the scientists and other members involved with the display, is staged, visually engaging, and carefully considered to transmit a message to audiences. Once

these similarities and similar end goals have been established, the artwork's inclusion and accompanying discomfort on the part of the scientists may be justified. Their discomfort may reflect resentment of *National Geographic*'s interference, and the issues of balancing various stakeholder's desires in an exhibition, or may be that artistic interpretation is still considered inferior to other modes of representation? Initially, my thoughts about the artwork's inclusion in the *Almost Human* exhibition were that there emerges a disparity between the carefully intellectually constructed displays of the exhibition, created by museum and science professionals, and the digital painting by Jon Foster, which disregards scientific integrity and historical accuracy in favour of a grand, sweeping portrait of *Homo naledi* set against a towering amphitheatre of rocks. In addition to recognisable evolutionary iconography, Christian iconography is overt in the image. The contradictions and complications caused by combining two concepts initially appear at odds with each other. However, there is ample evidence that the rest of the displays in this exhibition are also of a deliberate, staged nature, making use of well-established modes of representation like video material, and authentic objects, and interviews with experts, positioned to elicit certain responses from the audience. In addition, the Christian depictions of the past may also be an attempt by the artists to represent the unknown and the intangible.

The artwork does not necessarily interfere with the hypothesis put forward by the scientists, because "lifelike detail" (Teslow 1998: 58) implies a support of the 'natural order', or, more accurately, current accepted paradigms within museums (Teslow 1998: 58). As with authentic objects, other "realistic display styles [are] not presented as harbouring a point of view, as a collection of objects tainted with purposive intervention" (Harraway, 1989: 38.), but rather as a re-presentation of reality, in the sense that the artist has captured an image exactly as it appeared once in the physical world, except that these creatures were alive 300 thousand years ago, and now are gone, and so it is unclear what Jon Foster based his

depictions and the surrounding environmental detail on. Again, in this artwork, and the all other modes of representation in the display, are mediated and used for persuasive purposes. The entire exhibition is structured to present a point of view, and to bolster the narrative. The viewer makes vivid connections between the narrative they are being told and the physical objects they see before them in the displays, which includes the video material, the authentic objects, the photographs, as well as the reconstruction by John Gurche and the artwork by Jon Foster.

Far from the science displays and the paintings needing to be separate as they display conflicting ideas or give conflicting messages about *Homo naledi*, artistic descriptions bolster the narrative created by scientists. The art is legitimised by being in a science display (Teslow 1998: 53), and the science is being illustrated and condensed in a vivid, memorable artistic way. Everything in this display is mediated and carefully constructed; one should not dismiss the other because ultimately they are all working towards attempting to convey the excitement of this new species in an accessible, multi-modal way which will appeal to a wide, diverse audience. I discussed earlier that having authentic objects provides persuasive material that audiences engage with. Moser (1996: 187) applies this to visual representations, saying that “by showing illustrations, the effect is to make an argument more visible and thus believable”. The image, along with the photographs, authentic objects, and video footage, relying on “an epistemology of realism in which sight is the privileged sense, the sense through which we receive knowledge about the world” (Teslow 1998: 55), is showing the viewer the hypothesis, the excitement of the discovery and the science involved in powerful, condensed, symbolic ways that written texts aren’t always able to do.

Apart from the image being laden with romanticised, Christian iconography, *National Geographic*’s insistence that the image be included could also be a reason the artwork’s inclusion had been resisted by the scientists and curators involved in the exhibition. In terms

of environmental details in the artwork which are persuasive but have no basis in scientific fact, the cave entrance is one such instance.



Figure 26: The unassuming entrance to the Rising Star cave system. Image from Wits

University, accessed 20/11/2018.

With reference to Figure 26, the entrance to the Rising Star cave system is a small hole in the ground covered in red dirt. Far from the sweeping amphitheatre of rocks portrayed in the artwork, the entrance now looks like a sinkhole surrounded by scruffy trees. While the geography might have looked different 300 thousand years ago, and it is not unusual that artistic licence is taken when recreating the past, the backdrop of *Homo naledi* burying their dead was chosen by the artist, and approved by *National Geographic*, to reinforce the message and drama of this type of sophisticated social behaviour, as well as the struggle and sacrifice these creatures went to, to look after one of their own, as modern humans do. This representation could make the creatures more appealing to viewers if they are seen as emotionally sophisticated creatures who felt deeply the loss of a member of a group, as we do, and go to great lengths across sharp rocks, and, as the hypothesis suggests, deep into the treacherous belly of a cave, to lay their group member at peace.

National Geographic funded the expedition as well as the *Almost Human* exhibition. Firstly, the inclusion of the artwork fulfils *National Geographic*'s mandate for these types of images, as discussed by Lutz and Collins (1993: 33). The implications of being associated with

National Geographic are public exposure, prestige, as well as one's work appearing exciting and worthy. However, these benefits also mean that those involved with *National Geographic* are under pressure to produce exciting discoveries and imagery.

Illustrations like *H.naledi* are critical to the aim of settling the question of whether particular fossil hominids were part of or excluded from the human lineage, and thus worthy of excitement and public attention and scientific prestige. Reconstruction drawings of the appearance of certain ancestors have been “enormously influential in conferring human or non-human status upon the fossil specimens in question” (Moser 1996: 185). In addition, with a controversial , like the ritual burial, the persuasive power of the visual representation helps give it credibility. Then, do the scientists not like the picture because it makes *Homo naledi* seem *more* human than they want it to appear? It is important that *Homo naledi* be thought of as very human but not quite, because it would be a more prestigious discovery that way.

Scientific reconstructions

Scientific reconstruction is a highly specialised process, and involves using clay to build features directly off the skull structure, and inserting appropriate musculature, and the recreation of the nose shape based on the nasal bones, cheekbones, and brow ridges. A similar process is often used to recreate the face of human skulls in forensic situations. In certain parts of the exhibition it could be interpreted that scientific accuracy is of secondary importance to visual impact. Essa (2018 pers comm.) said that in Display 5: Dating the Dinaledi Chamber (see Figure 16), the scientific reconstruction by John Gurche was displayed, but had been edited to focus only on the eyes. Essa stated that facial reconstructions are controversial and raise all kinds of problems, where those involved with curating the exhibition “are cautious of the racist implications of hominid evolutions that has been used in the past”. It may have been more effective and less controversial to a wide

audience to focus on the eyes of a reconstruction, which are imbued with intelligence and emotion and the presence of a soul (Moser 1996: 202). In addition, facial expressions often suggest “that the species is fully self-aware or self-conscious” (Moser 1996: 202). The inclusion of the eyes helps to anthropomorphise *Homo naledi*. Rather than showing a large picture of the reconstruction of *Homo naledi*, the realism of which presents an inescapable image of an ape-like creature, emphasising the eyes presents the viewer with more human imagery. Essa (2018 pers comm.) says that “using just the face and the eyes avoids all the controversy about racist [interpretations]”. This avoidance is similar to the painting by Jon Foster, in which *Homo naledi* is presented in rosy, heroic imagery which stirs an emotional response and empathetic connection, rather than confronting the viewer with the stark reality, or ‘proof’ that one can see *Homo naledi* is not human. It is perhaps better to leave these determinants to interpretation and speculation, through the inclusion of emotive, more human-like characteristics like the eyes, and respect for their dead, rather than confront viewers with the stark realism based on scientific principles.

Video material

There are several screens throughout the display playing several sections of interviews taken from *National Geographic’s Discovering Homo Naledi: Journey to Find a Human Ancestor* originally aired on YouTube in the wake of the discovery and the exhibition opening. The screens are above eye-level, and feature Professor Berger, Pedro Boshoff and Professor John Hawks speaking about the discovery. The format of the footage is documentary-style, with sections of Boshoff and Berger out in the field, as well as to show Hawks in the fossil vault at Wits University. The video material is professionally filmed in a documentary style. Documentaries’ use of real people and places emphasise the reality and thus by proxy the authenticity and reliability of what is being shown. The footage thus emphasises that there were real people who really did go out into the field and discover *Homo naledi*. The video

footage could be seen to be another mode of representation to keep audiences stimulated and involved, with the real scientist, a charismatic explorer who made this discovery talking to you as the viewer and sharing his insights. There is a constant emphasis on the real in this exhibition, even while the items are behind glass, displayed as photographs, or on television screens. Viewers are able to look at all of the authentic objects and listen to authentic scientists, which strengthens the credibility of the content being exhibited. Essa (2018 pers comm.) “designed the glass cases as if they contained the fossils, and were just like archival cases and airtight”. This works in two ways, where the cases allow viewers to look closely at the objects on display, as well as providing a sense of involvement in ‘real’ scientific equipment and display cases used to house valuable fossils.

Photographs

In Figure 11, a photograph of Professor Berger and his team sitting watching the live footage being relayed to them from the Dinaledi chamber, serves as the backdrop for Display 3: The Command Centre. In addition to the actual photo being taken, of high enough resolution to be enlarged to roughly three by two metres in size, the photographer also captured the other photographers in the background, who are photographing Professor Berger and his team. The footage being shown from the Dinaledi chamber was also broadcast live on YouTube, via *National Geographic*. The presence of the cameramen point to a certain level of preparedness on the part of the expedition team, re-affirming that Professor Berger was not merely acting on a ‘hunch’ when he assembled his expedition team. This highlights the danger of embellishing a story too much for dramatic effect, because if more carefully examined, can come across as manipulative and dishonest to the viewer. The presence of the cameramen in the photograph can break a sense of trust that has been formed with the viewer. The viewer had been invited to go on this journey of discovery with the scientists, and is being propelled along by the narrative, and suddenly this illusion of inclusion is broken and the viewer

becomes aware of the artifice involved with the exhibition, and possibly also of elements of artifice in the expedition itself.

On the other hand, the presence of cameramen could also verify the value and hype over the discovery, as well as affirm Professor Berger's public presence as a paleoanthropological celebrity. Having people there to record the moment of discovery, and the event of bringing the remains to light both physically and philosophically, affirms that this expedition was a worthy venture and that there must be people there to record what is surely an important moment in history.

The lure of the experts and the cult of the explorer

This undertone of ingenuity is present in another display. Professor Berger states in the display's accompanying video material for Display 2: The Excavation that he was surprised when over sixty highly qualified international applicants answered his international call, when he was expecting only a few. However, Professor Berger may have been disingenuous in claiming to have only expected a few. It seems like he may have been a bit coy, underplaying his explorer status and the way he has been in the spotlight in the past. He has appeared several times in the media for important discoveries, as well as being one of only a few 'Explorers in Residence' for *National Geographic* worldwide. His disingenuous claims reinforces the risk aspect of the expedition, which becomes more exciting material for the *Almost Human* display. Professor Berger had already made significant discoveries and obtained the financial and ideological endorsement of the influential publication, *National Geographic*. If Berger was staking his status as a *National Geographic* affiliate, this implies that he must have already suspected there was something significant in the Rising Star cave system waiting to be discovered. In addition, Professor Berger's *Australopithecus sediba* discovery was only a few years prior to the *Homo naledi* discovery, and was also cleverly promoted to make local and international news.

By framing the large response for his call for explorers as unexpected, an image is created that it was a long shot, just one man with a dream, yet that could produce such a supportive response. In a way the large response adds value to Berger's intuition as a scientist, and his willingness to take risks. This intuition highlighted his explorer's instinct, but then, he is *National Geographic's* Explorer-in-Residence. Having Professor Berger appear as an explorer, out in the field with khaki clothes and wearing hiking boots, as opposed to appearing in a lab with a white coat, is a clever exercise in public relations. This explorer image shows that on the one hand, scientists are exciting, and on the other hand it could show that he isn't a scientist at all, but rather the explorer type from popular literature. It could be argued that this is a Professor Berger tactic and that it makes science look 'cool', but also makes Professor Berger look 'cool'. This may help Berger attract future research and expedition funding, because as a public figure he appeals to many people, including funders.

However, it is this 'rush' to present his discovery to the world, as well as Professor Berger's public image of collaboration and bringing in the press and utilising social media, that has led him to be accused of promoting a 'media species'. Randolph-Quinney (2015: 2) outlines the contentious issues surrounding discovery of *Homo naledi*. This accusation implies that the discovery has less significance in the story of human evolution than the scientists involved portrayed it as, because of things like *Homo naledi's* small brain size. In addition, Professor Berger has also been accused of being more of a showman than a scientist (Kuljian, 2017: 250). He and his team have been accused of rushing their work on *Homo naledi* (Randolph-Quinney 2015: 2), and the 'rushed' hypothesis of ritual burial being conducted by *Homo naledi* is regarded by some as sensationalist and unscientific (Randolph-Quinney 2015: 2).

The exhibition bolsters the Professor Berger's opponents' point of view in some respects, because of its theatrical elements. The adventure narrative in *Almost Human*, which was intended to draw the public in and make the discovery accessible, could be seen to focus too

heavily on Professor Berger's image as an exciting explorer, and this is seen as unpalatable by some in the palaeontological field. The kind of attention focused on, and influence garnered by, Professor Berger, speaks to the question MacDonald (1998: 1) asks, which is "who gets to speak in the name of science?". MacDonald (2010: 8) says that, with the development of the museum and scientific inquiry, notions of 'truth' began to depend on "scientific procedures" (MacDonald 2010: 8) instead of "worthy persons". However, as Shapin (1994: 60) argues, the relationship between charismatic, persuasive personalities and truth still "remains influential within scientific knowledge-producing domains".

However, Professor Berger's attitude may reflect the changing nature of the role of the scientist. Professor Berger encourages inclusivity and the sharing of knowledge both with other scientists of all levels, as well with the general public. He has made this discovery exciting, interesting and accessible to the general public. In contrast to the usual long time for a scientific discovery to be investigated and then published, perhaps risking that the discovery will lose momentum or be overtaken by other discoveries, Berger and his team worked in 'whirlwind;' style, inviting experts to share their knowledge and expertise, encouraging collaboration and utilising the social media to keep the public interested and invested. While this may be criticised as putting the integrity of science at risk, it reflects a need for the nature of science and scientists to change and be more inclusive. This exhibition, and the way the science concerning *Homo naledi* was originally conducted, shows how exciting science and the investigation into our ancient ancestors can be.

The excitement and inclusivity has to be deliberately created. This may run the risk that within the exhibition, the apparent transparency and inclusivity are calculated and mediated choices all aimed at getting ordinary people to understand and feel included in the science of this discovery, but also runs the risk of telling them what to think (i.e. gives them a pre-designed message), rather than telling them how to think. However, in terms of museum

display, the important thing is that the public visits the museum and has a good experience. If one can create a new with the evidence available and get it into the public and the media and get people aware and involved, arguably this is a positive thing.

What the remains impart

Essa (2018 pers comm.) said that the aim in displaying the actual remains of *Homo naledi* was to “open up dialogue about the fossils, and let the fossils be seen, rather than provide conclusive statements about them”. However, there are contradictions between the way the remains are presented in the exhibition, and the fact that *Homo naledi* is not human. For example, it is not clear what the purpose is of the curtain between the remains and the rest of the display. The purpose of the curtains is to confer respect and contemplation in some respects, akin to a funeral parlour, the curtains could also be an extension of the theatrical nature of the display as a whole. The theatrical nature seems more likely, however unintentional, because of the paradox of treating this creature with secrecy and reverence when it isn’t a person. Teslow (1998: 55) ascertains that this is a viable interpretation, where the exhibition space, imbued with scientific and cultural authority, can encourage “a kind of voyeurism, sanitised of shame in the culturally approved setting of a museum in which such seeing is given scientific sanction as the pursuit of knowledge and cultural sophistication”. It is a combination of hype, theatricality, and respect, depending perhaps on the individual viewer and how they interpret the remains after being primed by the rest of the exhibition.

Throughout the display, there are several ways in which *Homo naledi* is, and isn’t, treated like a human being. In several instances, *Homo naledi* is already displayed as if it is a human being. As discussed, the composite skeleton of *Homo naledi* has been given a name, Neo. In addition, there is a funereal, respectful atmosphere created by the dimmed lights, black walls, and blue velvet lining the display case for the remains. There is the quiet atmosphere of a wake, where visitors can pay their respects to the dead figure. As well as this, De Ruiter

(2017: online) in a TEDEx talk on *Homo naledi*, calls the deliberate and ritualised disposal of the dead “a hallmark of humanity”. However, the remains are then also presented in a number of ways which denote their non-human status. The title of the exhibition itself, ‘Almost Human’, tells audiences that this creature occupied a firmly liminal space between human and ape. In addition, experts I interviewed stated categorically that *Homo naledi* is not a human. The actual bones are laid out in plain sight for examination, and visitors can see how human these remains look, for example with regard to the teeth in Figure 20.

Bogle, in his work on colour choices which can influence how one wants audiences to react, says that colour is important in an exhibition space to establish ambiance and an immersive environment, and “can also be used to create a charged atmosphere or a quiet study area” (Bogle 2013: 207) for reflection and contemplation. The last room of the exhibition, containing the remains, provides muted, cooler lighting and a wider space for the audience to try think about what all this discovery means. Through this contemplative space there is an appearance of agency, even though throughout the entire exhibition all aspects of the displays have directed the viewer to a certain conclusion, which is that *Homo naledi* was a complex, nearly human creature, and that *Homo naledi* seems worthy of inclusion into the human evolutionary story, and is an exciting addition to South Africa’s rich fossil heritage. By portraying their hard work and risk, the scientists involved are also presented as worthy of renown.

In addition to the colours and lighting of the final display space, “the size of the space will inform the visitor about the item that it surrounds” (Bogle 2013: 256). An artefact surrounded by a large space will seem to be more important and special than if it were displayed in a small, tight area. The exhibition on the whole is small, but the lighting lends a sense of intimacy.

In terms of the container the bones are placed in, it is very large. The room itself is also large. So while the colours may lead the viewer to feel contemplative, the space surrounding the bones is large and impressive. Some viewers may feel uncomfortable being too close to actual remains, while others may want to get really close and examine the remains for themselves. Both attitudes are accommodated by the room being large. It is also large to accommodate big groups of people at one time, who may have moved through the rest of the exhibition fast but wish to spend more time looking at the remains and processing the rest of the exhibition in relation to the remains they see before them.

Essa (2018 pers comm.) said that exhibition designers, scientists and curators “have an obligation to create questions, rather than just imparting information”. This funereal display thoughtfully complicated the clear-cut distinction between human and non-human. By creating a funereal atmosphere, curators are persuading viewers that this is a creature worthy of respect and contemplation. This display of the remains is aimed at general viewers who may buy into the overall message of the exhibition, or not, and does not to inform specialised debates on human-ness, or lack thereof.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The *Almost Human* exhibition at Maropeng was constructed to promote a variety of ideologies. There are several intentional ways in which these ideologies are promoted. Firstly, throughout the display, the processes of scientific rigour and show of transparency, as well as the scientific process and accompanying paraphernalia, are used to promote the idea that science is the most important field of inquiry when attempting to find out about human ancestors. The scientific process is used to add credibility and authority to the discovery and conclusions made about it. Scientists, museum curators, and media coverage, including that of *National Geographic*, control the narrative surrounding *Homo naledi*.

Museums still assert themselves as dominant repositories of information about scientific discoveries and their implications. While the curators of the *Almost Human* exhibition said that this is an inclusive space of learning and discovery, the museum is still a space where control is exerted physically and visually to control how visitors behave and think about exhibits.

However, there were a few unintended outcomes (on the part of the curators) arising from the display. Firstly, despite claims of inclusivity and wanting to get local children involved in and excited about science, certain aspects of the display say otherwise. A key message of the display is that, to be involved in exciting discoveries like this, one must be of a particular educational, financial, and racial orientation.

Secondly, despite the curators and scientists disapproving of the religious tones of one of the displays, they too have employed strategies of sacredness and reverence to elicit an emotional response from viewers. One interpretation of the inclusion of the artwork could be an attempt to bridge the science-religion divide. Museum spaces already have aspects in common with religion, For example, exhibitions occur in spaces which are separate from everyday life.

Importantly, the exhibitions are coupled and displayed with a sense of drama and theatricality that heighten the sense of the objects' prestige and power. Through the ways in which audiences are physically and ideologically coerced into behaving (Bennett 1994: 101), there is a sense of sacredness and reverence in a museum space akin to the respect and reverence enacted by visitors to a church.

This was presumably done to generate emotional investment in *Homo naledi* and thus get broader public attention, which may result in further funding and revenue opportunities for everyone involved in the construction of the exhibition. If the exhibition is a success, and many visitors pass through the door, the curators of Maropeng and the exhibition designers will potentially gain more credibility or desirability for future funding and curating projects. If the exhibition is a success from the scientists' point of view, their work will be more widely recognised and their credibility and research status ensured. The results of this increase in research stature would enable them to access further funding for their work, access to other research opportunities and an international platform to speak about their work.

We should not underestimate the power of hype and popular appeal. These 'commercial' motivations reflect the changing nature of scientific displays and exhibitions in general, as well as of the museum space, yet appealing to a large audience should not mean sacrificing scientific integrity.

With that being said, *Almost Human* utilises many kinds of museum practice to achieve these goals of appealing to a wider audience, increasing the stature of science and of the participating scientists. The space at Maropeng occupies a position between scholarly displays of science and facts, and a fun day out for families and tourists. Things such as interactivity, the status of the museum space, colour, lighting, emotive imagery, a multitude of modes of representation, experts speaking, authentic objects, anthropomorphism, sound, video, large photograph are all deployed to transfer selected knowledge on the *Homo naledi*

discovery and send out ‘messages’ to the audience. All of these issues, aims and ideals have been tightly packed into the exhibition space at Maropeng to give maximum impact in 20 minutes. The message of ‘look at *Homo naledi*, our almost-human ancestor, remember this face, remember how much they are like us’ is especially important.

In addition, within that compact museum space, issues regarding stakeholder conflict, the role of museums in edutainment, and public knowledge of human evolution are negotiated to create a display which fulfils the needs of all those involved. The journey of the fossil discovery in the Dinaledi chamber was shown and emphasised in *Almost Human* as a ‘scientific’ adventure narrative, used because the adventure narrative is a familiar and comfortable one to most audiences, forming the basis of literature, comic books and film (Bedford 2001: 33). The use of an adventure narrative guides those who may be unfamiliar or sceptical about the content of the exhibition, and invites them to come on the journey and ‘see for themselves’. This strategy is well-employed at Maropeng to get a wide variety of viewers to come to the exhibition and engage with the potentially troubling content, involving human evolution. The exhibitionary devices used in the display vividly show the viewer what happened during the scientific journey of discovery to retrieve the *Homo naledi* remains, and were carefully considered and placed in relation to each other to encourage audiences to reach the conclusions set out by the curators.

Multiple modes of carefully choreographed representation reinforce the messages of excitement and significance of this discovery and selected events of the discovery. The exhibition has been constructed so that the strongest, most necessary, most exciting aspects of the display have been included, for example, the difficulty of going into the dangerous cave system to retrieve the remains. This is common museum practice, and produces a clear, directional narrative for viewers to follow. The implications of the discovery for human evolution are not entertained in the exhibition.

The experts that I interviewed emphasised that this exhibition and the discovery was about the story and about the people, yet only three men involved spoke in the exhibition, through video recordings, which were Professor Berger, Professor Hawks, and Pedro Boshoff. So, is the *H. naledi* discovery really everyone's story, as in the story of humanity, or really only one man's story, that of Professor Lee Berger? Some of those involved in the discovery have been left out of the display, which makes the supposedly inclusive message of the discovery and exhibition a little hollow in parts.

The putatively inclusive aspects of the display are, however, in line with current thinking and literature regarding the role of the museum, in that there is a sense of recognition that audiences are not to be instructed or dictated to, but rather invited in and encouraged to engage and make up their own minds about what they view. In some aspects, the *Almost Human* exhibition succeeds in including its audience by means of devices which encourage physical interaction, movement and participation, as well as spaces for reflection and contemplation. However, some of the content of the exhibition is jarring, having racial and religious undertones, like the iconography of Christ descending from the cross in *H. naledi*, at odds with the claimed and largely manifested intentions of audience involvement in the rest of the display.

The experts I interviewed said that *Almost Human* enables people of all levels of education, understanding and beliefs to be provided with factual information about the *H. naledi* discovery, presented in an accessible and exciting way that also fosters independent thought and learning. This was done in order for a wide range of visitors to formulate and grapple with their own questions regarding human evolution and the various branches of our complicated evolutionary tree.

In *Almost Human*, human evolution is not 'pushed' as a set of facts to be forced on visitors. The centre and exhibition space rather exists as a space where people are presented with a

brief summary of what we know about human evolution, and visitors are invited to make up their own minds. This may be an important strategy for a diverse country like South Africa, which has been living under regimes which have prevented the teaching of human evolution, as well as subjected to racist and discriminatory practices legitimised by pseudoscience and false ideas about human evolution and its linear trajectory of progress.

This ‘playing it safe’ approach also reflects the precarious situation that museum-type displays and visitor centres are faced with. They may not offend paying visitors, while at the same time trying to gently introduce people to human evolution. The absence of scientific intricacies in the *Almost Human* display perhaps reflects the anticipation of a lack of scientific literacy among viewers. However, by ‘keeping things simple’, the display successfully promotes engagement with a topic, human evolution, with which many people are either unfamiliar or apprehensive about.

Did this exhibition overall play it too safe? If the exhibition is looked at through the lens of Maropeng as a tourist space dependent on visitor revenue, it may be expedient to portray the story of the *Homo naledi* discovery as content which is open to interpretation, rather than as irrefutable ‘facts’ that may conflict with the religious beliefs or cultural backgrounds of visitors, or information that is still under scientific investigation. It is better to draw people to the exhibition and give them a positive experience, rather than create controversy by being didactic about human evolution.

Although no visitor survey was done for this study, informants mentioned that there is no guarantee audiences who saw the exhibition are going to follow up with the hypothesis and changes or revisions to the *Homo naledi* material, and so it is likely that the viewpoints put forward in the exhibit will remain static in audiences’ minds. This points to the importance of creating exhibitions like this which have compelling imagery and tell an exciting story, because visitors are likely to remember and think about it in the ways the curators, scientists

and exhibition designers have intended, and how they presented it. Future updates of the discovery and new science would be desirable follow-up exhibitions at Maropeng.

Potentially the exhibit of greatest interest to a History of Art study is the large-scale painting of the *Homo naledi* interment of one of their kind by Jon Foster. Of all the artists commissioned to do an illustration of *Homo naledi*, and all the images the artist could have portrayed, the representation we see within the display has sweeping and religious undertones. The amphitheatre of rocks in the life-size painting is artistic licence aimed at augmenting the ‘facts’ of *Homo naledi*’s supposed burial practices, to produce a better reaction from audiences. The painting transfers sweeping concepts about the significance of the *Homo naledi* underground burial ‘discovery’, and probably increases audiences’ emotional investment in the discovery. It can be said that it acts as a primer before visitors go through the special viewing room to see the actual *Homo naledi* remains. Long after I had left the physical exhibition, I felt the painting gave me an enduring interest in the mysteries of *Homo naledi* who were alive so long ago (300 thousand years ago), and also led me to understand the need for museum curators to include powerful images about human evolution in order to engage audiences. And maybe ‘in the grand scheme of things’, it is acceptable to sacrifice scientific accuracy or use devices that aren’t strictly scientifically correct, to get visitors’ attention.

Along with different beliefs and cultural frameworks, viewers also come to the exhibition with different interests and backgrounds. In some respects, this audience variability and unpredictability can be catered for. The exhibit has been structured so that, in the final room with the bone remains, how visitors engage with these remains is probably unstructured. There is only a basic text telling the audience what one needs to know about the bones themselves, so that one can make one’s own mind up about what, and how human, *Homo naledi* is, and where the species fits into the lineage of human evolution. However, the

lighting and positioning of the remains persuades audiences to feel respect and contemplation as if these were indeed human remains.

This research found that the exhibition did succeed in making the story of the *Homo naledi* discovery exciting, through theatrical imagery, and emotionally and physically compelling exhibitionary devices like artist's impressions, authentic objects, and glimpses into the 'adventurous' paleontological processes behind bringing *Homo naledi* to the public. This research also found that Maropeng set out to 'sell' the *Homo naledi* story as part of a strategy to encourage tourism and revenue for the visitor centre and surrounding areas.

What attracted me to this exhibition was its sense of drama and theatricality. With a background in English Literature and Media Studies, I have an awareness that all information is mediated by those who provide it. Nothing about the language, imagery, layout and props used in museum displays is done without a certain agenda in mind, and the utilisation of several methods to realise that agenda. Human beings have an intense and enduring love for telling and listening to stories, as well as being creatures who rely largely on the visual to make sense of the world. In the 'experience economy', the exhibition is being framed as a product, or as an experience visitors purchase. Visitors are then given a satisfactory experience so that they buy into the narrative of this discovery, are persuaded that the discovery was an inclusive process, and convinced that all aspects of the discovery and its implications are fact because they are 'shown' exactly the discovery processes involved.

National Geographic presents itself as an organisation that is a patron of ground breaking research and discovery, and 'proved' their good judgement by making Professor Berger an 'explorer in residence' and funding his research and supporting those who take 'adventurous' steps. Those involved in the discovery all gained public and professional exposure and prestige, hopefully leading to more funding for future work, as well as access to new platforms and scientific and cultural capital to speak about their work.

In *Almost Human* there is a version of carefully constructed truth formed by complex motivations. Rhetoric in the museum space is used to convince and persuade viewers of this constructed truth, in order for certain agendas to be fulfilled, which is motivated by desires for funding, exposure, and renown, both academically and in mainstream society. The curator, exhibition designer and scientists involved are convincing the viewers to buy into their narrative.

Through these methods, the curators and the palaeontologists were involved in creating certain ideological messages that were transmitted to viewers. These involved ideas about the infallibility of science and the scientific method. Another ideology communicated by the *Almost Human* display is that there is one, unchallengeable truth about the discovery, which is the Professor Berger and *National Geographic* version, and that there is no room or need for revision or other conversations regarding the discovery and its implications. However, perhaps this can be tolerated because the exhibition does engender a sense of excitement and importance of this discovery and may encourage a varied audience to further engage with the information because it is exciting and not because it is controversial. Through this display, viewers may be encouraged to get more involved with anthropology and archaeology and become fascinated by the topics. If this is indeed the case, the exhibition will have been successful.

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