Behavior in a Museum: A Semio-Cognitive Approach to Museum Consumption Experiences

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Abstract

Like any message, the meanings a museum exhibit has are determined by the complex interaction of several elements: the configuration of sign forms used in the design of the display, the predispositions and goals visitors bring to the experience, and the physical and socio-cultural contexts in which the interpretive activity takes place. This paper explores this dynamic process of interpretation in a museum gallery, showing by means of several examples how exhibits and visitors act upon each other in a process of mutual influence. Demonstrating the principle that the meaning of a display is neither in the eye of the beholder nor in the structure of the display itself or the situation of the encounter between the two, but in a lively triadic interplay of all three elements, the illustrations also confirm the utility of a semio-cognitive approach to visitor behavior.

Introduction

This study was designed as a preliminary exploration of visitor experiences in the Passport to the World gallery of the Indianapolis Children's Museum. As a pilot study, it was meant to produce a tentative sketch of consumer experiences out of which would be generated a series of hypotheses about consumers' interpretations of the gallery which could be examined in depth in subsequent investigations. It was also conceived of as a trial of various methodologies which would then be refined in follow up studies. Ultimately, it was seen as a first step in the development of a long-term program of research on visitor behavior in a variety of museum settings.

The Passport gallery was designed to introduce museum visitors to many cultures and to illustrate the "family of man" thesis that, underlying the enormous surface diversity between cultures, there are deep, functional similarities, defined in the gallery as the functions of celebrating, communicating, imagining, and creating; (see Figure 1 for a floor plan of the gallery). The complex gallery contains 54 permanent exhibits and several, volunteer-directed temporary displays and activities, all housed in six, large, interconnected rooms plus a balcony area overlooking the main rooms. Visitors encounter a wide array of competing sights and sounds, varying from simple display cabinets to large, free-standing micro-environments. Most of the displays are designed to engage the visitor in hands-on interaction with the artefacts being displayed.

Figure 1: Floor Plan of the Passport to the World Gallery, Indianapolis Children's Museum

An earlier tracking study carried out in the gallery by museum research personnel had indicated that exhibits varied widely in their ability to attract and hold the attention of visitors. While a later study involving interviews with visitors concerning individual displays had shown that most visitors understood the basic theme of the gallery, it did not shed much light on specific experiences in the rich environment of the gallery, nor did it explain these experiences in terms of the characteristics of the exhibits and/or the patrons.

These earlier Passport studies had utilized what might be called the mainstream or dominant model of museum evaluation. This model was developed over the last twenty years based first on behaviorist, then cognitive models drawn from computing, mathematics, information processing and cybernetics and adopted for museum research via sociology and psychology. Using the positivistic learning theories and survey methods of these fields, the principal aim of evaluation in this model is to demonstrate the utility of museum displays in order to justify their funding. "Hard" data is collected which demonstrates control of visitor behavior through the "transmission" of knowledge from curator to visitor (Lawrence 1991: 21). The dominant framework of museum evaluation is characterized by a great concern for scientific objectivity, a focus on the individual

rather than the social group, and an emphasis on the transfer of information rather than meaning. The Passport gallery was designed in keeping with this model, with each display described in terms of a list of its "behavioral objectives"‹specific behaviors that should be performed by the visitor, leading to the transmission of distinct pieces of information. Curators wanted to discover if these behavioral objectives were being met for different displays. When traditional evaluation was carried out in the gallery, however, staff found that learning that these bits of information had been communicated left them with little understanding about the *meaning* the gallery visit had for visitors. Like the museum staff who took part in the Getty focus group project (Insights 1990), the what was needed was a study aimed at meaning rather than information.
As in adjacent fields, over the last few years the changing paradigm in the human sciences has begun to infiltrate museum evaluation studies, with semiotic and critical approaches being adopted from media studies, cultural studies, semiotics, sociology à la Bourdieu, and other "post-Saussurean humanities" (Lawrence 1991: 24; see also Umiker-Sebeok 1992). While these borrowings are still scattered and eclectic within museum studies, taken as a whole they represent the beginning of a critical shift toward a new model of human behavior and society. This new model incorporates:

-use of a pragmatic, Peircean model of semiosis, where emphasis is on the active, contextualized *process* of interpretation, with the goals of interpreters as the crucial frame rather than simple sign-meaning correlations. In a museum setting, this entails the rejection of the idea that the methods of positivistic science are the only appropriate ones for evaluation. Evaluations are "not descriptions of some true state of affairs but represent meaningful constructions that...actors form to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves, [and] these constructions are inextricably context and value-linked and...may well serve to enfranchise or disfranchise stakeholding groups" (Guba and Lincoln 1989: 8-9, as cited in Lawrence 1991).

-an enactive approach to cognition, where cognition is seen as embodied and, in the case of museum studies, visitors are viewed not as passive "interpreters" or "re-presenters" trying to "grasp" the pre-defined external world of the museum (cf. Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991). With remarkable similarities to the *Umwelt* theory of Jakob von Uexküll, now being intensively developed in the rapidly advancing field of biosemiotics, Varela *et al.* summarize this model of cognition as follows:

> If we are forced to admit that cognition cannot be properly understood without common sense, and that common sense is none other than our bodily and social history, then the inevitable conclusion is that knower and known, mind and world, stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or dependent coorigination. (Varela *et al.* 1991: 150)

Applying this notion to the museum, Radley (1991: 74) writes that "the body is a key feature of the perception of museum objects...the lived body ...is the ground of our sensing of the resistance of the material world, its shape, size, and texture....It is not just in their spatial arrangements that artefacts are sensed but in their use. They are sensible in what they call out in us as we would touch, lift, wear, or stand upon them. To perceive a 'handle' I must not be just a thinker, but a handler with a hand that is substantial enough to grasp the cup, as it withstands my grasp." (cf. Veron and Levasseur 1989).

-an appreciation of the storied nature of thought and communication (including the qualitative interview process) (e.g., Bruner 1973, 1990; Sarbin 1986), which entails a thorough narratological component of any evaluation undertaken. Controlled, professional analysis of the stories visitors relate of their museum experiences and other leisure activities are a critical methodological step in revealing the embodied meanings museum exhibits have for different visitors and how they compare with competing leisure activities as well as non-leisure experiences. The use of both verbal and nonverbal narratives provides contrasting "views" of visitors' experiences and also gives access to those significant numbers of visitors whose cognitive style favors nonverbal sign systems (see below).

This new approach to visitor evaluation seeks to replace behaviorist accounts of remembering by taking into account the social and institutional contexts of memory processes, assuming that "it is not the primary function of all our talk to represent the world" (Lawrence 1991: 23). As Middleton and Edwards write (1990: 37), "people's accounts of past events, before they can be taken as data on the cognitive workings of memory, need to be examined as contextualised and variable productions that do pragmatic and rhetorical work..."

-recognition of the dialogic nature of self and meaning, which focuses attention away from the individual and toward the significant others who form a part of any act of consumption, including those of museum visits. It is well known that the vast majority of museum visitors view their visit as a social occasion, usually as a part of a longer social event, and yet most of the visitor research has until recently focused on individuals rather than social groups. Recently, a number of studies have begun to pay attention to the social work which is done by museum visitors (see, e.g., Hensel 1987; McManus 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991; Perin 1992; Silverman 1990). A useful model for the study of the dialogic construction of self in museum settings is that of Bakhtin (cf. Peirce's notion of the semiotic self), wherein:

> I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness (toward a *thou*)....The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion. To be* means *to communicate*....To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary: looking inside himself, he looks *into the eyes of another* or *with the eyes of another*....I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance)**.** (Bakhtin 1984: 287) (cf. Zavala *et al.* 1993)

-a view of the *production* of meaning as cultural work, and of a museum display not as a window on the world but a cultural construction of reality. As Radley notes, "Collected artefacts are significant not only because curators say they are, or because they are in museums, but because they have done what we might call 'cultural work' for the person concerned. The object's significance lies in it symbolizing a tying together of cultural and personal pasts in a particular moment during a visit." (1991: 8). This view is particularly important in dealing with issues of multicultural audiences, as a growing number of publications have made clear (e.g., Bitgood and Thompson 1993; Karp and Levine 1991; Karp *et al.* 1992; McDonald and Alsford 1989).

-affirmation of the multi-functional nature of museums. While education‹seen as the transmission of knowledge and information‹has been the function most emphasized and evaluated, museums serve a number of equally important functions. They

- educate and inform (the **educational function**);
- provide a therapeutic detachment from the stress of everyday life in a turbulent world (the **restorative function -** Fischer and Glennon 1993; Kaplan *et al.* n.d.);
- offer opportunities for visitors to experience and appreciate significant social traditions (the **symbolic** or **ritual function -** Annis 1986; Graburn 1977; McDonald and Alsford 1989; Zavala *et al.* 1993);
- present opportunities for playful exploration (the **ludic function -** Zavala *et al.* 1993)
- provide frames for the building of social relationships among visitors (the **social function -** Hensel 1987; McManus 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991; Perin 1992; Silverman 1990).

Museums may position themselves among competing leisure activity institutions vying by the way they place

varying degrees of emphasis on these functions. Within the museum itself, different zones may highlight different functions, giving visitors a chance to encounter a variety of contrasting experiences or to seek out different environments on different occasions or depending on their mood, their companion(s), and so on.

-Recognition of the impact of different cognitive styles on the museum experience, where divergent styles are seen as equally valid approaches to knowledge and understanding in a museum setting (Umiker-Sebeok 1992). These cognitive styles influence how visitors move through the museum, how they choose where to stop, and how they interact with displays and with one another.

Given the differences in the models of thought and communication being used, the emerging paradigm for museum evaluation involves ethnographic or interpretive methods rather than, or in addition to surveys. Studies aim at understanding rather than measurement (Silverstone 1989: 147), at socializing rather than naturalizing meaning (cf. Porter 1991 re. gender constructions in museums). They focus on subjectivity and intersubjectivity, rather than objectivity. They study textuality and intertextuality, connotations and cultural codes, not just content. They assume that the visitor is active rather than passive, and that this activity involves bodily sensations and emotions, not just vision and thought. They avoid a rigid dualism between subject/object, and stress a phenomenological as opposed to a "representational" approach.

This "softer" school of evaluation, with its emphasis on discourse analysis, is still a minority view within museological circles, and, in contrast to the description above, in practice it is somehow diluted and does not provide the kind of theoretical challenges found in other areas of research (Lawrence 1991: 22). Referring to the dominant model of communication within a museum‹where a transmitter (the exhibitor) transmits ideas, through a medium (real things, in displays) to a receiver (a visitor, usually imagined as a single individual) with a feedback loop from receiver to transmitter‹, Hooper-Greenhill notes that

It is, in fact, extremely difficult today to find out what, if any, model of communication underpins the communicative efforts of museum professionals. I am not sure how far people are thinking about it in this way. However, I think it is fair to say that most museum workers are thinking in terms of the messages of the display, and thinking in terms of how messages may be transmitted effectively, which suggest that the [Cameron] model...is still in operation. (Hooper-Greenhill 1991: 57)

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