

The Practice of Seeing, Knowing, and Engaging

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Abstract:

Museums have taken on different roles as social institutions as society, culture and technology have changed. Originally, the purpose of museums was not only the display of the collections of the powerful, but also the education of the general public. Through the visual presentation of objects, museums communicate with people. By visiting the museum space, visitors develop a specific understanding and knowledge of the objects on display. This paper discusses how knowledge and information are transmitted and produced in such an environment and how new knowledge is created there. It explores the relationship and interaction between the museums, the objects on display and the visitors.

Keywords:

Practice of Seeing, Power and Authorities, Meaning Making, Meanings and Values, The Objects on Display, Interpretation of Objects, Museum Learning, Engaging Learning

1. Introduction

In the 18th and 19th centuries, museums are largely promoted and established in Britain. The main intentions are to educate the general public, not just to give the public access to the private property of the aristocracy. In order to benefit from the experience of a visit, people will have to physically go to the museum and look at the various objects that the museums have displayed. However, the knowledge of the objects is specifically formed and produced from one given context to another. Bennett explains that the institution such as the museum “is involved in the practice of ‘showing and telling’: that is, the display of artefacts and/or people in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values”. [1]

2. Materials and Methods

Goode discussed the exhibition theory as “seeing is knowing”. [2] So I suggest this practice of seeing is manipulated in certain ways by the power of institutions embodying systemic values. As it says, “institutions historically have provided structures through which power could be enacted without force or explicit directives, but rather through more passive technique such as education, the cultivation of taste,

and the cultivation of daily routines”. [3] Yet, the ways in which knowledge and information are accessed have changed, driven by dramatically advanced societies and technologies and the rapid dissemination of knowledge.

The unidirectional didactic education of knowledge acquisition has been transformed into multiple dynamic modes of knowledge creation and re-creation. In his article “Encoding, Decoding”, cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggests that there are three modes of engaging with knowledge: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional. [4] In this essay, using his three modes as a framework, I will discuss this shift from the dominance of power and knowledge by institutions to the emergence of their viewers, who are empowered to interact with and recreate knowledge.

3. Result and Discussion

In the article “Encoding, Decoding”, Hall sees the process of meaning/message articulation as a “complex structure in dominance”, referring specifically to the television programme; and the process consists of production, circulation, distribution, consumption and reproduction. [4] Every cultural image or artefact is encoded with meaning in its production processes and has to be decoded by the viewers. He then suggests that there are three positions for decoding the encoded messages or constructing discourses: dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated code and oppositional code. [4]

Museums have been the places of representation of different images of objects in specific spaces or contexts in order to convey messages to viewers through these specific modes of visual experience. To show how museums as cultural institutions communicate with their viewers, Hall’s three positions can be applied to museums as three modes of knowledge engagement. What museums want viewers to know, that is, their social functions of educating people, is the knowledge of the subjects embodied in the objects. In terms of the complex structure, Hall points out: “The ‘object’ of these practices are meanings and messages in the form of sign vehicles of a particular kind, organised, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse”. This means that the production of ‘meanings and messages’ is coded on an object and operates within certain dominant rules. Therefore, meanings must be framed and produced through museum artefacts within the institutions’ ideological practices, relations and apparatuses. Only meaningful discourse can be decoded as meaningful meanings that will effectively influence, guide, and produce ideological and behavioral outcomes.

But how will viewers decode the encoded messages/meanings? Hall suggests that there are two levels of interpreting the messages/meanings. [4] He uses Barthes’s example of the ‘sweater’ to explain further: the literal meaning of the image is called denotation, and the jumper means “warm clothing”, whereas the more conventional meaning is called connotation, and the jumper could signify “the coming of winter”. [4] However, the jumper is human-made and has an easily recognised meaning of warm clothing. The visual codes are culturally specific, that the Jumper’s code is deeply naturalised, so that it seems to be naturally recognized. The connotation, less the fixed meaning, must depend on the intervention of codes. All codes are under constant manipulation by power and ideology in order to be signifiers of particular discourses. From this point of view, we can understand that codes reflect social

realities. They are formed as “preferred meanings”. The codes are “imprinted with the institutional/political/ideological order and are themselves institutionalised”. [4]

3.1. The dominant-hegemonic position

The first mode is the dominant-hegemonic position. It is an ideal case of “perfectly transparent communication” in which audiences “operate within a dominant code” in order to be able to fully and directly comprehend its connotations. [4] Viewers are passive recipients of knowledge in this form. The interpretations are “mainly generated by political and military elites” and they include “the particular choice of presentation occasions and formats, the selection of personnel, the choice of images, the staging of debates” because of the hegemonic quality placed on this position. [4] In the museum context, the objects presented are not randomly arranged. They are deliberately selected, displayed and designed in certain ways and environments.

Museums communicate with their audiences through the visual presentation of objects, especially in their early days when private collections were easily seen by more eyes. Viewers learn not only the knowledge of objects but also the meanings/messages embodied in objects and people through visual practices. Using the example of the Great Exhibition, we can see the power relations between the subjects, the spectators and the institutions.

The Great Exhibition was the first world exhibition held in Britain in 1851. Built of iron and glass, it was a spectacular display of objects and artefacts from all over the world. Whole trees, statues and fountains were installed to attract visitors. [5] Rydell said: “The spectacles of 'civilisation' and 'progress' attracted tens of millions of people to their architectural, industrial, agricultural and anthropological displays”. [2] People came to witness and acknowledge national and global social, industrial and technological development. The event also simulated and contributed to the development of museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Science Museum, as well as having a far-reaching influence on the organization of various world fairs. It has not only presented an ensemble of disciplines and techniques of display, but also played an influential role on other institutions on how to order objects for public inspection and the inspecting public.

The relationships between subjects, viewers and institutions are complex. The institutions had the dominant power to encode the meanings/messages of the subjects on the objects, people and even the designed spaces. The overall phenomenon of the emergence of museums and exhibitions in the course of the 19th century has been described by Bennett as the “exhibitionary complex”, Rydell refers to this term to mention that “the emergence of world fairs and museums provided the cultural underpinnings for the development of the modern nation-state”. [2] This was the substance that formed the institutional discourse and ideology of the museums. This was what they were trying to encode. As Bennett explains in his article, “To identify with power, to see it as, if not directly theirs, then indirectly so, a force regulated and channeled by society’s ruling groups but for the good of all: this was the rhetoric of power embodied in the exhibitionary complex—a power made manifest not in its ability to inflict pain but by its ability to organize and co-ordinate an order of things and to produce a place for the people in relation to that order.” [2]

While the museums and exhibitions opened their doors, they wanted the public to get inside to not simply look at the objects but the embody the imprinted hidden power which intended to unconsciously order their mental and moral welfare to turn

them into good citizens; and to a bigger extent, to carry the messages to the whole society. This relation developed between objects and bodies has nevertheless echoed to the formation of Foucault's "carceral archipelago", which he claim in Discipline and Punish of the scaffold and the body, whilst he claims the institutions of asylum, clinic, and prison as "institutional articulations of power and knowledge relations." [1] The scaffold and the body of the condemned, Bennett explains as follow, "The body of the condemned comes to be caught up within an inward looking web of power relations. Subjected to omnipresent forms of surveillance through which the message of power was carried directly to it so as to render it docile, the body no longer served as the surface on which, through the system of retaliatory marks inflicted on it in the name of the sovereign." [1]

Although this situation was different to museums, the museums have shaped both the objects and the people knowable and made them subject to the institutions under the surveillance that they are carrying the power messages to the general public. In other words, the objects and the bodies are formed to become the subjects rather than the objects' knowledge, as Bennett further highlights, "to become, in seeing themselves from the side of power, both the subjects and the objects of knowledge, knowing power and what power knows, and knowing themselves as ideally known by power, interiorizing its gaze as a principle of self-surveillance and, hence, self-regulation." [1]

In addition, museums offer places for people to come and see, while in the meantime, to a certain extent, people also become objects to be seen by others. On this issue of the built architecture space, Bennett quoted Foucault's discussion as, "an architecture that is no longer built simply to be seen, or to observe the external space, but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control—to render visible those who are inside it". [1] Viewers are also subjects of the institutional discourse. They are not only the viewers of the museum's contents, they are also part of the museum's contents.

The figure of the *flâneur*, this concept does not emerge in the discourse of the museum, but in a wider social context of the consumer culture of the nineteenth century. [3] The *flâneur* is referred to as a man who strolls along the streets of the city and observes the urban landscape, while his main activity is to look. He looks at new buildings, new technologies, new phenomena, new urban life and other people. These looking practices would in turn consciously and unconsciously alter or reshape how he behaves, looks, performs and thinks. The looking experience educate him in this point. Therefore, to make all objects in museums visible, people are able to observe and decode different layers of meanings/messages of museum contents, and finally through self-monitoring and self-regulation, they are transformed into orderly, cultivated and educated public.

3.2. The negotiated code

Each Hall's second position of knowledge engagement is that of the negotiated code. He identifies this position as the audience acknowledging the hegemonic position and its definitions, while situating themselves in a level of negotiation to obtain and find their own adaptive rules. Based on the above, the dominant definition is driven by national interests or intentions. The messages/meanings are encoded based on and associated with the larger picture within the defined or identified rules, either at the literal or connotative level. As Hall puts it, "It carries with it the stamp of

legitimacy—it appears coterminous with what is natural, inevitable, taken for granted about the social order”. [4]

In the case of museums, it seems that viewers follow and receive the absolute knowledge. However, everyone has his or her own mind, knowledge, experience, ability or social background. Therefore, the dominant messages conveyed may not be fully understood or appropriate to his or her situation. Hall refers Terno's notion of “subjective capacity” to explain this issue of while the viewers decode the signified, he quotes, “by the word reading we mean not only the capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs, but also the subjective capacity to put them into a creative relation between themselves and with other signs”. [4] Obviously, the coder, who produces the messages/meanings, and the decoder, who receives the messages/meanings, are not the same person and do not share the same knowledge. The process of interpretation is therefore relatively individualised. It brings up Hall's discussion of “distortions” or “misunderstandings” during the communication processes, which it exists owing to the fact that there is “lack of equivalence” between the two sides. [4]

This unequal relationship highlights the notion of negotiation. I would argue that it involves the actions and motivations of both sides. One comes from the decoder, who is unable to obtain or integrate a meaningful overall understanding, and prefers the alternative knowledge that these discrepancies can be seen as an implication of a failure to communicate. The other is from the encoder, who has realised the existence of the misunderstanding. In order to successfully carry out the communication, the encoder must know the audience well, and that forcing to listen to the voice of the audience and gradually endow the power to the audience. This position is in parallel with the relationship between museums and their audiences.

Through time, museums have realised that people have more demands and ways to see and know and they must adopt new ideas and approaches to re-use their resources to connect with their audiences. [6] On this issue, Hooper Greenhill writes in her articles of “Studying Visitors”, “In terms of how visitors are conceived, there is a shift from thinking about visitors as an undifferentiated mass public to beginning to accept visitors as active interpreters and performers of meaning-making practices within complex cultural sites.” [7] That is to say, museums are systematically transforming themselves into visitor-centred institutions, while the study of visitors has been one of their main objectives, with the main focus being on “people's experiences, attitudes and opinions in and about museums of all kinds (art, history, science; national, local, private, and so on)”. [7]

Instead of controlling visitors' behavior, museums are beginning to evaluate visitors' attitudes and subjective opinions to gain an overview of the social functions of museums. There are different ways of studying visitors. For example, behavioural approaches have been used to evaluate the effectiveness of the embodied knowledge of exhibitions. The Natural History Museum also has drawn up a twenty-year exhibition development plan, the aim of which is to use visitors' reactions and levels of understanding of subjectivities in museums to test whether the exhibitions have effectively conveyed the messages. [7] The tested results not only reflected the success of the exhibition. They also provided information on how to improve the design of the exhibitions.

As the Natural History Museum's 1979 proposed highlights, “careful thought should be given to the order in which information is to be learnt and this order should

be carried through to the design of the exhibits” and “exhibits should have explicitly stated objectives which specify exactly what visitor effects are intended.” [7] The visitor studies was set to examine whether the intended messages were well received, not just the visitors themselves. In fact, because the visitors did not always follow and achieve the expected outcomes of the set “educational objectives”, it is difficult to say whether the achievements belong to “the competent production of effective communicative media” or “the use made of these media”. [7] Therefore, given the unpredictable expectations or motivations of visitors, they became, “active” or should “have an agenda of their own”; museums should then not limit the interpretations of their visitors, because “learning goes beyond learning facts”. [7]

3.3. The negotiated code

These unpredictable roles of viewers echo the third position, the oppositional code, to return to Hall’s debates on knowledge engagements. In line with his argument, he explains this position as when the viewers perfectly understand the encoded messages/meanings by the discourse, however, incline to interpret the messages/meanings on contrary way that they decode in their own preferred codes so as to “retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference”. [4] The viewers in this perspective have their own free minds. They assert their own ideas and learning in relation to their interests and experiences. This ‘alternative frame’, I assume, implies the decoder's own situation and environment, including his previous knowledge, interests and experiences. Museums then realised that visitors are independent and have individualised personal contexts. Importantly, this greatly influences communication and knowledge engagement in museums.

In order to still play the important roles of cultural educational institutions, museums must yield their authorities to the visitors to impart them to speak and make their own choices. Here, evidence can find on the constructivist mode of learning developed in museums while the advanced research shows, “learning has been revealed to be a relative and constructive process”. [8] It is worthy to notice that the knowledge gaining is no longer from the standardized delivery but an active personalized learning process. As Hein explains of the constructivist conception that “meanings are mediated not only by museum objects and the way in which they are presented but also powerfully by the visitors’ culture, previous personal experience, and conditions of their visit”. [8]

From this point of view, it is more a question of what meanings the visitors want to and can make of the museum experience than of what knowledge the visitors need to know. Therefore, the initial motivation for learning is driven by the individual's own desire and choice, and free choice learning in the museum is established and increasingly sought after. [8] It is only in this way that new ideas can be triggered, and new knowledge can be reproduced. Likewise, these new perspectives from visitors contribute to the transformation and reconsideration of the role of museums, their ideas and concepts, so that they themselves remain forward thinking. As a result, the performance of museums will improve. They will provide and create more and more dynamic and free learning environments to meet the different needs and interests of different people.

4. Conclusions

Today, museums welcome multiple perspectives and become increasingly diverse and active learning institutions. With the demanding social, cultural and technological changes, museums have taken on different roles and have come to expect more. In the past, it was the repository of numerous collections that satiated human curiosity and demonstrated the supremacy of power. It was the voice of the authorities, cultivating and educating the population in good and virtuous habits through the practice of seeing and knowledge. Step by step, they are becoming lively and provocative places for sharing, combining and generating new ideas and knowledge through the practice of engagement. Yet, museum visitors are increasingly empowered to say what and how they want to learn. Museums are not only focusing on the authentic experience of the visitor. They are also rethinking themselves to create ever more dynamic, interactive and active learning environments to accommodate ever more brilliant minds, opportunities and possibilities.

Conflicts of Interest

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