The Fugue of the Five Senses and the Semiotics of the Shifting Sensorium

Selected Proceedings

from the 11th International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

editors:
Evangelos Kourdis
Maria Papadopoulou
Loukia Kostopoulou

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MEDIA & MULTIMEDIA

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MEDIA & MULTIMEDIA

The Deadlock of Museum Images & Multisensoriality

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Abstract

Musealisation as tool for collective memory management, constitutes a violent intervention in the social life of material objects, which – among other things – transforms them into almost exclusively visual stimuli. This loss of materiality contravenes the consolidated museum practice that is based on the tangible evidence of "authentic" objects, as well as its undoubted educational mission. I argue that the triptych "protection – authenticity – learning" that has been the ontological base of modern museum is characterized by inherent contradictions. Therefore, any attempt to re-determine museum practice should re-examine it. In this vein of thought, it is imperative to challenge vision's domination, using something more than limited naïve dashes of other sensorial stimuli, that leave intact the dominant visual approach. In other words, I argue that multisensorial museum experience can threaten traditional museum's ontological features, and, therefore, can lead to a "new" museum that will act principally as "public space", and secondly as the protector of a collection of dead things.

Keywords

museums, multisensoriality

One of the dearest presences of my childhood was Kitsos Makris[1], mostly for the very funny stories he used to tell us. Like the one about this poor guy who one day visited the museum-like house of this highly acclaimed folklorist and found himself in apprehension in front of a collection of popular religious icons. He felt compulsive to kiss them and pray with his fingers crossed out of respect. He even asked for a stool to reach the ones who were hanging high. Whenever he told that story he used to laugh hard with the lack of awareness on the part of the guy and we used to laugh along, not because we knew anything about religious icons, but because we did know a few things about museums. Obviously, a similar kind of confusion is what the sign hanging at Nea Moni in Chios[2] tries to clear up: when you pass through the heavy wooden gate of the Monastery you face a big label saying: "The sacred Nea Moni is not a museum. It is FIRST of all a place of worship, and SECONDLY a monument of Christian architecture and art. Therefore, the visitor is a PILGRIM, who should fear God and His Holy Mother". Needless to say, in a museum a visitor cannot taste the fear of God or His Holy Mother.

In the same way, in the very familiar modernist museum someone fails to engage in a range of emotions, as their visit seems designed to be a purely visual and cognitive experience (Chourmouziadi, 2006, 2010). Of course, things were not so in the beginning. Both at the first private collections and at the first public museums of the 18th century, art and antiquity lovers could pick up exhibits and closely examine them in their own time (Candlin, 2008; Dudley, 2010; Rees Leahy, 2012). However, the promotion of the public aspect of the museums was not solely associated with a romantic predisposition to democratise them[3], but rather more with their role in educating citizens (Bennett, 1995, 2006). Thus, the influx of ignorant working class people in museum halls, which presented world order in a crystallised manner, established between visitors and exhibits a safe distance that we all take for granted, today. Moreover, already as early as the first decades of the 20th century, the appropriate exhibition toolkit had been developed to foster a comfortable viewing, regardless of the need for a more sensory approach (Bacci & Pavani, 2014; Howes, 2014).

So then, the established modern museum exhibition is exclusively directed to the "pure gaze"[4] (Bennett, 1998, 2006; Duggan, 2007), as a long lasting philosophical tradition considers vision to be the sense that maintains a sort of distance from the object observed and leads to its critical evaluation and understanding (Belova, 2012). The rest of the human senses, deemed as "inferior" to vision by many intellectuals due to their association with the early stages of cognition and with instinctive, uncontrollable reactions[5], are banned from a museum experience altogether. In the same time, the behavioural norms imposed on the visitor along with the whole ritual of the visit itself (Duncan, 1995; Rees Leahy, 2012, p. 7) are tailored to address a logically thinking individual. A visitor capable of full cognitive vigilance who refrains from speaking loudly, roll on the floor or eat in the premises, somebody who in many cases does not even need a rest or water, an entity who yearns nothing but spiritual satisfaction.

The entire museum "technology" is developed to support this notion; linear narrative structures based on the information provided by well-organised collections, clean spaces, designated paths, elegant shelves with neatly arranged objects. Moreover, the coded representation of verbal information, the additional visual material, the ample lighting, etc. "facilitate" the visitor towards learning by seeing.

However, despite the progress of exhibition practices and the fact that no one has ever challenged the educational aspect of a museum visit[6], in reality its learning outcomes have without fail been rather disappointing. Admittedly, despite the hundreds of archeological reports about prehistoric times, the Flintstones were the ones who predominantly formed our collective image of the period (Χουρμουζιάδη, 2006). Panting then while trying to catch up with the times, almost a century after the formulation of pedagogical theories regarding hands-on learning[7], museums have started to doubt whether this fixation on vision has been effective after all and are hesitantly attempting to introduce a few more sensory stimuli.

However, the intention of such an introduction is primarily educational in the narrowest sense of the word. So, the use of the adverb "hesitantly" does not only refer to the small number of examples or to the use of mere soundbites, but also to how limited the use of sensory stimuli is, so much resembling infant education practices. This boils down to I see a hammer and I hear a bash, I see a clay water pipe system and I hear running water, I see a violin and I listen to a few notes[8]. On the other hand, especially in art museums where the educational goal gives way to the other core element of the modernist museum, namely contemplation, the use of marketing practices has been attempted. That is the use of ambient pleasant sounds and smells (Cirrincione *et al,* 2014) in the hope that this discreet sensory touch will foster vision and thus enhance the positive impact the works of art have on a visitor, exactly like the way such stimuli work in a supermarket to increase consumption.

All these attempts comfortably leave intact the well-guarded management methods of a museum collection. Recently, there have been several interesting critical voices stigmatising exhibition practices that caused objects to loose their materiality and be converted into plain representations of themselves (Dudley, 2012). A practice that in fact entails an inherent conflict of the modernist museum itself, whose objects are indispensable for they are tangible evidence of the exhibitor's perspective. As a result, some innovative proposals discard the iconographic role assigned to the museum objects and seek the reinstatement of the things themselves. This is not done by stripping exhibitions off interpretive material and embrace early museum practices[9], but rather it means focusing on how active exhibits can become. In other words, by seeking ways of letting objects function as transmitters of a wide range of sensory stimuli. This trend in its extremity, along with a New Age concept, seemingly suggests that if we let our senses run rampant while visiting a museum we will acquire a better understanding of it (Hamilakis, 2014, p. 3).

I will not pause here to dwell on the fainting episodes that such proposals may cause to heads of archeological museums all over, nor on the obvious technical difficulties that have to be to overcome. I will only say that apart from their provocative nature, these approaches could trigger, once more, the long-lasting dilemma regarding museums, whether objects or ideas should be at the heart of setting up an exhibition (Dudley, 2012; Weil, 1990; Witcomb, 1997). In my opinion this is a pseudo dilemma.

Before I attempt an alternative approach to the question of "whether a visit to a museum should have a multi sensory character", I would like to make a key observation. The fact that so far we have been preoccupied with what visitors see, does not mean that they are not experiencing a museum with all their senses (Bacci & Pavani, 2014; Levent & Pascual-Leone, 2014, p. xvi). Firstly, because viewing something invariably spawns sensory associations and secondly, because as they browse through an exhibition they have a sense of themselves walking on the marble floor, they listen to other people whispering, they are aware of the high ceiling above them, they pick the faint smell of the detergent from the freshly cleaned floors, they can not wait to have something to eat after their visit. Furthermore, this apparently agonising effort to suppress all other senses but vision is not emotionally neutral, as the cold and exclusively cognitive process regarding the objects viewed would have required. Rather than the museum objects themselves, it is this effort to keep other senses but vision at bay that provokes awe and admiration for the greatness of ancestors, that instills anguish to hold on to the past and fear for a nation's decline and other things along these lines.

Consequently, since all senses are present in a museum visit, I argue that it would be meaningful to examine the role they can play into replacing the traditional museum with something substantially different, rather than trying to restore the outdated modernist one. This entails challenging three key concepts: the narrow school-like perception of a museum's educational role, the central and dominant role the museum objects hold for themselves, and the belief that visitors are mere consumers of the museum product.

On the contrary, if the primary scope of an exhibition is to critically approach an issue, it might be imperative to ensure that it stimulates visitors emotionally by utilising their embodied experience more than just employing their pure logical analysis. Only then, I think, will we be able to achieve the psychological and cognitive twists required to enable visitors to confront their stereotypes, to question familiar representations, to comprehend discrepancies in interpretation, to be forced to identify contradictions and conflicts. In this case, the information put forward is assessed and interpreted by the visitors themselves[10].

Hence, an exhibition can neither be just the aesthetically pleasing arrangement of a collection nor just the narrative made up from a collection's objects. I believe that it should be a three-dimensional opportunity for discussion. This discussion primarily raises issues and sets the framework, as it also intrigues and leads to further research

which later facilitates the visitor to form an opinion. A similar "critical museology" produces exhibitions that seek emotional stimulation and demand comprehensive physical involvement so that they manage to shake off indifference and most importantly pave the way to overthrow the established.

Nevertheless, a museum does not produce technologies, but rather borrows and employs what others invent. Well, what I describe could get ideas from ephemeral art installations, as Claire Bishop (2005, p. 7) puts it, where "rather than imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, … presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision". Visitors do not simply contemplate the work of art; they immerse into it, become involved at a multi sensory level and ultimately contribute to its completion (Bacci & Pavani, 2014). In this way the distinct role of the museum objects is abolished since they are treated as one of the many tangible and intangible pieces of the composition. The exhibition equipment itself is in its own accord an exhibit as it plays an instrumental role in the narrative as well as in stimulating the senses. Things are not just represented or described, they are somehow there, as well. The original coexists with the copy as they cooperate to construct a meaningful whole.

On the other hand, visitors are decentered. Exiled from their predetermined Renaissance central viewing position and forced to choose by themselves where to stand[11]. So, in practice multiple short-lived positions, sometimes highly uncomfortable, should be taken in order to approach the exhibits. The visitor cannot complete the visit if he/she does not intervene with what he/she is being shown, even by merely moving through space. Therefore, one could claim that he/she leaves traces behind that may possibly alter some of the exhibition aspects, and up to a point, even render him or her a co-creator.

In an exhibition like this, vision is largely not on its pedestal. The glimpse has become more important than the gaze (*cf* Duggan, 2007). The moving body interacts with the exhibition and utilises touch, hearing and proprioception. Smell and taste could even come to play, even indirectly, with the enhancement of synesthetic stimuli that can cause visual, audio and tactile reactions.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that although the exhibition concept that I briefly presented is inspired by artistic events, I for once am concerned about the possibility of making good use of all things mentioned in exhibitions with more "down to earth" topics, like the ones that historical museums have to manage. In their case, the search for a multi sensory approach is not only about supporting or assisting the cognitive and mental processes, but even more so, about the management of non-defined, non-rational processes that play a cardinal role in shaping people's perceptions. Because we love our homeland, and the taste of its sweets or the smell of its freshly cut grass reminds us of this love[12]. But this love is not based on anything rational. The appeal a taste or a scent have on us cannot be rationally explained no matter how hard we try. Similarly, we hate

foreigners because they are “filthy”, darker, their faces are not easy on the eye and we find them intimidating, their language sounds harsh and offensive, because we are afraid they would do us harm (Crang & Tolia-Kelly, 2010). Possibly, no matter how many logical and well-documented papers we are given to study about equality and solidarity, our irrational fears and the things we love, our instinctive attractions and repulsions might remain ingrained within us forever. Maybe, then, it is worthwhile to try to overcome them by organising exhibitions that from one point onwards aim to go beyond the rational and the clearly drafted. As I say this I remember what I proudly used to recite as a student in primary school “what I feel about my home-land is like a turmoil inside me[13]”.

Endnotes

1. Kitsos Makris (1917-1988) was a prominent folklorist, honored by the Academy of Athens for his work. Albeit self-taught, in 1987 he was awarded the degree of Honorary Doctor of Philosophy by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He has published 47 books and studies, many of which were translated in English, French, German and Serbian. He bequeathed his folklore collection and his enormous archive to the University of Thessaly, along with his house that, today, functions as a folk museum.
2. Nea Moni is an 11th century monastery, recognised as an UNESCO World Heritage site, due to its byzantine architecture and its magnificent mosaics.
3. It is widely commented how the transformation of Le Louvre from a private collection - contemplated only by the royal court and meant to underline the taste and the political power of French royal family- to one of the first public museums in the world, was closely related to the democratic spirit of French Revolution. Along with the demolition of La Bastille, the “opening” of Le Louvre was one of the most symbolic acts of the new regime (Abt, 2006; Bennett, 1995; McClellan, 1994)
4. The “pure gaze” is a concept discussed by P. Bourdieu (1984, pp. 1-7). It is something possessed by the culturally and artistically competent, opposed to the ordinary way of seeing the world, which privileges function over form. The pure aesthetic demands a distance from life and necessity. For Bourdieu, this distance is enabled by the lives of ease enjoyed by those who hold this aesthetic disposition.
5. The origins of the theoretical discussion about the senses, their significance and their hierarchy can be traced, as usual, in the work of Plato and Aristotle. It was enriched by Decartes and Lock, reintroduced by theologists and modernists, and had a vigorous come-back, as usual, in the mid 20th century (Howes, 2005).
6. The long tradition that considers museums as educators can be traced from the first examples engaged in the nation ideology formation procedures – as ideological state apparatuses (Althusser, 1971), to the contemporary museumscape. Even if the size and the variety of the latter cannot easily establish a relation with nationalistic narratives in every museum, the education of the masses remains the main role of museums, as it is clearly mentioned in the ICOM’s (International Council of Museums) official definition (http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition).
7. The significance of experience in learning was first introduced by John Dewey in his classical book “Experience in Education” (1938). He focused on the participation by students in experience and radical democracy and the creation of praxis among learners. His work influenced many others, such as constructivist learning theory, which can be considered the theoretical base of informal learning (Hein, 1998).
8. The sonic design in a museum exhibition is a far more complicated issue. The immersive effect of the exhibition soundscape can not only support the interpretative process, but can alter the visitors experience altogether (Bubaris, 2014; Zisiou, 2011).

9. New Museology criticized early museums on the grounds that they left the objects "to speak for themselves", referring to the limited and not at all imaginative interpretative material that accompanied the exhibited objects of the collection.
10. Andrea Witcomb (2013; 2015), for instance, makes a very interesting analysis of the role that affect plays in exhibitions, which try to topple long lasting stereotypic colonialist approaches.
11. Claire Bishop argues that installation art's relationship to the viewer is underpinned by two ideas: "activating the viewing subject" and "decentring". The first refers to the need of the visitor to move around and through the work in order to experience it, rather than just staying still to optically contemplate it. The later is inspired by Panofsky's critique of renaissance perspective (Bishop, 2005; 2012).
12. Nadia Seremetakis, making a splendid correlation between the smell and taste of a specific kind of peaches and homesickness, argues that "memory cannot be confined to a purely mentalist or subjective sphere. It is culturally mediated material practice that is activated by embodied acts and semantically dense objects" (Seremetakis, 1996, pp. 7).
13. It is the final verse of the short poem by Aristotelis Valaoritis (1824-1879), "My love for my country".

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