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‘Museums, Tourism and the Visitor Experience’

“Destination Culture”:
New Visitor Research in Museums and Cultural Tourism

Philipp Schorch
Introduction

‘More has been written about museums in the past decade’, according to Preziosi & Farago, ‘than in the previous century’ (Preziosi & Farago, 2004:1). The new museum’s purpose, responsibility and vital potential as a forum for debate as well as an agent of social change and cultural inclusion has been widely recognized, theorised and conceptualised. But does it work for and with the visitor, the central focus of the new museology, in practice? Research on the long-term impact of museums on visitors, and thus on society, has been largely neglected and consequently we are not able to answer ‘the question we must ultimately ask ourselves’, as Weil reminds us: ‘do our museums make a real difference in, and do they have a positive impact on, the lives of other people?’ (Weil, 1989, as cited in Allen & Anson, 2005:159)

The purpose of this thesis is to substantiate the museum forum idea theoretically as well as empirically. I concluded my literature review with a museum forum model proposing a museological epistemology, which integrates visitor, museum, society and the global perspective. It is characterised by circular and interdependent relationships and a focal point for the reciprocal negotiation and interpretation of identities via narratives.

Scholars such as Message (2006: 202) have envisaged a museum ‘offering an alternative and effective framework of cultural production and engagement rather than rephrasing the reformist agenda according to new rhetoric’. In this thesis I will argue that by facilitating forum principles such as open discourse, critical debate and free argument, the museum can play a crucial role in ‘reassembling the social’ by opening existing social links for ‘public scrutiny’ (Latour, 2005: 257), moving from representative democracy, which Dutschke called ‘repressive tolerance’, to direct democratic participation (Crossley & Roberts, 2004) and by supporting the inevitable ‘cosmopolitan outlook’ (Beck, 2006) of the 21st century. The museum as a forum is uniquely placed to help emancipate the individual, and according to Latour (2005) it is the individual where everything originates.
In my literature review I have argued for the synthesis of broad socio-cultural as well as specific individual perspectives, by combining discourse with agency and interpretive communities with fluid identities, aiming to gain a holistic picture of the museum experience. I have further argued that the impact of museums is best understood via the meanings visitors make and negotiate in the long-term. While the narrative approach is recognised as the most appropriate mode in museological representation and education to facilitate meaning making among visitors (O’ Neill, 2007; Roberts, 1997), it has rarely been used as a visitor research method (Allen, 2002). Applying the narrative methodology in a long-term context and combining socio-cultural and psychological perspectives will therefore contribute to the fields of museology and visitor studies in particular as well as tourism studies and the social sciences in a broader sense.

**Research Questions**

The central question of this thesis is: *to what extent and in which forms do bicultural meanings negotiated by global visitors relate to Te Papa’s forum mission?*

In order to shed light on this complex problem I will examine the following questions of the museum visit, within the context of the proposed museum forum model; the individual and its society of origin, the museum and the global perspective. Shkedi’s (2005) distinction between first and second order research questions represents a very useful strategy to critically relate the museum experience to the wider research context.

First order research questions:

- What kinds of bicultural meanings do global visitors make when visiting Te Papa?
- What are the underlying processes (individual, social, cultural, political) influencing such meaning making?
• How does the bicultural Te Papa experience affect these processes in return and long-term?

Second order research questions:
• Does the museum function as a forum leading to open discourse, critical debate and free argumentation of its bicultural nature among global visitors?
• Does such potential cross-cultural dialogue provide some empirical insight into the ‘cosmopolitanization’ (Beck, 2006) of contemporary reality?

Methodological Approach

In this thesis I adopt a biographical narrative approach to synthesize broader socio-cultural as well as specific individual perspectives as stated above. Several scholars have argued for the inherently human capacity of making sense and meaning of life experiences via narratives. Bruner (1990: 56) concludes that ‘the typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form’ and Roberts (2002: 138) quotes Josselson:

Narrative is the representation of process, of a self in conversation with itself and with its world over time. Narratives are not record of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life.

The above literature, just like the vast majority of Western academic knowledge production, can rightfully be critiqued for its purely Western focus. However, Maori scholars such as Royal (2004) equally stress the central role of narrative in constructing reality and transmitting meaning, especially in oral cultures, and claim that it is a universal mode of thought and knowledge in all cultures. Including the indigenous perspective into the above reasoning will facilitate a bicultural argumentation for narrative theory just as Matauranga Maori is accepted as an alternative knowledge system in museum practice at Te Papa.
In my literature review I have concluded that such unique bicultural practices ‘behind the scenes’ are insufficiently accessible to visitors yet, which prevents the museum from achieving its full potential as a forum.

With its primary focus on the understanding of experiences and their interpretation from the perspective of the visitor and interviewee, this thesis is philosophically and sociologically informed by interpretive hermeneutics. However, I agree with Thompson (1981: 4) who states that ‘the problem of understanding cannot be divorced from considerations of explanation and critique, as both Ricoeur and Habermas insist’. Thompson refers to the inextricable link between philosophy and social science as well as the central social function of language and action in both traditions, hermeneutics and critical theory, and proposes a ‘critical hermeneutics’. Kincheloe & McLaren (2000: 288) support such argumentation and explain that researchers inject critical social theory into the hermeneutic circle to facilitate an understanding of the hidden structures and tacit cultural dynamics that insidiously inscribe social meanings and values.

The hermeneutic interpretation of bicultural meanings among global visitors (first order research questions) will therefore be embedded in Beck’s ‘cosmopolitan critical theory’ (Beck, 2006) by critically assessing Te Papa’s forum mission regarding the facilitation of cross-cultural dialogue, debate and argumentation within a global context (second order research questions).

Methods

*Interviews and Follow-Ups*

The primary method for this thesis will be semi-structured and in-depth narrative interviews. The main advantage of this method to this study is that it avoids the findings, or knowledge claims, being ‘artificialised’ (Bruner, 1990) by the researcher's 'system of relevancy' (Wengraf, 2001).
Other available methods, even if of qualitative nature, are organised by the researcher and thus are more likely to lead to consciously constructed and, in the case of a controversial topic, socially desired responses (Davidson, 2006; Elliot, 2005). A narrative description instead leaves it up to the interviewee to retrospectively construct meanings. The researcher gets access to the subconscious level of a lived experience without pre-structuring or guiding the flow of the interview. Wengraf (2001: 115) confirms this methodological advantage by stating that

   precisely by what it assumes and therefore does not focus upon, narrative conveys tacit and unconscious assumptions and norms of the individual or of a cultural group. At least in some respect, they are less subject to the individual's conscious control.

He proposes a three-stage analytical structure of biographical narrative interviews, which will be applied in this thesis.

**Stage one**: the researcher asks a single question to initialise the interview and elicit the interviewee’s narrative. It must be made clear that the interviewer will not interrupt or prompt and any intervention must be of non-directional nature.

**Stage two**: following the narrative-eliciting question in stage one, in stage two ‘narrative-pointed questions’ will be asked, which are restricted to the topics and themes brought up by the interviewee and the order in which these were raised in stage one. This limited intervention and guidance by the researcher in stage one and two facilitates the ‘system of relevancy’ of the interviewee to reveal itself.

**Stage three**: the third and final stage is organised by the researcher's ‘system of relevancy’ and asks ‘narrative-pointed’ or non-narrative questions to harmonise the narrative material of the first two stages with the research question.

Ideally this final session is conducted as a separate interview at a later date after analysing the first two stages.
Wengraf (2001), however, highlights that any research design is a compromise and for pragmatic reasons I prefer to conduct one interview while maintaining the three ‘analytical subsessions’. The fact that I intend to conduct follow-up interviews with the interviewees after six months in their respective home environment should outweigh such methodological limitation and will be crucial for understanding the context-dependent ‘endemic fluidity of meaning’ (Bauman, 1978:229, as cited in Davidson, 2006). Such longitudinal research design and its temporal triangulation is based on my museum forum model’s conceptual expansion.

In addition to the longitudinal in-depth narrative interviews, which generate multiple layers of narrative and meaning, additional methods will be used to further contextualise the qualitative material.

**Narrative Examples**

Visitors’ stories start revealing insights into the dialogical encounter of multiple narratives during the museum visit as proclaimed in the museum forum model I referred to at the beginning of my presentation. The following examples are not meant to define and isolate narrative categories but to highlight my line of enquiry with the ‘back-and-forth of studying parts in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to parts’ (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000: 286) as the main characteristics of the critical hermeneutic approach I am following in this thesis.

My first interviewee was Paul, 31 years, from New York, USA. He works as a financial lawyer and visited New Zealand and Te Papa with his fiancée on their honeymoon.

**The narrative self in cross-cultural dialogue**

*We took off our shoes and walked into the little house and looked at all that. It always amazes me how cultures retain information.*
I mean writing is a really cool thing, but it takes a lot of being able to stay in one place and have a fairly complex society for it so it pops up. Anyway, the sort of non-character ways of retaining information that the hut embodies, that the pylons are the ancestors and by looking at them you can recall your history, I mean it’s an interesting memory device. I suppose in computer terms it’s a very ‘lossy’ way of doing things, losing information over time, but it keeps at least the highlights for you and it keeps them really present. I mean I guess one of the things that came up while I was looking at those structures was that these are very connected societies that have a very close connection to predecessors and to the community. You are sort of necessarily in the community because, one you are small, and two because you have been sort of commonality that we don’t really have anymore…it was sort of neat to see how you…would always be exposed to history at all times. Whereas when I think about now, think about even my home, I mean it’s furniture, it’s flat walls…it’s syntactic, it’s not symbolic. I mean it’s a ‘there’ it’s not a ‘what’. Whereas you know the columns it’s all ‘what’, it’s information in itself, it’s not a syntactic device…you know we live in a much more alienated society now where I may have a picture, I think I have a picture somewhere, of my grandparents in the apartment but I mean it’s not present. I mean the name ‘Sony’ is probably more present than the names of any of my parents. I guess that is what occurred to me when I was looking at the building.

The narrative encounter of self and display

I can’t think of any other museums that are particularly similar. I have probably been to a few Native American Indian artefact museums. They all seem very out of context. One of the things that stopped me pointing out that was one of the jade weapons…and those were not really interesting, because they are sort of an artefact…they are a dead thing. They are a thing that’s outside of context now. They are not really a living thing. Whereas the stories that were, you know the story of the creation, the explanation and the understanding of how earthquakes happen and the explanation of how the islands came to be, those are still at least to some extent living things.
They are things that can still have an impact on the world rather than just looking at them and reading the inscription. That makes them more – I guess the trite way of saying would be a more interactive experience, but probably the better way would be it’s a more ‘writerly’ experience in that it’s information that once you have it you can interact with it. It will be something that at some point in the future I can imagine bringing into a conversation with somebody else. Whereas you know a life-size mock-up of a canoe that was used to travel between islands – I am not really sure how to use that. It’s interesting information, being a sailor, to see how the boats were built and what not, but what was more interesting was the presentation of the information in a you know, I guess the story in a useful way.

The narrative encounter of self and tour host
I don’t think I would have gleaned that information otherwise. I mean just because it was something that he made a point of and explained, the governance structure of the museum, it made clear that this is something that was being presented by the people themselves rather by somebody else. In general I think I really appreciated having the guide and the basic overview. I mean a lot of the things that we saw are things that walking around the museum you see anyway, but some of the context I don’t think we would have gotten. Like the fact that everything to the sea-side is Maori culture and everything to the city-side is white person or mixed cultures is something I don’t think I would have even gleaned if somebody hadn’t stopped and told me. Those connections are the ones that I think I wouldn’t have made immediately. I mean it’s a really neat structure, and it was a good way to put at least some parts of the building into perspective.
Bibliography


