



**HAL**  
open science

## Museology and the Problem of Interiority

Palmyre Pierroux

► **To cite this version:**

Palmyre Pierroux. Museology and the Problem of Interiority. Making National Museums: Setting the Frames, 26-28 February, 2007, Linköping, Sweden. 7 p. hal-00190024

**HAL Id: hal-00190024**

**<https://telearn.hal.science/hal-00190024>**

Submitted on 23 Nov 2007

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Museology and the Problem of Interiority

Palmyre Pierroux  
InterMedia, University of Oslo, Norway  
palmyre@intermedia.uio.no

Museum and culture studies traditionally approach social issues related to national museum narratives by critically analyzing the historical development and orderings of collections and their functions. Studies may investigate museums' representational practices in interpretations of the 'other,' for example, or the role of official and state narratives in history museums' constructions of national identity, or scientific paradigms in natural history museums' orderings and material culture. Often these histories are told from the perspectives of 'insiders' who relate the motives of actors engaged in producing narratives of a national character, namely, collectors, state authorities and museum founders (Roberts 1997).

However, the *consumption* of narratives is typically not included in these accounts. While perspectives on national museums may acknowledge that visitors bring their identities, memories, and previous knowledge into the museum experience, meaning making and identity formation are not the analytical focus. As a consequence, conceptualizations of visitor agency often remain implicit and under-theorized in analyses of how national museums 'make new realities thinkable' (Bennett 2005). The purpose of this paper is to develop a perspective on visitors' agency that moves away from a focus on 'practices of inwardness' and 'kinds of interiority, in other words what goes on 'inside' the individual in entanglements with museum objects, to instead locate experience in the entanglements themselves.

# Museology and the Problem of Interiority

## Introduction

Museum and culture studies traditionally approach contemporary social issues related to national museum narratives by critically analyzing the historical development and orderings of collections and their functions. Studies may investigate museums' representational practices in interpretations of the 'other' (see Farago and Mann 2006), for example, or the role of official and state narratives in history museums' constructions of national identity (Wertsch 2002), or scientific paradigms in natural history museums' orderings and material culture (Knell 2000). Often these histories are told from the perspectives of 'insiders' who relate the motives of actors engaged in producing narratives of a national character, namely, collectors, state authorities and museum founders (Roberts 1997). However, the consumption of narratives is typically not included in these accounts. While historical and social science perspectives on national museums may acknowledge that visitors bring their identities, memories, and previous knowledge into the museum experience, problems of actors' meaning making and identity formation are not the analytical focus. As a consequence, conceptualizations of visitor agency often remain implicit and under-theorized in analyses of how national museums "make new realities thinkable" (Bennett 2005).

At the same time, it is apparent that perspectives on the nature of relations between objects and persons do shape notions of agency and mediation in museological investigations. Preziosi (2006), for example, speaks of early museums' aims to improve the minds and values of the working class through exposure to art and curiosities previously reserved for the elite, Duncan (1995) describes how public museums have been intertwined with moral ideals and civilizing rituals from their very inception, and Bennett (2005) discusses the ordering of relations between objects and persons in terms of enabling different kinds of interiority. Tellingly, in these studies and in museology in general, agency is analytically and empirically explored in terms of the productive power of museums, not visitors. This trend has been the subject of critique in recent research (McTavish 2006; Trodd 2003).

This paper takes up the critique of museological approaches that situate agency in museum expertise and practices of cultural objecthood rather than in visitors' encounters. Specifically, I take up from a sociocultural perspective the tensions between attributing museum objects an agency that is provisional, in flux, and reconfigurable while at the same time envisaging the effect of museum object on self in terms of a direct, unmediated process. The purpose of this paper is to develop a perspective on visitors' agency that moves away from a focus on 'practices of inwardness' and 'kinds of interiority, in other words what goes on 'inside' the individual in entanglements with museum objects, to instead locate experience in the entanglements themselves. In this way, it is proposed, it may be possible to analytically and empirically situate the narrative performance of museums in the public sphere.

The discussion is organized as follows. First, I explore the concept of interiority in psychology and its implications for understanding relations between objects and the ways in which they are experienced. I then introduce a sociocultural perspective on the significance of mediated activity and the social origins of mind in order to extend the concept of interiority, drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978), Bakhtin (1986) and Wertsch (1985; 2002). I conclude by considering the potential of a dialogic, sociocultural approach to narrative for studies of public and social discourse within but also outside of national museums.

## Interiority and Methodological Implications

Interiority is a general term that refers to the inner nature of mental and spiritual life, inviting associations with a range of psychological perspectives on human development and behaviour from the past century. These include Wundt's introspective psychology in the 1880s, Jung's theory of symbols and shared archetypes in a collective unconscious in the 1930s and 40s, and Piaget's concept of autistic thought from the 1950s. However, as Vygotsky (1978) points out, a shared characteristic of psychological theories that focus on internal, mental processes is a method of research that implicitly, if not explicitly relies on a stimulus–response framework. This framework serves the purpose of providing a context for the researcher to develop descriptions of processes "presumed to have been elicited by the stimulus" (Vygotsky 1978, p. 59). Although interpretations of the consequences of a response may vary, research aimed at uncovering interiority processes will apply variations of this approach. This means that psychological phenomena are ultimately explained as products of individual mental structures.

How is a stimulus-response framework apparent in museum research? Much of the research in visitor and learning studies is influenced by this methodological approach, for example, grounded in behaviourist and constructivist perspectives on human learning and development. There is a political aspect to this focus as well, in that quantitative methods used to assess learning results, or what Bennett (2005) calls museums' 'civic yield,' scientifically address problems of accountability and the need to secure government funding for museums as educational institutions (Lindauer 2005).

In art museum research, notions of interiority are intertwined with long traditions of reception theories. Here, aesthetic response is equated with cognitive activity, and relations between perception, object and the beholder's experience are explored as such (see Kesner 2006). Emphasis is placed on universal, ahistorical aspects of an object's formal characteristics, the structure and organization of which constitute its essence in immediate and unmediated reception. Fredric Jameson describes this as "some 'pre-established harmony' between the structures of the mind (and ultimately of the brain) and the order of the outside world" (1972, p. 110). Interestingly, although newer museology is more interested in 'network' approaches from the social sciences than in generating verifiable learning results, questions of what constitutes 'reception' seem to be similarly based on the premise of an unmediated, cognitive response to objects. This premise often remains *implicit*, however, for as Knox et al. point out, "researchers are not primarily interested in individuals at all, but in the dynamics of certain kinds of network structure . . . most of these cultural studies have not used ethnography, but have instead concentrated on historical case studies using documentary data" (2005, p. 13).

Furthermore, the notion of a direct correspondence between museum object and beholder's perception is often at the core of museology investigations into how the collecting and ordering of objects in art museums affects cultural competence and networks of art production and consumption. In Bennett's research on the production of cultural objecthood in national historical museums, there is interest in "...whether, and, if so, how the forms of objecthood that are produced by museums are characterized by a similar internal complexity that gives rise to similarly complex and dynamic *forms of interiority* on the part of persons who become entangled with them" (2005, p. 8). On the whole, I maintain that embodied in approaches to analyzing the roles of national museums in producing a collective identity and public memory is a cognitivist understanding of relations between objects and persons.

## Mediation Concept

How might a concept of interiority be 'extended' to analytically and empirically embrace the social and cultural sphere? From a sociocultural perspective, the concept of *mediation* developed by

Vygotsky and others is central to overcoming behaviourism's problematic stimulus–response model. Rather than severing the active subject from the world of objects in a stimulus-response framework, sociocultural perspectives analyze cognition as "individuals–acting–with–mediational–means" (Wertsch 1991, p. 12). This means that relations between human action and the cultural, institutional, and historical settings in which action occurs are always conceived as mediated (Wertsch et al. 1995). From infancy, humans first participate in their surroundings, and semiotic, cultural 'tools,' particularly language, mediate their actions and meaning making. Human cognition thus develops through processes of participating, negotiating, and interacting in cultural and social practices. This is what researchers mean when they speak of the 'social origins of mind' (Polman 2006).

The essential role of culturally developed tools in mediating understanding is fundamental to what is referred to as the sociocultural tradition. Therefore, in museums, a sociocultural perspective situates processes of interiority in the social sphere by focusing on naturally occurring human activity in encounters with museum artefacts. Importantly, this perspective has methodological implications, in that human activity - and not products of mental structures - is the unit of analysis. Rather than behaviourist analyses of how external factors stimulate response in the brain, ethnographic methods are used to understand how and whether cultural tools and artefacts are made relevant in social interactions and other forms of public discourse. Consequently, analyses of human action are obliged to include observations of the specific social, linguistic, and historically variable settings. It is in this way that the social sphere enters into analyses of encounters with museum objects, making it possible to situate museum visitors within a spatio-temporal context.

## Narrative as a Mediating Tool

What are some of the mediating tools afforded by museum settings? The museum's architecture, objects, orderings, exhibitions, thematic content, practices of looking, conversations, physical interactions, labels, websites, podcasts, blogs, catalogues and other texts are some of the resources that may mediate experience. An intrinsic aspect of many of these affordances is that of narrative. Accordingly, emphasis is often placed in museum and culture studies on the *narrative performance* of museums. How may narrative performance be understood from a sociocultural perspective?

Museum research often deals with narrative as a cognitive instrument, wielded by museums to mould and fashion the beliefs and behaviours of their visitors. In other words, narrative research often operates with a transmission–absorption model of learning, attempting to get inside individual minds to determine and improve the affect of museum narratives on their experiences, behaviours, and interpretations (Roberts 1997). It is precisely this approach to narrative that Wertsch (2002) addresses and unpacks in his analysis of Soviet ideology in Russian national museums. In his critique of institutional perspectives on narration in national museums, Wertsch applies a sociocultural perspective in order to distinguish between what he calls *narrative production* and *narrative consumption*.

First, Wertsch makes distinctions between kinds of narratives in museums according to their functions and characteristics. He identifies specific narratives that are produced to relate historical events and the characteristics, and points to the 'schematic templates' that these stories of national identity often share. Second, Wertsch draws on Bakhtin to argue the dialogical function of these narratives and sheds light on how visitors master and appropriate meanings that emerge in their encounters with museum exhibitions (Wertsch 2002). Mastery is a term that describes 'knowing how to use' historically and culturally developed narratives and forms of knowledge, and points to how people's skills in reproducing this knowledge renders them legitimate participants in social systems. Appropriation, although intrinsically linked to mastery, implies a personal stake in the meanings put forth, what Bakhtin (1986) refers to as the "expressive aspect" of utterances. Appropriation stems from Bakhtin's use of the term *prisvoenie*: (pri) "forward" and (svoi) a

reflexive form "on oneself," or "to make one's own" (Wertsch 2002, p. 120). In appropriation, specific narratives, as cultural tools, thus become more identity than knowledge resources, "a means for anchoring or constructing one's sense of who one is" (ibid). Central to Wertsch's argument is that it is possible for people to master national narratives without appropriating them as their own. Therefore, analysis of interaction and discourse *in situ* makes it possible to discern 'who owns the meaning' in the consumption of narratives.

This is illustrated empirically in Wertsch's interviews with museum visitors and Russian citizens. The dialogic function of national narratives is revealed as embedded in concrete discourses that people master as part of their national identity, but also as open to contestation, negotiation, appropriation, and in some cases, 'disappropriation' (Bakhtin 1986; Wertsch 2002). It is in this sense that mastery and appropriation are useful in conceptualizing the narrative performance of national museums. In understanding narrative as embedded in concrete discourses that persons may or may not choose to appropriate, visitors are endowed with agency not found in cognitive, transmission theories of reception (Pierroux 2003). Instead of ideological demonstrations or (ultimately) linguistic structures, then, narratives enter into human activity as mediational means, "part of the 'cultural tool kit' that characterizes a sociocultural setting" (Wertsch 2002, p. 57). It is through analyzing the dialogic function of narratives in national museums, that is, how narratives are made relevant in specific socio-historical settings, that the performative aspects of narrative production and consumption are revealed (Pierroux 2006, in press).

## Networks and Multiple Timescales

Although analysis of interaction and discourse may shed light on how museum narratives and other tools mediate visitor experience and meaning making, ethnographic methods do not necessarily entail a micro-approach to museum research. Ethnographic methods are also used to understand how networks of relations make the world meaningful to people (Knox et al. 2005), and there is increasing interest in network theories in museum research. In particular, Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) is used to examine the processes of making national museums, the specific forms of expertise that produce museum 'objects,' and how forms of cultural objecthood give rise to similarly complex forms of interiority (Bennett 2005). Artefacts, from policy documents to orderings of museum objects, play an important role in all of these processes, and Latour (1999) refers to the significance of analyzing both human and 'non-human' agents in actor networks.

However, from a sociocultural perspective, it may be argued that intentionality, a uniquely human characteristic, is not captured in network theories that confer an agency to 'non-human' artefacts that is on par with humans. Furthermore, it has been proposed that network theories operate with *spatial* metaphors, tracing human activity and public memory in spatially organized sets of data and entanglements of artefacts (Middleton & Brown (2005). In contrast, sociocultural approaches are equally concerned with the temporal aspects of situated activities, that is, how human intentions, cultural artefacts, and institutional frameworks, comprising multiple timescales and individual trajectories, intersect *in situ* (Lemke 2000; Ludvigsen et al. forthcoming).

The point to be made here is that the making of national museums involves multiple timescales and activities at individual, social and institutional levels. Sociocultural approaches are sensitive to the task of choosing a unit of analysis that corresponds with the genetic domain under inquiry. In this way, problems of interiority at an individual level are not conflated with institutionalizing processes and the fabricating of cultural objecthood in national museums.

## Interiority in the Public Sphere

In this paper I have considered the problem of interiority from a sociocultural perspective. I have argued that visitor agency is often neglected in museology discourse, and that the experience of museum objects is framed, implicitly if not explicitly, in terms of a stimulus-response. Vygotsky's concept of mediating tools was introduced as a means of shifting focus from a transmission model of cognition to a concern with the context of the physical and social arena in which museum visitors act and interact with each other and museum collections. I have pointed to the significance of narrative as a mediating tool in museums, and the possibility of mastering but not appropriating institutionalized discourses. This dialogical understanding of narrative allows for a concept of visitor agency in processes of meaning making. Finally, the problem of conflating types and levels of activity was raised, drawing attention to the analytical and empirical challenges of museum research.

A concern with visitor agency is particularly important in understanding national museums today, as new forms of social software - blogs, wikis, podcasts, and YouTube - are being used to shape museum discourse in the public sphere. Just as visitors' agency within museums may be understood in terms of a mediated, dialogical relationship to objects and their narratives, so too may this understanding be extended to relations between visitors and national museums in a larger cultural context. Therefore, museology needs a concept of interiority grounded in a sociocultural concern with the connections that visitors construct between disciplinary content, narratives, objects and experiences within national museums and, equally important, how these intersect with experiences outside museums. In light of the access to knowledge resources that we have in our global society today, extending notions of interiority into the public sphere seems an important task for national museums setting the frames for their positions as cultural institutions in the future.

## References

- Bakhtin, M. M. 1986. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bennett, Tony. 2005. "Civic Laboratories: Museums, Cultural Objecthood, and the Governance of the Social." In *CRESC Working Paper Series*, Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change. Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Duncan, Carol. 1995. *Civilizing Rituals*. London: Routledge.
- Farago, Claire and Nancy Mann eds. 2006. *Transforming Images. New Mexican Santos in-between Worlds*. University Park: Penn State University Press.
- Kesner, Ladislav. 2006. "The Role of Cognitive Competence in the Art Museum Experience." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21:4-19.
- Knell, Simon J. 2000. *The Culture of English Geology, 1815-1851: A Science Revealed Through its Collecting*. Ashgate.
- Knox, Hannah, Mike Savage and Penny Harvey. 2005. "Social Networks and Spatial Relations: Networks as Method, Metaphor, and Form." In *CRESC Working Paper Series*, Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change. Manchester: University of Manchester.
- Latour, Bruno. 1999. "On Recalling ANT." In *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Lemke, Jay L. 2000. "Across the Scales of Time: Artifacts, Activities, and Meanings in Ecosocial Systems." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 7(4):273-290.
- Lindauer, Margaret. 2005. "What to Ask and How to Answer: A Comparative Analysis of Methodologies and Philosophies of Summative Exhibit Evaluation." *Museum & Society* 3(3):137-152.
- Ludvigsen, Sten, Ingvill Rasmussen, Ingeborg Krange, Anne Moen and David Middleton. forthcoming. "Temporalities of Learning in Intersecting Trajectories of Participation." In *Learning Across Sites: New Tools, Infrastructures and Practices*, eds. Sten Ludvigsen, Andreas Lund and Roger Säljö. Amsterdam: Pergamon, Elsevier Science Ltd.
- McTavish, Lianne. 2005. "Thinking Through Critical Museum Studies." University of New Brunswick. Electronic resource, accessed June 21, 2006. <http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca:8000/archive/00000024/>
- Middleton, David and Steven D. Brown. 2005. *The Social Psychology of Experience*. London: Sage.
- Pierroux, Palmyre. 2003. "Communicating Art in Museums." *Journal of Museum Education* 28(1):3-7.
- Pierroux, Palmyre. 2006, in press. "Guiding Meaning on Guided Tours. Narratives of Art and Learning in Museums " In *Inside Multimodal Composition*, ed. Andrew Morrison: Hampton Press.
- Polman, Joseph L. 2006. "Mastery and Appropriation as Means to Understand the Interplay of History Learning and Identity Trajectories." *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 15(2):221-259.
- Preziosi, Donald. 2006. "The Museological Object: Art Museums and the Staging of Knowledge." Seminar, University of Oslo, Norway: November 17.
- Roberts, Lisa C. 1997. *From Knowledge to Narrative. Educators and the Changing Museum*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Trodd, Colin. 2003. "The Discipline of Pleasure; Or, How Art History Looks at the Art Museum." *Museum and Society* 1(1):17-29.
- Vygotsky, Lev Semenovitch. 1978. *Mind in Society. The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, James. 1985. *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, James. 2002. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wertsch, James, Pablo Del Rio and Amelia Alvarez. 1995. *Sociocultural Studies of Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.