Book Review

Avagyan, A., and Winterbotham, N. (eds.), 2018. *Museums and Written Communication: Tradition and Innovation*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. ISBN: 1-5275-0755-6, hardback, 258 pp.

The book under review is a fresh take on the core issues facing museum professionals about the use of written text either on paper or on electronic format for interpretation, communication and learning in the museum. It is an edited volume comprising a foreword and thirty chapters -twenty-six in English and four in French- written by authors representing various museum contexts and geographic locations (Armenia, Austria, Botswana, Brussels, California, Croatia, Denmark, Indonesia, Jerusalem, Korea, Portugal, Singapore, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). The papers evolved from the International Council of Museums Committee for Education and Cultural Action (ICOM/CECA) Annual Conference held in 2012 in Yerevan in Armenia.

The essays are aimed at an international audience and reflecting a convergence of developments that taken together contribute to an awareness of the role text plays in framing the museum's identity (starting from the logo) and the visitors' interpretation efforts. The museum text contextualises objects for visitors in the form of catalogues, descriptive panels, audio-visual materials, teaching resources, and other. The essays mainly give suggestions on how to offer differentiated texts and tailor the paper-based and digital text to simplify the acquisition of new knowledge.

I will talk about selected chapters and present the take-away messages from the four chapters in French. The first essay, which I believe is a notable contribution to the discussion, is by Meereboer. The main argument is that 'a text can no longer be static, […] information and meaning are continuously on the move and in transition' (14). Therefore, museum professionals should 'speak (and write) the language of today and tomorrow' (34) and know their audiences well enough to respond to their needs in ways that enable visitors to converse and share 'stories that anyone can tell and share in their own way' (19).

Fuchs exposes the role social media and particularly Twitter can play in audience engagement and development. The author presents the benefits of reaching out to online communities and enriching the offerings with user-generated content -something many museums are already successful at-. The suggestions are to allow for and encourage 'a flow of themed, relevant and engaging discussions' (57), 'to tweet about what goes on behind the scenes, thus letting your audiences be part of it' (59), and to sustain long-term engagement by replying to every question and being attentive to the trending concerns. The essay has resonance to the 'Engaging diverse audiences online through an international language' research presented in the *Museums (em)Power Conference 2018* (organised by the University of Leicester). The discussion problematized the use of mediated language and the impact of assumed knowledge. Digital text can be part of the museum's efforts to democratise curatorship and diversify the outlets for communication and engagement.

Reeve presents a comprehensive review on how the use of text was developed in the last three decades making the transition from didactic, authoritative and passive to negotiated, personalised and active. Taking into consideration that 'text is an event' (65), exhibition design could embody aesthetic elements that favour pluralism, discontinuity and heterogeneity. The author then challenges us to rethink whether this approach has become too relativist or not.

Winterbotham explores answers to the question 'Why use texts at all?'. The main argument is that learning is a dynamic process and visitors' memories and emotions play a pivotal part in constituting the museum experience meaningful. The author critiques cases where text was misused and the intended message did not come through, and calls for simplicity, directness and playfulness.

Samis uses a metaphor about water to illustrate that the absence of interpretative text might lead to intellectual drought and the overuse of it to overloading the meaning-making process. The idea is that text should 'give visual reinforcement to each point as it is made, to anchor it in the visitor's consciousness and then allow him or her to build further understandings from there' (155).

Next, Gafni-Peleg's essay deals with instructions and how visitors are surrounded by them both onsite and online. The case study shows how different tones, styles and prompts stimulate different reactions and emotional responses. The discussion moves on to the socio-political aspects of expecting conformity or disobedience in order to explain why it is important to be critical and reflective of how written communication is materialised.

I found the following three essays on museum learning highly informative. Bede describes how storybooks with flaps, fold-outs, embossed illustrations and pockets hiding surprises can enrich the learning experience for children and young people. 'They offer opportunities for longer viewing and deeper investigation or add a new interpretation, while the main storyline is not overburdened and remains accessible' (82). According to Bede, the tactile nature of the museum experience will not lose ground to digital technologies because of the intimacy and the imagination-activation involved.

Boritz talks about an under-researched age group of visitors, the pre-schoolers, because 'even the youngest can benefit from an educational programme at a museum' (93). The activities for this particular age group should be focused on simple and various hands-on activities that build on the children's fascination with digital technologies. The museum can be transformed into a place of discovery where children can touch, feel and play as part of a holistic experience with pre-visit and post-visit activities too.

Eun Mi's essay sheds light on multicultural learning (c.f. Ruth, 2010) by using discovery boxes -containing various objects- designed to travel and share knowledge about minority communities. The chapter proposes cultural mediation and appreciation by raising children's sensitivity and 'awareness of cultural diversity in an increasingly multicultural society and promote their authentic experiences of various cultures through actual objects and five-sense experiences' (210). The discovery boxes serve as *mobile museums* because they expose children to the different lifestyles and are easy to maintain.

The first essay in French deals with measuring the impact of written text as a prompt for emotional engagement and conversing with the objects. Structuring the experience around emotions is a sine qua non condition in order to yield not only recreational but also learning benefits -activating both cognitive and affective mechanisms-. By understanding the ways visitors interact with the objects on that level, exhibition design may better fulfil the expectations and written text may better frame content exploration.

The second essay talks about games, designed for children and teenagers, implemented to enrich the museum experience and scaffold learning. The games should have clear objectives, include visuals and allow errors, feedback-exchange and self-monitoring performance.

Next, the history of museum learning is presented to pinpoint the changes the field has undergone since the 1950s (c.f. Coxall, 1999, Hooper-Greenhill, 1995) and show -using illustrative examples- how the shift from outcomes to unmediated processes occurred placing an emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between the museum and the visitor.

What follows is an expository essay on the Louvre museum and the provision to improve accessibility and the ergonomic conditions. Written communication comprises the interpersonal, contractual, pragmatic, representational, didactic and promotional dimensions of the audience engagement agenda. The aim is to carry out a decomposition of the physical and intellectual pathways to question the dialogue established between the museum and its visitors.

All in all, the workshop-style suggestions and the theoretical models presented in this volume have practical implications for museum professionals and policy makers in re-designing their text-based communication strategies to embrace multi-vocality and shared responsibility,

ongoing transition and multimodality. My understanding is that text will remain strong on the forefront of audience engagement but its use for the appropriation and interpretation of heritage will take new shapes. These will come as a response to the demands of the post-modern visitor, the changes digital technologies bring and the realities of the museum's role as an agent of social change.

The chapters are quite diverse but the thread that unites them is the message about written communication itself: the museum is a polyphonic and ever-changing piece of text (c.f. Ravelli, 2006). No matter how fragmented this message may appear, it is indeed difficult to do justice to the multitude of aspects that the volume explores as a resource of great interest to museum professionals and researchers alike. The museum text should be structured around a well-thought-out plot with simple, stimulating and open to negotiation messages. However, as more and more museums break away from the didactic grand narratives and consciously open-up to the fragmented personal narratives, we cannot stop wondering if the pendulum has swung too far on one side or not. In other words, whose stories should the museum text be designed to tell, with whom and for whom?

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References

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