

Museumchronotopics: on the representation of the past in museums

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Abstract

Many visitor studies make social background variables the central point of departure to explain participation patterns. How the past is 'staged', however, also has an influence on those to whom it appeals. This relational perspective calls for new conceptual tools to grasp empirical reality. Inspired by the historical philosophy of Georg Simmel and the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin a number of concepts which enable us to grasp the subtle relationship between museum presentations and visitors are presented. Bakhtin's notion of chronotopy serves as a key concept. By linking museum presentations and visitor perceptions with each other, it is also possible to identify certain tendencies within the contemporary museum landscape.

Introduction

Museum visitors cannot properly be studied in isolation from the museum's historical mediation of the past. In order to understand patterns of visitor participation at historical museums we must take account of the different forms of museum presentation. Many visitor studies make social background variables a central point of departure for explaining participation patterns. Such studies, which are absolutely necessary, start from premises which have a strong empirical foundation and, as such, they offer us a wealth of data about museum meanings. However, they often fail to take account of the ways in which museums deal with the presentation of history. Museum meanings cannot be explained by reference to visitors alone for how the past is 'staged' has an influence on those to whom it appeals. Making such a relational perspective our point of departure for research calls for new conceptual tools that will grasp this empirical reality. The purpose of this essay, which is inspired by the historical philosophy of Georg Simmel (1877/1892) and the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) is to establish a number of concepts which will enable us to grasp the subtle relation between museum presentations and their visitors.

I begin by exploring Simmel's idea of historical mediation and by showing how best the concept may be elaborated for the field of museum studies. Once we have a clear understanding of Simmel's view of history, we can see that it has important implications for visitor studies. Thus, I argue that there are problems with the research design of 'classical' visitor studies because, for the most part, they do not take account of historical mediation. In considering these problems I go on to elaborate and to explain my own perspective on research design for museum studies. I introduce Bakhtin's concept of chronotopy and argue that it is useful for analysing the relation between displays and visitor perceptions. Three main chronotopics, which I have identified in the museums of Belgium, are introduced and explored. I conclude with an analysis of the display of *In Flanders Fields*, a museum about the First World War which is situated in the small Belgian town of Ieper (Ypres). I argue that by means of a micro-analysis of the display, we can identify different chronotopics in one museum. My point is that in developing our appreciation of the polyphonic character of those spatio-temporal grids we may also show how the museum connects with a differentiated public.

Historical mediation

If something is important, then importance must be 'ascribed' or 'attached' to it; in other words, it is important because the historian is interested in it (Simmel, 1977/1892).

It is an irony of history that Simmel's¹ words apply to himself, for twentieth-century sociology textbooks tended to marginalize him in relation to other so-called founding fathers of the discipline, such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Only in the last two decades has Simmel's work come to sociological prominence. In the late-modern period when fragmentation, polyphony and hybridity have become prevailing metaphors for social phenomena, Simmel's micro-observations have begun to be appreciated. At the turn of the last century this idiosyncratic sociologist was already speaking about social networks and their fundamentally hybrid nature. Today this idea has been happily embraced by network-thinkers such as Manuel Castells, Bruno Latour, Rudi Fuchs and the actor-network school. According to these sociologists an event only acquires meaning when it is connected to a network, and only within the boundaries of that configuration. This tautological account also applies to history, or rather to historical consciousness. Indeed something or someone only acquires historical importance, when this importance is ascribed retroactively. However, not everyone has such intermediating power. Where historical 'facts' are concerned, the historian, for example, plays a crucial intermediate role between the present and the past. Simmel describes this in no uncertain terms in his book *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (*The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, 1892/1977). Whilst the originality of Simmel's argument has, by now, disappeared into the folds of history he remains for us, nevertheless, a discerning thinker of modern history. Despite his cosmological framework, the principles of his theory have a contemporary relevance; he was one of the first to unsettle historical doxa by means of pronouncements which established their relativity. Nowadays such an utterance may seem to be all too evident or to be a well worn cliché. But we should not forget that Simmel formulated this in the early 1890s.

However, the concern of this paper is not to elaborate Simmel's theoretical framework but to show how his ideas may be developed in relation to museums. I want to emphasize the importance of his stress on mediating between present and past because, for Simmel, it is not *what* is said, but *how* something is said that determines the possibility of a connection between a historical event and the present (Simmel, 1977: 65). Moreover, causality, consistency and resemblances can only be experienced, not objectively observed. Though the possibility of grasping particular facts and historical events does exist, their mutual coherence is the result of interpretation. In other words, a causal relation and consistency cannot be deductively inferred from empirical facts (Simmel, 1977: 45). These are, to use Simmel's own expression, retroactively 'woven', and it is the nature of the weave which determines if the events of the past permeate into the present. Thus the weaver, so to speak, is an important mediating link between different periods of time. He or she constitutes an indispensable translation-centre between present and past. Simmel appreciated the increasing importance of the historian in all of this for his own time. Thus, whilst an existing 'practising memory' was a component of ritual traditions, historical science had gained importance as an intermediary. Within the truth paradigm of modernity the professional historian and his or her science were, more and more, becoming an obligatory passage to the days gone by. However, as the twentieth century drew to a close it was becoming apparent that historian was in increasing competition with other 'memory workers' such as the many heritage brokers. It may be that in a secularized world it is the latter who are the heirs to the ritual traditions and to the traditional experience of history. In a professional manner they organize an economy of experience of the past.

Visitor studies: towards a relational view

In arguing that the presentation of history is a matter of mediation I do not, of course, mean to say that this is only the case for professional historians and heritage brokers. The museum visitor is also an active interpreter of history. To characterize the visitor as active is to make

a distinction between *perception* and *reception*. Whereas the latter notion refers to a passive taking in of phenomena, the former indicates an active experience: a museum visitor observes by means of a viewing grid or schema that he or she has acquired through education or socialization. The same may also be said for the so-called 'passionate viewer', who is 'blindly' carried away, overwhelmed by the presentation of a historical event. The relation between subject and object, between the viewer, reader, listener and the museum display, consists of a double synchronous movement of *active passion* and *passive action*. The French sociologist Antoine Hennion describes that movement with regard to music (Hennion 1993; Gomart and Hennion, 1999) but in a way that can be extended to the museum. For, the visitor has to develop all kinds of skills in a more or less active manner, before he or she can enjoy passively. The point is that the way something is offered, can help to generate the development of appropriate skills. Thus, intercourse with museum presentations may be described as a subtle 'interweaving' between manipulation and being manipulated. The visitor may develop skills, practices and a vocabulary, only to be overpowered finally by that which is on display. The quintessential museum experience is, therefore, the result of a reflexive acting and, at the same time, an unreflective undergoing of the visit.

My own research² in the Huis van Alijn (House of Alijn), a museum of urban folk culture in Ghent (Belgium) has made it clear that this double movement between 'active' and 'passive' can be established by observing people in the course of their museum visiting. Filmed recordings of museum visits have shown how participants slow down or stand still when they recognize certain artefacts, or when a historical context is offered, possibly by the attendants. Our appreciation of this double movement has been especially sharpened by one particular room in which the museum visitor, him or herself, is invited to identify the original uses of objects. This room, the Identification Room, forms part of the standard museum visit, so that every visitor normally passes through it. In the room stands a table with objects from the collection placed upon it. The origins and former uses of some objects are known by the museum staff, but in other cases the original use or meaning is a riddle, both for visitors and for the staff. So, visitors are invited to write down on a piece of paper what they think they are about. As an extension of this public space the staff have taken suitcases full of artefacts to homes for elderly people so that residents may talk about the objects and their experiences of using them in the past. As another extension of The Identification Room objects were publicized in newspapers so that readers could send in their own stories about the artefacts. These stories were, in turn, collected and displayed at the museum, so that new visitors could read about the different interpretations. So far, my findings have suggested that this alternation between passive viewing and active interpreting serves to intensify the usage of the whole museum. Thus, for example, objects in a display cabinet, which are less accessible in the Huis van Alijn, are scrutinized further as visitors pass through The Identification Room. In other words, there are museum presentations which transform the viewer into an active participant: he or she starts co-constructing the meanings of things. Or in the words of Gomart and Hennion:

...a sculpture exhibit, does not bring together already existing objects, subjects and social groupings – rather, this is a conjunctural event in which the relevant objects, subjects, and social groupings are co-produced (Gomart and Hennion, 1999: 228).

Thus, without an active glance hardly anything is experienced or observed.

Gomart and Hennion's sociological insight derives from Actor Network Theory (ANT) which differs from other sociological approaches such as phenomenology and from more structural approaches such as that which is associated with the well known work of Pierre Bourdieu (1979). ANT sees an individual as a particular and dynamic actor, who can, up to a point, overcome their social background. To put it in our terms: the person is not fixed or imprisoned in their own historical frame. On the contrary, every experience can be a part of an active learning in which the singular actor develops and even re-articulates their personal mode of

attending to the world. In our case this means also that the relationship between museum and society is a dynamic one in which museum displays can always reach out to endow the visitor with new skills which will help him or her in redefining their former perceptual grid. But on the other hand, the museum will also learn from developments in the wider society to construct other presentation formats. The development of viewing and listening skills generates an observation grid for the visitor by means of which the environment is interpreted. Museum presentations may go along with that grid or they may even attempt to change it. In the absence of an 'optimistic' or non-deterministic and dynamic perspective on the social actor, such as that of ANT, the mutability of visitors' frames of reference will always seem to be relatively limited. For it is evident to the sociologist that the spectacles with which reality is viewed, remain to a large extent constructed and fixed by social background characteristics, such as education and schooling, in short by everything which Pierre Bourdieu (1979) refers to as primary (upbringing at home) and secondary (education at school) socialization. Sociologists Gordon Fyfe and Max Ross started from those premises in their research of museum visitors (1996). By means of in-depth interviews with families of different social backgrounds they discovered that the frame of reference for people visiting a local cultural historical museum differs to quite an extent from that of people visiting a museum of fine arts. In the first case they established that those types of people chiefly are looking to locate their own existence within a spatio-temporal framework. Exhibitions in cultural history museums serve as a reading grid to confirm the local embedded-ness of the visitor. The visitors to a regional cultural historical museum, therefore, are mainly focused on the local histories and events of their local community. It is exactly this local 'interwoven-ness' that grants the artefacts on display a significant meaning so that the boundaries of a visitor's own territory are thereby seldom exceeded. In contrast to this case, Fyfe and Ross identify the so-called 'trans-local visitor': the man or woman who looks beyond the local *Gemeinschaft*. The boundary-exceeding approach of a museum for fine arts better fits this segment of the public, because their familiar spatio-temporal viewing grid is reconfirmed by the 'trans-local' context of the artistic institution. The museum serves as a source of inspiration in the quest for new ideas that push back the horizon of the professional fine arts visitor. This visitor, who views the world more easily through 'trans-local' spectacles acquired by virtue of her education, training and profession, is characterized by a degree of relative detachedness from the local (Fyfe and Ross, 1996: 136-147). Thus, to a certain extent, what a museum presents can confirm the habitus of the visitor and can play a role in the construction and social reproduction of identity within specific social strata.

The majority of visitor studies start from the above mentioned premises, namely that there is a causal relation between social background variables and cultural participation. Fyfe and Ross refine that insight by looking at the nature of the local interwoven-ness: e.g. they ask, has the participant always lived in the same place, or is he or she an outsider (Fyfe and Ross, 1996: 136-139)? Social background characteristics as well as the individual's geographical trajectory strongly mark the observation grid of the museum visitor. As such these kinds of studies are beyond reproach, for they provide important insights into visitor participation patterns. However, despite their virtues, the distinction I have made between modes of participation on the one hand, and on the other hand *how* something is presented, rarely comes into view with such studies. For this reason this kind of research has sometimes been overtaken by new developments in the field. For example, some museums now stage the past by means of all kinds of cross-over techniques, whereby so-called high and low culture, international and local frames of reference and so on, cross over each other. Social anthropologist Sharon Macdonald, for one, demonstrates how the Transcultural Galleries at Cartwright Hall in Bradford, England, present a layered image of a local community by means of presentation methods that transcend the distinction between fine arts and crafts. On the other hand, contemporary artists are engaged to intervene at exhibitions (Macdonald, 2003: 6-9). In the case of Belgium this is again illustrated by the *Huis van Alijn* where contemporary visual artists, cartoonists, poets, writers and others are called upon to tell the folk history of a town. Such aesthetic presentations certainly presuppose a different public. The visitor is approached at least in a different way, or in terms of our jargon, he or she is addressed by means of another grid of possibilities.

Belgian research in progress

The idea of historical mediation, the relational view of 'activity-passivity' between visitors and objects and, last but not least, the development of more complex displays in museums, suggest the need for an alternative research design if we are to understand the relationship between museums and their visitors. A relational perspective means that you cannot gain complete insight into participation patterns by studying only the visitor, as tends to happen in quantitative surveys and in much of qualitative research. So, it was with this in mind that we decided to conduct in-depth interviews with museum directors, as well as other museum staff, guides and guards, about their aims and their visions for the displays. In a second phase of the research we went on to analyse for ourselves how the past was presented by the institution. We filmed the displays and how visitors interacted with installations. In a final phase we asked participants after their visit if we could make an appointment to conduct at their home, in the following week, an in-depth interview. In this way the research design has helped us to develop a more total, but also complex view of the relationship between museum displays and the visitor. The interviews with museum professionals and visitors were not only about display in the institution, but (of course) also about social background variables, their social network, their conception of cultural heritage, folk culture, art, their interest in history and their travelling habits and experiences. The subject of travel has encouraged us to think in terms of the spatio-temporal grids of museum professionals and visitors. So, it is has proved possible to contrast them with each other, and to see how museum professionals translate their grid into displays.

For the research as a whole, which is ongoing and will be finalized in 2005, we have selected ten heterogeneous cases, including a museum of contemporary art, a museum for folk culture, an ethnographic museum and so on. Holding in mind the ideas of Simmel about historical mediation (not what is presented, but how it is presented) the sample's diversity is proving to be very important. Thus, one hypothesis is that a museum of folk culture can, by means of an appropriate presentation, awake the interest of visitors to a museum of contemporary art. Limited resources have meant that all the cases have been selected from Belgium and we are, therefore, limited to drawing provisional conclusions from our findings. Moreover, so far, we have analyzed only five cases completely and we are aware of the need to be prudent about our visitor interviews. Thus, we focus in this essay on forms of museum display and rather less on the perceptions of the visitors. However, the reader should note that our interviews with visitors are in the back of our mind, while we are presenting our analyses of displays³.

However, whilst our research is still in process the theoretical insights which have begun to emerge may be of use for other researchers, for museum personal and for heritage brokers. In this connection there remains one more important thing to say about our research design. This study is an exercise in theory building rather than theory testing in so far as it is informed by the tradition of what the American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss called *grounded theory* (1967). In such a design there is a close relationship between collecting data, analysing data and theory. Empirical findings can, for example, direct the theoretical search for new concepts whilst, conversely, new concepts can influence the process of data selection and analysis. Concepts are tested in direct confrontation with empirical findings. In so doing, we have tried to get as close as possible to the basic ideas of Glaser and Strauss, namely that a grounded theory must fit the substantive area in which it will be used. It must readily be understandable by laymen concerned with this area (such as museum professionals) (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 237). This way of working has also its consequences for the argument presented in this paper. Empirical findings are interwoven with theoretical ideas. They provide a rationale for new concepts, but at the same time those concepts will have an influence on how we (re-)interpret our research object. That is why it is appropriate to introduce preliminary findings in a theoretical introduction and it is in this spirit that I now proceed to explore the key concepts of this essay.

Towards a chronotopy of the museum

As I have already argued, history and heritage do not simply *appear* in the consciousness of museum visitors. What is perceived as relevant history or heritage, is offered to the visitor as an artefact or as an event of some historical importance. The mediator decides what is worth inheriting so to speak. The occupations of historical mediators, subsidized or not, and perhaps also those of memory workers, official or not, locate what is valuable from the past, and what has historical or eventual relevance, on a scale. In fact we often encounter the latter as argument in exhibition catalogues, discursive presentations of museum collections, introductions to historical documentaries, and so on. What is important about the past is decided by the agenda of the present. Meanwhile, historical events and objects are staged with the dramaturgical means of today. Time and space are said to be the two central ordering principles serving this purpose. Given that, for Western modernity, both dimensions constitute the most important coordinates of human experience that should come as no surprise (Benjamin, 1996). The perception of the past as well as that of everyday events is given meaning within a spatio-temporal grid. In order further to qualify the relationship between museum displays and the visitor we need to refine this frame. The notion of *chronotopy* which derives from Mikhail Bakhtin can help us in this endeavour. Bakhtin, a Russian literary theoretician, used the concept in his posthumously published study of the novel to disentangle different connections between time and space in that literary genre (1981). This neologism means that both dimensions are treated as symmetrical and absolutely interdependent. The experiences of time and space are unconditionally connected and, at least from a theoretical point of view, need to be treated as equivalent analytical concepts. They constitute the observation grid by means of which cultural products, which in the case of Bakhtin were mainly literary, relate to the cultural context within which they are produced as well as perceived. In the case of display theories, visual culture, historical theory, visitor studies and our own empirical observations in Belgium, we can identify at least three general ways of connecting time and space which are of relevance for studying the museum world. They are local time, global time and glocal time.

Local time

A conception of time which is especially relevant to the museum world, and which in the West has constituted a dominant chronotopy, is linear time. History, conceived in this way, is presented as a chronological succession of events that can be clearly placed along a time-line. Formal history still makes use of this time dimension; it may suffice to recall, for example, the time-line from prehistory until the present day that is represented on the walls of elementary or primary school classrooms. However, not only schools, but also quite a lot of museums make use of linear time as a practical guide. The first room of a museum route invariably starts with period x and we end up many years or decades later with artefacts from period $x+1$. The past is almost mathematically surveyable and subdivided into little compartments. Such a mode of presentation makes us experience the past in a certain manner. The past is first and foremost a pluperfect time, meaning a closed period for which the story is fixed. The history of how things actually were is known and no longer permeates into the present, whilst no-one could imagine that a present would still be able to intervene in the past. Chronological narration thus claims an absolute past which in fact is *monochronous*. Such presentation barely tolerates a personal point of view or a particular vision. One cannot touch the past, which is impersonal and sacrosanct. Historical events or heroes receive their importance or grandeur from the very fact that they belong to history. The tautology decrees that the past itself is the source of their 'authentic' reality or value. This form of historical narration functions according to the mechanism of the memorial: the history that is narrated is at the same time memorable or consecrated. The American sociologist of performance art, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, refers to such presentations as *in-context displays*. Objects are shepherded in a discursive regime, whereby it is not their own performative strength, aesthetical value or eloquence that most matters. Rather, artefacts are only (re)animated by the story in which they are introduced or the historical knowledge that is

released about them. In other words, what is displayed is only an illustration of the discourse that is set up (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998: 3).

In an absolute historical presentation whatever is to be known about the artefacts has to be taken as the only 'true' interpretation. The model is based on the classical communication scheme in which a message passes noiselessly from sender to receiver. Such a model presupposes a passive participant who barely interprets, who does not transmute the things, nor mould them to his or her own will. It implies a museum visitor who, for certain, does not inhabit the history or geographical setting in which the event occurs. Such a presentation offers the special advantage of telling a lucid story which provides the viewer with a solid grip. Moreover, it may provide objects with a meaningful frame, for as I have suggested, performative strength lies outside the artefacts which are only given life within their discursive setting. In addition, they derive their historical weight from the place where they are displayed (the museum) and the authorities and experts surrounding them. To explain the success of the chronological narrative line, is a matter research in itself, but one thing may be said without much doubt: from a tender age we are socialized within the idea of causality and chronological succession. The above example of the time line in the classroom is a silent witness to this. The monochronous narration certainly has an important pedagogical and educational value.

The careful unwinding of time over a linear path often goes hand in hand with an equally meticulous spatial delineation. Historical adventures are unwound within sharply delineated places which are locally traceable. The story of that alliance between chronology and geography has been widely described (see for example Gathercole and Lowenthal, 1994). In the romance of the nation state not only historical scientific analysis, but also ethnology has been readily used as an instrument within a geopolitical setting. Soil and people merge together in an inextricable choreography of the *Gemeinschaft*. Historical figures or characters are not coincidental residents of an estate. Rather, they are its inhabitants in the sense that they live in and through their environment. Moreover, the geographical setting lives through the medium of community, for the soil counts as the most important bearer of the tradition and the histories of its inhabitants. Roads, paths, trees and buildings constitute the heritage of the ancestors and the links that connect successive generations with each other. Consequently, moving a road, felling a tree or demolishing a building, constitutes an attack on the past and also on the continuity of the community. Though this chronotopy is no longer taken seriously by the majority of historians and museum personnel, it is hard to deny that it still acts on the sentiment of some museum visitors. Though it may not have to do that much, anymore, with a (geo)political perspective, time and locality are often unconditionally connected. For example, heated discussions regarding a central depot for heritage associations of different parts of a province in Belgium⁴ or, the at times, tedious negotiations of a municipal museum for the loan of works from local museums would all indicate that that is so. The members of heritage associations and people concerned with local (ethnological) museums are often quite attached to their local connections, and sometimes rightly so, as many artefacts become meaningless when they are plucked out of the very environment that impregnates them with meaning. Meanwhile the alliance between time and locality, hence 'Local Time', generates a chronotopy that matters for museum visitors and perhaps chiefly so for 'heritage activists'. Likewise, the spatio-temporal grid remains intact for many 'history-loving souls', when on a larger scale histories are staged inside a town or country. It is, of course, widely known that in the latter two cases chronotopy is quite often exploited for commercial reasons such as city-marketing or the political purposes of the nation state.

Global time

The opposite pole of Local Time is inevitably Global Time. Whether we like it or not, in the last decade the concept of globalization has been popularized as the master key to social analysis. The frequent use of the notion in various contexts and with diverse meanings has rendered the concept into a rather colourless and perhaps negative definition of social change. Thus, globalization often conveys an understanding of social change as the loss of the local. Roots, in the sense of people's local roots, become roads; authentic landscapes, village views, city squares, and other localities evaporate into non-places such as airports, parking lots, uniform

shopping malls and the inevitable MacDonalds. And in the case of the museum world we have an institution such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao. In fact globalization often seems to go hand in hand with that other polyvalent concept from the seventies, Americanization. Here we come to a second, crucial chronotopy, as the experiences of time and space interact with each other in quite a different way within a global setting. The markers of time do not claim authenticity which is tied to the soil, but rather they claim universality. It concerns identical key-points which spread worldwide and thereby install *instantaneous time*. The latter concept of time is borrowed from the English sociologist John Urry. In *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000) he describes the experience of time, amongst other things, as the effect of rapid information and communication means that see to it that similar kinds of information almost simultaneously spread throughout the entire planet. Moreover, within this space of flows technological developments and hyper-smooth modes of transportation generate a cluttered procession of artefacts between highly divergent cultures. The availability of cultural goods eases them away from their place of origin. So we no longer need to travel in order to eat Pakistani food, buy Chinese clothes or look at African masks. Moreover, the spatio-temporal interpretation grid is made uniform by means of the ever-increasing 'modularization' of education, training, labour and leisure time (Urry, 2000: 129).

The customary heritage presentations associated with this chronotopy are widely known: Disneyland in the United States and Paris or Mini-Europe and the entirely simulated historical scenery around the Brussels Atomium in Belgium. The rationality of the historical chronology makes room here for an emotionally experienced 'past-ness'. Because everything revolves around the direct experience of the past or a touch of the past, correct data, right locations and historical context do not really matter. Time no longer serves as an educative organizer of the heritage experience, but as an animator in which one may lose oneself for a while. The event or sensation gives the participant a flush of past-ness. Far from the aforementioned monochrony, such presentations simulate a history that comes within reach. So it is no coincidence that these heritage presentations often make use of techniques of mediation which appeal to all of the senses. The remote scientific gaze is exchanged for, or at least compensated by, scents, sounds, and especially a variety of tactile stimulants. The participant is literally besieged on all sides by a simulacrum of the past.

Historical tourism and other forms of commercial exploitation are often denounced as the causes of such heritage presentations. Hence, Disney becomes an easy target for those of its critics who judge the theme park to be a 'perversion' of the past. Yet history and economy do not necessarily conspire to generate this chronotopy, for the predecessors of simulated heritage cannot be traced to commercial motives alone: dioramas, style rooms and other mimetic re-creations of historical settings are well known examples of museum presentations that also appeal to a total experience. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett takes note of that genesis of historical presentations in *Destination Culture* (1998), where she contrasts the in-context displays mentioned above with *in-situ displays* which favour experience at the expense of historical knowledge. Long before computers existed these presentations were already simulating the past by means of a virtual world. The heritage effect is based on the ambiance of a travel experience and the pleasure of entering a different way of life. The participant feels that he or she is a nineteenth-century explorer, and is able for a moment to step into the life of another. The core of the illusion in this chronotopy is the feeling of being able to travel through time without the actuality of a time machine. The possibility of movement through space is confused with time travel.

Notwithstanding the simulacrum however, we can hardly deny that many museum visitors are seduced by this call from the past and that heritage brokers are aware of that. Some of them, therefore, play with the possibilities of a total experience in order to lure in a larger public. For example, museums will make use of anything from scents, soundscapes to virtual simulation machines. The case of our own sample of about two hundred public presentations by museums and other heritage projects in Belgium revealed that most of them did not mention the historical period with which they were concerned in promotional materials such as programmes and leaflets. Likewise, a large proportion of museums and heritage mediators seem to prefer to tempt visitors with an enigmatic sense of past-ness rather than a lucid past.

Glocal Time

Whereas the past is out of reach in the monochronous narrative, a Global Time simulates the notion that we can step without a hitch into a time machine. However, notwithstanding the great difference in historical experience both presentations follow the same strategy, for they both deny their own role in mediating between present and past. Within the first chronotopy the expert, usually a historian, effaces his or her own labour of construction by creating the illusion that historical facts 'speak for themselves'. In the second spatio-temporal frame, the mimetic illusion denies that the past is staged. The Simmelian lesson on mediation, introduced at the beginning of this paper, is not taken into account by either of these two heritage presentations. Herein lies the essence of our final chronotopy, which we call Glocal Time. The realization that there exist different localities also generates the consciousness of multiform times. In other words, every locality has its own time. Nevertheless, those same localities can have an international character when they are connected worldwide with other localities. However, it should be noted that only the connection determines a synchronous time experience. For example, the opening hours of the only café in a small village may determine the rhythm of a local community. However, that same time goes by differently for employers at the stock exchange in London, New York and Tokyo. Notwithstanding their geographical distances from each other the employers exist within the same chronotopy. However, this can differ quite substantially from a virtual community chatting away with each other amiably next door to the stock exchange buildings in the respective cities. So it is important to understand that our conception of time as well as that of space comes into being through connections. Our conception of space, like our experience of time, depends on the network or configuration in which we find ourselves. If, after their day's work is finished, our London, New York and Tokyo stock brokers visit a local pub, they are also entering into different time and space coordinates.

The very consciousness of the diversity of people's own times, generates a new, polyphonous, view of days gone by and different heritage presentations may continuously come up with ever different time loops. In contrast to Global Time that departs from an absolute relativism reducing history to an enigmatic past-ness, a Glocal Time generates the consciousness of diversity, which also constitutes an entirely different conception from the first chronotopy which organizes history according to one absolute principle, namely monochrony. Apart from the realism of chronological narration, and the absolute relativism of mimetic staging, Glocal Time installs what might be called a *relative* relativism (Latour, 1994). This is brought about by showing that there exist many experienced pasts, and that access to a specific past depends on the instruments of disclosure that are launched to that effect. Hence, the museum personnel may draw their conclusions from our Simmelian lesson and exhibit their own role: the staging of the past is put forward as one possible staging. It shows a picture of itself and is thereby reflexive. In other words, the gap between a historical event and the way it is currently presented, is dramatized.

The above mentioned complex narration of heritage is what we refer to as the 'novelization' of the past, a notion which, again, is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). In his literary research he contrasts the novel to the epic genre. In the case of the latter genre the adventure unrolls monochronously within an absolutely unreachable past. The great epic or story of the untouchable hero stands central. The novel, on the other hand, is polyphonous: not only are temporal coordinates shuffled but, and this is crucial for our argument, maximal contact with the present is staged by means of an open ending. The narrated event is connected with the present by means of which a vital contact with an incomplete, yet evolving, contemporary reality comes into being. The open ending of the past provides for a connection with the present by means of which the literary genre accentuates the sense that history has not yet ended. In other words, the 'novelization' infects the past with a spirit of endless incompleteness. The bygone days are placed in the extension of a daily flow of events. Through the connection with that contingent everydayness the past is also injected with it. There is no first word anymore because the last one has not yet been spoken. That principle of the novel is what we see returning with some heritage presentations. For example, the *Huis van Alijn* deliberately carries the subtitle 'the museum of things that (never) pass'. It is

precisely that 'never' between brackets which symbolizes the ambivalent and reflexive attitude of an institution which oscillates hesitantly between present and past. When, on the contrary, we are dealing with a museum of things that do pass, we fall back into the old chronology of a distant past. A museum of things that never pass, on the other hand, appeals much more to a sense of past-ness.

Chronological narration is broken open through the novelization of the past. The distance between the present and the times gone by disappears, not because one can travel without problem throughout time, but because the present day is located as the extension of history, or rather of multiple histories. The strategies that museums use for such presentations of the past also display similarities with the style characteristic of a novel. On the one hand, curators aestheticize the past, something which is enabled through rendering forms relative. For example, artefacts are no longer only displayed along a time line; the requirements for combining objects are also taken into account. At the *Huis van Alijn* the arrangement of objects takes place in permanent consultation with a visual artist. An aesthetic bias obviously makes far more configurations possible than a mere monochronous narration. And artefacts are freed from their historical corset by means of a formal play of presentations. Thereby the number of interpretative possibilities for the participant also increases. On the other hand, laughter breaches the distance with the past. That second strategy of irony, parody and travesty knocks the heroes, gods and demi-gods from the absolute past off their pedestals. We discovered such an approach in the *Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst te Antwerpen* (MuHKA, the Belgium Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp). Here, young artists were asked to make so-called 'interventions' in works of the permanent collection. Guests may select works from the collection which they deem 'relevant' and place them in the exhibition space. However, they can also push a collection aside and use it as background for their own artistic project. This often brings about a sort of visual and playful comment on museum pieces. Consecrated artists from the past are thrown off their historical pedestals, but at the same time their very identification constitutes a sort of tribute. What is important is that laughter, irony, parody and travesty enable a space of open questioning that brings historically consecrated artists and artefacts into an unusually familiar proximity with contemporary artists. This leads them to a 'fearless' zone of observation and investigation. It generates a general feeling that 'it is okay to experiment with the past'. It is exactly this Socratic irony and dialogue that make free research possible, according to Bakhtin.

Familiarization of the world through laughter and popular speech is an extremely important and indispensable step in making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization (Bakhtin, 1981: 23).

The monologue about the past in the aforementioned playfulness is bent to a *dialogic imagination*. This notion, according to Bakhtin (1981), makes it clear that every meaning can only be seen in relation to other meanings, and that permanent interaction between those meanings takes place, so that meaning also transmutes throughout time. In the dialogue a word, a discourse, a culture or a history is made relative, 'less privileged' and at the same time made relatively unstable. It should be noted however, that making relative does not mean 'minimizing' something. On the contrary it concerns how we 'constitute a dialogue with' or literally 'relate to' that something. Thus consciousness of a continuous struggle for definition about the same things comes into being. With respect to the historical facts the 'novelized' museum presentation, enters into a dialogue with the past, thus presenting the visitor with an especially complex chronotopy. He or she is not only given a historical interpretation, but that very interpretation is also on display in the presentation. The historical staging is literally presented as dependent on time and place. From this grows the realization that the past is time and again given meaning by an ever-moving present.

A display example: In Flanders Fields

All of the above may sound a little abstract, but the example of In Flanders Fields Museum, may make things more concrete. In Flanders Fields, tells the story of the First World War (1914-

1918), which is a time, in the Belgian town of Ieper (Ypres)⁵, which is a place. Both of these ingredients, those of date and place, constitute the central time-space coordinates of the presentation. We can define this chronotopic as an example of *local time*. Indeed, we are provided with basic information about our place in linear time and about the concrete location. Nevertheless, other chronotopics are presented apart from these. For example, at the entrance of the museum, the visitor receives a card with the name of someone who played some kind of role in Ieper during World War I. By subsequently inserting the card in different computers, chronologically installed along the museum trajectory, the visitor receives biographical information about 'his' or 'her' character. This chronotopy follows different time and space coordinates to those of the aforementioned grid. The life that is told usually begins before the tragic events of the Western Front and continues thereafter, unless the person in question is killed in battle. Moreover, the character may come from a different place and only reside temporarily in Ieper, later on to emerge in yet another location. In other words, the biographical story follows a different chronotopy than that of the factual historical parameters: 1914-1918 at Ieper. In fact we are dealing here with a possible presentation of *glocal time* because the experience of a grand history (World War I) is particularized. The visitor gets an idea about how the human disaster was experienced in different ways by different people whose different biographical paths simultaneously evoke other time loops.

In addition to all this In Flanders Fields Museum regularly calls on contemporary artists to (re)interpret the events of the beginning of the twentieth century. This often leads to artistic presentations that bring certain universal themes, such as 'war is of all times' or 'the human tragedy' to the fore. This is the very message we receive as we enter the final section of In Flanders Fields: the first modern war, we are told, was not the end, but the beginning of many new wars. Moreover, the tragic events of the past can teach us lessons for the present. With this latter suggestion the war museum sets itself up as an advocate of peace. The coordinates of time and space, depending on which is the last story to be told, are no longer linked to time and space, for war is now seen to be of all times and is a universally despicable event. This brings us to the above mentioned *global time*. At times this universalism takes the upper hand at the museum and the visitor who is interested in an economic and political introduction to World War I, may have a hard time finding what he or she is looking for. The political situation, in for example, Germany, as well as the economical situation in Europe, are submerged in the universalistic peace message of the museum. In other words, a sense of the wider development of local time (economical and political facts) or glocal time (different interpretations made at that time by, for example, Belgians and Germans about the economical and political situation) is missing. This gives world war the aura of some natural disaster hanging unconditionally above our heads.

In the Museum's different stagings of one historical event we have detected three general and different chronotopics. However, whereas some stagings are more developed in their presentation others are submerged in the dramaturgy. The main importance is that the visitor finds points of contact with one or several of them, or perhaps none of them. Thus, he or she may let the visit pass by without meaning, due to the lack of a spatio-temporal presentation grid. This is not only a prudent hypothesis, but it is also confirmed by the first five research cases that we have already completed. Social background characteristics as well as the staging of displays see to it that the visitor is attracted by one or other chronotopy. The well-educated world traveller is, for example, more sensitive to glocal time, because he or she understands that different places can have different time experiences. By contrast we have found that those people who hardly leave their small town, and whose access to the wider world is primarily by means of their televisions, are more sensitive to global time. Of course not all visitors conform to this black-and-white opposition. A lot of visitors can be attracted by several chronotopics and the intelligent exhibition-maker is able to play with those divergent spatio-temporal frames: he or she can let them merge into each other or accompany each other temporarily after which they may again go their separate ways. It is then up to the visitor to pursue or not pursue certain coordinates, or to eventually return and combine time and space presentations. However, it should be noted that the notion that the museum visitor has a single and monolithic identity does not conform to reality. A historian, for example, will visit In Flanders Fields with a different expectation pattern than, say, the son or daughter of a war

veteran who was actually there in 1917, knee-deep in the mud. And to make the analysis more complex: there are also historians whose fathers were shooting and whose mothers were nursing in 1914 at Ieper. It is precisely this subtle or 'layered' vision of the participant that deserves our attention. The particular ways in which museum visitors appropriate what is presented, and may go on to tinker with and nuance their own identity, is emerging as both an interesting and important question. This will be the focal point of our further research.

Conclusion: 'multi-chronotopic' museums and 'multi-chronotopic' visitor studies

In this paper I have presented theory and research that are in progress. I began with Simmel's notion of historical mediation and concluded from this insight that 'classical' visitor studies often miss a relational point of view. They only relate the social background of participants to *what* is presented and not to *how* history is told by museums. That is why many visitor studies are overtaken by developments in the field. Today, at least in Belgium, some historical institutions try to attract different layers of society by developing a polyphonic display strategy. Our research tries to capture this by developing a research design with a relational perspective on museum professionals, their displays and the visitor. Inspired by the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss we are currently conducting empirical research which is closely related to our theoretical explorations. In following this research methodology we came up with Bakhtin's notion of chronotopy which has proved to be particularly useful in conceptualizing the relation between historical presentations, museums and visitors. Our theoretical exploration and analyses of displays in Belgium teach us that we can discriminate between at least three general chronotopics, namely local, global and glocal times. The example of the displays at the First World War museum, In Flanders Fields, teaches us that different chronotopics can be presented in the display of the same historical events. It provides the visitor with several ways into the story. The concept of chronotopy has the potential to help museums to be more reflexive about their own praxis. Which chronotopics, for example, are presented, and which are absent or are less developed? For visitor studies the idea of chronotopy can help us to gain a deeper understanding of visitors themselves. Which chronotopics flourish amongst the public and in society more generally, and how can they be expressed in museum displays? I want to suggest that the museum of the future will be a 'multi-chronotopic' museum. This will be a museum which aims not so much to attract as many visitors as possible, but rather one which seeks to enlist a differentiated public. In order to develop the museum, reflexively in this direction 'multi-chronotopic' visitor studies are necessary. At least, they can help us to understand the important mediating factors between museum and society.

Notes

¹ Georg Simmel (1858-1918) who was for much of the twentieth century best known for his influential essay on the metropolis and mental life also wrote widely on aesthetics, history and philosophy as well as sociology. Sociology's much vaunted cultural turn along with its growing interest in consumption, sensibility and the body has re-established the importance of his work for the discipline.

² The general research question is about the presentation and perception of cultural heritage: how is cultural heritage presented in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and how does the public perceive it? The research started in 2002 at the Centre for Sociology of Culture of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) will continue into 2005. Its main aim is to develop ideal types of presentation models, considering the targets of museum personnel and heritage brokers on the one hand, and the social background of participants on the other hand. The research is mainly based on qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews with museum personnel, heritage brokers and visitors, and the filming of displays as well as the use of the public of the latter. This is done by one post-doctoral researcher with the help of his supervisor and students. Ten cases have been selected because of several reasons. Selection criteria comprise the time period, target groups of the museum, 'high' versus 'low'

culture, the display format (e.g. use of ICT, extraordinary formats), religious versus secular heritage, etc. All the contacted museums and other heritage sites have afforded voluntary access. More details about the research can be found in this paper.

³ Because the research is still in progress the in-depth interviews are not yet finished and analyzed. At this moment we have completed 65 interviews with museum personnel, heritage brokers and visitors. At the end of the project we will have done about 200 interviews around ten cases. But of course the interview data we have already collected was in the back of our mind, while we were writing this text. At this moment, for example, we have discovered that the targets of museum professionals with their displays do not always fit with the perception of the visitors. Aesthetic presentations in a folk culture museum, for example, were used to attract people who were interested in contemporary art. But some regular visitors of the museum (who are not interested in contemporary art) get a romantic and nostalgic view of the past as a result of those aesthetic presentations. This has to do with a difference in 'chronotopy' between museum displays and those of the museum staff on the one hand and those of the visitor on the other hand. Later in the paper I return to this concept. Of importance is that visitors often use observation grids other than those of the museum staff. This leads also to different interpretations; one and the same display can be understood in very different ways because the visitor is an active interpreter.

⁴ The Province of Limburg in Belgium has commissioned an inquiry into the possibility of instituting a central museum depot for all the small museums and for the archives of local heritage associations. This inquiry has provoked many heated discussions because local 'heritage activists' did not want to their objects to leave their village or town, even just to store them while they were not displayed. A lot of this had to do with the emotional bond between the owners of such small museums and their local setting. They were not only afraid that they would lose the objects, but that their artefacts would lose their local meaning. Some artefacts, for example, stand as a symbol for the history of a local community, so it is felt to be sacrilegious when they leave their local setting. It would be an attack on the community itself.

⁵ Ieper (Ypres), which is a small Flemish market town, close to the French border, was the scene of some of the worst fighting during a series of three major battles on the Western front during World War 1. Whilst the combined casualty figures for the German and Allied armies are a matter of dispute the consensus is that at least 550,000 soldiers and thousands of non-combatants were killed. The town was virtually destroyed. In Flanders Field Museum is an award-winning interactive museum, which was re-opened following a major refurbishment of the old World War museum in 1998 and which interprets the Great War at Ieper.

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