Object, Space and the Museum: a semiotic approach

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This paper discusses the object in a museum context and the different ways in which space is used within the museum paradigm. The aim of the paper is to enable a wide vision of the different ways in which a museum signifies.

Museums form a significant reality within the global culture, they are certainly part of an identity construct. It is, therefore, important that all those who have a stake in activities involving cultural organisation should be examining and re-examining meaning production in what is a dynamic process.

A key element in a semiotic approach, that should be clarified before continuing, is that of competence:

> "[to] bring someone to understand a text or to see an interpretation requires shared points of departure and common mental operations."[1]

This does not mean that understanding is going to be uniform, far from it, but that, in the case of museums for example, ignorance of the museum paradigm would be an impediment to understanding.

> "... social and cultural phenomena" explains Culler, "are not simply material objects or events but objects and events with meaning, and hence sign ... they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations, both internal and external."[2]

It follows that there must be an underlying system of distinctions and conventions which makes meaning possible. Within this structure, there are codes which we use to create the meaning we want. The structure is there but the meaning, at the end of the day, occurs through a subject.

To move on to the museum object then, it can be said that it forms part of a paradigm of function: a museum, and that it signifies through the way in which it is used by a subject. That subject includes, of course, the person who had exhibited it and the person who views it. The object's 'value' is, to borrow a phrase from Terence Hawkes,

> "... finally and wholly determined by its total environment."

One cannot really talk about the museum object without first making mention of the collected item. This is because there are historical links and cognitive connections between the two. In characteristically brusque manner, Baudrillard states, "... what you collect is always yourself."[3] And certainly the early collections such as those of the Medici family seem to support this hypothesis. Is there validity, however, in extrapolating that idea to include national collections? I think there is serious evidence to support such an extension of the collector. To return to Baudrillard, he defines collected objects in general as

> "... objects of a passion - the passion for private property, emotional investment in which is every bit as intense as investment in 'human' passion."[4]

A national museum may not aspire to the collection of private property but it certainly does have an acquisitive side which can involve deep emotional investment not only on the part of the curators but also on the part of the general public. One only has to think of the banner stating: 'Tuna x-xabla lura!' (Give us the sword back!) seen recently during a Malta-France football match to know that. Many of the people who painstakingly painted the banner would probably never actually go to see Grand Master La Valette's sword even if the Louvre were to return it to Malta but they felt very strongly about the issue all the same.

The narrative of collecting deserves much more time than I can give to it in this paper. However, it cannot go unmentioned as the dynamic narrative of the 'collection' is key to the status of the object. Every new insertion, for example, can change the dynamic and the status of the object within a narrative that rarely reaches a conclusion. As Peter Brooks says, a collector's greatest fear is of conclusion. His or her desire to go on adding and changing is so as to avoid the death of a collection.[5]

The collection could also be described as a 'supernormal' sign. Sebeok, without particular reference to collections, suggests that such a 'supernormal' sign overtakes a 'normal' sign in its effect as a stimulus to meaning. The collection (private or public) could thus be described as an excess or amplification of meaning.

The modern museum, and by modern I refer to the major developments of the Nineteenth century up to the present day, have taken place in, as the song goes, 'a material world', a world of "things, of objects and material goods" as Susan Pearce tells us.[6] The growth of capitalism based on production gave enormous importance to acquisition:

> "Our complex relationship with objects - as producers, owners and collectors - is itself a characteristic modern meta-narrative, and so, in its way, is our effort to understand material culture and our interest in it."[7]

Certainly, the museum paradigm carries with it "like a snail [...], its stratified accumulation of collections and buildings, and the traditions, or mind-sets, which accompany them."[8]

So what would be a good definition of museum? How can we describe this place in which the object is positioned? The Museum Association of Great Britain has a seemingly straight forward definition which mentions the collecting, preserving, exhibiting and interpreting functions of a museum. Jeanne Cannizzo defines it thus:

> "Museums are symbolic structures which make visible our public myths: the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are institutionalised and materialised in our museums."[9]

So what is the status of an object in that context? An object has at least a double existence. It is what it is but it signifies more than what it is. To use an example, a rock is a rock but it represents also a period of geological time, it could be a weapon. It can also hold metaphoric meaning such as 'strength', 'protection', 'integrity'.[10] It could have a metonymic meaning as a representation of St. Peter. This might be stretching things a bit but just to give expression to the breadth of meaning of this item.

The object is always part of a paradigm which is the exhibition, which itself is found in the world of museums which itself refers to the general world of western culture and so on. However, the user must also be aware of the syntactical experience provoked by the exhibition of the object. A linear development can seem very logical and, consequently, very truthful, but, as cinema directors well know, the sequence of events can be created as the creator wishes. He or she who creates the linearity, the syntax, can limit that development while, at the same time, giving the impression of a progression forward.

This sensation of manipulation of history is the basis of an accusation by Kavanagh:

> "Curators literally make history by deciding what to collect and what to ignore, and by so doing dictating what should be remembered and what forgotten."[11]

The statement serves to emphasise the complexity of the rapport between the user and the museum object. As Jean Umiker Sebeok says, the meaning of a display is expressed through the 'triadic interplay' between the user, the display and what she refers to as the 'situation of the encounter." Within the context of that interplay, the object carries with it an inviolable existence which is coupled with the inevitable present day construction and reconstruction. For example, as McHoul suggests:

> "The ethical needs of the present determine (if anything) how the past is to be read - not vice versa."[12]

How, then, do the goals of the present day museum affect the status of the object? Today the emphasis seems to be on the museological experience, a trend which may diminish the importance of the genuine object in exchange for an informationally replete simulation. This issue has been under discussion, of course, since Benjamin in the Fifties. There may be a danger here that the information takes precedence over the object. 'The Medium is the Message' said Marshal McLuhan in the Sixties. Perhaps the medium can obscure the message. Hilde Hein, for example, is worried about differentiating the object from the experience because she fears that if the objects in a museum context are not understood in their original ontological context then they will take on meaning assigned to them by others. Traditionally, she sustains, museums were linked to an idea of genuineness as a value per se. The museum

experience without the mediation of the genuine objects must leave a different effect.

Interesting, also, is the idea that an object, because of its visual impact, can offer a vista different to that prescribed by the curator. "Objects", affirms Hooper Greenhill, "enable reflection, and speculation." These reflections of the observer can provoke abstract ideas precisely because they are not limited by the written word.

The museum object, although not a personal object, can become a quasi-personal possession either through art books or archaeology publications or because somebody visits a particular object in a gallery or a museum. The user knows or expects that he/she will find an object every time they visit. Who has not been disappointed to find a favourite painting has been lent for an exhibition abroad?

The juxtaposition of the objects and the visual importance given to each one impact meaning for the viewer. The political meta-narrative seems always present. Much has been written about the meta-narratives of culture created in their turn by the politics of power. Douglas Crimp, for example, severely criticises the development of a cultural history that removes an object from its original historical context not so as to commemorate a particular political moment but to create what he calls an illusion of universal knowledge. With reference to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, he laments the historical manipulation exercised by the curators and denounces the separation into categories - Picture & Sculpture; Drawings; Prints & Illustrated Books, Architecture & Design, Photography and Cinema. He feels that in this way, MoMA automatically constructs a formalist storiography.[13]

The MoMA comes in for further criticism by Carol Duncan who is convinced that the itinerary can serve to consolidate in the user a certain cognition of the past. Referring to 'Woman I' by De Kooning and Picasso's 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon', Duncan writes:

> "The museum (MoMA) has always hung these works with precise attention to their strategic roles in the story of modern art."[14]

and again:

> "Like those of all great museums, the MoMA's rituals transmit a complex ideological signal."[15]

In some ways, the museum or art gallery context is similar to that of a theatre. Both areas of activity involve the creation of an ambience which is outside the sphere of normal everyday activity. There is an element of show, of ritual and a certain competence is needed to be able to recognise what Elam calls the intertextuality of 'reality' and 'theatre'. From the time of the Prague School in the Thirties, there have been many exponents of the semiotics of theatre. Bogatyrav, for example, speaks of the way in which the stage radically transforms all objects and, consequently, the elements of meaning associated with them.[16] Elam calls this the 'semiotization of the object' in which an object that might have had a purely practical or ritual function becomes a referent for the whole of its object class. Exhibited museum objects may suffer the same type of transformation. Once an object is exhibited it cannot return to being what it was before and yet it can evolve in a kind of constant dialectic between denotation and connotation. The choice of objects then is clearly key to the weaving of a discourse about the past.

One of the main reasons for using semiotic analysis with regard to museum objects and the meaning they produce is that it recognises the fact that material culture constitutes a communication system that enriches our understanding of ourselves. It is not enough to consider museum objects as things that function independently of us. They are not 'simply' anything. On the contrary, objects can be described as complex phenomena which, as Pearce says,

> "... both generate and are illuminated by overarching interpretative philosophies." [17]

Before passing on to what is, I believe an integrated discussion about space, I would like to bring in a practical example from our own National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. Let us take as an example of meaning production the so-called Sleeping Lady.

The Sleeping Lady was found at Hal Saflieni Hypogeum and is perhaps Malta's most enigmatic archaeological object. We cannot be sure what meaning the Sleeping Lady had for her contemporaries although we can speculate that,

given the care with which it has been modelled, the statue played an important role in some funerary ritual. Today, however, the statue plays a symbolic role and is a sign within a system of meaning. This object, found in the early 20th century, remains integrally connected with its origin and its past and will remain always representative of that period of prehistory. The fact that this object will remain 'alive' much longer than we do gives it added significance.

Certainly, the way in which the statue is displayed shows that the curators consider it to be a key item in the collection. The room which holds the statue is deep inside the exhibition area and represents the culmination of the itinerary. Whereas the other rooms are lit both by artificial and by some natural light, this room is kept dark. The statue is placed in a glass showcase and is surrounded by a rope to indicate that the visitor should not get too close. The atmosphere is similar to that of the cave where it was found.

There is, of course, a discourse which surrounds the statue. Grima, in an article about the Sleeping Lady, states that probably most visitors to the National Museum of Archaeology would say that the statue represents the fertility cult of perhaps a Mother God or perhaps a local Venus, all of which are familiar themes concerning the temple period. In fact, in the Nineties there was an attempt to re-evaluate the statue as a single object rather than an object that was part of a general category. Grima quotes some authors who felt that the feminists had hijacked somewhat attempts at evaluating the Sleeping Lady. Grima laments the fact that we tend to make aesthetic judgments through our own episteme (to use a Foucaultian term), that of linear perspective and suggests that the exaggeratedly prominent hips of the statuette might reflect a particular interest that the temple builders had for curvilinearity. This interest is certainly reflected at Ħal Saflieni where the replication of a normal temple is subject to a curvature not seen in the original.

Grima suggests that the representational codes and architectural expedients could be transposed to the sculpture and that it is

> [...] another expression of another way of knowing, another way of experiencing [...][18]

This kind of analysis is useful to our discussion for two diverse reasons. One, it clearly illustrates that the user enters the museum with his or her own baggage of knowledge and ideas gleaned through reading, education, the family and myriad other influences. And, secondly, it demonstrates that the relationship between museum - object - user remains a continual challenge as Umiker-Sebeok suggests.

But these objects are not simply positioned in the air but form part of the museum paradigm which includes the space they occupy and influence. Extensiveness, or area, is Greimas' starting point for a discussion about space. This indefinite area is structured as a series of places, such as sea, land, city, village, road, buildings and so on. This space/ place could also be a map, a painting or a sculpture but whatever it is it can be referred to as a constructed object envisaged "as a full, filled up, seamless entity."[19]

Once seen as a construction, this space becomes "a semiotic object with space as its signifier."[20] Each constructed area can be examined from various points of view: the strictly geometrical; as "a progressive emergence of spatial qualities"; or as the cultural organisation of nature. If, as Lukken and Searle suggest, we look at space as a matter of socio-cultural organisation then buildings can be seen as socio-cultural entities through which people express their social-relations. It follows also that identities can be constructed in spatial terms and this is important with regard to the museum as space or rather place. Greimas looks at space in socio-cultural terms, seeing it as an 'utterance' (énoncé) constructed by a human subject to be read and utilized accordingly by a human subject. The 'places' that we experience will all be the result of the diachronic input of various human subjects where 'input' refers to the total human 'sensorium': smell, touch, sight, hearing and sound. And any analysis of place must take these elements into account.

If one is to attempt a semiotic analysis of museum space then it is pertinent to include another analytical tool i.e. the semiotics of architecture. One possible model is that used by Lukken and Searle which evolved from the work of the Paris School. Architecture is seen as being the result of two processes: the initial creation and the later use made of the building. Although the building is seen, in

the first instance, as a single autonomous object concerned with how meaning takes form in the data immediately available to the viewer, the subject is seen as an integral part of the system. Also, it is important to realise that the semiotic system of architecture functions within a paradigm containing other semiotic systems in an interdependent way. Clearly, when we are talking 'architecture' we refer not only to the external but to the internal place.

To return to the analogy with the theatre, in the use of space there exists that which Carlson refers to as the dialectic 'space/observer':

> "It is not these separate spaces for player and observer which makes theatre, but their simultaneous presence and confrontations [...]."[21]

Hillier and Hanson, while explaining their theory of the syntax of space, emphasis that "... buildings are not just objects, but transformations of space through objects." They believe that it is space that creates that special rapport between function and social meaning in buildings. When we try to systematise space, what we are in fact doing is creating relationships between people.

As explained and discussed by Lukken and Searle, the generative trajectory of the discourse concerning the semiotics of both space and of architecture develops around the form of the expression and the form of the content.[22] The form of the expression is concerned with the actual structures of the signifier. This would correspond to phonology in speech but in architecture and space (in the sense in which it is used by the Paris School including Greimas) it refers to the actual building. Not, however, only to the manifest form but also to the network of relationships present in that plastic form. Within this discussion concerning the plastic dimensions of the expression, there exist topological categories of position and orientation and the plastic categories of chromatism and eidetics (the study of shapes). Concerning the chromatic category, colour is accepted as a key conveyor of meaning in many types of discourse and the museum context is surely concerned with such a category. Eidetics as well is recognised as a relevant category. Greimas discusses shape and hypothesises on the development of the architectural discourse which might include the opposition of curved/straight; triangle/square/circle.[23]

To analyse the form of the content one must include other categories within a discoursive syntax: actors ('signatures' placed on buildings, for example); time references; spatial programming of the oppositions 'within/without'; the human sensorium (concerning smell Greimas refers to 'the odour of sanctity' and the sulphurous fumes of the devil[24]; the syntactic component (divisions of space according to roles known as topoi). Acceptance of these topoi, for example, indicates or rather necessitates an acceptance of 'conventional communication' and here we can refer back to Culler's insistence on competence. Boundaries between topoi can be both physical and/or conventional - can divide the public from the private.

As Hammad states, space is much more than "just a necessary backdrop to the realisation of actions."[25] Space is something physical but it is also invisible, an intangible phenomenon. It is not difficult to analyse museum space from the physical point of view: one can measure distances and dimensions; one can calculate the ease or difficulty of access for individuals, groups, the disabled. But space goes beyond these elements. It is even possible to go beyond museum space through technology (videos/ computer imaging etc.) The original dioramas were designed to do something like that with lights and large pictures. Through space, the museum creates its meanings on various levels and uses diverse codes in an interaction between space and architecture, between observer and the observed. One can study these dialectics through the morphology of the internal space that is influenced by the positioning of the architectural elements and through a study of the system or code which operates in such a positioning.

Let us take, for example, the circulation of visitors. One supposes that the basic aim is to position the objects in such a way that viewers can see them well and that they should be in a certain order. However, there are other elements to consider. To quote Choi, who has done pioneering work in this regard,

> "The creation of a field of reciprocal social visibility confers to museum visits their character as social occasion and public events."[26]

With reference to the design or layout of a museum, there are two principal models which can be of

influence: the deterministic model which encourages a certain rigidity in the viewing of objects and the probabilistic, based on statistical data, which moderates exploration on the part of the observer according to syntactical properties in the design of the museum.[27]

Pearce quotes research done by the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM).[28] From the ROM study it resulted that most of the users passed in the shortest line between two points of reference and this has consequences for the mapping of an exhibition. According to two researchers in the field,Peponis and Hesdin, back in 1993, there exist three relational properties within the museum space. The first is the relative distances between one museum unit and another, which they call Depth; the second concerns the various alternatives to movements within the museum spaces and finally, there is the facility with which the user understands the physical structure of the gallery or museum. This last property is referred to as 'entropy' (a term which in science refers to a measure of efficiency of a system). Peponis and Hesdin conclude that if a museum has strong axial structure, little 'Depth' and few choices of movement between one object and another, it will usually present knowledge as though it were something already known and settled. If, on the other hand,the user finds various ways of going around an exhibition and when the physical connections between one set up unit and another are not so marked, when there is more entropy, cognition is seen as a suggestion or proposition with various possible outlets.

In 1999, Choi was able to examine similar elements with the aid of a computer. His research seeks to explain, without direct reference to exhibited objects or to a particular museum, the system which underlies the behaviour of visitors. Using the syntactical space method of Hillier and Hanson, Choi identifies the spatial constituents and their relational rapport which he then inputs while introducing some variables. His results show that a probabilistic model moderates exploration and contact statistically according to the syntactical properties of the general layout.[29] Choi comments that movement and contact are central to the museum experience when one cannot see the whole all at the same time. To see is complemented by 'being seen' and this is an important factor regardless of the exhibited object.

> "In museums this is more important precisely because the spatialisation and socialisation of displays is their institutional aim."[30]

Linked to this use of space is the system of proxemics. Greimas defines it as a semiotic discipline

> "which seeks to analyse the arrangements of subjects and of objects in space, and, more particularly, the use that the subjects make of space in order to produce signification."[31]

He also comments that when one is considering artificial behaviours such as theatre, religious ritual etc., the positioning of the objects becomes the carrier of signification as much as that of the subjects. This is a comment valid for a museum context in which there is a tension between object and subject. In the Nineteenth century museum one can imagine that, for the viewer, the exhibited object must have seemed strange and out of reach both metaphorically and physically. Paintings, at that time, were usually placed high up on the walls while objects were kept in study cases or even in drawers in the 'cabinet' tradition. Even today, in some museums and galleries one finds examples of proxemic meaning such as a rope attached to two brass stands in front of an object or painting. Clearly, it does not prevent the observer approaching but is a warning not to do so. About theatre, Elam states

> "We are still conditioned by the Nineteenth century ideal of spatial organisation in the playhouse, that is to say, a maximum of grandiosity and fixity, resulting in a maximum of formality."[32]

Things have changed in the postwar years but probably not as much as one might imagine.

Much work has been done on proxemics by researchers such as Edward T. Hall, who worked out a proxemic continuum in four sectors: intimate, personal, social and public. Although designed to fit the U.S. culture, this system can be adapted and represents a very Saussurian structure of signification through the many binary oppositions (within/without; high/low; close/far etc.) In a museum context, proxemic structures will differ greatly according to the type of entity it is. Science and Technology museums, for example, would have a different proxemic approach than art museums,

as might a museum that contains copies and not original works.

The museum itinerary calls into play many of the categories that we have discussed both within the form of the expression and within the form of the content. The fact that one walks around an exhibition is really a ritualistic action in which the visitor participates in the so-called museum experience. Sometimes, as in the case of the Guggenheim Museum, the sloping floor gives the user the idea of a real journey (up or down). Often there is a sense of moving upwards towards the natural light which might give the impression of having arrived in a kind of museum heaven. As we have seen, the more deterministic the itinerary, the tighter the narrative.

> "Space in the museum, then, is a finite resource. It is also a territory, more or less jealously guarded and colonised."[33]

The following passage from Umberto Eco describes the moment of choice, the moment of the decision to use a certain code in a certain way. He writes:

> "... si limitano le possibilità di combinazione tra gli elementi in gioco e il numero degli elementi che costituiscono il repertorio. Si introduce nella situazione di equiprobabilità della fonte un sistema di probabilità: certe combinazioni sono possibili e altre meno. L'informazione della fonte diminuisce, la possibilità di trasmettere messaggi aumenta."[34]

From the situation of infinite possibility we move to that moment of creativity that is part of our essence of being human. It is both a limiting and a liberating moment. The great pay off is our unique ability to communicate.

We work within paradigm structures that give us the opportunity to use many different codes. Recognising the power of signification of each of those codes is the key to the enabling of a dynamic process. If codes are not analysed, then the paradigm will remain stagnant. The most creative amongst us will be those who push that paradigm to its limits and perhaps even beyond.

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