

MUSEUMS, DRAMA, RITUAL AND POWER
A THEORY OF THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a new model of the museum visitor experience. My model analyses the dynamic interplay of visually powerful objects in authoritative institutions with the power of visitors to draw upon the knowledge, values and ideals of their own life experience and use the displays as a resource to make and take ownership of meaning. The model shows that the key factors affecting how people make meaning of displays are transaction, ritual, identity and power.

I investigate the museum experience through the varied roles visitors adopt, as revealed in written comments made by visitors to my case study museum. I analyse these through a wide range of theory and through using drama as a metaphor for the visitor experience. The museum arranges the objects and spaces in a symbolic performance, leading visitors to engage in aesthetic and social rituals. Through the frames of their interpretive communities, visitors engage intellectually, emotionally and aesthetically in transactions with the objects which modify or reinforce their identities. Visitors' meaning-making is influenced, but not wholly determined, by how well the museum drama works for them. This depends largely not just on the quality of the museum but on how comfortable and familiar visitors are with museum rituals.

At its best, the museum drama can engage visitors' emotions and imagination and enable them to experience intellectual, psychological, emotional and perhaps spiritual growth. At its worst, visitors' negative experiences alienate them not just from the museum but from trying such experiences again in the future.

In my model, authority, power and the task of creating knowledge are shared between visitors and curators. If the museum embraces this epistemological shift, and recognises the complex transactions of ritual, drama and power, it could enable visitors to experience not just learning but growth, and greatly increase the educational and cultural value of museums.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

***'Museums have the potential to enrich many aspects of national life but they can only do this if they become part of the lifeblood of society. For this to happen museums need to identify their value.'*¹**

Background

Museums are one of the enduring legacies of the nineteenth century commitment to education for all. They played a vital role in spreading knowledge and enjoyment in the twentieth century, but face special challenges today. The traditional role of museums in developing, interpreting and safeguarding their collections for future generations to enjoy remains as important as ever. However the report by the body which advises the UK government on museum policy for England, *Renaissance in the Regions*, asserts that museums have a much larger role to play in society - in education, learning, access, social inclusion, in the regions and in the modernisation of public services.² In Scotland on St Andrew's Day 2003, the First Minister said in a speech in which he embraced museums and located them in the wider cultural debate 'Culture cuts across all portfolios of government, and it can make a difference to our success in each'.³ Museums, as part of a larger cultural framework, are being challenged to find ways to make a real difference in people's lives by using their collections not just for the more traditional aims of inspiration, learning and enjoyment, but also to promote creativity and a more just society.

Despite museums in their modern form having existed for over two hundred years there is much that is not understood about why people value museums. A growing body of visitor research provides insights into the demographics of museum visitors, who they are and what they do in museums.⁴ Much less well understood is what

¹ Anderson, D. (1999) *A Commonwealth - Museums in the Learning Age*, London: HMSO

² Council of Museums, Libraries and Archives formerly Re-source, (2003) *Renaissance - Museums for Changing Lives*, HMSO, London

³ Speech delivered at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow on 30 November 2003 by First Minister of the Scottish Executive, Jack McConnell.

⁴ Falk and Dierking, 1992; Bitgood, Serrel and Thomson, 1994; Screven and Shettel, 1993. Museum Focus, 1999. Many surveys in Western countries have shown a consistency in visitor demographics. Museum visitors are generally categorised as mainly white, middle class, aged above 35, educated

sense visitors make of museums and what they take with them when they leave. Without a much better understanding of the experience of visitors, it is difficult to identify which elements of the public face of museums are valued and which merit re-examination and change.

As a museum educator I am encouraged by the recent trends in government to support and reinforce best practice in museum education through funding and a focus on the active contribution that museums make to society. I believe that this best practice has to be underpinned by a sound theoretical understanding of the museum experience and in particular, of how visitors make sense of this experience, how visitors make meaning in the museum environment.

In order to reinforce the relevance of, and contribute to the debate on, the educational purpose of museums in the twenty-first century, I aim to develop a theory of the museum experience which seeks to explain and understand the way the individual interacts and responds to objects personally and socially, within the museum environment. I focus in particular on the meaning that people make in museums and develop a theory of the museum experience based on meaning-making, which I shall represent as a model of the meaning-making process. I shall draw on a number of disciplinary areas in my argument – principally sociology, psychology particularly educational psychology, anthropology and cultural studies. In this introduction I shall begin by outlining the initial building blocks from which my theory will emerge.

Museum learning

Unlike the formal institutions of education, museums are public spaces that people of many ages and types independently choose to visit. Within the broad demographic profile, visitors have many different backgrounds and invest differing amounts of time, energy, attention and interest in their visit. They can choose what to look at, what to skim and what to study. In recent years there has been considerable debate in the museum community as to what people are experiencing in museums, what they are learning and exactly what is meant by museum learning.

and in professional or skilled employment. They visit museums mainly for education and for entertainment.

A review of the current literature in education suggests that learning is seen as an active process of assimilating and accommodating information within social, physical and psychological contexts and as a process that takes place over time.⁵ Theories such as Piaget's theory of intellectual development, which focused on concrete learning experiences and conceptual stages of development in children, Vygotsky's developmental theory emphasizing the importance of history, culture and the social context of learning and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences have all been important in developing teaching and learning practices in schools and museums and have influenced museum practice, initially in children's museums, but latterly to a limited extent in new museum displays.⁶

Among museum researchers there are two prominent models. Firstly Falk and Dierking's Interactive Model of Contextual Learning which proposes that individual learning in museums takes place as a result of the interaction at a moment in time of three environments - the personal, socio-cultural and environmental contexts for learning; and secondly, Hein's Constructivist Museum which emphasises the active participation of the learner in making sense of the learning experience.⁷ They have gained prominence with educational practitioners in museums as they provide a way of transferring many of the theoretical approaches and practices already established in formal learning situations to the museum environment and give them legitimacy. Researchers recognise also that learning is an active process involving the connection of past experiences to more recent ones and that memory is an important constituent of that process. Memory and perception are inextricably linked and 'both are in different ways, sources of belief, justification and knowledge'.⁸

The application to displays of these learning theories have contributed to a better understanding of the visitors' experience and have challenged the assumption that the visitor is passive within the museum space.⁹ Over the past quarter of a century, there has been a period of experimentation in innovative display techniques, some using electronic media, to try to improve the effectiveness of exhibitions for learning. Children's museums like that in Boston, science centres such as those in San Francisco and Bristol and discovery areas in some of the large national museums of

⁵ For example Ashcraft, 1994; Steffe and Gale, 1995; Ball, S. (ed.), 2004

⁶ Piaget, 1954, 1955; Vygotsky, 1930/1978; Gardner, 1993

⁷ Falk and Dierking, 1992, 2000; Hein, 1998.

⁸ Audi, 1998:70

⁹ Duncan, 1995

the Western world – Tate Modern and the Science Museum both in London, the National Museum of American History in Washington and the Museum of Natural History in New York – and major displays such as the British Galleries in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and the Powerhouse in Sydney, Australia - are all designed to enrich the visitor experience and enhance learning.¹⁰

The *Inspiring Learning for All (ILFA)* framework published in 2004 by the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives in the United Kingdom, provides a framework for thinking about learning in museums.¹¹ It approaches learning from a constructivist and socio-cultural perspective and emphasises the potential for creativity and innovative thinking; it sees learning as a complex process involving more than just an acquisition of knowledge or the filling-of-a-vessel behaviourist approach¹²; it acknowledges that the most important factor influencing learning is the learner's prior knowledge and beliefs; and it encompasses the construction of individual and collective meaning founded on Piagetian and Vygotskian learning theories.

ILFA argues for an holistic view of learning as 'a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and a desire to learn more'.¹³

This harmonises with, and encourages me to revisit, the educational philosophy of the influential American John Dewey who argued that 'all genuine education comes about through experience' but that this belief does not mean 'that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative'.¹⁴ He maintained that 'the idea that there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and

¹⁰ Two edited publications which give an overview of the application of various learning principles to museums in the United Kingdom in the first half of the 1990's are Hooper Greenhill in 1994 which contains papers on the relationship between museums and their audiences and includes theories of communication, exhibit design models (case studies) and education programmes; and secondly that by Durbin in 1996 which examines the use of exhibition displays for life long learning in museums in the context of underlying principles and different kinds of audiences.

¹¹ Council for Museums Libraries and Archives, 2004. *Inspiring Learning for All (ILFA)*. London:

DCMS

¹² Skinner, 1957; 1971.

¹³ Johnsson, E. 2004

¹⁴ Dewey, J. 1938: 25

education... sets new problems ...to be worked out on the basis of the new philosophy of experience'.¹⁵ The focus for my research is to investigate the museum educational experience in this very broad sense and contribute to a new philosophy of museum education so that innovations in museum practice can be underpinned by a theoretical understanding of the visitor experience.

An appreciation that learning is an holistic experience moves the focus away from the question whether the visitor has correctly learned the message of the display, to what meaning the visitor is making of the museum experience. In the past twenty-five years, especially in America, evaluation has attempted to assess the effectiveness of exhibitions through finding out how far visitors had correctly assimilated what the exhibitions were trying to communicate.¹⁶ The failure to find evidence of the curatorial message was interpreted that learning was not taking place. However the social theory of learning suggests that depending on the visitor's agenda, the information that the exhibition aims to communicate may be ignored while other forms of learning are taking place.¹⁷

The acceptance of this much wider definition of learning seems to me to encourage and enable museums to acknowledge the validity of the different ways that visitors may use the museum and the different meanings they make. In accepting these outcomes the museum may look again at what it is trying to do when it displays its collections. The opportunity is to change the focus of displays from being just about didactic information transfer or even the creation of good cognitive learning experiences which acknowledge different learning styles, but about consciously making an environment in which the visitor can have a whole range of cognitive, affective, psychological and spiritual experiences.

Meaning-making

In the 1990's a great deal of work in both the theory and practice of museums has focussed on the meanings constructed from museums and their collections. In her

¹⁵ Ibid: 20 - 22

¹⁶ Borun, 1998

¹⁷ Much of this work has been carried out under the umbrella of 'meaning-making' in museums, a topic which will be explored in depth in this thesis. I shall draw in particular on the work of Lois Silverman in the USA and Eilean Hooper Greenhill in the UK.

article in 1995 entitled *Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age* Silverman proposed 'meaning-making' as a way of understanding the active role played by visitors in their museum experiences.¹⁸ Silverman describes meaning-making as a process in which visitors draw on their past experience, memories and perceptions to understand and make sense of the museum visit. She argues that self-identity is a key influence on visitors' meaning-making and that individual visitors may make different meanings depending on their background and life experience.

Meaning-making acknowledges and validates a far wider range of experiences than cognitive or aesthetic responses in the museum and gallery space. It embraces a wider concept than even the new definitions of learning in that it acknowledges the psychological and philosophical aspects of museum learning. 'It encapsulates all of the valued and valuable possibilities that can and do arise when people encounter artefacts in museums such as reminiscence, fantasy and spiritual connections'.¹⁹ Silverman, among others, suggests that museums need to incorporate into an exhibition those design elements that support, facilitate and enhance visitor efforts to create meaning from exhibition experiences.²⁰ To enable this to happen museums themselves must more fully understand the process of meaning-making.

When trying to measure the effectiveness of museum displays for learning it is easier to measure the transfer of cognitive information than to try to take into account the richness and the variety of museum experiences as outlined in meaning-making. Evaluation techniques based on cognitive science theories emphasise quantitative techniques for measuring the success of visitor learning in an exhibition.²¹ In order to assess the whole learning experience that occurs in museums it is necessary to look beyond cognitive learning only and take into account ideas, feelings and sensations, what Ausubel describes as 'meaningful learning'.²²

¹⁸ Silverman, L. 1995

¹⁹ Silverman, 2002.

²⁰ Round, 1999: 3-4 and 22-26.

²¹ Borun, M. et al: 1998.

²² Ausubel, Novak and Hanesian, 1978.

Meaningful learning implies that new information, be it new facts, attitudes or feelings, are linked to existing information in a learner's knowledge structure in such a way that the learner is able to recall this information after extended periods of time and to apply these new ideas to new situations and problems. The ideas, attitudes, feelings, information or skills become part of the visitor's permanent store of knowledge available for his or her use long after the museum visit has ended. Perin argues that the meaning-making perspective redefines the results of visitors' meaning-making as 'invaluable consequences of museum visits, rather than as the exhibition makers' failures'.²³

'Meaning-making' is still an assemblage of ideas rather than a comprehensive theory with explicit implications for practice. My research will contribute to the formulation of a more complete and coherent theory and will lead to a clearer understanding of the nature and process of meaning-making itself. This can then be applied to displays so that they become more effective educational vehicles.

Interpretive communities

Best practice in museum education in the UK has been greatly influenced by the research carried out in the University of Leicester Department of Museum Studies and in particular by the work of Eilean Hooper Greenhill.²⁴ With the publication of *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* Hooper Greenhill showed how the concept of interpretive communities could be applied to museums and could help to explain some of the visitors' responses to museum displays.²⁵ Using this interpretive approach she has argued that while the process of meaning-making is individual, personal interpretations are mediated through the communities from which visitors come. When visitors interpret museum displays they draw on their life experience which they use to frame the kinds of meanings they make, meanings which in turn are influenced by those that are acceptable within their communities. By linking hermeneutic philosophy and constructive theories of education, Hooper Greenhill proposes that the meaning-making process is a dialogic encounter

²³ Perin 1992 :182 –220.

²⁴ Hooper Greenhill, 1992, 1994,1995 and 2000.

²⁵ Hooper Greenhill uses interpretation as a process of arriving at understanding in the hermeneutic sense rather than as a process of communicating to people the significance of a place or an object to increase their enjoyment or understanding of their heritage and environment.

between the object and the person, in which the visitor constantly checks and rechecks against previous experience the meaning that s/he is making. 'Meaning is constructed through this circular dialogic action, with modification to the sense we construct being made constantly.'²⁶

Both hermeneutics and constructivism assert that learners are active in the process of making sense of the experience. Individual learners combine concrete and abstract modes of perception and active and reflexive processes of accommodating and assimilating knowledge according to their preferred approach to learning.

The concept of interpretive communities places visitor meaning-making in a social context. It acknowledges visitors' prior learning and experiences and shows how they are relevant in the meaning-making process. It will be an important tool in the construction of my theory of the museum experience.

The museum environment

The ideas of interpretive communities and meaning-making are powerful analytical concepts and seem to give the visitor almost complete autonomy within the museum environment. They emphasise the social nature of museum learning and highlight the power of visitors to make different meanings within the space according to their life experience and the various interpretive strategies that they deploy. If visitors make meaning from their own interpretive communities and according to their own self-identity, what role is there for the curator and curatorial expertise? The curator has usually been seen as the driver and ultimate authority in most exhibitions, even those where there is a project team or ones in which collaboration with audiences are involved.²⁷

The idea that more than one meaning can be made by visitors throws into question the influence of the expertise of the curator on the meaning-making process. Curators have had almost unchallenged power to make those meanings of objects which they consider most appropriate for 'their' exhibitions. Curatorial power was the focus of debate in a range of influential essays in the early 1990's in *Exhibiting*

²⁶ Hooper Greenill, 2000: 118

²⁷ A senior curator for instance, led the curatorial team for the British Galleries in the V&A in London, with input from education staff as part of the project team.

Cultures – The Poetics and Politics of Museums Display and in *Museums and Communities – The Politics of Public Culture*. These articles raised awareness of how the selection of information and the presentation of ideas and images are enacted within the power system of the museum, and also of the extent to which traditional practices of representation were seen to be supporting dominant but increasingly unrepresentative perspectives, when viewed against the make up of contemporary society in terms of ethnicity, religion, gender and nationality.

The politics of museum displays has been the focus of another writer, Carol Duncan, who likens a museum, particularly an art museum, to a secular temple in which visitors take part in a ritual, the nature of which is determined by the often hidden political agenda of the museum. She argues that the museum is not only a symbol or a sign in the semiotic sense of the power of those of influence in society, but an instrument for the continuity of that power in the hands of a few.²⁸ The semiotic nature of the space within which the visitor meaning-making takes place relies on the competence of visitors to make sense of the space according to what resources cognitive, cultural and social, the visitor brings to the encounter. Bourdieu described these resources as the 'cultural capital' of visitors which influences and determines the success of the interpretive strategies they might use.²⁹

This concept, revealing the politics of museum displays, has helped me to identify another important factor in the visitor meaning making process – the museum as a symbol of power. In order to understand the process I have to understand not only the individual visitor making meaning within the framework of *his or her interpretive* community but also the extent of the influence on the perception by the visitor of the power and the authority of the museum itself.

The notion of the museum environment as 'contested terrain' highlighted by Karp and Lavine in the 1990's begins to be especially relevant when seen in the context of the meaning-making process.³⁰ In the interface between the museum meaning represented by the curatorial displays and the meaning that visitors make, how much influence does the museum environment have? What is the nature of the meaning-making process?

²⁸ Duncan, 1995: 4

²⁹ Bourdieu, 1993.

³⁰ Karp and Lavine, 1992:9

Current discourse in museums encourages a more visitor-centred approach to the museum experience and highlights the value of the meanings that visitors make. This is the focus for my research. I will use the research process to build a theoretical framework that will help me understand the visitor experience in a rich and deep way, rather than within the narrow parameters and approaches that explain the experience in cognitive terms only. I shall draw on the three areas of theory which I have outlined above - cultural and educational theories relating to learning, the concept of interpretive communities and the authoritative role of museums in society - to produce a model which illustrates my theory of what happens when visitors encounter exhibitions. This model will embody my theory of the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of the museum experience and the meaning-making process. Fundamental to an understanding of meaning-making is a theory of knowledge and culture and I shall develop these to underpin the evolution of my framework. I believe that my model offers an heuristic device for improving the understanding of what actually happens during museum visits and will lead to a more relevant and significant educational and inspirational role for museums in the twenty first century.

Structure of the thesis

In chapter 2, *Museums and Society*, I explore the role of museums in society from the time of the French Revolution and examine the interrelationships of museums, culture, politics and power. I distinguish certain characteristics of the museum as an institution and argue that museums throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries have used their power to support the political ambition of the state in the creation and maintenance of a dominant national or civic cultural identity for individual citizens.

I argue that museums as part of what was perceived as 'high culture' were appropriated by the middle classes and became a bastion for them of the truth, status and power that reflected their position in the new industrial society and the status and power of their country within the world.³¹

³¹ Williams, 1976. He discusses the complexity of the changing definitions and use of the words 'art' and 'culture'. From 18C 'high culture' was associated with music, literature, painting and sculpture and became synonymous with the mark of a 'civilised society'.

I address the political context for the emergence of the educational function of the museum which I argue has generated a perception of the museum as a place of power and authority with a central cultural and educational role in society. I discuss the traditional role of curators as experts who with their special knowledge of the artefacts have been assigned a powerful and authoritative role and responsibility for passing on that knowledge to visitors.

Finally I begin to discuss the challenges facing museums in the twenty-first century as the certainty of knowledge and truth gives way to discourse, and many demand equality of cultural representation in institutions with status and authority like museums. Not least of these challenges is how museums can revisit their educational role and respond to government initiatives to contribute in a more meaningful way to the growth of the individual and of society. I argue that in order to understand the meaning-making process I must take into account the role and the influence of the museum in society, the visitor's interpretive community and the roles of one's cultural practice and identities.

In chapter 3, *Museums, Knowledge and Culture*, I examine the current sociological, psychological and educational theories that challenge a positivist view of knowledge and discuss the implications of this epistemological shift for the authority of the curatorial voice, and the role of the visitor within the environment. I explore the link between knowledge, culture and reality, introduce the concept of meaning-making and argue that meaning is an outcome of cultural practice. I discuss the relationship between knowledge and power and the potential for a new pedagogy for a cultural institution where the context for the deployment of curatorial power is radically different from that of the traditional museum.

Chapter 4, *Museums, Role and Ritual*, explores the museum as a cultural environment in which I apply the socio-cultural theories of knowledge and learning of Mead and of Dewey and the more recent theories of Bruner in cultural psychology and Turner in anthropology and I draw on these theories to investigate and explain the meaning-making process of visitors to museums. I introduce the notion of the visitors making meaning in a series of transactions with the objects, the museum, other people and with themselves, which draw on the knowledge, values, and ideals of their interpretive communities. I begin to explore the concept of the museum visit

as drama and show how the vocabulary of the drama - role, ritual and power - has relevance to the museum visit.

In Chapter 5, *The Research Methodology*, I review different ways in which museum visitors have been studied and I select for analysis comments data obtained from my case study museum, the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow. I discuss the issues which might arise in the research design and make explicit the various interpretive frames of the communities involved in this study of the meaning making process -society as a whole, myself as a researcher, the museum, the visitors and the museum team. By doing this, I raise awareness of the limitations of this methodology where I use meaning-making to investigate meaning-making. I discuss my role as a researcher and outline the processes of analysing the evidence and theory building, which enable me to develop a theoretical framework which I present as a model at the end of the research.

In Chapter 6, *A Case Study*, I describe St Mungo's Museum in detail and place it within the context of the City of Glasgow. I describe the displays and their arrangement in each of three galleries, along with the two notice boards on which visitors are invited to display their comments. I explain how I am going to use these comment cards and also interviews from three of the project team as the basis for my research data. I introduce the curatorial team and the architect responsible for the creation of the displays and use their words to describe the museum's aims.

Chapter 7, *The Pilot Study*, sets out the preliminary research I carried out on a sample of the visitor comments data which I treat as units of meaning, expressions of the experience of the visitor at the moment of writing. I found that as part of their experience, visitors regarded the museum as if it had a persona and in many instances addressed the museum as a person. Their comments were influenced by their perception of the museum persona, to which they attributed various qualities. Visitors acknowledged the special nature of the museum environment and their responses varied from intensely personal and reflective, through negotiation with the museum persona, to requests for different displays or for more accurate or more complete information. As well as the museum in role, I also identified various roles that visitors themselves adopted as they strove to make their own meaning of the displays in relation to what was happening around them in the museum.

The emergence of the concept of roles encouraged me to explore the museum visit as a drama in which the museum team write the script, the museum itself is a stage and the visitors while acting as both audience for and to some degree participants in the drama, are also active in making meaning of the drama. This approach recognizes the contribution of curators and their displays to visitor meaning-making, acknowledges the symbolic nature of the museum space and its displays and gives importance to the mental and emotional activity of visitors as they make meaning in the space. It is this activity which I identify as the key to understanding the meaning-making process.

In chapter 8 *The Development of a Theory of Meaning-Making* I use the vocabulary of the drama - actor, performance, script, scenario and repertoire - to explore the 'dramatic performance' within St Mungo's museum and begin to construct a hypothesis based on what visitors have said, which enables me to explain how individual visitors make meaning in the museum. My hypothesis is that visitors make meaning by taking part in a ritual drama which involves a negotiation of the visitor's identity framed by his life experience, in the presence of other visitors, real or imagined, and in response to the museum persona. Critically I argue that in making meaning visitors do not just adopt a role for themselves but construct an identity which becomes part of their self-narrative. The negotiation and the subsequent meaning are influenced by the perception of the visitor of the relative power and authority of all these scripted voices. These components - ritual, identity building and power - form the basis of my model of visitor meaning-making in which the visitor is both audience and performer and in which she enacts meaning.

In the next two chapters I explore the strength and value of my developing theory for its explanatory power in relation to another sample of the comments data. I select a second sample of visitor comments from the full data range and apply the model from two different perspectives to test its validity.

In Chapter 9, *Testing the Model – Ritual and Power*, I examine another comments sample to study the effect on the meaning-making process of the different displays or spectacles which have been prepared by the museum team in the galleries. I find evidence that visitors do acknowledge the power of the museum as a ritual space which has authority within society which impacts on their experience, and also that they make intellectual, social, psychological and spiritual connections with the

objects in the negotiation of their ownership of meaning. These connections range from what visitors perceive to be appropriate within a community of practice of museum-goers, to meanings made from the much wider interpretive communities from which visitors come. The comments show that their meanings are influenced but not dominated by the museum script.

In Chapter 10, *Testing the Model – Identity and Power*, I examine the data again for another aspect of the museum visit which as my model proposes, shapes meaning-making – the visitor identity. I am able to show evidence that in the museum situation visitors negotiate their identity i.e. they strive to reconcile their views of their own self-image with the image that they encounter in the museum. The meaning-making process is one of self-reflection, and, in writing the comments, visitors display the outcomes of that reflection – the affirmation or confirmation in the displays of different aspects of their identities. The act of meaning-making is a self-constituting act continuously engaged in relation to the external environment.

In my examination of the evidence in both of these chapters I also discovered another aspect of the meaning-making process which could not be explained by my existing model. In attributing roles to the museum, visitors also used abstract concepts to describe the museum displays. For instance St Mungo visitors used words like fair, tolerant and biased. In making that judgment, visitors were comparing their cultural meaning of these words against their perception of the way the museum was acting in this regard. The judgement was made against criteria from their life experience, from their interpretive communities. *In making that judgment* the visitor perceived the museum display as not only having that abstract quality, but of enacting it; i.e. the museum was *being* fair or unfair, tolerant or biased. The comments showed that visitors also made transactions about individual qualities relating to their personal and social identity, like race or gender, seeking confirmation of these aspects of their identity in the displays, as they made meaning in the museum.

This process by which the visitor makes a judgment about the value and identity of the museum is a process of transaction, which is a fourth dimension which I have now identified should be incorporated into my model of meaning making in the museum. These transactions, which are in some cases described by the visitor as

transformative, become part of the visitors' emotional and cognitive repertoire for encounters in other places and at other times.

I review my research journey and theoretical framework in the light of my findings in *Chapter 11 – A Model of the Visitor Experience*, and I present a model which now encompasses four major dimensions of the meaning-making process – ritual, identity building, power play and transaction. I show how my framework adds a new dimension to existing models of the visitor experience and advocates a different perspective on the educational role of museums in society. I challenge Kathy McLean, the Director of Public Programmes and Exhibitions in the San Francisco Exploratorium and a major critic of meaning-making, who says, in her experience, meaning-making is no more than a redescription of effective cognitive communication. By examining her account of her own most memorable and significant museum experiences I demonstrate how my model explains what is happening better than her own theoretical approach.³²

I show how my model can form the basis of a new museum pedagogy, one which recognises the collaboration between museums and visitors in the meaning-making process. I show how my model adds significantly to the existing models; does justice to the richness and diversity of experiences which people seek out and have in museums; acknowledges the contribution of curators and exhibition designers; provides a holistic and respectful approach to the visitor and helps understand some of the deeper and more meaningful experiences which have been documented in various museums.³³

By analysing the meaning-making process and its dynamic component factors, I suggest that my model gives a better theoretical understanding of the meaning making process in museums. The model can underpin developments in museum practice which seek to enhance the value and use of museums in society for personal education and for increased understanding between peoples.

³² McLean 2001. A tape of proceedings from the American Association of Museums' Annual meeting 'What Large Amounts of Visitors Data Can Tell Us'.

³³ Spock, 2000:19-33

Chapter 2 Museums and Society

‘It is precisely because museums have become global symbols through which status and community are expressed that they are subject to appropriation and the struggle for ownership’. ¹

Introduction

In this chapter I briefly analyse the role of museums in society from the late eighteenth century and examine the interrelationships of museums, culture, politics and power which underpin the role of museums as social, cultural, educational and political institutions. I address the political context for the emergence of the educational function of the museum and argue that this context has generated a perception of the museum as a place of power and authority with a central cultural role in society. This perception, while challenged, still persists in many places today. It supports the importance of the museum message and the strength of curatorial voice within the meaning making process. My research will explore the interaction between this museum power and the freedom of the individual within the museum environment to make meaning.

The foundation of public museums

The modern institution of the museum grew directly out of seventeenth and eighteenth century princely collections which were often displayed in impressive purpose built halls and galleries which set certain precedents for later museum buildings. ² These various displays of objects demonstrated symbolic attributes of the prince – his splendour, legitimacy or the wisdom of his rule.³ Public museums appropriated and perpetuated many of these qualities, and transformed the function of these princely reception halls into one in which the state was idealised and presented itself to the public with authority, legitimacy and power. Museums from their inception were imbued with symbolic value related not just to the value of, or

¹ Macdonald, 1996:4

² Various authors; Hudson, 1975; Vergo, 1989 ; Anderson , B. 1991; Hooper Geenhill, 1992; Duncan, 1995; and Bennett, 1995.

³ Clifford, 1988: 215-251

knowledge about, the objects in the collection but also to the museum as an institution. The museum proved to be a producer of potent symbolic meanings.⁴

From the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a rapid expansion in the number of museums throughout Europe and North America. These new public museums were designed 'to resemble older ceremonial buildings like temples and churches, in which truths though secular and not religious, were no less authoritative. They were built for the specific purpose of providing places to show the wonders of the world to the mass of the population'.⁵ They were sites that publicly represented beliefs about the order of the world and people's place within it. 'To control a museum means to precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It also has the power to define the relative standing of people in that community.'⁶

There are a number of features of museums which collectively make them distinctive - their authoritative and legitimising status, their roles as symbols of community, their buildings, the centrality of material culture, the non-verbal nature of so many of their key implicit and explicit messages and the fact the audience literally enters and moves within them.⁷ These are key attributes which I shall use throughout my research since they affect directly the experience of visitors and hence the meanings they can make in museums.

Authoritative and legitimising status/ the politics of the museum

In France the revolution of 1789 marked a decisive break with the rigidly hierarchical and inegalitarian society in Europe and the beginning of the end of the old way of imagining the world as a fixed order ruled by theological-political logic.⁸ The transformation of the Louvre Palace in Paris which housed the royal art collection into a public space accessible to everyone, served as a signal that the power and authority of the aristocracy could be shared with the citizens of that country. That which had been the exclusive sphere of the elite was breached and the high culture

⁴ Duncan: 24

⁵ Ibid: 5

⁶ Ibid: 8

⁷ Macdonald: 5

⁸ Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:155.

associated with the aristocracy began to be appropriated by the emerging bourgeoisie. The establishment of the museum was an especially pointed demonstration of the state's commitment to the principle of equality. By making the objects physically accessible to people, the state implied that it was also giving access to ownership and the knowledge of the objects, attributes which carried status and authority.

Before the eighteenth century many of the objects in collections had been displayed for their symbolic value to show the power, wealth and taste of the owner and /or collected for their intrinsic value or curiosity. These collections were organised into categories of classification on the basis of visual similarities and dissimilarities or classifications which were derived from nature.⁹ Later scholars began to identify broad intellectual organising structures which underpinned the visible phenomena and could explain them in terms of their function – the *Origin of Species* for instance which proposed the Theory of Evolution.¹⁰ This approach to knowledge based on scientific principles became known as a rational approach in comparison to earlier forms of knowledge based on religion, myths and magic. Knowledge was seen as something which could be acquired, ordered, classified and passed on to other less knowledgeable people. This established a hierarchy of knowledge and ways of knowing which has influenced museums displays since that time.

The early public museums and their curators began to display their collections according to academic classifications imposed as part of this rational intellectual movement. For example, new display categories separated the art works into particular national schools and art historical periods. This art historical approach gave works of art a new historical importance and a new cognitive value. Duncan writes that within these schools 'progress was measured in terms of a single universal idea of beauty, an ideal to which all societies presumably evolved, but one that, according to experts, ancient sculpture and high Renaissance painting most fully realised'.¹¹

Progress in and knowledge of art became the hallmark not only for how far a people had developed towards civilisation in general, but how far an individual had himself

⁹ Hooper Greenhill, 1992: 16

¹⁰ Darwin, C. 1859.

¹¹ Duncan, 1995:25

become civilised. Williams has traced a parallel development in the use of the words 'art' and 'culture'.¹² 'By the 1820's art increasingly designated a special domain of creativity, spontaneity and purity, a realm of refined sensibility and expressive "genius"'. Bennett argues that culture developed in a similar way, coming to mean what was 'most elevated sensitive, essential and precious'.¹³ Until very recently this usage of 'culture' as a noun to represent the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy or as an adjective to describe the 'cultured person' has been the canonical definition of culture in the English speaking world.

The French sociologist Bourdieu used the idea of 'disposition' or 'habit of understanding' in relation to the development of the concept of cultural capital.¹⁴ He introduced the term *habitus* which encompasses the idea of 'habit' but also much more: a sort of cultural baggage, varying from stratum to stratum, which is socially valued or devalued by comparison with the *habitus* of others.¹⁵ Beyond economic capital (wealth), social capital (connections or networks) or cultural capital (knowledge), individuals have different capacities for manipulating those assets according to their upbringing. For example, public schools in England encouraged 'dispositions' with regard to issues of culture and taste which would gain approval from those in power in society, ensuring that their pupils continued to occupy positions of power. In general, dominant forms of cultural capital such as an intimate knowledge of the classics in literature, art and music were accessible to a very few people – those who were white and middle class. Museums, identified with the middle classes, became part of that cultural capital.

Symbols of community

The nineteenth century history of the public museum is closely allied to the development of the Europe of nation states and the identity of the individual within that state.¹⁶ Anderson argues that nation states have often adopted similar forms,

¹² Williams, 1958 and 1976 :87-93

¹³ Bennett, 1885:163-173.

¹⁴ Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991. (First published in French in 1969).

¹⁵ Zolberg, 1994:69-65

¹⁶ The 19th Century saw the development nations and nation states which has been traced by Hobsbawm in his *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* . At the beginning of the nineteenth century the idea of the nation was new and the museum was one of the spaces within which the nation could present itself as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) in all its aspects.

similar institutional strategies and similar cultural expressions.¹⁷ State-financed educational institutions, among them museums, were important in this work of construction of the nation. Museums, through displaying their objects, were able to materialise the culture of the nation and play a role not just in displaying the world but in structuring it. The museum became a space in which national culture and history were constructed, expressing a difference between one nation and all the others, a distinction all the more necessary as their state structures were broadly similar. In the form of 'national museums', museums could embody 'common' culture and history, symbolising at a political level the unity of the nation. The museum was one of the spaces within which a nation could present itself as an imagined community.¹⁸ As has been argued by Anderson and exemplified more specifically by Duncan in reference to the Louvre, these became models which were widely exported round Europe and later much of the rest of the globe.

Nationalistic movements reached a new phase at the end of the nineteenth century when they became mass movements. The arguments of Hobsbawm and Ranger can be expanded to show how, with the extension of state structures and the onset of mass nationalism, many museums became symbols of the state and also of the nation.¹⁹ Museums in many European nation states displayed trophies from their imperial colonies, from displaced aboriginal peoples and from the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome and China which the wealth of capitalists enabled them to purchase in vast quantities.²⁰ In Britain as elsewhere, national identities and national publics began to be identified through their differences from other nations and ethnic groups. A sense of belonging to a particular nation was reinforced by a perception of national superiority derived from their empires based on technological and military dominance of much of the rest of the world. 'The harnessing of nation and state brought together social regulation and the sentiments of belonging – this is one of the reasons it is so powerful and why museums as an expression and agency of some of these social trends are so important'.²¹

¹⁷ Anderson, B. 1983:1-8

¹⁸ Anderson, B. 1983:32

¹⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger. 1983.

²⁰ Hudson, 1975:1-7

²¹ Ibid: 5

Prosler writes that the 'museum takes the form of a complete microcosmic representation of the sovereign nation state. The objects collected at the museum document a human community extending in time and space: the nation. They also document in their territorial origins the spheres of political influence. The building contains everything in the state's territory – and in this way becomes itself a symbol of power relationship.....Within this perspective the national museum assumes a quite particular symbolism and meaning for the nation and the nation state. This transcendental quality embodying the order of things and embedding the nation within it is peculiar to the museum'.²²

The nineteenth and early twentieth century museums played a role not just in displaying the world through the objects of material culture but also of structuring people's view of the world underpinned and legitimized by the authority of the state. This function mirrored that of formal education but had the potential to be more global due to the breadth of its constituency - the people, generally the middle classes, who visited and appropriated the museum. It was also global in its intent to foster a relationship between the individual and the state, which directly affected one's identity and self esteem, a covert transaction between the individual and his nation. The early public museum was seen as a visual representation of a national identity that could be expressed through the culture of that nation - the way that its people lived, the values and ideals they associated with it and the society or community to which they belonged.

Bourdieu challenged the culture of art museums which he said was derived from a myth of taste which had become so embedded in society that it provided a continuity for the reproduction of inequality in society. This myth maintained that 'Greatness in art is grasped by some innate quality of the human spirit, not through learning but something akin to grace; merely by having access to art those with a special gift are enabled to manifest this capacity, whereas those lacking in it gain nothing and expose themselves to ridicule; since taste is innate, ineffable and spontaneous it is difficult to define or specify'.²³ If taste is innate there is not much one can do to develop it. Bourdieu argued that these myths justify the maintenance of hierarchical distinctions among different social categories. The ideas have become so ingrained as to be accepted by those excluded groups themselves, contributing to the

²² Prosler, 1996:21-44

²³ Sherman and Rogoff, 1994 . 56-60

perpetuation of their subordinate position as well as to the continuation of the elite position of those who benefit from their parents' wealth or connections.

The museum, people and power

Throughout the nineteenth century in Britain, Europe and America with the spread of the industrial revolution and the accelerating growth of the capitalist economy, new social structures emerged as a great many people moved to the rapidly expanding cities in search of work. Many of these new working classes were kept economically poor while the middle classes whose wealth accumulated as a result of their industry moved into positions of economic and political power. These newly confident middle classes emulated national museums and art galleries by building large and imposing buildings to hold civic collections which were a symbol of their status, culture and civic pride. Glasgow, 'Second City of the British Empire' was very typical, differing from other British cities only in the grandeur and scale of its buildings and collections – Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum which opened in 1901, was the last and greatest achievement of the Victorian municipal museum movement.²⁴

The values and ideals formerly associated with the aristocracy were appropriated by the middle classes, who secured their positions of authority and status through their civic ownership of the collections; by their understanding and appreciation of the aesthetic and educative value of the objects through their education and position; and by the symbolic power of the museum as an institution which could represent the meaning of the objects for other people. *Museums could change the meaning of the object from objects of luxury status or splendour into repositories of spiritual treasure - the heritage and pride of the whole nation.*²⁵

The consequence of putting objects on display places the museum in a power relationship with its visitors. Curators choose what to display and how to represent the objects. This may or may not have any relationship to the purpose for which the object was made or the meaning attributed to the object by the maker. In theory museums and exhibitions are morally and politically neutral. In practice museums always make moral and political statements. 'The alleged neutrality of museums and exhibitions is the very quality that enable them to become instruments of power as

²⁴ O'Neill, 2002

²⁵ Duncan, 1995:27

well as instruments of education and experience'.²⁶ Bennett argues that while the principle of the modern museum may be to equality of access the very function of the institution is one in which objects and hence the people represented by these objects are subject to selection for display. 'There is a distinctive field of political relations constituted by the museum's specific institutional properties'.²⁷

From the early nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century, museums reflected the status of political rulers who seemed to control knowledge and power with the acquiescence of the majority of the people. The Italian Marxist and theorist Gramsci distinguished between the coercive apparatus of the state like the prison and police and civil society which he maintained was made up of institutions engaged in the organization of consent like education, the law and the church.²⁸ He argued that civil society can not be seen as simply the benign agent of social reproduction and education, but as the field in which consent to middle class capitalist dominance is secured.

In the Gramscian paradigm museums are instruments of ruling class hegemony.²⁹ His concept of hegemony implied that 'real class control in capitalist societies is ideological and cultural rather than physical'.³⁰ He maintained that the real strength of bourgeois rule was not to be found in violence or the coerciveness of the state machinery but in the acceptance by other groups and classes in society of a state of affairs in which the leadership and privileged positions of a powerful few seemed natural. This natural state of affairs extended to an acceptance by the majority of a

²⁶ Duncan, 1991

²⁷ Bennett, 1995:91

²⁸ Forgacs D. (ed.) , 2000. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader* . Civil society refers to those 'social activities which are not directly part of the government, the judiciary or the repressive bodies such as police and armed forces. Gramsci used the term 'state' in different senses in his notebooks which were written in prison where he was incarcerated for his opposition to the Fascist Italian state. In the first sense the state is a 'sphere of domination', the instrument of oppression of one class by another. Later he uses the term 'integral state' which has the functions of both coercion and consent. The integral state contains both the apparatus of government and the judiciary and various voluntary and private associations and para-political institutions.

²⁹ Traditional Marxist theory treated culture as determined by economic forces so that inevitably the culture of the middle class dominated. However, Gramsci believed that politics and ideology were independent of the economic base, that no ruling class could dominate by economic force alone, and that the working class could achieve liberation by political and intellectual struggle.

³⁰ Ibid. Gramsci 1947/1971

system of meanings, habits and underlying assumptions - a culture - which served the interests of a powerful few.

In the 1960's Althusser, revisiting Marx, also argued that many established economic and political practices become embedded in society to the extent that they are taken for granted and constitute an unquestioned reality in that society. Institutions which support this reality, among which he included museums, he called 'Ideological State Apparatus'.³¹ Ideology in this sense, rather than a set of doctrines or a coherent system of beliefs, is part of people's experience of their world, unconscious precisely in that it is unquestioned. Ideology, in Althusser's use of the term, works in conjunction with political and economic practices to constitute a way of thinking, speaking and experiencing inscribed in language.

Both Gramsci and Althusser emphasised the significant nature of the symbolic power of institutions like museums that comes not only as has been argued previously from their position within the structure of society and from their association with knowledge and hence power within society, but also from the consent of people to a 'natural' order in society. This power is typified in many instances in the structure and edifice of the buildings themselves and exemplified in the practices of the institutions and their use of language.

The natural and hence the dominant voice of the museum was the voice of the powerful since it portrayed the values of ruling classes. Nineteenth century European bourgeoisie regarded themselves as members of a superior race at a higher stage of evolution as compared with lower orders and their assumed superiority was propped up by a racist ideology that defined non whites as 'beardless children whose life is a task and whose chief virtue consists in unquestioning obedience'.³² Also, as is pointed out by Duncan and by Hooper Greenhill, the bourgeois was of course the male bourgeois whose assumed superiority in the political field rested to a large part on the inferiority of his wife and children in the domestic field.³³ These values embedded in the concept 'museum' became part of the fabric of society and part of the culture of the Western world.

³¹ Althusser, 1971:121-173

³² Hobsbawm, 1977: 312. See also Hooper Greenhill, 2000:41 and Young: 1995.

³³ Duncan 1995; Hooper Greenhill 2000:41

In the United Kingdom, as in other countries, issues of representation, relating to class, race, gender and ethnicity, have become pressing as museums seek to manage their role in defining and redefining cultural identity both for individuals and communities. The increased representation of previously excluded voices has played a part in shifting the emphasis of sociological and theoretical perspectives on museums from instruments of hegemony to 'contested terrain'³⁴.

However, the traditional ideologies of the museums are persistent and are not universally regarded as contentious. Duncan argues that art museums remain as hegemonic institutions which favour the perspective of the elite who dominate society. 'In the modern world, art museums constitute one of those sites in which politically organized and socially institutionalized power avidly seeks to realise its desire to appear as beautiful, moral and legitimate.'³⁵ There has been a backlash to increasing visitor participation in interpretation of displays as powerful social forces are aroused in defense of the status quo and against what they see as 'dumbing down' of the display content and a threat to their culture – 'their shared knowledge and practice, representation, ritual and symbolism' - which the traditional museums helped not only to express but also to constitute.³⁶

Museums, culture and education

I have argued that the public museums of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the status and aspirations of the middle class elite who founded them and who aspired to be 'cultured'. This cultural perspective became embodied within a range of key social structures, including the educational system, and in those institutions that would be seen as cultural such as theatres, concert halls, opera houses, museums and galleries.

Education reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reproduced a bourgeois paternalistic model of teaching, promoting the dissemination of this body of knowledge to the unenlightened masses with the intention of elevating them to culture. Henry Craik, Secretary of the Scotch Education Department between 1885 - 1904, argued in 1901 that the parish schools had been the 'making of the Scottish

³⁴ Karp and Lavine, 1991:1

³⁵ Duncan 1995: 6

³⁶ Macdonald, S.J.2003

nation'.³⁷ As I have discussed earlier, museums as instruments of civil society were seen as supporting the more formal educational institutions and their generally didactic displays emulated the academic approach of schools and universities.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London for example, was founded as a fundamental element in Henry Cole's new Department of Public Art to spread art 'among all classes of the community', to improve the quality of industrial art and design and to help raise standards of art education in schools and colleges.³⁸ In the 1880's the Director Cole said 'Unless museums and galleries are made subservient to the purpose of education, they dwindle into very sleepy affairs'. In Scotland the national museums in Edinburgh, the Scottish capital, followed the British model. 'The prospect of establishing an Industrial Museum in Scotland has been merged in the larger notion and name of a National Museum. . . .The exhibition in 1851 and the interest which Prince Albert was known to take in the diffusion of all knowledge relating to science and art, gave great impulse to the movement for establishing a permanent museum of the class of which the Great Exhibition may be said to be the representative'.³⁹ The ambition was of a museum which could be source of inspiration for the public at large and an institution which could exert an educational influence over the Scottish population. 'The new museum was seen as making an invaluable contribution to the improvement and progress of the nation'.⁴⁰ Implicit in this statement is the concept that acquiring knowledge was one way that society would ensure it encouraged the development of good citizens who would contribute to the wealth and status of the community and of the nation.⁴¹ Wittlin describes the European museum before 1914 as fulfilling two main services for its visitors: 'to act as an expression of group loyalty above all of patriotism.....and to some extent of education'.⁴²

David Anderson describes how that faith in the power of museums, that conviction that museums had great potential as education establishments which could contribute to social improvement, diminished during the twentieth century.⁴³ The

³⁷ Holmes, 2000:22

³⁸ Esteve-Coll, 1993

³⁹ *The Scotsman* newspaper (1866, May 21): 6

⁴⁰ Calder, J. 1968:6

⁴¹ Esteve-Coll, 1993

⁴² Wittlin, 1949 :149

⁴³ Anderson, D. 2000

Museums Journal reports on a meeting in 1920 between the Board of Education and the Council for the Museums Association, with additional representatives from the Science Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, where the delegation was very clear that 'Museums are not fundamentally educational institutions'.⁴⁴ Museums had become increasingly concerned with the conservation and preservation of the objects and with academic research and had lost their initial public educational purpose.⁴⁵ The Council went on to state that '.... facilities offered by the museums as a factor in education can be fully utilised without interfering with the development of its more important functions.'

Wittlin describes how efforts to exploit the use of museums as a force for education between the two world wars failed as a 'substantial body of progressive thought and some outstanding pioneering efforts stood out against a mass of half hearted measures lacking in preciseness of purpose and a still larger background of complete stagnancy. The ensuing result was that in its sum total the European museum up to 1939 did not develop to an institution vital to the community'.⁴⁶ Museums, which had been founded on educational purposes, failed to realise their potential as they became increasingly concerned with the care of the collections.

Education in museums had become identified with school and formal education. The practice of museum education in major museum services like the London nationals, Birmingham and Glasgow developed into almost exclusively schools services and museum educators, in the main teachers, performed that function with little connection to other museum functions. For example in 1941 Glasgow City Council created the role of Museum Education Officer who was employed by the Education Department, not the Museum department, to work in Glasgow Museums. His role had political and social significance which was to ensure that the city's population particularly the children, would benefit from the museum resources. In 1951 a report stated - 'Glasgow has a Schools Museum Officer with a small staff who have done the State some service in using the treasures of the Glasgow Art Gallery at Kelvingrove for the education of future citizens of Glasgow, and have by their

⁴⁴ Museums Journal 1920:123 –129.

⁴⁵ This argument is developed more fully by O'Neill, M. 2002 'The Good Enough Visitor' in Sandell, R. (ed.) *Museums, Society, Inequality*. London: Routledge. 24-40.

⁴⁶ Wittlin, 1949:176

alertness, enterprise and zeal, completely changed the attitude of some of these future citizens to the museums.’⁴⁷.

In the early years of the twentieth century a number of educationalists and philosophers were beginning to apply new thinking to education.⁴⁸ For Gramsci questions of education and culture have always been of central importance as it was through them that he envisaged that working class people could move to a position of power within society.⁴⁹ ‘We need to free ourselves from the habit of seeing culture as encyclopaedic knowledge and men as mere receptacles to be stuffed full of unconnected raw facts, which have to be filed in the brain as in the columns of a dictionary enabling the owner to respond to stimuli from the outside world’. He stated that this form of culture is ‘harmful and creates maladjusted people who believe they are superior to the rest of humanity because they have memorised a few facts’.⁵⁰

For Gramsci ‘everybody is already cultured’ and the learning process is directed towards self-mastery, self-knowledge and thus liberation. Education is not a matter of handing down encyclopaedic knowledge but of developing and disciplining that potential for learning which the learner already possesses. He criticised teachers for dispensing ‘bits of knowledge’ not taking into account the different needs and backgrounds of a working class public.

⁴⁷ *An Educational Experiment 1941-1951*, Glasgow Museums Education Service. Glasgow :City of Glasgow Education Department: 60. The service was established in 1941 as a partnership between the museum and education departments within the City Council. The service expanded and continued until 1996 with its original remit. Although there were then drastic cuts during local government reorganisation, the appointment of an Education Officer from the City’s Education Department continues today. In 2003 Glasgow’s Cultural and Leisure services appointed additional education staff to deal with the demand for life long learning in the city.

⁴⁸ For example: Dewey (1859-1952); Mead, G.H. (1863-1931); Montessori (1870-1952); Piaget (1896-1980).

⁴⁹ I am using the definition of class put forward by Hewitt, 2000: 8. Class is a structural concept; its focus is on the patterned and repetitive conduct and social relationships that can be observed within and between various groups in a society at a given point in history. The concept of social class refers to the fact that societies are typically divided into segments whose members have a similar position in the division of labour, comparable education and incomes, and a similar view of themselves and their place in the world.

⁵⁰ Forgacs,D. 2000:57

This holistic approach to the aims of education had been championed by the American educationalist John Dewey writing about the same time as Gramsci, but proposing radical reform rather than the overthrow of capitalism.⁵¹ Dewey argued that the task of schooling should be to give the child opportunities to 'grow' by applying stimuli to evoke responses which arise from the tendencies already possessed by the individual.⁵² Dewey defined culture 'as the capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perceptions of meaning' where meaning depended directly on people making connections with shared experience derived for their environment.⁵³ He stressed that the environment in which one lived was the main means of one's social education and he introduced the idea of meaning as a 'habit of understanding' which enabled people to acquire dispositions to respond in a certain way to particular situations.

Dewey regretted the concentration of formal education and schooling on acquiring facts and amassing the ever increasing information which emerged with scientific and technological advances. For him the purpose of education was to learn ways of living in the world in order to form democratic communities. Dewey recognized the potential for museums to contribute to the education of adults and called on museums to take into account the experience of their audience when creating displays. 'The measure of the worth of any social institution, ...is its effect on enlarging and improving experience.'⁵⁴ This new thinking was slow to take root in the museum world and the practices built up over a long period were slow to change.

It was not until 1992 that the American Association of Museums issued its first ever major report on the educational role of museums, *Excellence and Equity - Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*.⁵⁵ The report expanded the definition of the

⁵¹ Dewey was writing and working in a capitalist state – the United States of America. In Marxist terms the state is seen as increasingly necessary to the preservation of the capitalist system through the public provision of a complex economic infrastructure as well as a social welfare system that stabilises order and absorbs the costs of education and training that would otherwise have been borne by private capitalists.

⁵² Dewey, J. 1934:26-30

⁵³ Ibid:145

⁵⁴ Ibid:7

⁵⁵ *Excellence and Equity – Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, 1992. This report for the American Association of Museums (AAM) presents the findings of the Task Force on Museum Education that was established in 1989 following the AAM report *Museums for a New Century*. This report states

museum's educational role which had previously been the responsibility solely of educators and docents⁵⁶, to embrace the entire museum staff - trustees, personnel and volunteers. Three key ideas are embodied in the report. 'First the educational role of museums is at the core of their service to the public and this assertion should be clearly stated in every museum's mission and central to every museum's activities. Second, museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, and they should reflect this diversity in every aspect of their operations and programmes. Third, dynamic forceful leadership is needed within and outside the museums community and is the key to fulfilling the potential for public service in the new century'.⁵⁷

Explicit in these ideas is a call for museum education to become more than a few museum teachers and volunteers working with schoolchildren to promote learning through the provision of information. They ask all museums to address the learning experience of all visitors and in particular to explore the learning potential of exhibitions as a key facet of their activity.

This report gave legitimacy to many of the innovations taking place in the USA especially in the realm of children's museums. Five years later in the United Kingdom, Anderson produced a report for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, '*A Commonwealth – Museums in the Learning Age*', which laid out recommendations for politicians and museum professionals to realise the educational potential of museums in the UK.⁵⁸ It presented an expanded concept of *museum* learning that defines it as 'a collaborative process involving both public and staff.' It goes on to say that 'museum education is not about what museums do with their objects to people, but a process of individual and community development drawing upon the full range of community and institutional resources, to which both the public and museum staff contribute as full partners.'⁵⁹

that there is an educational dimension in every museum activity, and emphasises the public service role of museums.

⁵⁶ Docents are usually adult volunteers who work in American museums explaining collections and displays to the public.

⁵⁷ *Excellence and Equity – Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, 1992 : 3,8

⁵⁸ Anderson, D. 1997 and 1999 (reissued under the New Labour Government of 1997)

⁵⁹ Anderson, D. 1999: 13

This report reasserted the place of education as a key public function at the heart of the museum and coincided with New Labour government agendas which also gave priority to education. Publicly funded national museums were encouraged by national government agendas to serve a wider audience base and support government objectives in accessibility and social inclusion.⁶⁰ Local government museum services, which had undergone successive cuts in funding during the eighties and nineties, re-emphasised the education agenda as part of the 'best value' regime of service evaluation and renewal.⁶¹

The report served as a catalyst for further reform and partnership resulting in such practices as the partnership between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) in promoting learning activities and building educational expertise and capacity in museums. The *Inspiring Learning for All Framework* is the latest in these initiatives from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.⁶² The result has been a change of direction, albeit slow in some quarters due to competing demands for preservation and research on the collection and also to the lack of skills and understanding among the profession. There has been a rediscovery of the original educative purpose of public museums, a reorientation towards their public service role and a move towards working in partnership with other educational organisations.

It is in the context of this debate that I pursue my investigation. By exploring the experiences of actual visitors and using them to develop a theoretical model I believe

⁶⁰ 2001 'Centres for Social Change', London: DCMS

⁶¹ 'Best Value' (BV) in local government in the UK was the name given to the Government drive in 1999 to ensure that local authorities became more efficient in the delivery and management of their public services. In the BV Review of Services delivered by Glasgow Museums in July 2001, the themes include the requirement for the Council to be clear about what it wants its services to achieve; the need to assess thoroughly the effectiveness of its services; the search for improvements and where necessary better methods of delivery; the integration of these principles into the Council's management processes; that Education is one of the priorities for Council services.

⁶² In March 2004 the Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) launched a major new project - Inspiring Learning for All - a pioneering programme to make museums, libraries and archives central to the development of modern education. In April 2004 the DfES and the DCMS announced £7 Million funding for museum and gallery education.

that I will enable museums to negotiate the uncertainties and pressures for change and make better decisions about their roles in society.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the role of the public museum from the time of the French Revolution until the early twenty-first century and have argued that museums throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries have used their collections to present both the authority and implicit power of the state dominated by the middle classes. Museums as part of high culture were appropriated by the middle classes and became a bastion for them of the truth, status and power that reflected their position in society and the status and power of their country within the world.

The characteristics which I have listed that distinguish the museum as an institution - their authoritative and legitimising status, their roles as symbols of community, their buildings, the centrality of material culture, the non-verbal nature of so many of their key implicit and explicit messages - are seminal to the intellectual and ideological construction of the museum concept. As has been argued in this chapter, integral with these ideas is the educational function of the museum and the power associated with the museum institution as part of the structure of civil society.

Although ostensibly the educational aim of the museum was about the transfer of knowledge from the curatorial expert to the visitor *through the text of the displays*, the 'hidden agenda' or subtext of the museum was to produce a cultured public; one which consented to the values of the middle class and who had an acquaintance with, if not a knowledge, of the finer things in life – art, music and drama.

Hooper Greenhill and Bennett both argue that the public museum was shaped into being by two contradictory functions 'that of elite temple of the arts and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education'. While changes in society have produced pressures, internal as well as external, for changes in museums so that they become more accessible and more representative of today's plural society, dualities such as that outlined above continue to occupy much of the discussion in museums. Care of collections vie for resources with public access; curatorial expertise is seen to be threatened by visitor participation; and the educational

function of the museum is juxtapositioned against the aesthetic experience for its own sake.

Locked within traditional disciplinary boundaries and recycling old orthodoxies many museum professionals are oblivious to new discourses that have emerged in other fields. In education, pedagogy is no longer about the transfer of skills and knowledge but about the best way to use the instruments of teaching and learning to help people understand themselves and the way they engage with others.⁶³ This change has come about through an understanding of the social construction of knowledge and an analysis of the production and representation of meaning and how these practices and their effects are implicated in the dynamics of social power. Any question as to the educational function of the museum in the twenty first century must address these ideas and assess them in the light of the complexities of the relationships between museums and society, which I have explored in this chapter.

Museums are places where politics, epistemology and aesthetics are necessarily intertwined.⁶⁴ I need to understand the implications of these pedagogical changes and emerging new role of meaning in museums so that I may build a model of the museum experience based on firm epistemological foundations which gives new impetus to the educational function of the museum in the twenty-first century.

⁶³ Giroux, 1992:3

⁶⁴ Vergo, 1989:40

Chapter 3 Museums, Knowledge and Culture

'Interest in the role of knowledge has developed along with the recognition that *social reality is not a phenomenon that exists in its own right but one that is produced and communicated; its meanings are derived in and through these systems of knowledge*'.¹

Introduction

I have argued in the previous chapter that in Europe the emerging nation states, with their bourgeois elites and wealthy individuals, have used museums to legitimise their hegemony with an aura of culture. In the process these groups have endowed museums with considerable authority to define and represent the cultural sphere based on the premise that knowledge is finite and absolute.²

I will now examine how current sociological, psychological and educational theories challenge this positivist view of knowledge and discuss the implications of this epistemological shift for the authority of the curatorial voice and the role of the visitor within the museum environment.³ I will explore the link between knowledge, culture and cultural practice, introduce the concept of meaning-making and argue that meaning is an outcome of cultural practice.

Culture and meaning

In 2000, the Scottish Executive issued a cultural strategy document *Creating our Future, Minding our Past*,⁴ in which Scotland's culture is defined as 'the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterise a society or a group. It includes not only the arts and the letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of human beings, value systems, traditions

¹ Doyle McCarthy, 1996:17 The Italics are in the original quote.

² Sherman and Rogoff, 1994: xvi

³ Many theorists in education and in sociology - Steffe and Gale, 1995; Mead G.H., 1934; Dewey 1938; Bruner, J., 1986, 1990 and 1996 ; Giroux, 1992

⁴ 2000. 'Creating our Future, Minding our Past' A National Cultural Strategy for Scotland. Edinburgh: HMSO.

and beliefs'. It goes on to add that 'culture is represented in the natural and historical landscape, archaeology, buildings, museums, gallery and library collections, archives and records, and shared memories and experiences. Continuous migration both into and out of Scotland has enriched its culture and widened its horizons and aspirations. This diversity of influence is reflected in the collections held by Scotland's museums, galleries and libraries'.

This is a much broader definition of culture than notions of 'high culture' – the classic works of literature, painting, music and philosophy or even than 'mass culture' - the forms of popular music, art, design, television, film, computer games and sport which make up the everyday lives of 'ordinary' people.⁵ The Scottish document describes culture as a distinctive way of life of a people, a community, a nation. It links culture with the formation of knowledge or knowledges⁶ within, out of and through culture and harmonises with Williams' position that "cultural practice" and "cultural production" are not simply derived from another otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution'.⁷

These statements emphasise the evolutionary and dynamic nature of culture which can be influenced by the changing practices of people within the culture. Culture no longer simply reflects other practices, it is itself a practice – a signifying practice with its own product – meaning. Hall says that primarily 'culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings - the giving and taking of meaning - between members of society or a group'.⁸ *Meaning is what gives members of the group their sense of identity, of who they are and with whom they belong.*⁹ Cultural practices embrace feelings, attachments and emotions as well as concepts and ideas. Participants in a culture interpret what is happening around them and make sense of the world in broadly similar ways. Cultural meanings are not only 'in the head'.¹⁰ They help people to organise and regulate social practices, influence conduct and consequently have real practical effects. Differences in cultural practices may lead to different constructions of reality for different groups within a society like Scotland for instance, and one group may attach different meanings to museum

⁵ Williams, R. 1976:87-93

⁶ Doyle McCarthy, 1-10

⁷ Williams, 1981:12-13

⁸ Hall, 1997:16-28

⁹ Silverman, L. 1995: 161- 170

¹⁰ Hall, 1997.

objects than another. As an official state definition at pains to emphasise diversity within an all embracing national unity, the cultural strategy document under-represents the degrees of conflict between different elements of Scottish culture and inequalities in power and status among different groups – urban and rural, modern and traditionalist, highland and lowland, catholic and protestant; nationalist and unionist as well as complex fractures along lines of gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and ability/disability.¹¹ While most Scottish people would agree with the Scottish Executive's broad definition of culture and Scottishness, in practice many would have difficulty putting it into practice.

Nonetheless the cultural strategy definition acknowledges different realities and hence different knowledges within a culture. Knowledge is not single or finite but depends on the source, the community from which it comes – the culture and the meaning constituted within the culture would regard certain elements within it as less Scottish, less real or less authentic. This represents an epistemological shift in the way knowledge is viewed and understood. In order to explore the implications of these notions, I should like to examine how this changing definition of knowledge affects museums.

Museum Epistemology

The museum that emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries developed and was shaped in relation to the ideas and values of that period. At that time the dominant view of knowledge was a positivist one - knowledge was absolute, certain, factual, objective and value free and able to be transferred from those who were knowledgeable to those who were not. Human knowledge was a process of discovery of facts of history, the nature of reality and the laws of science.

Museum curators, at the leading edge of some parts of academic thinking, displayed their collections taxonomically, symbolically showing the structure and objectivity of knowledge. Displays in many of the world's older science museums, the Science Museum in London and the Royal Museum in Edinburgh for instance, were ordered by scientific disciplines - natural history, geology etc., and were arranged to elucidate both the wonders of science and the correct descriptions of the laws of the universe.

¹¹ Devine, T. and Finlay, R. 1996:1-13

This model extended from science to the humanities so that art, archaeology and anthropology developed quasi-scientific taxonomies. Museums were built with the confidence that they could collect, organise and display the sum of the world's knowledge.

The idealised space of the museum was positivist, objective, rational, evaluative, distanced and set aside from the real world. The museum visitor was accorded the status of neutral observer, walking in an ordered fashion through galleries that were in themselves ordered, well-lit and laid out for the acquisition of knowledge - the knowledge that could be constructed from objects that, once properly arranged in the neutral space, would speak for themselves.¹²

This idea reflected the immense intellectual self-confidence of the European nations, and their sense of predominance over the other peoples of the world. The superiority of Western science and technology seemed self-evident, as did that of western art. Rational investigation, first using the Linnaean model, and then the Darwinian, seemed to support the superior position of humans over other creatures, and that of Europeans over their colonies.¹³ The objects in museums, set out in a rational narrative of progress, were visual evidence of that superiority. Museums were there for the transfer of knowledge based on scientific and historical truth while art museums displayed evidence of the aesthetic achievements of Europeans and the superiority of Western art. The positivist view of knowledge was underpinned by the premise that there was an underlying order to nature that can be known and that aesthetic values were based as universal truths.

Changing definitions of knowledge

Early in the twentieth century new concepts in sociology began to emerge which have contributed to contemporary views on the nature of knowledge and how one comes to know.¹⁴ In these accounts the truth of a statement rests not on correspondence to some objective reality but on the context in which it is derived – be it historical, cultural or social. The sociology of knowledge is closely linked to the philosophical

¹² Conn, 1998:4

¹³ Duncan , 1995

¹⁴ Mannheim, 1936:73

tradition of pragmatism identified with such figures as James, Dewey and Mead.¹⁵ Dewey for instance, argued for a position where knowledge depended more on practical experience and the application of ideas to the aspirations and characteristics of all areas of human activity, rather than a verbal description of 'truth'.¹⁶ For the pragmatists the human mind is conceived as activity; mental attitudes and knowledge are always linked to action.

Pragmatists believed that knowledge and experience are coterminous – they arise and develop simultaneously in human acts.¹⁷ These acts take place between peoples in society and within individuals in society. Mead stressed that people are not passive in the sociation process – in encounters with others they do not simply absorb their responses. Rather they evaluate the reactions of others and organise them into a unified whole in the mind. Mead concluded that not only the self but the mind is a social product and that people use the signifying systems of society like language and visual images to think with. Mind is a product of society.¹⁸

In 1966 following on the work of the pragmatists, Berger and Luckman proposed that 'knowledge and (social) reality exist in a reciprocal or dialectical relationship of mutual constitution' and that 'knowledge and reality are socially generated'.¹⁹ They assert that knowledge rather than being a fixed body of 'truths' was constructed within a social, environmental and cultural context and that based on this definition, reality may be different for different groups of people according as to how they reconcile the different sources of knowledge and justify their beliefs. They proposed that reality and hence 'truth' is subjective. 'Knowledge refers to any and every set of ideas accepted by one or another social group or society of people, ideas pertaining to what they accept as real'.²⁰

¹⁵ James, 1911; Dewey, 1916; Mead, 1934. Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition founded by American philosophers C.S. Pierce, W. James, J. Dewey and G.H. Mead. Their philosophy made practical consequences the test of truth (philos). They developed an account of 'self' as a product of social practices. Mead was seen as one of the founders of symbolic interactionism which is a socio-logical psychological perspective which tries to explain human behaviour in terms of the meaning people make as they interact with each other.

¹⁶ Dewey, 1938:

¹⁷ Doyle McCarthy, 1996:4

¹⁸ Mead, G.H., 1934.

¹⁹ Berger and Luckman, 1966

²⁰ Doyle McCarthy, 1996 :2

Throughout the twentieth century in contrast to previous notions of knowledge as finite and fixed, researchers in different disciplines have increasingly recognised that knowledge is linked to the context of its production and that it is in the prevailing interests, values, culture and beliefs that prescribe the standards of quality and criteria of truth that knowledge is defined. 'To speak of a historical event or an artistic masterpiece, in other words, is also to speak of the criteria of taste and value by which they are judged to be important'.²¹

These ideas together with my previous discussion on culture and meaning have three important consequences for museums and for my argument. Firstly, they imply that depending on their beliefs, customs and value systems, people may have different forms of knowledge which will affect the meaning they make in the museum; secondly that the knowledge that curators have can no longer be viewed as objective, but must be recognised as socially constructed within their set of values, beliefs and education; and thirdly that visitors are active within the museum space with the ability to construct, rather than just receive, knowledge. I shall expand on each of these in turn.

Different forms of knowledge - interpretive communities

I have moved from a position where knowledge has close correspondence with an objective reality to one where the creation of knowledge depends on the culture of the society. Knowledge, reality and meaning are formed within a culture. *The Scottish Executive* document outlines the way that culture and cultural practices are not fixed but may change as people participate in a culture and circumstances change.

Any society or culture tends to impose meanings on the social, cultural and political world. If there were no shared meanings within society people could not live together and understand one another. Members of the same culture share similar meanings and participants in that culture recognise the signs, symbols and systems through which these meanings are produced. Objects are just one of the languages – text, display furniture, lighting and architecture being some of the others – which museums use as signifying systems to convey their meanings. I have discussed how the

²¹ Roberts, 1997.

museum itself can be seen semiotically as a cultural form which carries with it the ideals, values, authority and power of certain groups in society.

The museum is a semiotic space which will frame visitor expectations of a visit and the meaning of the objects. The museum will also frame an object by giving it a context i.e. its mere presence in the museum space, the way it is displayed and how it is related to and juxtaposed with other objects, will affect the meaning of the object. The museum provides an ideological frame for the objects and displays.²² The concept of framing which has roots in social psychology and in cognitive science, throws important and useful light on how curators and visitors relate to each other and to the objects in the museum.²³

An individual's frame in this sense is made up of the way she views the world as a consequence of how she was brought up, her lifestyle, education, life experience, friends and family as well as gender, race and beliefs. From her culture and life experience she will have developed a set of behaviours, values and ideals, expectations and perceptions - a frame of reference - against which she will measure new experiences. She will frame new experiences in the light of her culture. Individuals will have their own frames of reference but if they are from similar background, they will have established some ways of thinking and meanings in common, which will enable them to frame the museum experience in a similar manner. People from similar backgrounds who share the same frame of reference are sometimes referred to as an 'interpretive community'.²⁴ This concept is significant

²² MacLachlan and Reid are using the term circumtextual frame as the larger frame within which the gallery paintings hang and within which visitors find other texts which help them to construct meaning of the artwork – the artist's name and the accompanying label for instance.

²³ Social psychologists such as Goffman working in the 1970's were interested in an individual's framing of events. Goffman studied in particular, the way a situation could be used to deceive, mislead or manipulate another person. Although he introduced a number of useful concepts such as keying – a kind of 'superframe' which signals the frame through which particular social occasions should be perceived - he limits his focus to experiences between individuals – conmen, swindlers and practical jokers, for instance. (Goffman, 1974) The broader socio political frames - gender, race, ethnicity and class - and the various institutional frames that control the range of meanings are only mentioned incidentally. For my research I am interested in these wider cultural frames which affect individual autonomy.

²⁴ The phrase 'interpretive community' comes initially from the field of linguistics where there has been a great deal of debate about the meanings made by an individual reader of a text. These range from the reader accepting the meaning which the author intended to the reader ignoring the author's intention and making meaning in his head independent of the text. The literary critic Stanley Fish (1980) asserts that

in that it implies that an individual's interpretation is a shared occurrence and that while each individual makes sense of their own experience, the interpretive strategies they use emerge through prior social and cultural events.²⁵

The curator / visitor relationship can be expressed through framing. Curators may not share the frame of reference of their audiences; they may belong to a different interpretive community. There may be differences in class, gender, age, religious or ethnic background or lifestyle, which contribute to the way they perceive an exhibition and the visitor role within it. Curators tend to display objects so that they can direct the visitor interpretation towards one particular meaning. They construct the displays according to their own culture and background and use various framing devices such as lighting, positioning, proximity to other objects, film and labels to provide a context appropriate to the curatorial message.

'Their codes are ideological and discursively constructed, rooted in a specific historical situation and operating in conjunction with a particular social formation'.²⁶ The codes form part of the curator's interpretive community which has ideological sources depending on his background. The 'obvious' meanings of an object are not given but are produced in a specific society by the way that that society talks and thinks about itself and its experience.²⁷ If some visitors do not share the knowledge of the obvious interpretation then they may be alienated from or may challenge the museum meaning. Visitors see the museum displays through their own frame, which is influenced by the institutional setting and their socio-cultural circumstances, class, gender and ethnicity. *Assumptions and inferences drawn from past experience are used as a resource as they 'construct' what they see.*²⁸ Visitors belonging to similar interpretive communities may well construct similar meanings.

As well as the cultural influences on visitors due to their previous experience and way of thinking and perceiving, visitors' frames are also determined by their status within

although reading is an individual process, there is a high degree of consensus about the meaning of particular texts by readers who share the same assumptions and have similar expectations about the reading process and the text itself. Fish calls the group of readers who make similar meanings an 'interpretive community'.

²⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, 2000:122

²⁶ Belsey, 1980 :3

²⁷ Ibid;3

²⁸ Ibid:39

the visiting group and their agenda. A grandmother coming with her grandchildren will have a different frame of reference from when she comes with an adult group or on her own. A person taking friends and relatives around their city and visiting the museums will have a different frame from when they are on their own.

Frames as well as incorporating socio-cultural backgrounds with their inbuilt codes also include visitor intent, motivation and agenda.²⁹ The museum display sets an agenda and provides a framework within which the interpretive strategies of the visitor can be enacted. 'The success of the encounter will depend on the degree to which the museum enabled the visitor strategies to be deployed in a 'meaningful' way".³⁰

Interpretive communities use the signs and signifying systems of the museum displays to make meaning within the museum which itself acts as an encompassing frame for the displays and the activities which take place in the museum. Other frames operate, and the whole visitor meaning-making process is a complex one which relies on a number of variables. I have identified some of these – the visitor agenda, visitor intention and motivation, other people in the museum and the interpretive community to which the visitor belongs. Drawing on semiotic theory I have argued that the curator uses the objects, texts and display techniques as signs which carry the messages he wishes to convey, supported by the semiotic authority of the museum. The style and tone of the museum language will be another sign to the visitor who will make meaning from her own experience and *may or may not be able to interpret, or feel comfortable with, the signs used by the curator.*

In her study of adult museum visitors and their responses to the Native Americans' Hall in the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, Perin concluded that differences in meaning were as a result of their membership of "different interpretive communities" – groups of people who share particular associations or ways of viewing an exhibit. Perin described visitor meaning-making as taking place through 'repertoires of frames of reference that are constituted by systems of meanings, ideals, myths, beliefs and prior understandings'.³¹

²⁹ Falk, Moussouri and Coulson, 1998: 106-121

³⁰ Hooper-Greenhill, 2000: 116

³¹ Perin, 1992: 195

Hooper Greenhill uses the concept of interpretive communities to examine the power relationships amongst particular communities of visitors; to explain the differences in meaning which arise in different cultures and at different times in history and also to highlight the possibility of misinterpretation of different cultures by individuals who are not part of the target interpretive community.³² She says that 'Individual meaning-making is forged and tested in relation to communities of meaning making, which establish frameworks of intelligibility within which individual subjects negotiate, refine and develop personal constructs'.³³ She introduces the idea of economies of meaning where some meanings will have more support than others within society.³⁴ For example in the museum, the curators' meanings will have high currency. These meanings tend to dominate and so the museum displays may alienate those for whom the curatorial interpretation is not meaningful, someone whose culture does not have the same ideals, or provide them with specific interpretive skills. 'The authority of the interpretation of the text does not derive from agreeing with the authors but having currency with respect to the practice of the interpretive community. The currency of these interpretations will change as the economy of meaning formed by this and other communities brings out new contenders'.³⁵

The concept of 'interpretive communities' which arose out of a discussion of the epistemological shift in the understanding of knowledge, is a useful analytical tool for a number of reasons. Firstly it shows that there are collective experiences which influence individual meaning; secondly it exposes the power operating within the museum space – those communities with influence and power within a society can ensure the dominance of their voice within museum displays as much as elsewhere; thirdly, it highlights the importance of the active visitor and of their prior experience; and fourthly through the identification of interpretive communities and hence community boundaries, it introduces the possibility of exclusion from or inclusion into those communities.

Given the role of museums in society and their broadly educational vision, an understanding of the process of inclusion and exclusion is of vital importance, and is an essential dimension, of any understanding of the museum experience. Rather

³² Hooper Greenhill, 2000:123

³³ Ibid. : 119

³⁴ Wenger, 1998: 198-202

³⁵ Fish, S. (1980)

than focusing on exclusion purely as a physical issue, the role of institutions like museums in maintaining the boundaries of interpretive communities makes it clear that there are also powerful intellectual, emotional or psychological barriers which may prevent meaning-making in the museum space – or deter people who might potentially be interested from visiting in the first place.

The concept of interpretive communities brings together many of the most important issues that I have highlighted in my discussion of the history of the museums within society and of the way knowledge is constructed within these authoritative institutions.

The subjectivity of curatorial knowledge – Knowledge and power

The ideas encapsulated in the notion of interpretive communities, moves my discussion beyond the subjective/ objective aspects of curatorial knowledge to examine how power and knowledge inter-relate. The mode of knowledge employed by the curatorial community has dominated and shaped the way collections and exhibitions have traditionally been treated. Where before there was an assumption that curatorial knowledge was objective, certain and value free, those assumptions are now being challenged in the light of the understanding of the degree to which knowledge is socially constructed. Each curator must now recognise the powerful socio-political forces at work in the selection of the objects and what can be said about them. The curators' task is now not so much a search for and display of objective facts (though accuracy and respect of the *material evidence remains* fundamental) as much as an interpretation of the significance or meaning of the object and the people associated with it at a certain time, and its re-interpretation in the context of the present day.

The culture and life experience of the curator will frame the meaning he makes which can no longer be regarded as purely objective but created within the frame of reference of his interpretive community. In a similar manner, visitors will interpret their meaning according to their culture and values. Silverman wrote in her article on meaning-making that the 'fit' or lack of 'fit' between the culture of curators and that of their visitors, will directly affect the meaning that visitors make. Notions of power are unavoidable in this discussion and raise again the questions of who has the greater authority – the visitors or the curator? Which interpretation or knowledge construction

is the most valid and the most powerful? If visitors as well as curators construct knowledge where does that leave the expertise of the curator, the authority of the museum and its educational role? I shall begin to address these questions through a discussion of the work of Michel Foucault.

Foucault, writing in the latter half of the twentieth century, argued that not only is knowledge always a form of power but that power is implicated in the questions of whether and in what form knowledge is to be applied. The question of application and effectiveness of power/knowledge was more important, he thought, than the question of 'truth'. Knowledge linked to power, not only assumed the authority of truth but also had the power to make itself true. All knowledge once applied in the real world has real effects and in that sense 'becomes true'. 'There is no power relation without the constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations'.³⁶ Museums have exerted their authority and power in society through the application of their fields of knowledge.

Objects are defined and classified according to the frameworks of knowledge that allows them to be understood at particular points in history. Using this analysis, the study of museums becomes a study of how the combination of discourse and power has produced a certain perception of knowledge of museums and their objects throughout the ages, which have profoundly affected the practice of curators and the experience of visitors.³⁷

The power and authority of the museum curator lay not only in the knowledge which he had, but also in the authority of the museum as an instrument of society. In Foucault's terms the knowledge embedded in the museum and also in the curator, linked to the power of the state, not only assumed the authority of 'truth' but also had the power to make itself be accepted as true.

A museum is a historically constituted social institution and public space. At different points in history museums have had distinctive ways of viewing objects and conferring meaning, value and validity. In the mid nineteenth century for example, the Pitt Rivers Museum promoted and legitimised the reduction of cultures to objects, so

³⁶ Foucault, 1977

³⁷ Hooper-Greenhill, 1992

that they could be judged and ranked in hierarchical relationship with each other.³⁸ This ethnographic discourse did not reflect the 'real' state of cultures; it exhibited as much the power relationship between those subjected to such classification and those promoting it. Objects are not intrinsically 'ethnographic' but they are collected and described in terms that render them so. The texts and intellectual framework that are used to interpret them change with time as shifts occur in political power, as groups emerge who seek to control how their identities are represented.

The politics of exhibiting means that museums make certain cultures visible and renders others invisible. Every choice - to show this or not to show that, to show this in relation to that, to say this about that - is a choice about how to represent 'other cultures'; and each choice has a consequence for what meanings are produced and how meaning is produced. 'The success of history belongs to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise them so as not to pervert them, to invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them; controlling this complex mechanism, they will make it function so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules'.³⁹

These meanings are inevitably implicated in relations of power - especially between those who are doing the exhibiting and those who are being exhibited. In 1989 Peter Vergo writing about 'the new museology' summed this up as follows, 'Whether we like it or not, every acquisition (and indeed disposal), every juxtaposition or arrangement of an object or a work of art, together with other objects or works of art, within the context of an exhibition or museum display means placing a certain construction on history, be it the history of the distant or more recent past, of our own culture or someone else's, of mankind in general or a particular aspect of human endeavor. Beyond the captions, the information panels, the accompanying catalogue, the press handout, there is a subtext comprising innumerable diverse, often contradictory strands, woven from the wishes and ambitions and preconceptions of the director, the curator, the scholar, the designer, the sponsor - to say nothing of the society, the political or social or educational system which nurtured all these people and in so doing left its stamp on them'.⁴⁰

³⁸ Chapman, 1985:24-25

³⁹ Foucault .M, 1980:131

⁴⁰ Vergo, 1989:2/3

The deployment of power associated with knowledge within an interpretive community derived from a culture is one important factor in the meaning-making process.

The role of the visitor

My argument has led me to re-examine the relative authority of the meaning-making processes within the museum experience. The interpretive view of meaning-making asserts the role of the visitor, engaged as an active participant in the exhibit experience. This image replaces the old view of the visitor as a passive receptacle waiting to be filled with the expert knowledge offered up in the displays by the curator. The experience of the visit is now seen as a process in which the individual visitor actively makes meaning in the museum environment.

For visitors, the whole meaning-making process is a complex one which relies on the interplay of a number of related factors – for example, the visitors' agenda, intention and motivation, the presence (or potential presence) of other people in the museum as well as the interpretive community (communities) to which the visitor belongs.⁴¹ Visitors use their interpretive frameworks to make meaning of the displays in the museum environment, which itself acts as an encompassing frame for both the displays and the activities that take place therein.

Visual images, sounds, body language, facial expressions and music are all vehicles which can carry meaning because they operate as symbols or signs which stand for or represent the meanings to be communicated. A museum has its own language and the exhibition staff use this language to help frame the meaning of the objects - the lighting, the text, the use of photographs, film and multi media, the display architecture all contribute to the meaning that the visitor will make. Visitors will construct their own meaning using the associations of these various elements from previous experience within the parameters of own interpretive communities.

Silverman describes some of the activities of visitors in her account of the talk of visitor pairs in which she identified that, regardless of museum type, there is a range of strategies which visitors employ to respond to and make sense of objects – they reminisce about them, imagine and fantasise with them, worship and revere them,

⁴¹ Falk, 1992, 2000. Falk, Moussouri and Coulson. 1998

treat them as symbols, react unconsciously to them and use them to tell stories to others.⁴² These meaning making strategies are deployed within and enabled by the frame museum and are influenced and constrained by other people present including those with whom they visit.⁴³

These strategies illustrate the visitors' active role in the meaning-making process, a process that involves a number of distinct factors of which I have identified the knowledge/power relationship as one. To investigate the visitor's role in this process more closely, I turn to a discussion by Pearce of a display in the National Army Museum in London of an infantry officer's red jacket complete with bullet hole from the Battle of Waterloo.⁴⁴ She discusses the fact that the museum message is the socially approved and ideologically endorsed story of the battle and of the bravery, loyalty, self sacrifice and national pride of the soldiers rather than the individual story of the officer or the views of those at the time who had sympathy with the ideals of the French Revolution.

The curator with a specialist's knowledge of the jacket has represented a selective narrative and tried to persuade the viewer of its veracity through the display language. The visitor in making meaning will recreate her own significance which may or may not be the same as that of the curator. Pearce argues that the meaning that the object offers is always incomplete and each visitor fills in the gap in his own way. The meaning of the object for the visitor lies not wholly in the object itself nor wholly in the interpretation but somewhere between the two.⁴⁵ The object only becomes 'real' when the viewer interprets it and attaches a meaning to it. The meaning depends partly on the experience of the visitor and partly on the context for the object which acts as a stimulus for her. 'It is this interplay which creates meaning: however the precise convergence can never be exactly pinpointed but 'must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader'.⁴⁶

⁴² Silverman, 2000:234

⁴³ Silverman, L.1990.

⁴⁴ Pearce, 1994: 19-30

⁴⁵ Ibid:26

⁴⁶ Iser, 1974:274

The kinds of visitor activities that I have described have moved the discussion of the museum visit away from focussing solely on the content of displays and the meanings and messages that curators have produced for visitors, to the responses that visitors make within the museum space and their active use of the displays as resources for meaning-making. It has moved the focus from the meanings produced by the curator to the meanings that visitors construct. Using an educational parallel, it has moved the focus from teaching to learning.

There is considerable debate about whether or not meaning-making and learning are the same experience. The Inspiring Learning For All (ILFA) definition says that 'Effective learning leads to change, development and a desire to learn more'.⁴⁷ Silverman questions whether or not there has to be change as part of the museum experience. She asks – 'what about reminiscence? what about fantasy – are they learning? If one comes away from the museum feeling good about oneself, is this learning?'⁴⁸ It seems to me that the generic learning outcomes of the ILFA framework do address the potential effect on the visitors' self esteem and of visitor reflection as possible outcomes of the visit. I shall continue to explore in my argument the relationship between meaning-making and learning.⁴⁹

The concept of meaning-making does underscore the shift from the idea of solely cognitive learning and therefore for me it is a useful phrase on which to focus a discussion of the visitor outcomes of the museum visit. The museum representation depending on how it is displayed, can affirm or contest the self esteem and self knowledge of individuals and affect their life experience. The transactions that visitors make with objects on one occasion can affect the meaning they make in successive encounters.

The power of the museum as a legitimate and legitimating cultural institution within society favours curatorial meaning, and the legacy of the hegemonic power of the museum is continued in a public recognition and acknowledgement of the museum as an educational and cultural institution. The connection between knowledge, power

⁴⁷ Inspiring Learning for All Framework: Council for Museums, Libraries and Archives, 2004

⁴⁸ Silverman. L. 2002

⁴⁹ Generic learning outcomes are emerging with the ILFA framework just as I am finishing my thesis and I have not had time to consider their impact for me.

and authority, has to be understood in order to exploit fully and effectively the educational potential of the museum.

Summary.

Any theory which describes the meaning-making process in museums must address the important elements of museum visiting highlighted in this chapter. These derive from an understanding of the socio-cultural theories of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and power - the relative authority and power of the curator and the visitor, the role of culture in the meaning making each undertakes and in the role of the institution. The institution has authority conferred on it by society and this power affects the meaning of the messages within it. Different cultures and attitudes are legitimised by their representation in the museum. As museums seek to widen their constituency to reach increasingly diverse audiences they will have to address a plurality of views. As multicultural and intercultural issues emerge ever more on the public's agenda so the 'inherent contestability of museum exhibitions is bound to open the choices in those exhibitions to heated debate'.⁵⁰

An understanding of the meaning-making process becomes central to debate on the future educational role of museums. Since culture is constantly being produced and exchanged in personal and social interaction and transaction, the museum provides a relatively safe space for cultural production and exchange.⁵¹ During a museum visit there is potential for visitors to learn about and learn from other cultures and other visitors, thereby opening up new possibilities for themselves and others in the process of engagement. By revealing what others do and feel and how they live their lives, museums may make it possible for people to engage in dialogue to improve communication between peoples.

In learning about others, people learn about themselves. It is not so much the acquiring of information as making sense of what it means to be part of a cultural practice and interpretive community and how that affects ones' own. In different cultures there are different ways of doing things which take on a significance within that cultural practice. Visitors may learn what is distinctive about their own lives, and the ways they relate to groups of people they thought radically different. In these

⁵⁰ Karp and Lavine, 1992.

⁵¹ Gurian, 1991:176-191

ways they may come to redefine themselves and enrich the possibilities of their lives. This enrichment, this growth is what Dewey has identified as the true outcome of education.⁵²

Foucault's knowledge/power discourse has important implications for the educational function of the museum. Whereas knowledge was formerly seen to be able to be transmitted from curators to visitors, this new perspective shows visitors and curators actively constructing knowledge in the museum. The American educationalist Giroux, advocating a new pedagogy for cultural institutions, argues that often those involved in cultural education must 'often unlearn the habits of institutional privilege that buttress their own power while sometimes preventing others from becoming questioning subjects. We do not abandon authority but we work with others to deepen our understanding of the complexity of traditions, histories, knowledges and politics that they bring to the schools'.⁵³ The curatorial expertise is still essential for the enrichment of the museum experience but the context of its deployment is radically different in this scenario. The discussion on culture provides the basis for understanding of pedagogy as a form of cultural production and exchange rather than the transmission of a body of knowledge, skills, or a set of values.⁵⁴

Various practices in society have inscribed institutions like museums with particular forms of social or moral authority which presuppose particular visions of the past, present and the future. Thus the Scottish Executive's definition of Scottish culture attempts to construct the country's identity as tolerant, consensual, open-minded and distinctive. This aspiration is not necessarily reflected in the social realities of Scottish institutions such as museums. In so far as museums in Scotland wish to influence society in a positive way i.e. to function as pedagogical institutions, they need to be based on an understanding of how knowledge is socially constructed and of the meaning-making process so that they can establish new shared forms of authority.

⁵² Dewey, 1938.

⁵³ Giroux, 1992:35. He refers to educators and other cultural workers. I am arguing that what he says could apply equally well to the museum.

⁵⁴ Ibid:166

Chapter 4 Museums, Role and Ritual.

‘A ritual provides a frame. The marked off time or place alerts a special kind of expectancy, just as the oft repeated ‘Once upon a time’ creates a mood receptive to fantastic tales’.¹

Introduction

In the previous two chapters I established my ontological and epistemological positions and explored the political foundation of the modernist museum, which I argued placed museums and their curators in a superior power/knowledge relationship to their visitors. I began to review how this power relationship could change with the changing perception that knowledge is constructed within socio-cultural settings and have argued that different groups in society develop cultural practices that establish the values, ideas, customs and signifying systems through which they construct knowledge, communicate with each other and make meaning. The personal experiences that visitors bring with them when they visit museums, are embedded in these cultural practices and provide the interpretive frames they use to make meaning.

The concept of interpretive communities is significant because it implies that interpretation is not carried out exclusively by the individual but is a shared experience even if the individual is alone. I have chosen to build on this notion of interpretive communities in which visitors use their past experience with its accompanying perceptions, values and emotions, both positive and negative, to frame the meaning they make. One of the aims of this research is to find the extent of the influence of the museum environment and the curatorial meaning on visitor meaning-making.

In this chapter I shall focus on the museum as a cultural learning environment and I shall develop the socio-cultural theories of knowledge and learning of Dewey and Mead and the more recent theories of Bruner in cultural psychology and Turner in anthropology and relate these to the museum as a cultural setting in which visitors

¹ Douglas, M. 1966:63

make meaning. In this discussion I shall establish a relationship between meaning-making, learning, knowledge and identity.

In the second half of the chapter I shall introduce the concept of role and role-playing and begin to explore the use of drama as a metaphor for the museum visit. In particular, I shall investigate the museum as a ritual space. This chapter will set some of the parameters, which I will use later in my research to analyse the nature of the meaning-making process in museums.

Meaning-making and situated learning

I have argued that meaning-making is not just about acquiring information but also about the intellectual, social and emotional response to museum visits, about constructing knowledge in the museum environment and about visitors understanding themselves within a wider context. Meaning was the focus of the work of the early pragmatists like Dewey and Mead, introduced in Chapter 3, who developed a socio-psychological approach to learning called symbolic interactionism.² This concept focuses on the signs, symbols and signifying systems which people learn to use as they interact with one another in social situations within a culture. They enable people to recognise the situation, assess how to behave in that situation and have the ability to understand other people's responses and behaviour and interact with them. People from the same interpretive communities share similar symbolic systems, tools and frameworks which they deploy as interpretive strategies in making meaning.³

These systems may be part of the environment into which an individual is born or may have been learned through shared practice within a community, and they constitute a special kind of communal instrument for making meaning. This is the basis of situated learning theory. 'People appear to think in conjunction or in partnership with others and with the help of culturally provided tools and implements'.⁴ The surround – the immediate physical, social and symbolic resources outside the person – serves as a vehicle in which people's interpretive strategies are enacted.⁵ I maintain that the museum is one such environment.

² Dewey, 1916; Mead, 1934

³ Hooper-Greenhill, 2000:122

⁴ Salomon, 1993:xiii

⁵ Perkins, 1992

In society, knowledge is shared, developed and passed to successive generations within local communities through their particular discourse or work practice, though globalisation and the mass media greatly extend the range of what individuals can draw on or be influenced by. Individuals shape their cultural activities and are simultaneously shaped and changed by them.⁶ The reciprocity in this process is critical. As individuals learn how to behave in socio-cultural situations and pass on that way of behaving to the next generation, the practice itself can be changed by the participants and the participants shaped by the practice, in ways that can be slight or dramatic. As individuals engage in social situations and interact with one another and fine tune their relations to each other, they learn. The learning can be intellectual, emotional, psychological and/or moral.

In situated learning theory, learning is about enculturation. Individuals in Western society have a particular expectation of the museum visit and behave in a particular way within that situation. This shared practice affects the meaning they make. Within the cultural setting they observe and interact and relate what is happening to the shared mores of their culture and make meaning. There may be influences from more than one set of mores, which are activated in the encounter, and in this situation the individual is presented with a dilemma.

In the museum setting, some people have learned how to behave because the community into which they were born (or have become a part of) has established a familiarity and a confidence with the museum environment and has also constructed a set of practices which enables them to behave in an appropriate way, recognised by the community. They make meaning of the visit and the 'fit' between their meaning and the museum meaning is generally a good one. All visitors will make meaning, though not all will have the same level of familiarity, confidence or knowledge of the museum or the objects or ways to behave in the environment. The aim of the museum is to influence that meaning and enable visitors to have a positive experience.

From his research, Bourdieu proposed that appreciation of art is related to social class and those visitors who, from their background and upbringing, know about and understand art will feel more comfortable in an art museum for instance.⁷ These

⁶ Hein, 1998: 32-34

⁷ Bourdieu, 1977.

people have acquired what he referred to as cultural capital – knowledge of art and a way of behaving and an expectation of the museum that gives them ownership of the space, and the objects displayed in the galleries. They regard their relationship with the museum as ‘natural’, whereas it is a product of their upbringing.

Many people who visit museums have often acquired the habit as children.⁸ Equally for others for whom this has not been part of their background, they may not become museum visitors or indeed, they may have learned from their community that museums are ‘not for the likes of us’.⁹ In Scotland approximately 25% of the population never visit a museum or gallery.¹⁰ A survey in Glasgow found that in the month before the survey, more than twice as many people from social group AB as from social group DE had visited museums.¹¹

Individuals are encultured into museums and feel comfortable in the museum environment depending on their life experience and the attitudes and values of their interpretive communities.

The transaction experience

Consultation with non-visitors from deprived communities in Glasgow identified the feeling of not belonging in those places where society preserves and displays its cultural treasures as the single most important barrier to visiting museums. The reality for many people is that they feel excluded from the museum environment, in some cases as a result of negative museum experiences.

For Mead, Dewey and other symbolic interactionists it is the individual’s conception of self in relation to the environment which underlies her capacity to be aware of her own responses, to manage these responses, and to formulate hypotheses about the expectations and responses of others. Bruner describes the process in which this happens as a process of transaction which results in meaning. He argues that in interacting in a social situation, individuals have the innate ability through their culture

⁸ Falk and Dierking, 2000

⁹ *Museums and Social Justice*, 2000. Published by the Scottish Museums Council.

¹⁰ *Scottish Household Survey Bulletin* 3 February 2000

¹¹ Lowland Research 1998/99 cited in Glasgow City Council Best Value Review, Glasgow Museums, June 2000

to calibrate their thoughts and actions against another and articulate meaning.¹²

When individuals at one end of the spectrum regard museum visiting as 'natural' and at the other end as 'not for the like of us', they have made transactions which have resulted in these meanings. In the former situation they have experienced feelings of inclusion and belonging, in the latter exclusion and alienation.

Transactions are mental activities which occur within the individual when they interact in social situations. In transactions people are interacting with objects and with themselves as objects, they are able to act towards themselves as they act towards others. They can name themselves, think about themselves, talk to themselves, imagine themselves acting in different ways, love or hate ourselves or feel proud or ashamed of themselves, they can act towards themselves in all the ways they can act towards others. The transaction process is one involving self regard, an encounter in which the individual assesses the situation against the values and attitudes which make up her personal and social identity, and decides how to respond so that she maintains and presents a satisfactory image of herself to herself as well as to others who are present in the environment.¹³ Mead argued that the human beings ability to imagine the response of others to their acts gives them the capacity to be conscious of themselves. Individuals inner experiences are capable of observation and they are able to report to others their private feelings and experiences by using significant symbols such as language.

For example if the museum visit meets the visitor expectations then her self-image and self-esteem will be reinforced. If however the museum visit gives rise to an embarrassing situation the individual's self-esteem will be diminished and she will have a negative experience.

Transaction is an integral part of the meaning-making process and is a continuing process as visitors make their way through the museum and encounter the displays and other people in the museums. Visitors stand in front of the case and make meaning in a process of interchange between the individual and the object where the effect of the encounter is weighed against past experiences.¹⁴ Meaning becomes realised in the activity of the transaction as individuals assess their experience of the

¹² Ibid, 1986:57-69

¹³ Mead, G.H. 1934

¹⁴ Czikiemihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981:173-196.

object in its context and sift through their memories and their personal and community frames to select what, if anything, it represents for them.

Objects are both signs – they stand for something - and symbols - an abstract idea or concept. As visitors move through the space they focus their interest on those displays with which they have associations (or have an attractive novelty) and make meaning of the objects relative to their interpretive communities. The red army jacket in the Pearce example used in the last chapter may evoke a whole range of responses in different visitors. These visitors will draw on the experiences, resources and knowledge of their interpretive communities to evaluate these responses as part of the meaning-making process. This evaluation will enable visitors to assess and judge the displays against criteria established in their culture and in their individual memories – are the displays fair, unbiased, beautiful or accurate for instance? They will use language to express that meaning.

Transaction is an integral part of the meaning-making process with objects, which is enacted within the framework of the visitor's interpretive community and the power/knowledge dynamic of the museum. Individual transactions may give rise to one dominant assessment of the museum visit or a particular transaction may stand out in the individual experience of the visit.¹⁵

'Every experience affects for better or worse subsequent experiences and the conditions under which subsequent experiences are encountered'.¹⁶ Dewey argued for a direct relation between education and experience, but that not all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. He maintained that negative experiences can have an adverse effect and limit the growth of an individual or restrict the possibilities of them having a positive experience in the future. This is an important concept for museums in the sense that a visitor may have a museum experience which reinforces prejudice or negative perceptions or may be so adverse that s/he may never visit again. Alternatively, the museum may provide an experience that is so memorable that it provides a motivation for a return visit to repeat the experience.

¹⁵ Spock, 2000. *Philadelphia Stories* In interviews with museum professionals Michael Spock gathered information of life changing episodes which had occurred in a museum for each individual.

¹⁶ Dewey, 1938:20

Successful meaning-making will lead to individual growth where that growth could be both an increase in self-knowledge and/or cognitive gain. The latter is what is usually referred to as learning, though current definitions, as I have argued, are more akin to the outcome of successful meaning-making.¹⁷ I am using the term growth as used by Dewey in *Education and Experience* (1938). He says that the educative process can be identified with growth when that is understood in terms of growing as developing, not only physically and intellectually but also morally.¹⁸ He cautions against those experiences which are mis-educative, where prejudices may be reinforced and the experience prevents subsequent growth. Dewey made the link between how an individual learned within a culture, the experience he has and the meanings he makes. 'Learning is not the passive acceptance of knowledge which exists out there but involves the learner engaging with the world'.¹⁹

In situated learning theory, the emphasis is on what the learner is becoming rather than what she knows; knowledge and social identity are intertwined. A person's prior knowledge is part of her personal identity. Any change in her knowledge construction involves a transformation, large or small, of identity. This crucial step forward makes the link between identity, knowledge, learning and meaning and I have identified transaction as an important part of the meaning-making process.

In summary, I have argued to this point, that the socio-cultural theories of knowledge indicate that different communities share different knowledges and practices based on their shared ideals and values and that individuals make meaning through making transactions in social situations, like museum visiting, which draw on this shared culture to make meaning within the environment. These transactions are grounded on people's perceptions and expectations of the visit and in the process of transaction they reflect how their behaviour and actions will project an image of themselves to others and to themselves. Dewey related the experience to an educational process in which the individual is not just taking in information but is making meaning which can affect subsequent experiences. The meaning-making process may affect the individual's values, ideals and attitudes as well as knowledge; in other words, the

¹⁷ Definition from the 'Inspiring Learning For All' framework quoted in Chapter 1.

¹⁸ Dewey 1938:20 I interpret Dewey's use of the word 'morally' as implying the values, ideas and practices of culture.

¹⁹ Dewey, 1916.

individual's identity both personal and social is involved in a process of 'becoming' and growth, either positive or negative, depending on the conditions.

Roles

Individual visitors to a museum have a perception and an expectation of the visit from past experience. First time visitors, too, have a picture in their minds of the visit, even if it does actually relate to what they find there. Some of the expectations might be related to the place, to education/enculturation and to entertainment but may also be related to practical issues.²⁰ For instance, most visitors would expect to see displays of objects or paintings that they could look at and they might also expect some of the facilities like toilets and perhaps shop and café, that they would find in other visitor attractions.

The individual would also have a concept of their role on the visit, whether this is an external role as a grandmother or a tutor for instance, or an internal role where the values, ideals and knowledge from their interpretive community would give visitors an intrinsic motivation for looking at and making meaning of the displays. The museum as a cultural setting provides visitors with a number of possible roles which they can enact – 'a map of possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought and self-definition are permissible (or desirable)'.²¹

The anthropologist Turner says that as individuals become enculturated, they increasingly come to play parts defined by the dramas of their culture, firstly family dramas, but later ones that shape the expanding circle of activities outwith the family.²² There is a sense in which 'humans beings as social actors in their cultural worlds take for granted that they are acting in relation to others who share a history and a set of common experiences and understanding of experience'.²³

²⁰ Hooper-Greenhill, 2001

²¹ Bruner, 1986 :68

²² Turner, 1982 . Theorists like Bruner in cultural psychology and Geertz and Turner in anthropology among others have revisited the work of the pragmatists in the latter half of the twentieth century. They have focussed on cultural situations in which people use symbolic activities, including language, as part of a shared activity where each has an expectation of the outcome of the activity and their part within it. For Geertz and Turner this concept has developed from their research in non-Western cultures but in their later work they have applied situated learning theory to groups across Western culture.

²³ Kapferer, B. 1986.

One of the earliest pioneers of role theory, the American psychologist Goffman analysed social life as a drama in which the performance is 'all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers'.²⁴ Using metaphors of the stage – actor, performance, script, repertoire – Goffman described how people use social situations to give performances according to a script as if the social stage was a setting for their performance. Initially he focussed on those situations where people used conversation and non verbal language to present impressions of themselves which reinforced or protected their self esteem, undermined or attacked the self esteem of others or in some cases deliberately deceived others, as in a con trick or a card game.²⁵ Later he went on to apply his theories to social groupings and institutions – 'any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place'²⁶.

When Goffman introduced his dramaturgical model for social life in the late 1950's, people's sex, socio- economic status, religion, geographical location, ethnicity and family all carried an expectation within society of how people were and how they should behave.²⁷ Hage and Powers argue that in postmodern times, with the breakdown of traditional institutions and the changing definitions of work, leisure and family roles, expectations and roles have changed and are being redefined so that individuals are beginning to negotiate their social and personal roles rather than having them inherited as a given. 'Most people in postmodern society will acquire complex selves who can maintain multiple identities, in touch with their own feelings and less responsive to social pressure.'²⁸

The absence of fixed role boundaries places more responsibility on the individual to define his or her role and the extent to which s/he will embrace the role. The definition of the role becomes closely associated with the identity of the individual person. Roles are a resource which provide individuals with a sense of how to behave in a particular situation, rather than an externally provided set of requirements which try to prescribe the way one should behave.

²⁴ Goffman, 1959

²⁵ Goffman, 1974

²⁶ Work has been done on role conflict in the workplace – Walton Dutton and Cafferty, 1969; in the classroom –Corwin 1970 and Biddle, 1987; and in social work – Compton and Galway, 1992.

²⁷ Levinson, 1982:170-180

²⁸ Hage & Powers, 1992: 5-16

More than just presenting oneself to others as in Goffman's pioneering description, roles have come to be understood as one aspect of the social construction of knowledge. The roles people construct are not prescribed but constituted by the individual. They use their roles as a resource from which to make meaning of the situation, and they self-consciously act so that they understand the way their actions will be perceived and will be consistent with their individual and social roles. Roles provide people with an organising framework that they can use to make a performance that will meet the needs of the social setting.

The predictive and sense-making capacities of roles are crucially important when people decide how to behave in a particular situation. People within roles transact with others and with themselves in this decision making process to make meaning. In any situation individuals make sense of the behavior of others and modify their own behavior. The same sense through which people predict the behaviour of others enables them to do the same thing with respect to themselves. The role which they see as appropriate to themselves, their role within a situation, as well as the definition of the situation as a whole, gives them a perspective from which they not only view others but view themselves, a sense of who they are and how they fit in.

People are not locked into a particular role structure but have the capacity to create new ones. Visitors may construct roles for themselves as a result of assessing the situation of the museum surroundings, other visitors and themselves against their own life experience and may attempt to add to or reinforce their self esteem and have positive emotional responses. Where this does not happen they feel they do not belong, and that the museum did not fulfill their expectations. The meaning-making has been a negative learning experience which will inform subsequent museum visits.

If the meaning-making process is to be a positive experience, then the individual will 'grow' in the Dewey sense. They will learn. The critical factor for museums is that this learning should lead to positive growth; that the museum will create an environment in which visitors can enact roles in which they feel comfortable and which will lead to a reinforcement of positive aspects of their identities and/or cognitive gain. The visitor experience becomes one of personal growth and I

maintain that the aim for the educational function of the museum is to maximise the potential for this to happen.

The museum visit as drama.

Mead, Goffman and Turner have all used the metaphor of the drama to describe the way that individuals behave in social situations. Museums professionals have also compared art museums to theatre sets in which the objects rather than the people are performers.²⁹ I have hypothesised how the cultural setting of the museum encourages the adoption of roles by visitors, which correspond to ways of behaving that they have learned from their interpretive communities, particularly those shared practices which relate to museums. The mental and physical behaviours of visitors could be described as their performances and the strategies that they adopt for making meaning will be derived from the repertoires of interpretive strategies from their interpretive communities. The script could be said to be written by the museum, in that curators choose the objects and write the labels and with the help of designers, create the displays. However as I have argued in the previous chapter, visitors too are active in the space and are making meaning. One of the aims of this research is to find the extent to which the visitor writes their own script or performs the museum script.

The museum visit can be compared to a social drama where the visitors move through the scenes and are not static in relation to the objects and other visitors as actors.³⁰ The encounters are principally between visitors in groups and the objects and the meaning made is a negotiation within the social groups.³¹ Turner describes

²⁹ Rhys Adams, 1954

³⁰ Chaney has likened social drama to a wedding or a carnival where the roles of the spectator and performer overlap and where everyone takes part simply by being there – not just those of the bride and groom or those on the carnival floats.

³¹ There are many examples or observations by researchers into group learning in museums. See for example Falk and Dierking, 2000 and Paris, 2002. The way people learn in groups owes a great deal to the theories of the Russian social psychologist L.S.Vygotsky who believed that individual cognition develops as a result of interactions in the social life of the individual. He researched social interactions of small groups, focussing on the meanings that they made using verbal and non-verbal language. And identified a 'zone of proximal development' in which tasks which were too difficult for children, could be accomplished with the help and guidance of adults or more skilled children. Vygotsky, , L.S. (1930, 1933, 1935) 1978, *Mind in society, the development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

aspects of social drama in terms of the tension that arises when the interests and attitudes of groups and individuals stand in opposition to one another, and he maintains that the performance is the enactment of strategies for the resolution of these tensions in which loyalties, values and ideals of the interpretive communities, the power, influence and support for the individual actors and the purpose of the drama, all play significant parts.

Turner used theatrical terminology to describe situations which he found in his anthropological research - ceremonies, trading practices, rites of passage – which are inherently dramatic because participants not only do things, *they try to show others what they have done*.³² Actions take on a performed-for-an-audience aspect – a similar situation to a visitor writing in a comments book or using an audio guide for instance. Interactionists argue for a similar process of performance in negotiation with oneself.³³

Chaney identified two types of cultural performance, aesthetic and social drama. Classical theatre for instance, is an example of aesthetic drama where there is a distinct separation between audience and actors, the script is the organising force, usually tightly sequenced with little or no variation from one performance to the next, and the individual actor interprets the script directly and delivers it with authority to a mainly passive audience.³⁴ Duncan has likened an art gallery visit to a ritual, a particular type of aesthetic drama, in that the separation of the objects and the visitors is overt and the seemingly passive nature of the visitor activity is seen to be indicative of their reception of the gallery script articulated by the museum. In aesthetic drama the encounter is an individual one with the actor or, in the case of the museum visit, between the object and the visitor.

However socio-cultural theory indicates that far from being passive, visitors are actively engaged in making meaning in the museum environment with the potential to

³² Turner, 1988

³³ I have discussed Mead's concept of Self in relation to transaction and will return to a broader consideration of the Self later in the thesis. Although much of the current thinking in the approach to Self is based on the work of Mead, he held positivist views whereby interactions were seen to be between human beings as organisms and environments, which seems at odds with later interpretivist development. See, for example, Mead's discussion of 'Organism, Community and Environment' in *Mind Self and Society*, 1934:245.

³⁴ Chaney, 1993.

add to their knowledge, reinforce their identity and increase their self-esteem. While I disagree with Duncan's notion of the visitor passive within the space and accepting the museum meaning, the idea that the museum environment may be considered as a ritual is one, which I think is useful, and which I shall now explore.

The museum as ritual space

I have argued that situated learning is a process of enculturation and that meaning is made in the transaction between the object and the individual, which resonates with Dewey's position and accounts for something genuinely new which can arise from the experience of the encounter in museums. As long as things mean what they are 'supposed' to mean, a person cannot grow beyond the boundaries set by culture. An aesthetic experience involves something more than the projection of meaning from the person to the environment or vice versa. It involves a realisation of meaning through interaction with the inherent qualities of the object.

In describing aesthetic encounters with art objects, Dewey distinguishes between perception and recognition of the object. The latter relies on falling back on meaning from previous experiences while perception is the active reception of the object so that its qualities challenge previously formed shared ideals or knowledge. Dewey does not limit aesthetic experience to art alone but considers it a potential element of all experience. Recognition alone serves to maintain existing relationships and practises, since the object creates meaning only as a sign endowed with meaning by cultural convention. Perception is essential to aesthetic experience and leads to psychological growth and learning.³⁵

For instance following a visit to New York City's American Museum of Natural History, Ackerman describes her emotions on standing before a displays of microscopic invertebrates: 'Relishing their intricacy and variety, I felt so startled by joy that my eyes teared. It was a religious experience of power and clarity, limning the wonder and sacredness of life, life at any level, even the most remote'.³⁶

For most of the twentieth century such deep meaning was depicted by social theory as a process that took place only in specialised times and places such as churches

³⁵ Dewey, 1934

³⁶ Ackerman, 1995, :332

and secular rituals. A distinction between the religious and secular emphasised the separateness of the activities - dealing with meaning making on the one hand, from those dealing with the mundane and practical on the other. Symbolic action was understood as necessary to social order, but because it was a distraction from practical business it needed to be confined to certain places and times.

During the last few decades following Bourdieu's argument that the most powerful meaning making occurs precisely in the context of everyday practical action, social theory has swung in the opposite direction.³⁷ Nevertheless specialised settings for meaning making in this deep sense, persist in society and appear still to play a vital role. This is an important issue for understanding museums as environments for meaning making, since it focuses attention on whether museum environments should be designed with a strong separation from everyday life, or should endeavour to emulate the familiar environments of everyday life.

There is every evidence in recent museum building – the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, the Guggenheim in Bilbao, and the Holocaust Museum in Berlin - that the preferred option is for a strong separation of the museum from everyday life, in preparation for the reflections and symbolic meaning to be made within. 'The entrance sequence had as an objective – to establish a contemplative frame of mind which would prepare the visitor for the unique relationship between the collections, their specific housing and the surrounding historical and civic context'.³⁸

Duncan argues in respect of art museums that 'museums resemble older ritual sites not so much because of their specific architectural references but because they too are settings for rituals. Like most ritual space museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case for contemplation and learning'.³⁹ The designation of the museum environment as a ritual space fits in with the semiotics of the museum as a space imbued with power and authority. Ritual is often associated with ideology as in religion, and with the preservation of traditions and authority as in various festivals, like a harvest festival,

³⁷ Bourdieu, 1977

³⁸ Extract from a note issued in 2003 by architects Benson and Forsyth on the proposed Museum of Scotland changes. The Museum of Scotland designed by Benson and Forsyth was opened in 1998.

³⁹ Duncan, 1995:10

for instance. The idea of the museum as a ritual space reinforces the power, authority and status of the museum as cultural symbol within society.

Ritual may be defined as 'formalised behaviour of activity in accordance with rules and procedures specified by society'.⁴⁰ Certain rituals, like funerals, weddings, graduations or bar mitvahs, are very clearly marked off from the rest of social activity. A ritual may have an elaborate internal structure such as are found in the rites of passage described by Turner, or it may be individual and private or social and public.⁴¹ Ritual space need not be a religious space, but it is one in which performance is enacted according to rules understood by the participants and which enhance the experience. Duncan describes the art museum ritual where the space is specially prepared for the enactment of the ritual and visitors process around the galleries pausing at the artworks for contemplation. The narrative is provided by the curators and even when visitors only come to see individual art works, she maintains 'the museum's larger narrative structure stands as a frame and gives meaning to individual art works'.⁴² She seems to neglect the visitors' contribution to the meaning-making process.

Her argument is that only those who are perfectly disposed socially, psychologically and culturally can enact the museum ritual. In other words there are no roles for those who do not already have an understanding of what art museums are about. This gives credence to the commonly held notion that art museums are elitist. She says that art museums offer up values and beliefs about social, sexual and political identity in the form of vivid and direct experience. Duncan's art museum visitors are usually people who acknowledge the power, legitimacy and authority of art and have their identity as educated and cultured people reinforced by the museum visit.

With these visitors she argues that the museum ritual has the potential to be transformative. Visitors come away with a sense of enlightenment or a feeling of being spiritually nourished or renewed. Turner introduced the word 'liminality' to indicate a mode of consciousness outside of or 'betwixt and between the normal, day to day cultural and social states and processes of getting and spending'.⁴³ Although

⁴⁰ Chambers dictionary, 2004

⁴¹ Turner, V. 1969 and 1974.

⁴² Duncan, 1995:12

⁴³ Turner, 1977:33-55

much of Turner's work was done in non-western cultures he recognised aspects of liminality in activities such as attending the theatre, seeing a film or visiting an exhibition.⁴⁴ These cultural situations Turner argued, could open a space in which individuals can step back from their everyday concerns and look at aspects of their world with different thoughts and feelings. Other observers have recognised the liminal qualities of the museum space in which visitors enter in the hope of finding one of those 'momentary cultural epiphanies' which give him 'the illusion of knowing intuitively his essence and his strengths'.⁴⁵

Duncan's picture is of a select institution with a strong ritual in which the museum meaning dominates the visitor meaning-making process. My research will seek to investigate the extent to which the ritual aspects of the encounter affect the visitor meaning-making process.

Summary

In this chapter I have established that the museum as a cultural institution has an identity in peoples' minds which they may or may not be familiar with from their life experience. Those who visit museums generally have some expectation of the visit and bring with them shared knowledge and values from their interpretive communities and culture as to how to behave in the museum and what to expect from it. During the visit, people make meaning in a series of transactions with objects, with other visitors and with themselves, during which their values and identities within their roles may be reinforced or challenged.

If the meaning-making process is a positive experience, then the individual will 'grow' in the Dewey sense. They will learn. The critical factor for museums is that this learning should lead to positive growth; that the museum should create an environment in which visitor can enact roles in which they feel comfortable; and that these experiences will lead to a reinforcement or enhancement of their identities. The visitor experience becomes one of personal growth, which may or may not include cognitive gain.

⁴⁴ For example in his book *Drama, Fields and Metaphors* Turner writes of his experiences among the Ndembu of Zambia.

⁴⁵ Bazin, G. 1967: 7

Situated learning theory suggests that individuals adopt roles through which they are able to prioritise that part of their identity appropriate to the setting. The process of meaning-making can be seen as an enactment of these roles to make sense both of the situation and of the meaning that the museum has presented, by relating the experiences back to oneself and to one's interpretive community in a series of transactions. I have argued that where there is a good match between the museum meaning and the meaning transacted by the individual, where the values, knowledges and ideals of the institution fit with those of the visitor, there may be a dramatic moment of heightened tension and aesthetic drama. Where the fit is less obvious, the process of negotiation and enactment can be regarded as a social drama in which individuals deploy strategies from their interpretive repertoire, either individually or in a group, which can lead to reconciliation with, or rejection of, the museum meaning. The visitors are like actors working out their script and one of my tasks is to explore the extent to which the museum meaning and hence the museum script dominates the meaning-making process.

The predominance of the museum meaning through the enactment of a museum ritual was central to the idea proposed by Duncan in which the roles that museums, particularly art museums, present can only be enacted by those people whose education and life experience fit with that of the museum and the curators, who have created the meaning of the objects within the semiotic space of the institution. This seems to me to reject the value of the meaning that many visitors enact and to misunderstand the role of the objects and the potential effect of the whole experience on all visitors.

My premise is that that the museum environment is created as a special place in which meaningful experiences can take place and that it may be likened to ritual space in the anthropological sense proposed by Turner. That is, the museum is a ritual place where the continuity of the culture of a community is preserved and the individual within the ritual may be transformed in a dramatic process where ideals, values and knowledges, her identity, are subject to challenge and change. The degree to which this ritual process is enacted depends on a variety of conditions within the museum and within the individual, but my premise is that the potential exists and that it serves an educational purpose in that it may affect the positive growth of the individual.

The major elements of meaning-making process that I have established as relevant for my research investigation are - identity within a role, tension and power play as in a social drama, aesthetic notions of power and ritual and the visitor active within the space, making transactions with others, themselves and with the objects to make meaning. My next chapter will begin to set up the research process for this investigation.

‘Knowledge consists not in the experience itself but in grasping the sense of the experience’.¹

Introduction

In chapters 2-4 I have described my theoretical approach to my research. I have outlined how the museum has acquired an authority and status within society as a reservoir of knowledge and a symbol of the most dominant values and ideals in society. I have further maintained that the curatorial and educational functions of the museum are being challenged by an epistemological shift in the understanding of knowledge and its relationship with culture.

My research aims to use this perspective on the museum visit to analyse the meaning-making process and indicate how it could underpin a different pedagogical approach to maximise the educational potential of museums through displays.

In the last chapter I advocated the use of a drama metaphor to begin to explore the museum visit. In this chapter I shall outline my reasons for choosing a particular methodology to investigate meaning-making. I discuss the issue of using meaning-making to investigate meaning-making and I describe my way of dealing with this by making clear the interpretive frames in which the research is made, and the limitations of the method. I describe my approach to the data first using grounded theory and then introducing further theoretical concepts, building on the drama metaphor, to develop my framework for understanding the meaning-making concept.

The selection of a methodology

Bruner and Turner have developed the work of interactionists and sociologists like Goffman and have focussed on cultural situations in which people use symbolic activities, including language, as part of a shared activity where each has an expectation of the outcome of the activity and their part within it.

¹ Fay, 1996:27

'Action in a cultural setting and in the mutually interacting intentional states of the participants is called *situated action*'.² Actors in this sense are people who act, but in a metaphorical sense can be seen as actors in the ritual drama of the museum visit. The ideas of a shared culture within an interpretive community which individuals use to make meaning, aligns within idea of people as actors in social situations using their shared background as a norm against which they interpret and give meaning to situations which may conform to, or deviate from, what they regard as the norm. The potential for change exists within the process so that cultural meaning-making is concerned not only with sense and reference but also conditions in which 'difference in meaning can be resolved by invoking mitigating circumstances that account for divergent interpretations of reality.'³

Symbolic meaning depends on the human capacity to internalise the signs and symbols, the language, of ones' culture and to use these to make meaning of a situation. Closely allied to the work of interactionists is that of the ethnomethodologists who focussed on the way that people construct meaning and make sense of situations through their spoken language, their conversations.⁴ They maintain that spoken language had developed and is used not only to convey information but to articulate abstract concepts and constructs which have been determined both within the individual and within the community from which he comes.

This gives me a practical way forward on which to design my research project which enables me to incorporate the insights of interactionist theory and socio-cultural theories of learning which underpin my understanding of meaning-making. If I focus on what people say in the museum environment that will give me an insight into the meaning they make.

² Bruner, 1990:20

³ Ibid: 67

⁴ Symbolic Interaction has some features in common with phenomenology and ethnomethodology. The former founded by Husserl (1900) and Heidegger (1927) has influenced the work of Berger and Luckman in their treatise on the sociology of knowledge (1966). The phenomenologist approach is that one can only understand and account for what people do by understanding the reality they perceive and act toward. Ethnomethodology is a variant of phenomenology. Ethnomethodology is concerned with the perspectives of people and how they view and act in the world as they see it. The main contribution of ethnomethodologists is the insight that people construct meaning and make sense of situations through their conversations, a concept which is fundamental to my selection of a research method.

There are a number of language-based methods for studying visitors in museums, including questionnaires, comment cards, visitor conversations, interviews and focus groups.⁵ Interviewers use prepared questionnaires sometimes with objects or specific questions as prompts, or as part of a taped interview, or a focus group or a process of evaluation known as Personal Meaning Mapping.⁶

As an example of the latter, visitors to the London Transport Museum were asked to write words, ideas, images, phrases or thoughts which came to mind related to 'Transport in London'.⁷ Their responses formed the basis for open-ended interviews which were conducted before and after a visit to the displays. The information was analysed over four fields in which the researchers had agreed a definition of change – extent of vocabulary, concepts, depth of knowledge and feelings and mastery of the topic - and the percentage change over these criteria before and after, was calculated to two decimal places. This is essentially a quantitative technique which measures cognitive learning and is founded on an positive rather than interpretivist philosophy, which I have been advocating.

While many questionnaires do ask open-ended questions this is a method which seems to me to reinforce the management of the visitor response in a certain direction and favours a quantitative analysis of the results rather than an interpretive one in search of the meaning individuals make.

Examples of techniques which try to empower the visitor and examine meaning are those where visitors conversations are taped or recorded as they wander through the galleries, with visitors selecting for themselves where they wish to go and what to comment on. The researcher only prompts as a way of encouraging the visitor to expand on what she is saying, rather than suggesting a direction for the conversation. Silverman's work on interviewing visitors in pairs is one example which I have referred to previously, and another is that of the research team from University of Leicester, who interviewed individual visitors in Wolverhampton Art Gallery.⁸

⁵ Hein, 1998:100-134.

⁶ Adelman, Falk and James, 1998. Falk, Moussouri and Coulson, 1998.

⁷ *Visitors' Understandings of Transport – An Evaluation Report*, 2001 by King's College London.

⁸ Silverman, L. 1992; 1993 and Hooper Greenhill (ed), 2001

In the latter, visitors were asked to 'think aloud' as they made their ways through the galleries and their comments were taped. This research found that in making meaning, visitors deployed interpretive strategies that they brought with them from their life experience, the selection of which was defined by who those visitors were - their biographical profile, prior knowledge, experience, interests, learning style expectations and plans for the visit. This research suggests that an individual visitor's identity is directly related to the meaning made, which is corroboration of my earlier theoretical argument.

Comment cards also provide a rich resource of information on visitor responses to exhibitions and are another way of capturing individual visitor's words. This methodology has been used successfully to evaluate new interpretive methods in the *African Worlds Gallery* in the Horniman Museum and Gardens in London and in the Art Gallery in Ontario.⁹

In the former, visitor comments from the new Africa gallery were divided into two groups, positive or negative comments. Within these groups, categories were identified which were based on the objects, the museum interpretation of the displays and what visitors said about themselves. As in the Wolverhampton example, identity again emerged as a major feature of the meaning-making process. For example, *I left South Africa when I was 29. I have Africa in my blood, in my heart and in my soul...Apartheid destroyed my family. I am alive to remind people to unite – not divide. Respect and understanding is the way forward*'. (129)

In Canada, Douglas Worts also analysed visitor responses to different interpretive methods in the Art Gallery of Ontario. In his study, people wrote statements like '*For me, the most evocative painting in the Art Gallery of Ontario is the West Wind. I come to see it regularly because I am immediately transported back to my childhood and early teens and the pleasures of the childhood summer holidays on the shore of the Georgian Bay. All the paintings in the Group of Seven speak to me of my Canadianism, but it is the West Wind that speaks to my heart. I am 64 years old and live in London, Ontario*'

⁹ 2001. *African Worlds Gallery – Visitor Evaluation*. London: Horniman Museums and Gardens and Worts, D. 1994. 'Extending the Frame: Forging a new Partnership with the Public', in *New Research in Museum Studies* 5.

and

'I would like to know why in this entire gallery people of colour are not represented. I would like to see more art about the Indian culture and also about the Black race. I am really disappointed that in a city where we are so multicultural only European cultures are seen in the art gallery. I would not bring my child here because we are not represented. We are not recognised for our talents – I am a black woman, who is Canadian born'.¹⁰

As a result of his investigations Worts emphasised the visitors' contribution to the meaning that visitors made of the paintings.¹¹ 'While it is true that we as an institution have something unique to offer the public in the collections and our intellectual insights, the visitor centred half of the creative process is based on personalising the symbolic objects'.¹²

Worts offered a *Conceptual Model of Museum Experience (figure 1)*, which emphasises individual identity and the many processes and products of the experience that happen during interactions with people, objects and places.¹³

¹¹ Worts, 1995

¹² Ibid

¹³ Worts, 1994

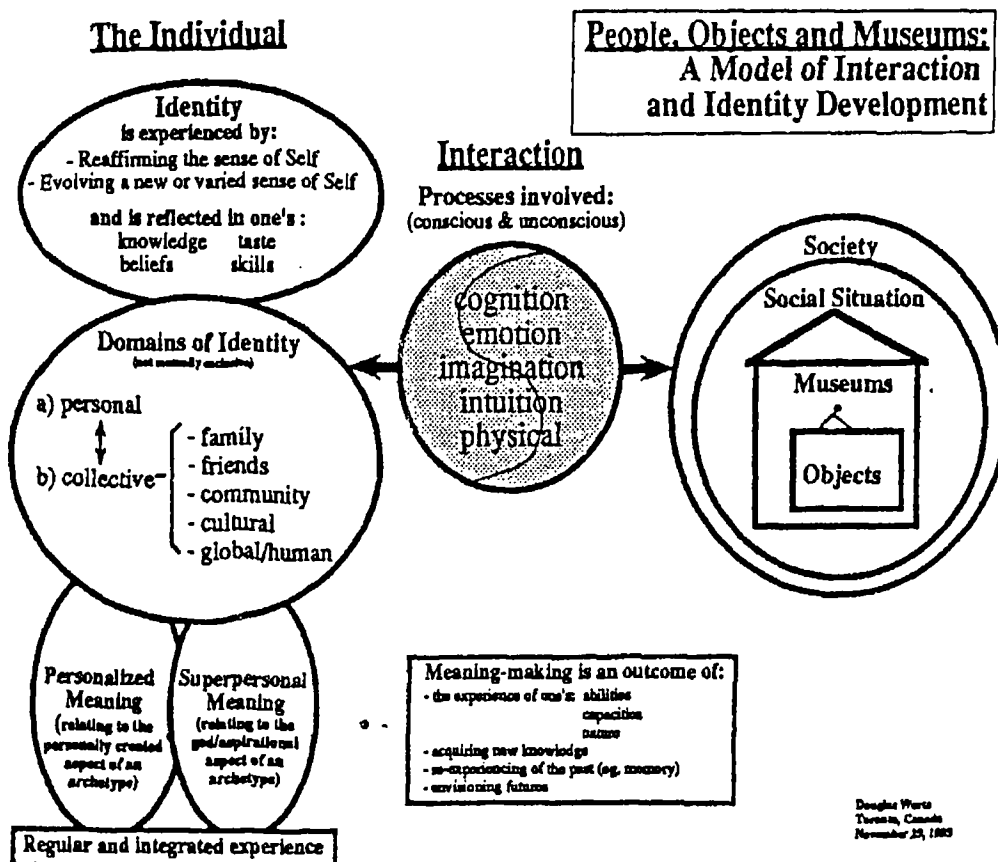


Fig. 1 - Conceptual Model of Museum Experience ¹⁴

In this model Worts links the visitors' experience closely to the re-affirmation or evolution of the individual's identity. He writes, '*People want to see themselves reflected either literally or symbolically in their imagery and in their writing*'. The comments give a range of personal insights that the Gallery itself could not articulate and illustrate the emotional power of the objects in the displays. Worts demonstrates that a study of comments data can be a rich resource for the study of meaning-making. The model shows the complexity of the meaning-making process and brings together many of the issues I have highlighted. However, the model in its present form seems rather unwieldy and I have failed to find any evidence of it being applied, modified or developed.

¹⁴ Worts, D. 1994. Extending the Frame: Forging a new Partnership with the Public, in *New Research in Museum Studies* 5. London: Athlone Press.

In these examples, the comments are the meanings that visitors make at a particular moment in time. They are not just about gathering information but include feelings, expectations, images and impressions as well – their whole experience. An experience is unique to an individual but when a visitor writes the comment she interprets the meaning of her experience for others. The style and language of the comment will reflect some of the visitor intention and identity – her attitudes, values, knowledge and life experience - and will be influenced by her perception of the role of the museum. The comment will be an expression of her experience, where an expression is how an individual experience is framed and articulated depending on the interpretive community to which she belongs. The use of comment cards seems to me to provide rich and diverse evidence of a meaning-making process obtained by minimum interference from the researcher. I chose to study what people say by using comment cards as the basis for my investigation into meaning-making.

My comments data

My comments data came from a museum in Glasgow where I was working when I started my research – the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life, afterwards referred to as St Mungo's museum. The museum was being constructed while I was working in Glasgow Museums and was the first museum of its kind in the United Kingdom and at the time, one of only four in the world devoted to the subject of religion.

The results from the study of visitors to the Horniman Museum has shown that one of the most interesting of the 'public conversations' in their comments was the way their visitors explored the subject of religion.¹⁵ I believe that since religion, or more generally a belief system, is an aspect of peoples' lives that has a profound effect on them as individuals and as members of society, the St Mungo museum would be a suitable space in which to investigate meaning making. As well as having objects associated with faith, religion is concerned with non-material beliefs and values. I have argued in earlier chapters that it is precisely because visitors are able to associate objects with values and beliefs that they are most powerful and can provoke powerful meaning. It is my belief that the potential for meaning-making by visitors to the St Mungo is enhanced by the religious topic because belief systems are so fundamental to their identity.

¹⁵ 2001. *Visitor Evaluation of the African Worlds Gallery* :16

If, as has been argued in Chapter 2, the whole concept of a museum is a deeply contested idea in the world today, then a museum of religion dealing as it does with one of the most emotive areas of human experience can expect to be at the centre of even more heated debate. This heightens the possibility of a more overt meaning-making process which is the focus of my research question.

In St Mungo's visitors were invited to fill in comment cards in two of the three permanent galleries, and pin them up on boards to become part of the gallery displays.¹⁶ These comments accumulated rapidly and were increasingly recognised as providing a rich and varied resource of visitor response. These are some of the examples of comments from St Mungo relating to beliefs and non belief.¹⁷

Some gorgeous artefacts – especially Shiva (hard not to want to believe in such a beautiful creature.) But as an atheist, I feel neglected here. Surely atheists have artefacts too – paintings, writing, sculptures inspired by Humanist/Darwinist thought? I'd like them to have their place here. (357)

In Islam there are two main branches Sunni and Shia which share a common essence but differ in several aspects, can you please make sure you do not state things such as 'All Muslims Must. . .' A real believer (Muslim) practises his/her faith every single moment of his life. (505)

It is all very interesting though it is sad that man has brought hatred into the church - hatred towards other religions and people e.g. lesbian and gay men as we too have feelings and turn towards God. But where can we go without the hatred of men being against us? Why are so many religions against women? We are not on this earth to serve men. Be strong sisters. (1656)

Good job. Some suggestions –what about mentioning various forms of mysticism? Also in this room, the coming of age part also mentions that only boys have Bar

¹⁶ The three galleries are situated across two floors each of which had a comment board. The comments show remarks about artefacts in all three galleries.

¹⁷ I am using the original numbering of the comments introduced by the museum who registered the comments sequentially and stored them as year dates.

Mitzvahs. In the modern world of Judaism, young women also have Bar Mitzvahs (except in orthodoxy). (3124)

It is a brilliant museum. Could it have a clone in Belfast? It seems to me a pity that the Christians are nearly all so banal (including the Dali) surely there are Christian artefacts of real beauty and power like the Shiva. (4153)

When I examined the comments I saw that they provided me with evidence of what visitors thought of the museum – their likes and dislikes, how they felt about what they saw, the opinions they formed – in essence, a snapshot of the meaning they were making in the museum. In 1997 when I began my research, a body of data consisting of over 4000 visitor comments was available for analysis.

Issues in the research design

My aim is to use the comments data from St Mungo's to build a theoretical framework or hypothesis which will represent the visitor meaning-making process. One of the main difficulties for me as a researcher in making meaning of the comments is that I am using the very process which I am investigating. Inherently in both the collection of the data and its subsequent analysis I will be involved in 'meaning-making' and interpretive processes. The overall project structure will have to address this critical issue. The text of the comment is a meaning that the visitor attached to that part of his visit. My task is to try to infer from the content and style of the comment what the visitor's meaning was when she wrote it, and to interpret the significance of the words so that I may analyse and understand the whole meaning-making process. I have to be sensitive to the sentiment as well as the substance of the words so that I may interpret the process, although I cannot experience what they have experienced.

David Silverman says that no hypothesis is ever 'theory free' ¹⁸ whether the theory is explicit or implicit. Researchers look at things in certain ways because of their theoretical background and life experience. This gives them a 'way of seeing' or a frame through which they make meaning, a frame which is constituted by the interpretive community to which they belong. I have a background due to my life experience which I will use to frame my research. In addition I have a background as a museum professional and educator and I shall use these experiences to assist my framing of the comments. The meanings that I make will depend on my understanding of the comments against my interpretive frame.

'Framing' as a concept was introduced in chapter 3 as an interpretive tool that the visitor uses to understand, to make sense of and to learn from museum displays. My research process may be described as analysing frames within frames, a technique introduced in the last chapter and applied practically by Victor and Edie Turner.¹⁹ By making these frames explicit I am raising my awareness of the subjectivity of the process and prioritising my professional rather than personal frames to analyse the comments. Figure 2 shows a visual representation of how I see this frame technique within my analysis and I shall explain each frame in turn.

¹⁸ Silverman, D.1993:46

¹⁹ Turner, E. 1988, 139 –155. On the University of Virginia campus they set up a 'play' frame with students to enact a wedding ceremony in order to gain an inside view of how ritual and ceremonial structures are presented and to analyse the emotional, behavioural and intellectual responses of the participants. In their experiment, students and staff at the University were allocated parts within the wedding ceremony and their experience was examined through interviews. The surrounding frame was the research frame inside which the play frame sits and ensures that the enactment of a wedding ceremony is not 'real'. The wedding ceremony provided the frame in which the University staff and students enacted the ritual. The meanings made by the participants were collected through interviews and by observation.

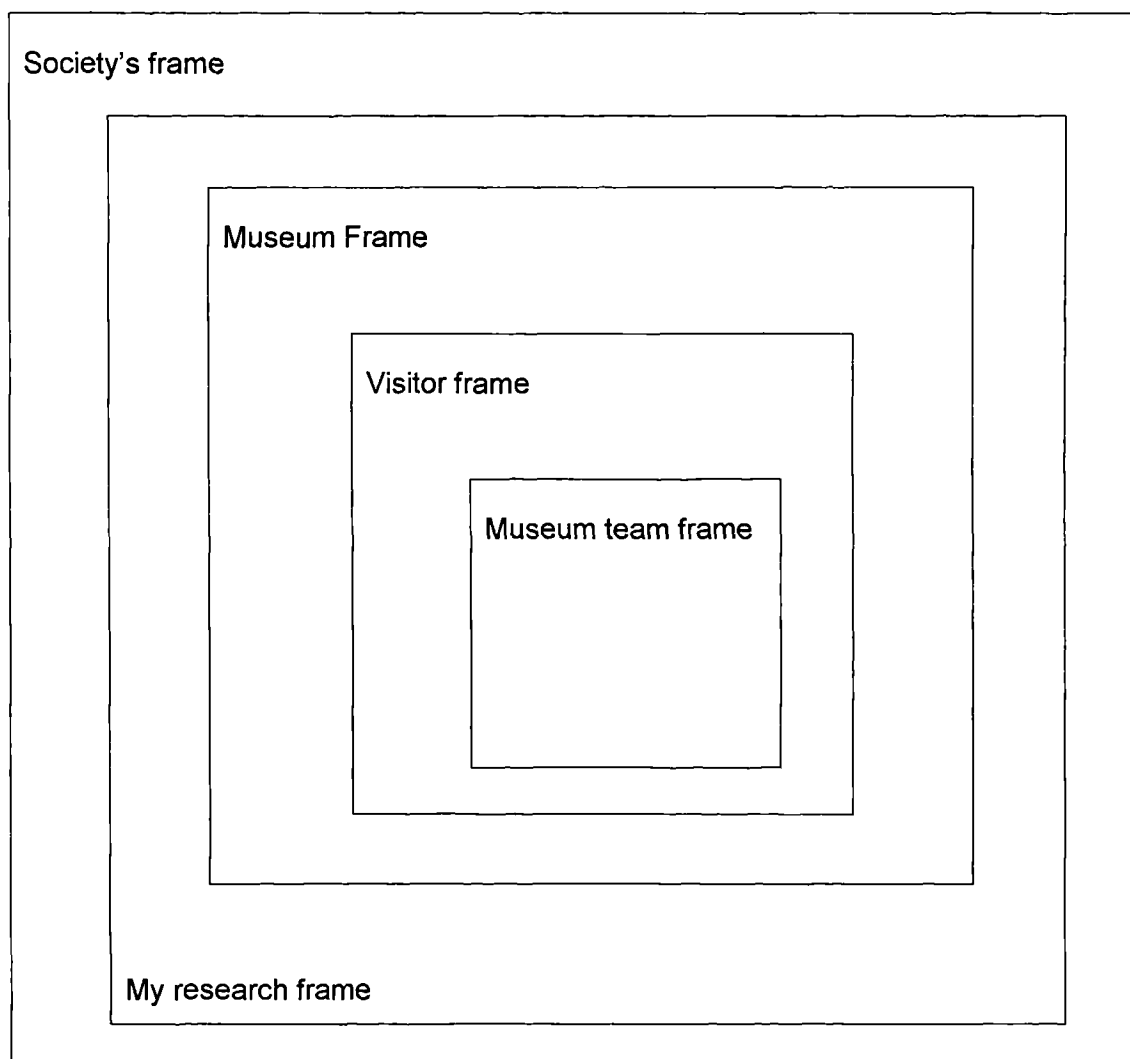


Figure 2. Frame analysis of the research process

Society's frame The surrounding frame I have called 'society's frame' and it encompasses all the values, ideals and knowledge of society in global terms at this particular point in history. This is not to imply that there is only one global society and that it is uniform for everyone. I am using the term to indicate national and international concerns which may have impacted on visitors and shaped both the interpretive communities to which they belong and the interpretive strategies of staff in the museum. I too am affected in my interpretation of the visitor experience by the values, ideals and perceptions of society as well as my own interpretive research frame.

My research frame is the frame in and through which I interpret the meaning of the comments, analyse and draw conclusions from them and within which I test my hypothesis and present my model of the museum meaning making process. This

frame will also reflect my personal and professional experience. I will not be analysing the results as a museum visitor but will prioritise my role as a researcher who is also a museum professional with a particular understanding of the museum visiting experience. I have reviewed the history of museums and have discussed the cultural hegemonic role that museums have played, and to some extent still play, in society. I have discussed the curator / visitor relationship and wish to investigate to what extent the visitor meaning-making is influenced by the curatorial meaning and by the museum environment itself. This is the professional intellectual framework for my investigation which is the frame I shall consciously prioritise in my research process.

My background research of the literature has given me an understanding of the visitor experience in terms of what other research has established and a competence to counteract, to some extent, my subjectivity and test my intuitions. Trying to be continually aware of my frame is part of the exercise of that competence and reflexive practice.²⁰

The museum frame encompasses both the visitors and the curatorial meaning-making practices. The museum frame is the one through which staff make meaning and present the displays as representations of other interpretive communities, in this case principally faith communities. Visitors may be part of these interpretive communities but the objects, even if they are familiar, will be reinterpreted through their perception of the encounter within the museum. 'Objects when they are encountered outside the gallery have very different meanings when they are found inside an art gallery'.²¹ Chapter 2 has discussed the semiotic power of the museum as an institution in society and one of the key questions in my research will be to investigate the extent to which this power is recognised and acknowledged by visitors.

Visitor frame Visitor surveys were commissioned externally for all of Glasgow Museums in 1998, one year after I began my research. They showed the visitor profile for St Mungo was 49% male and 51% female with a wide spread of ages from 16-54, while the very young and the very old were underrepresented. Approximately fifth (20%) of the respondents came from the Glasgow area, with 14% from Glasgow and 7% from the surrounding local authorities. Eleven per cent came

²⁰ Mason, 1996

²¹ Silverstone, 1994.

from the West of Scotland and 32% from England, Northern Ireland and Wales. Visitors from countries outwith the United Kingdom accounted for 35% of the sample they surveyed. In terms of socio-economic groupings 75% of visitors to St Mungo were ABC1 and a corresponding 25% were C2DE. Ninety-six per cent of respondents were white and 4% of other ethnic origin. This survey is helpful to provide a context for the visitor frame.²²

In analysing the visitors' comments I shall also have to be aware of what visitors say about their intentions as well as the significance that I attribute to each comment. Fay argues that both the intention of the writer and the significance of the text have to be taken into account in the meaning that one makes of text. 'On one interpretation of the meaning of meaning, agents' interpretations as understood by them are determinative.... On a different interpretation of the meaning of meaning.... not agent's intentions but later significance is critical ;In all cases of meaning, what it means for them and what it means for us are both operative.'²³

I shall make certain assumptions in making meaning of the comments. I shall assume that the writing of a comment was the outcome of a desire by visitors to express publicly an opinion or thought, and that by placing it in the public domain they wanted someone to pay attention to it. There may be other intentions such as making oneself feel better, 'showing off' to a friend, or wanting to appear to be knowledgeable for instance, but I am unable to assume these as a general rule.

In order to assess the significance of the comments I am placing them in the context of what I know about the visitors, what I know about the displays and what I understand the visitors to say against that frame and against my own frame of reference. There can be no single understanding of the comment. What I offer is informed interpretation for this socio-historical context.

Museum team frame. An interdisciplinary team - three social historians, an anthropologist, and a decorative arts expert, put the intellectual content of the museum displays together, with strategic interventions by the Director who was an art

²² This is consistent with the patterns in museums and heritage visiting described in visitor surveys of the 1990's when this research was conducted; in particular with those in Merriman , 1991:42- 56 ; Hood in 1994 and the Museums and Galleries Commission, 1999.

²³ Fay, 1996:152

historian.²⁴ The team had advice from an education adviser employed by the Education Department of the City Council who was responsible for multicultural and religious education in the City schools.

The team, together with the architect and designer, made decisions regarding the choice of objects, the settings and the interpretation. The objects were chosen across the disciplines and across the other sites within Glasgow Museums. A few new purchases were especially commissioned, the six foot bronze image of Shiva Nataraja, the Hindu god, for instance;²⁵ some artefacts were borrowed from the Burrell Collection²⁶ and the painting Christ of St John of the Cross by the Spanish painter Salvador Dali (1904 – 1989) and some Egyptian artefacts were moved from the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum to St Mungo's Museum.²⁷

The team decisions depended on the relative importance that each assigned to the different meanings of the objects, which of these they valued and the story they wanted to tell about each object or group of objects. They recognised the sensitivities of the various faith communities, consulted with them and persuaded some of them to become engaged with the process of setting up of displays. Curators asked believers to describe aspects of their faiths and the labels in some of the galleries and the introductory video carried their direct quotes. O' Neill has written that in spite of the museums having the expertise and knowledge about the objects, the only way the museum would work was to involve believers of a wide range of faiths in the interpretation and to settle any conflicting issues in the light of their views.²⁸

²⁴ O'Neill, Museums Journal 1993. The Director of Glasgow Museums from 1989-1997 was Julian Spalding. Mark O'Neill was the Senior History curator who led the St Mungo Museum project team.

²⁵ Shiva Nataraja - the Hindu god of destruction and creation and is depicted in the 6ft statue in St. Mungo's performing his fruitful cosmic dance in a circle of flames. In 1993 the statue was valued around £70,000. The artist is unknown.

²⁶ The Burrell Collection opened in 1983, is the museum built to house the collection, bequeathed to the City of Glasgow in 1947, of Sir William Burrell, an early twentieth century Scottish industrialist.

²⁷ This painting was bought by the then Director of Glasgow Museums, Tom Honeyman for £5400 in 1954. There was great controversy as it depicted the figure of Christ on the cross which was controversial in an officially Protestant country for whom images of religious people were associated with Roman Catholicism.

²⁸ Museums Journal February 1994.

In order to try to understand more fully the museum team frame, I interviewed two of the curators and the architect who described how they worked together on the museum team. These interviews have helped me to understand the cultural backgrounds of the team, their interpretive frames and how they were presenting the message of equal respect for people 'of all faiths and of none'.²⁹

In describing the process one member of the curatorial team said *'The displays were led by the designer and the architect and the objects and photographs. Some work better than other. In the Art Gallery we realised having all faiths together could be quite threatening for Christians, but we tried to give each object a ritual space. In the Religious Life gallery all the faiths have equal space and the cases on the after life were determined by the number of grave goods we had.'*³⁰

Though each museum team member may have had a different perspective, which dominated at different points in time, decisions and compromises resolved the tensions among them and resulted in the final series of exhibitions. In her description of team working towards the Linnaeus exhibition, Roberts writes that 'like visitors, museums are engaged in the production of a story, and they too may just as legitimately present a story that supports *their* particular interests and goals. Indeed this is what museums have been doing all along under the guise of objective, neutral presentation'³¹ Instead of presenting *the* version, the museum team at St Mungo's understood that they were presenting *a* version.

One of the most important influences on the curators was political. The ethos of the museum reflected the political policy on multiculturalism of Glasgow City Council which was to create a tolerant city which celebrated the cultural diversity of its citizens. This policy was not necessarily one to which all the citizens of Glasgow subscribed. The relationship between religion and politics was articulated by a curator who said that *'the power of religion to move and motivate people means that St Mungo is more than an attempt to create an interesting exhibition. It is an*

²⁹ This is part of the vision statement which greets each visitor on entering St. Mungo museum. 'We hope the St Mungo museum will encourage mutual respect and understanding among people of different faiths and of none'.

³⁰ Interview with Harry Dunlop, Curator, April 2003. There are three main galleries in the museum - the Art Gallery, the Religious Life Gallery and the Scottish Gallery.

³¹ Roberts, 1997:145.

intervention in society, a contribution towards creating greater tolerance and mutual respect among those of different faiths and of none'.³²

Implicit in the meaning-making process is the notion of the relative power of the museum meaning and visitors' meanings. The aim of the museum was to encourage 'mutual respect and understanding among people of different faiths and of none'.³³ My research must examine the extent to which visitors made sense of the museum message of respect and understanding. Would the comments show that visitors find the museum message controversial? Do visitors to St. Mungo's Museum feel empowered to make their own meaning or do they take their lead from the power and authority of the museum? These interviews with curators form an important part of the data for my research since they are a resource which establishes the context of the displays and the preferred curatorial meanings which the curators hope the visitors will adopt – respect and understanding among all people. An analysis of the visitor comments should enable me to establish the extent of the influence of the curatorial message on the visitor meaning-making process.

My role as a researcher

I believe my background as a museum educator and as a person familiar with the culture of the West of Scotland will assist me in being sensitive to the intentions of some of the visitors to St Mungo's Museum.³⁴ I also recognise I will have a personal outlook from my work, my family background, gender, beliefs and ethnicity which will also frame my interpretation of the data. My 'insider knowledge' may help me to understand the local visitors, sensitising me to the events, experiences and socio-political environment from which they have come and that has shaped their identity. Fay argues that 'Sensitivity heightened by shared experience is often an important step in understanding the lives of others' but he goes on to add 'genuine understanding goes beyond this into making sense of the experience'.³⁵

From visitor surveys I am aware that most visitors to St Mungo's, like myself, are residents of the United Kingdom and those in the upper age group in particular, are

³² O'Neill, 1993:22

³³ The mission statement of St Mungo's which is displayed in the foyer of the museum.

³⁴ Personal note. When this research began I was Head of Education at Glasgow Museums

³⁵ Fay, 1996:27

likely to have, some knowledge of a European Judeo-Christian background which may help me in analysing their comments.³⁶ I may share their broad interpretive frame though aspects of my life experience will be different in many ways. However I must also take into account that 'even if it is clear that the Christian tradition is still very largely intact (in Europe) it is much less clear that Europeans are able to access this memory in the way that might have been true for earlier generations'.³⁷ There will be many other visitors whose background socially, educationally and culturally will be different from mine, who belong to different interpretive communities and for them I must maintain an open mind and an awareness of the subjectivity of my interpretive frame.

This conscious scrutiny of the decisions that I make in interpreting the data will be important for the integrity and usefulness of my research. I have to be consciously reflexive about every decision I take, and should not take any decisions without actually recognising that I am taking them.³⁸ This places me in an active role as a practitioner who thinks and acts in a way that is situated and contextual but also strategic. I must engage with the ethical and political issues as they arise contextually throughout the research process and deal with them in ways which are informed and situated rather than formal and abstract.

Research process.

In my research, data collection, hypothesis construction and theory building are not three separate things but are interwoven with one another. My deliberations to date have suggested that the complex links between knowledge, culture, power and the museum can be investigated using a social theory of knowledge. In trying to find an answer to my research question 'what is the nature of the meaning-making process in museums' I shall investigate the links between the individual and the wider cultural processes. I shall develop an initial hypothesis which I will review against the data.

At first I opted to use a grounded theory approach described by Glaser and Strauss' which involved three stages; an initial attempt to develop categories which illuminate the data; an attempt to 'saturate' these categories with many appropriate cases in

³⁶ *St Mungo's Summary Report* Prepared by Lowland Market Research October 1998.

³⁷ Davie, 2000: 176

³⁸ Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Mason, 1996.

order to test their relevance; and developing these categories into more general analytic framework.³⁹

I chose to analyse those comments which had accumulated between the period 1993 and 1998, a total of just over 4000 comments. Since I was more interested in the qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to the analysis of the comments I decided to begin with an initial pilot study of a smaller number of comment cards in which I began to set up the categories and investigate relationships which I would then test against more of the data.⁴⁰ For my pilot study I selected every 20th comment for analysis which gave me a sample size of 200 (5%) in total from which to build initial categories.

Mason describes three modes of analysing qualitative data and developing categories - firstly 'literal' where I record what people said, secondly 'interpretive' where I use my judgement to interpret the meaning of what they say and thirdly 'reflexive' where I use my professional expertise to examine my role in the interpretation of the data and check the interpretive meaning for internal consistency both epistemologically and ontologically.⁴¹ These stages are not distinct but often overlap, and in my analysis I have tried to identify where I am focussing on particular methods at different times. Initially I read through the entire sample and began to take notes using a card system.

Using the card indexing system I began to create a set of headings and subheadings from which larger categories emerged. I had to stop every so often and reflect on the categories and check them against the questions I was asking in my research and against the whole body of the data.

The comments showed overwhelmingly that St Mungo visitors were *active* in making meaning on their visit and had responded both mentally and physically to the invitation to share their meaning-making experience with other visitors. However this methodology produced a matrix of relationships which did not seem to take my thinking and understanding about meaning making further than that of Worts. I seemed to be creating categories for the sake of it rather than for elucidating my

³⁹ Silverman, D. 1993:46; Glaser and Strauss, 1967

⁴⁰ Mason, 1996:107-134

⁴¹ Ibid:109

thinking.

At this point I had to stand back and review what I knew about meaning making, reassess my approach and listen to what the visitors were saying. Hammersley and Atkinson have described this ethnographic approach using the analogy of a funnel: "Ethnographic research has a characteristic funnel structure, being progressively focussed over its course. Progressive focussing has two analytically distinct components. First over time the research is developed or transformed, and eventually its scope is clarified and delimited and its internal structure explored. In this sense it is frequently only over the course of the research that one discovers what the research is really about, and it is not uncommon for it to turn out to be something quite remote from the initially foreshadowed problems".⁴²

I re-considered the museum environment as a cultural setting in which a series of dramatic events had taken place which had been narrated by the visitor in their comments. (For me this is the past tense, for the visitor the comments were being written in real time as they made meaning of the event in which they and the displays or other people were actors.) I began to identify roles and attributes for visitors and for the museum and I analysed the comments in terms of those factors which I have shown from theory to be important the meaning-making process – power, identity, transaction and ritual.

I used the metaphor of the drama to develop a new language and a new theoretical framework to describe the meaning-making process in the museum which I illustrated as a model of the museum experience. Areas such as role theory, drama and ritual may have been discussed separately by museum researchers but have not been synthesised into an holistic theory of the museum experience such as I propose. My model is based on the evidence of visitors themselves and encapsulates my argument and theoretical framework. Finally I discuss how my model could provide the basis for a new museum pedagogy which will take forward the educational role for the museum in the twenty-first century.

Summary and conclusion.

⁴² Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:175.

My research journey began with a firm desire to understand the meaning-making process in a museum in order to enhance the museum's educational role. The relationship between meaning-making and culture was based on new perspectives in theories of knowledge which saw knowledge as constructed in and through culture and cultural practices. I chose as my case study a museum devoted to religion and belief in which, I argued, the meaning-making process would be enhanced because the themes affected both the culture in which people lived and the personal beliefs, ideals and values of their daily life. I have described the process by which I analysed a set of comments data from this museum; outlined my perspective on the data taking into account the interpretive frames of the communities involved in the research – the curators, the visitors and my own, encompassed as we all were, within the museum and wider societal frameworks; and I discussed the issues associated with my role as a researcher and my own interpretation of the comments.

I found that the practical application of grounded theory to the comments was limited and chose to address the comments analysis using the theoretical frameworks which I had developed by drawing on a range of disciplines including cultural psychology, sociology, educational theory and anthropology. From this I constructed a framework which I illustrate as a model of the visitor experience. This is the model which when I tested against a further sample of the data, I present as the summation of my thesis.

Chapter 6 A Case Study

'Glad to see religion consigned to a museum. Sadly it still lives'. (1204)

'I came to visit a dead museum and found a living faith'.(3029)¹

Introduction

My aim in undertaking this research has been to create a theoretical framework for understanding the meaning-making process of visitors to museums so that the educational potential of museum displays can be more fully realised and understood as museums move forward in the twenty-first century. The environment of the museum is different from that of formal education environments in that in the main, people select what they see want to see and pay attention to, and there is in general, no fixed outcome for the visit other than their own personal agenda. The museum experience is towards meaning rather than specific cognitive learning though that may be part of the experience.

I have argued that people create cultural signs and symbols within their society which have meaning for them – language, gestures, ceremonies and objects, for instance. Many of the objects in museums remind people of connections to their lives and of the values, ideals and beliefs which govern their conduct. Other objects in the displays may be unknown and are an opportunity for visitors to make new connections and to make sense of these artefacts against their own life experience. In the choice of a museum for my case study I selected one whose subject matter and displays were based on artefacts relating to peoples' belief systems. Since some belief systems whether based on organised religion or not, forms a basis for and affects most people lives, I argue that the displays in St Mungo's would increase the potential for visitors to make connections with the objects and make meaning.

St Mungo's museum is also a valuable case study for my research because it enables me to address the relationship between the meaning-making process and the connections that visitors make to their own personal and group identity, a significant factor in the process. Both the Horniman and the Ontario examples illustrated a connection between meaning-making, religion or belief systems and identity. In this chapter I shall describe the St. Mungo Museum and its relationship

¹ Comments from visitors to St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art , Glasgow.

with its environs and I shall paint a picture of the displays which inspired the comments which I have chosen to analyse. I have provided for reference some images of the building, the objects and the displays and three gallery layouts at the end of this chapter.

The City of Glasgow

St Mungo's Museum is situated in heart of the city of Glasgow in Scotland, United Kingdom. The city with a population of 623,850, is the largest in Scotland and has not always enjoyed the best of reputations.² Once an industrial giant set on the banks of the River Clyde, it can still initially seem a grey and depressing place, with the M8 motorway cutting through its centre and barren estates on its outskirts. As in many other metropolitan areas in the UK, post-war Glasgow was witness to a succession of crises which highlighted the almost overnight transformation of highly industrialised and successful urban space into terminal decline. Glasgow's post-war troubles owed much to its over-reliance upon metal manufacturing particularly ship-building and mechanical engineering. A lack of investment in new technologies and the emergence from abroad of strong competition for its markets combined to put Glasgow's entire manufacturing base into a downward spiral. As is shown in the Table1 below, the net effect was that Glasgow lost 96,769 jobs, nearly one-fifth of its workforce in 1971, a more severe employment loss compared to both the average in Scotland and in Great Britain in general.

Sector	1971	1983
Primary	2,260 (0.5%)	1,710 (0.4%)
Manufacturing	172,847 (34.7%)	95,250 (23.7%)
Services	323,022 (66.4%)	304,400 (75.9%)
Total	498,129 (100%)	401,360 (100%)

Table1 Glasgow inner conurbation employment 1971-1983³

Faced with urban blight of a severe nature, Glasgow soon became aware of the need to launch a programme of economic regeneration. Central to this was the strategy of attracting capital investment from external sources. A problem soon emerged,

² Census 1998

³ Glasgow District Council (1985): 32

however, to do with the negative images Glasgow was projecting. As one commentator put it 'Glasgow was seen as a city of mean streets, razor gangs, the Gorbals slums, of smoke, grime and fog, of drunks, impenetrable accents and communists'.⁴

Such representations were proving fatal to the efforts at attracting inward investment. Glasgow became conscious of the need for an image-building campaign as a key part of a renewal strategy. In recent years Glasgow has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis, set in motion in the 1980's by a promotion campaign "Glasgow 's Miles Better", featuring a yellow cartoon creature called Mr Happy.⁵ The city subsequently proceeded to generate a brisk tourist trade, and in 1990 was awarded the accolade of European City of Culture 1990. Central to the programme for the year long celebration was the arts and within that Glasgow 's museums.

Glasgow has some of the best-financed and most imaginative museums and galleries in Britain – among them the showcase Burrell Collection opened in 1983 – and they all have free entry. St Mungo's Museum was a brave step in a city whose image has never been helped by the depth of animosity between its two rival football teams traditionally associated with the two largest denominations of Christianity - the Catholic Celtic and the Protestant Rangers - whose warring armies of fans clash with monotonous regularity. Though post-match violence has decreased in recent years, the "Old Firm" matches continue passionately on the field.

The city also has the largest population of minority ethnic groups in Scotland with South East Asians from India and Pakistan forming 3% of the city's' population and a much smaller Chinese community. There is a substantial Jewish community, a Gaelic speaking Highland population and considerable Italian, Irish and Polish communities.

The religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants mirror some of the conflicts in Northern Ireland while other communities of faith have become the axes around which there is a struggle for power. In the 1990's the Scottish Office, and since 1998 the Scottish Executive, has promoted a number of initiatives like '*One Scotland, Many*

⁴ Taylor, 1990:2

⁵ The *Mr. Happy* series is part of the *Mr Men* series by Roger Hargreaves

Cultures' to encourage an open and tolerant outlook and a pluralist society.⁶ These initiatives have been supported wholeheartedly by the Glasgow City Council who have responsibility for the whole of the Glasgow Museums Service including St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art.⁷

Crispin Paine writing of the relationships between museums, objects and religion says 'St Mungo's museum sets out not just to illustrate religious diversity but to foster respect for the different elements which constitute that diversity. These two aims might be served were one to think of such diversity not as something problematic – with a tendency to cause intolerance, dispute and conflict - but as something that offers the possibility of new forms of ...thinking.'⁸ He sees St Mungo's as an opportunity for interacting and changing culture, for visitors to construct a new reality, a new meaning, within the museum.

The St Mungo Museum of Religious life and Art

St Mungo's Museum was at the time of opening in 1993, the first museum of religion in Britain and one of only 3 or 4 in the world.⁹ It is situated on the north edge of the City centre, close to the sprawling campus of the University of Strathclyde and at one end of Cathedral Square, which is dominated by the medieval cathedral of St Mungo. It was originally built as a visitor centre for the Friends of the Cathedral. When the cathedral committee ran out of money, the City took over the project and commissioned an architect to create a museum devoted to religious life and art. St Mungo's has three permanent galleries - the Art Gallery and the Life Gallery on the first floor and the Scottish Gallery on the top floor of the building. One of the museum's most striking features is the Zen garden at the rear of the building. With its slabs of rock, white gravel and moss carefully arranged to suggest the forms of land

⁶ In 1998 the Scottish Executive was established as part of the Scotland Act of 1998 in which certain powers including museums were devolved to the Scottish Executive. Prior to this date all legislation concerning Scotland was debated at the Houses of Parliament in London.

⁷ In 1998 as part of local government re-organisation Glasgow Museums became part of Glasgow City Council Culture and Leisure Services, along with arts, libraries and sport.

⁸ Paine, 2000:23

⁹ Catalogues of sacred art collections and exhibitions are not uncommon. A recent example is the catalogue *The Image of Christ* of the exhibition *Seeing Salvation* in the National Gallery, London. 2000. The book by C. Paine's 2000, *Godly things* is the first in the field apart from short publications by Goa and O'Neill and a study by Lautman.

and sea, its presence blurs the distinction between the secular and the sacred and provides an area of beauty and contemplation juxtaposed with the busy motorway junction, huge Royal Infirmary and lively student campus nearby. 'Created by one of Japan's leading landscape gardeners it represents the meditative tradition of the East but looks out over Glasgow's medieval cathedral and the Necropolis. It has a power that goes beyond the aesthetic and summarises the aim of the museum'.¹⁰

The mission statement of the St Mungo Museum is written up in the foyer to greet visitors as they enter - 'We hope the St Mungo Museum will encourage mutual respect and understanding among of people of different faiths and of none'.

St Mungo's museum displays historical objects, art, photographs, film and witness statements from believers from six world religions - Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. The ground floor of the museum houses the entrance lobby, shop and restaurant and a large function room with access to the Zen garden. On the lower ground floor there are the offices and meeting room for the friends of Glasgow Cathedral.¹¹ On the first floor is the reception desk, introductory video area and access to the Art Gallery and on into the Religious Life gallery. The introductory video contains interviews with people from the various faiths represented in Glasgow and the video together with witness statements which are found in some of the gallery labels, are an interpretive device used by the museum so that more than one voice is represented in the gallery, so that there is more than one meaning presented to visitors.

The temporary exhibition gallery is on the second floor on the way to the third floor. At the third floor level one can see a panoramic view over the Necropolis before entering the Scottish gallery.¹² Beyond this space is an education room with an interactive exhibition for use by schools and families at weekends.

The Art Gallery (Floor plan 1)

¹⁰ O'Neill, 1993:22

¹¹ Glasgow Cathedral is a medieval cathedral of the 13th century which has been added to architecturally over the centuries and is still used for services.

¹² The Necropolis behind the Cathedral is a burial ground which dates back to 1833.

The stated aim of the Art Gallery is to communicate religion as an inspirational tool behind the creation of works of art. Here portrayals of the Hindu gods Shiva and Ganesh are to be found along with the painting by Salvador Dali of *Christ of St John of the Cross*, a 17th century Islamic prayer rug, stained glass windows by a local artist, and a painting by the Jewish artist Dora Holzhandler. Other belief systems such as those of the aborigines of Australia and the Tlingit people of the North West coast of British Columbia, Canada, are also represented through their art. Each of the religious objects or group of objects is given their own space and the visitor has to physically move through different spaces to see each object in turn, rather than see them all at once.

The aesthetics of the Art Gallery script are tightly prescribed - the walls are light and the gallery spacious; the objects are placed where they can best be viewed, singly and at their best vantage point; the ambience is one of beauty. The architect said '*our driving notion was to give each object its own space and place. We could not treat these objects as if they had been found in an archaeological dig, these were objects of faith and we had to create for each a metaphorical respect by carving out its own space.*'¹³

The Director of Glasgow Museums, focussing on the symbolic meanings of the objects, wrote in the guidebook for St Mungo's, 'In the Art Gallery six major religions are represented iconically through visual art and poetry. The Art Gallery displays objects of great beauty which communicate through art something of the meaning of the religion they represent'¹⁴. In the Art Gallery the Project Team prioritised the aesthetic and spiritual meanings of the objects. They had created a space in which people could be separate from the downstairs clamour of the entrance, the café and the arrival and made an environment in which, as I have argued previously, ritual could be enacted. Each of the galleries could be said to offer a different kind of ritual space.

The Religious Life Gallery (Floor plan 2)

The Religious Life gallery, situated just off the Art Gallery is a completely different aesthetic environment. Where the Art Gallery is light, this is a darkened space with only internal case lights; where the Art Gallery had a few isolated objects, this one is

¹³ Interview with David Page, Architect, April 2003

¹⁴ Spalding, 1993: Preface

densely populated; and where the visitor to the Art Gallery had freedom of movement, in this gallery the route is tightly determined and the visitor has to journey through a U-shaped corridor between the object- rich cases. This gallery explores religion's role in daily life over 5000 years of earth's history.

Displays round the walls of this gallery cover the key elements of human life – birth, coming of age, marriage, death and concerns about the after life. The latter is the largest single display and includes an Egyptian mummy, print of a Dantesque hell as well as images of intermediaries between this life and the next, which range from angels and demons to St Jude, the Christian patron saint of hopeless cases.

In the centre are situated cases devoted to each of the six world religions – Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The objects represent a diverse cross section of religious expression – a bottle of Holy water from Lourdes, a Sri Lankan snake demon mask, a Nigerian depiction of the spirit of smallpox, a photograph of young boy's Bar Mitzvah, a Hindu bridal costume, an Egyptian mummy, Tibetan Buddhist ritual objects and a decorative Sikh dagger. The visitor has to pass through a relatively narrow corridor running a gauntlet of objects or images demanding his or her attention. The overall impression that the architect has tried to create is one of *richness, diversity and mystery*. The architect also said, *'In the Life Gallery each case became like a miniaturised art gallery - like a bas relief, a room without enclosure to house this collection of objects. Whereas in the main Art gallery it was as if the spirit of the different faiths washed over you, and allowed you to gently enjoy the richness and the lavishness of faith, the Religious Life gallery was intense and colourful; dark as against the light of the Art Gallery'*.¹⁵

The guide book describes this gallery in this way - 'This gallery looks at some of the ways in which religion has been interwoven with many aspects of daily life: the marking of major life events such as birth, the progress to adult-hood and marriage, as well as the provision of formal communal and individual prayers and ceremonies'.¹⁶ The aim of the Life Gallery is to show the importance and meaning of religion and religious objects in people's everyday lives across the world and across time. Curators framed their interpretation in this gallery to convey socio-cultural rather

¹⁵ Extract from interview with David Page, April 2003

¹⁶ 1993 *The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art*. Edinburgh: Chambers. 23

than aesthetic or historical meanings, and used the semiotics of the space to reinforce the message of diversity and mystery.

The Scottish Gallery (Floor plan 3)

In its guidebook the museum says that 'religion has played a major role in shaping the history, culture and identity of people in Scotland for thousands of years.'¹⁷ Objects in the Life and Scottish Galleries are from different faiths, periods and cultures. The aim of the Scottish Gallery is to show the importance of faith in Glasgow and to highlight the influence of religion in shaping the culture of the West of Scotland. The people of Glasgow are shaped by its culture and in turn have shaped the culture of the city.

The museum endorses the dynamic nature of culture and reflects the definition of culture in the National Cultural Strategy document.¹⁸ By using the witness statements as an interpretation device, the museums team recognise both that people have helped to shape the culture of Glasgow and of Scotland and that they are continuing to shape their culture.

This gallery on the third floor of the museum is devoted to the history and development of religion in Scotland. The curatorial team had difficulty sourcing objects for the early part of the story since most religious objects before 1560 were destroyed during the Scottish Reformation.¹⁹

Themed displays in the Scottish gallery are arranged around a central group of seats which contain audio loops made up from witness statements from people of different faith communities in Glasgow. Organisations whose participants include people of different ages such as the Boys Brigade, the Band of Hope, the Salvation Army, the Union of Catholic Mothers and the Orange Order are featured together with the activities of the more recent additions to the city's religious history such as the Islamic Women's groups and the Inter-Faith community. Photographs and archive material

¹⁷ Ibid: 40

¹⁸ 2000. '*Creating our Future, Minding our Past*'. A National Cultural Strategy document issued by the Scottish Executive.

¹⁹ Reformation of the established Catholic religion in Scotland took place in the 16C and was principally influenced by the teachings in Europe of John Calvin and in Scotland by the Presbyterian preacher John Knox.

display the power of the 19th century Temperance movement, the work of Scottish Christian missionaries such as David Livingstone and Mary Slessor and the current religio-political issues such as the inter-necine warfare in Northern Ireland, street marches on pro-life and abortion issues and media evangelists.

Their interpretive methods include photographs, explanatory labels and oral testimony both in the form of transcribed statements and listening points. The quotations from people about their beliefs were mostly from lay people with no special authority or expertise and the team used them to show the personal significance of beliefs in people's lives. Alongside these other interpretive devices sits the comments boards which contain the meanings that visitors make on a daily basis. The meanings are framed in this context by the museum frame and are given authority and status by this relationship.

Summary of the Galleries

The principal meanings that the museum projected were those of respect and understanding for people of all faiths and of none. The museum team have created and displayed their own meanings in the selection and display of the objects and texts. In addition they also display the meanings constructed by other personae - witnesses and practitioners of various faiths. Visitors meet these people in the introductory video and their voices are heard on the audio guides and can be read on labels as visitors progress throughout the gallery. Visitors too can add their meaning to the displays when they write and display their comments in the gallery spaces.

St. Mungo's visitors are presented with a variety of voices and a variety of meanings within which they make their own meaning. The museum team by presenting many voices in a situation of mutual respect was enacting its own meaning within the displays. The museum meaning was constituted in and through the displays. In some ways the museum team could be said to be acting as impresario, 'neither actor nor audience but the controlling intermediary who sets the scene, induces a receptive mood in the spectator then bids the actor to do their best artistic selves. The art objects do have their exits and entrances; motion - the movement of the visitor as he enters a museum and as he goes, or is led, from object to object - is a present element in any installation'.²⁰

²⁰ Rhys Adams, 1954 *Towards a Strategy of Presentation in Museums*. Vol. 7 No. 1:4

St Mungo's interpretation is a multi layered one in which the museum team aspire to create a situation in which, by their treatment of each individual religion through its believers with equal respect, visitors would experience respect. This presentation of a variety of meanings creates more opportunities for visitors to enact diverse roles and therefore could be said to be an attempt to be more inclusive.

Civic response to St. Mungo's

Reactions to the St Mungo museum, whether from religious constituencies, museum professionals, interest groups or the general public varied from the enthusiastic to the sharply critical.²¹ The socio-political impact of the museum was much in evidence when a barrage of criticism in the Scottish press accompanied the opening. The Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland argued that the museum had failed to do justice to Christianity and in particular to the role which the Church of Scotland played in the life of the nation. Specific criticism was directed against an error in the guidebook whose content was subsequently revised by a member of the department of divinity at the University of Glasgow and a minister working in religious education.²²

The David Livingstone Memorial Trust disputed the accuracy of the labels which stated that Livingstone like other missionaries of the period, exploited Africa and its people, and showed little respect for African people and cultures. This was resolved by a rewording of the label which now states '*Some people in the late 20 Century are less sure than the Victorians about the validity of missionary work*'.²³

The local Muslim community has also expressed concern at a photograph showing a young Muslim woman being circumcised. The Museum consults regularly with various groups to discuss these and other issues.

The lead curator sums it up in this way - '*I do not regret doing the museum. I can't think of a more suitable subject for a museum. Until now the only thing stopping*

²¹ Butler and Clelland, 1994. *Museums Journal*

²² Lovelace et al, 1995:63-78

²³ Christina Ballinger writing in the *Museums Journal* June 1993 *Unholy row over Glasgow Museum of Religion*.

people has been fear but the important thing is to get the balance right between representing faiths and challenging them'.²⁴

The visitor response – the comments data

From the time the museum opened, a number of visitors used the feedback boards found within the displays in each gallery to say what they thought about the museum. *'The concept (the museum) is an interesting one not least the concept of feedback boards within the enterprise as a whole'.²⁵* The St Mungo comments are located on the first and third floors of the museum, in the permanent galleries. They are given a legitimacy, respect and authority by being treated as an integral part of the displays. This encourages dialogue with the museum and between visitors. Many of the comments were found to be more than just the retrospective evaluations such as is found in visitors' books at the end of the museum exhibition, but personal statements stimulated by the museum environment. By 1997, when I began my research, over 4000 rich and varied comments had been posted in this way.

I have argued that comments cards have been shown to provide evidence of visitor meaning-making in museums. They are usually placed at the end of or outside an exhibition, in a lobby or a foyer to give visitors a chance to express their opinions and make suggestions. Quite often these comments show that visitors take this opportunity to conduct a dialogue with the museum and with the other visitors who have commented before them. Some researchers are sceptical of their use as reliable and valid data.²⁶ Serrell writes that 'comment books can serve as an evaluation tool for staff but have limited validity and are not statistically reliable. They provide a source of qualitative feedback for museum staff but should not be used as the sole method of evaluation. Comment books are primarily for the benefit of visitors, giving them a voice in the exhibition.'

While I agree with Serrell that comment books at the end of the exhibition give low status and authority to the voice of the visitor, her remarks regarding the visitor's voice in the exhibition is one of the most significant factors regarding the St Mungo comments. In St Mungo's visitors are invited to pin their comments up on boards

²⁴ O'Neill, 1993:22

²⁵ Paine, 2000.

²⁶ Serrell, 1993.

which form part of the display. Explicitly, their text sits alongside the curatorial and other interpretive texts such as witness statements and implicitly this gives them authority.

Since the museum opened in 1993 it had been the practice for museum administration staff to routinely transcribe and store the comments electronically. All comments were recorded with the exception of those in a language other than English or those few which were nonsense or obscene, a total of less than 1% of the comments. No record was made of the individual galleries in which the comments were made. When the comments were collated they were numbered sequentially and were stored in annual year dates, the number for the subsequent year following on from the previous year - 3775 recorded in 1996 was followed by 3776 in 1997.

When I checked the comments data I noticed that there were some anomalies in the numbering which indicated some gaps in recording.²⁷ However in order that other researchers could check my findings against the data I have kept the original numbering, a practice established by Michel, a previous researcher who has also researched some of the same data.²⁸

Visitors had not been asked to leave their name, age, address or gender though a few visitors did leave this information. The anonymity of the comments, which had been publicly posted, meant that I could ethically use the text of the comments without breaking individual visitor's confidentiality. It also meant that I had an emotional distance from individual visitors that would have been more difficult if I had known who they were.

²⁷ The consequence of the anomalies meant that the numbers allocated to the comments exceeded the actual numbers of comments I was dealing with in the period between 1993 and 1998. The last comment listed in July of 1998 was given the number 4735, while in fact the number of comments I had on disc was 4104. I have discounted this within my analysis as I am concerned principally with a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to the data.

²⁸ Michel, P. 1999. *La religion au Musee*. Paris: l'Hamattan. 102. In this book the author analyses the comments in terms of how visitors use the museum. He concludes that visitors used the St Mungo museum in three different ways – as a place to look at their culture and heritage; as a place to find out about and think about who they were, their identity, and lastly as a place to contemplate and reflect upon some of the most profound aspects of human life. His conclusions are complementary to, and in no way conflict with, my findings.

I did discuss with museum staff the possibility of contacting those people who had left names and addresses with a view to selecting a certain number for interview. The advantage of this would have been that I would have known more about the specific individual and have been able to investigate how different parameters such as gender and age, affected the meaning visitors made. I decided that as my prime focus was a general theory of meaning-making a discussion of specific parameters would not be helpful at this stage.

Where visitors have left their names and addresses I have omitted these details and marked that comment with an asterisk to show that they are available. The numbers in brackets at the end of the quote is the number given by the administrator and could be regarded as the registration number for that comment. For example,

**An impressive introduction to comparative religion. Omissions there are bound to be, given space and the risk of upsetting balance. Perhaps a leaflet suggesting follow-up reading matter could be issued - at a modest cost if necessary. (990)*

Visitors to the museum share the experience of museum visiting – they do not share the same experiences. In St Mungo's some visitors have made the decision to share their individual experiences through writing a comment. These comments are a record of that visitor's experience, a personal expression of that part of the visit which has become conscious at that moment. In writing the comments visitors themselves choose what to highlight, what to discount and what to share with other visitors. In transactions with the displays they have created individual meanings within their own interpretive framework. The comments are articulations of visitor experiences and meanings. They are also on occasions 'not only naturally occurring units of meaning but also periods of heightened activity when a society's presuppositions are exposed, when core values are expressed and when symbolism is most apparent'.²⁹

I have discussed this liminal quality of aesthetic space in Chapter 4 and Csikszentmihalyi has also pointed out the phenomenon in his discussion of people's relationship with objects. He argues that focused (what he calls integrated) attention to an object or an event can produce a 'flow experience' – 'one in which there is a merging of action and awareness, a centering of attention, a loss of ego and sense of

²⁹ Bruner, J. 1986:9

self and clear unambiguous feedback to a person's actions and finally intrinsic rewards'.³⁰

My visitor comments will give me a snapshot of visitor responses, intellectual, emotional, spiritual and social, to that part of the visit which is most important to that visitor or at least important enough to motivate her into writing it down. Even though the comments are brief, the key role of language as a signifying system means that they reveal the range of responses people have to many aspects of the museum.

I have argued that as religion is a subject of deep personal significance it is likely to engage the meaning making faculties of visitors. The comments are elective, revealing, diverse, passionate, engaged, focussed and constitute a huge resource of visitor responses. They are socio- cultural units of meaning made by the visitors at a particular point in time and are expressions of how visitors assess their experience at that moment. By writing the comment the visitor puts his 'experience into circulation'³¹. These are a few examples of the comments chosen to show the meanings that people made relating specifically to their beliefs.

I very much enjoyed the museum and learning about the different religious beliefs and ways of life. The only point, which marred the experience, was the negative, intolerant remarks of some visitors on the bulletin board. Obviously the museum is ahead of its time for some Christians. (1.60)

The photograph of the young girl undergoing clitoral mutilation is - rightly - very disturbing. More information is needed to elaborate the extent of the practice geographically, and the appalling consequences of the pain and mutilation. It cannot be left as one-foot note in 'Childhood'. At least a comment on the move to abolish it should be made. (3.20)

**I have enjoyed your exhibition of Aboriginal Art. I am visiting from Chapman Gallery, Australia and each year we hold several exhibitions of work from Utopia's, Yuendumu, Papayra. We also have a permanent stock of artefacts and canvases. (282)*

³⁰ Czikcentmihalyi:1981: 186-187

³¹ Bruner, 1986:12

Good mixture of religions which show how alike they really are and how we all look to one God in different forms. (1753)

After reading other people's comments about the mummy and having her covered instead of visible I would like to say that it is very interesting to see the body, as it looks bandaged up. I feel this is important as it helps us to understand Egyptian beliefs more fully. (3164)

To glorify Bloody Sunday is an absolute disgrace and an affront to all members of her majesty's forces who served (some died) in Northern Ireland. (4384)

The comments are evidence of the nature of participation by the visitor mentally and emotionally in the museum visit; of what people say about themselves and their individual and collective identity; of the meanings that visitors construct for themselves at a particular moment in time and also of the influence of the museum as an institution on their meaning making process.

They were not just about gathering information but included feelings, expectations images and impressions as well – their whole experience. 'The museum visitors are active agents in the historical process who construct their own world - they are authors of ourselves'.³² The experience is unique to an individual but when the visitor writes the comment she interprets the meaning of her experience for others. The style and language of the comment will reflect some of the visitor intention and identity – her attitudes, values system, knowledge and life experience - and will be influenced by her perception of the role of the museum. The comment will be 'an expression of her experience', where an expression is how an individual experience is framed and articulated which will depend on the interpretive community to which she belongs.

Summary

In this chapter I have described the case study museum and have expanded on my reasons for choosing this museum in which to study visitor meaning-making. I have shown some of the examples of the meaning that visitors make through their associations with objects of belief and have described how the St Mungo team could

³² Turner, V. and Bruner, E. M. 1986

be said to have prepared the gallery spaces for the enactment of ritual where there is the potential for visitors to have an intense meaning-making experience akin to a spiritual experience. In the next chapter I will analyse an initial sample (5%) of the data and begin to develop a theoretical framework for describing the meaning making process. This theoretical framework must include those factors which I have identified as important – identity, transaction, ritual and power – and will be based on my premise that knowledge and the search for meaning is at the heart of the educational function of museums.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1	FLOOR PLAN 1	THE ART GALLERY
2	PLATE 1	THE ART GALLERY
3	PLATE 2	THE STATUE OF SHIVA
4	FLOOR PLAN 2	THE RELIGIOUS LIFE GALLERY
5	PLATE 3	THE RELIGIOUS LIFE GALLERY
6	FLOOR PLAN 3	THE SCOTTISH GALLERY
7	PLATE 4	THE SCOTTISH GALLERY
8	PLATE 5	THE ZEN GARDEN

FLOOR PLAN 1 THE ART GALLERY

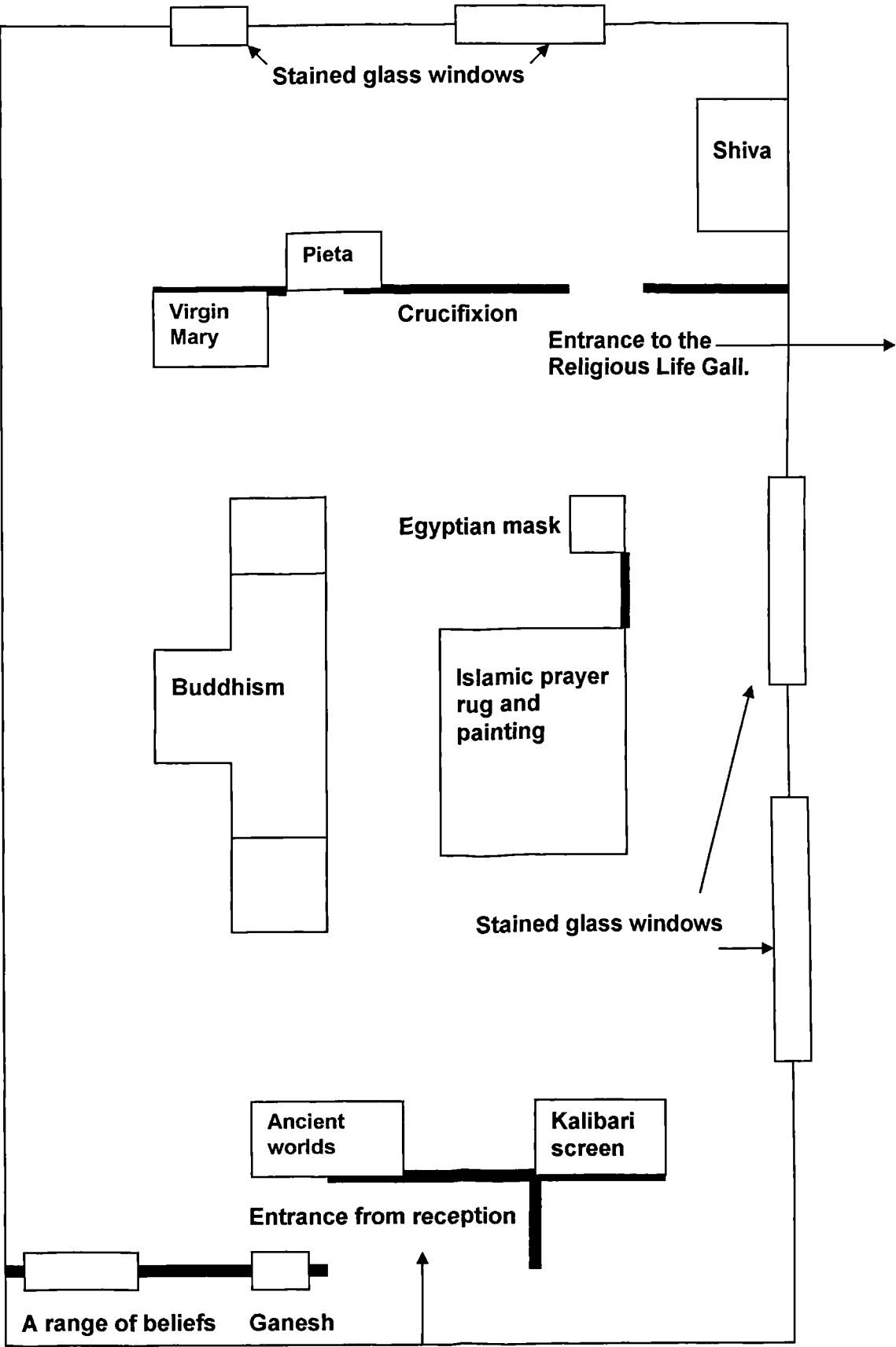




PLATE 1 THE ART GALLERY 1



PLATE 2 THE ART GALLERY 2

FLOOR PLAN 2

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE GALLERY

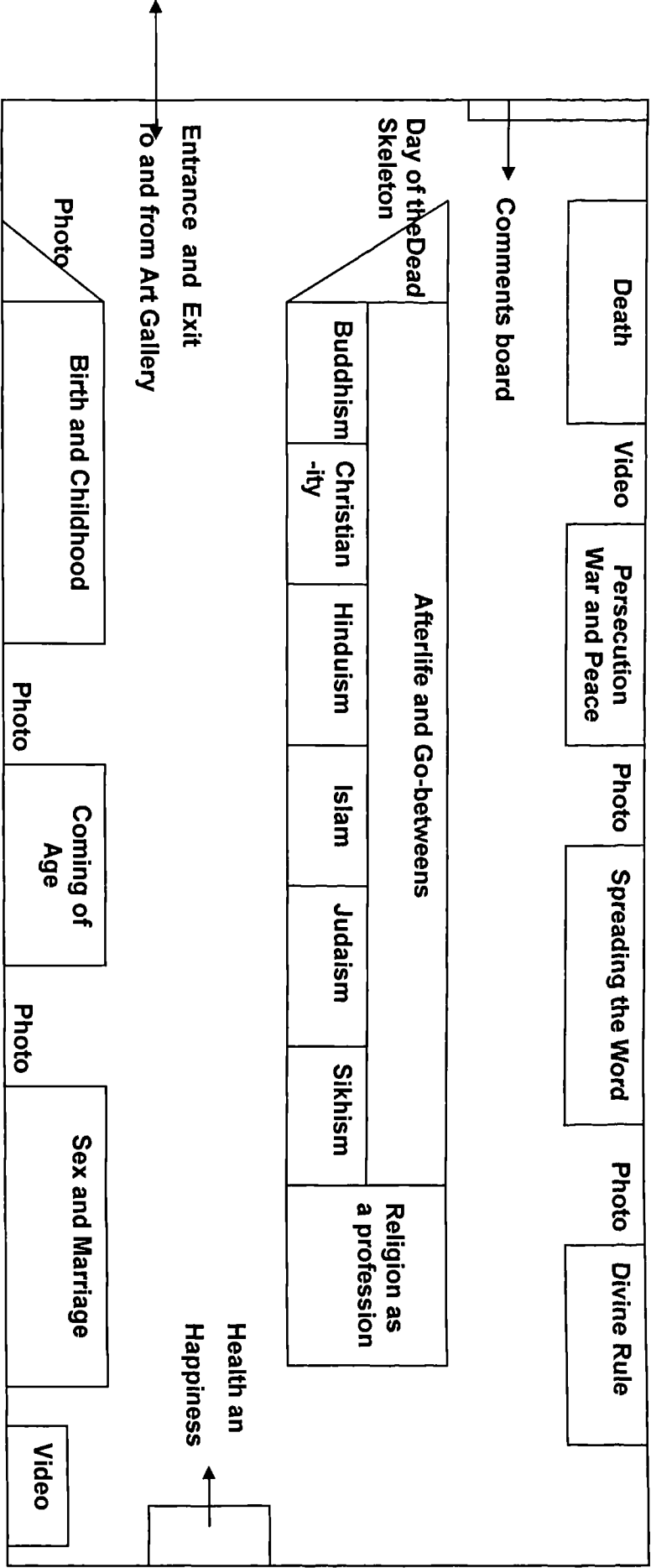




PLATE 3 THE RELIGIOUS LIFE GALLERY

FLOOR PLAN 3 THE SCOTTISH GALLERY

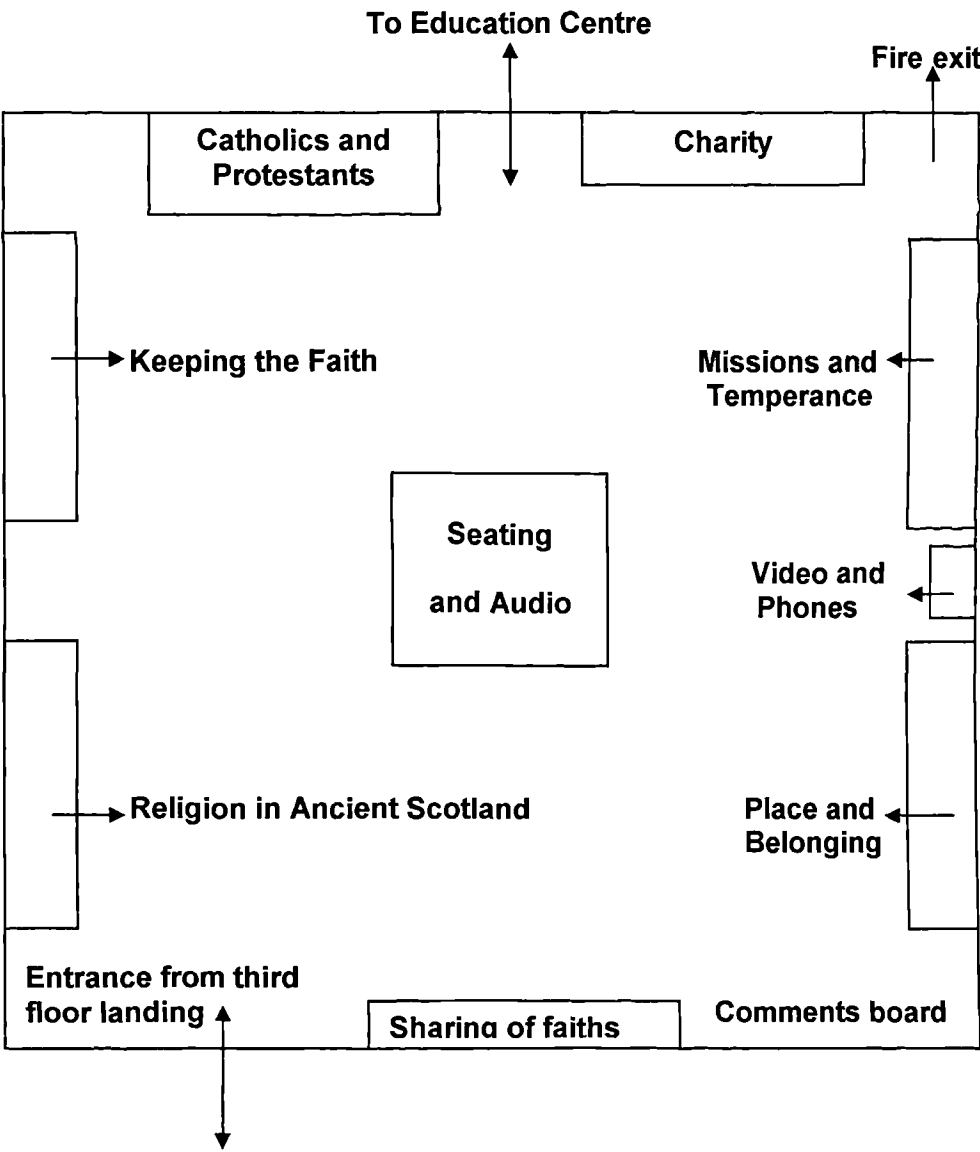




PLATE 4 THE SCOTTISH GALLERY

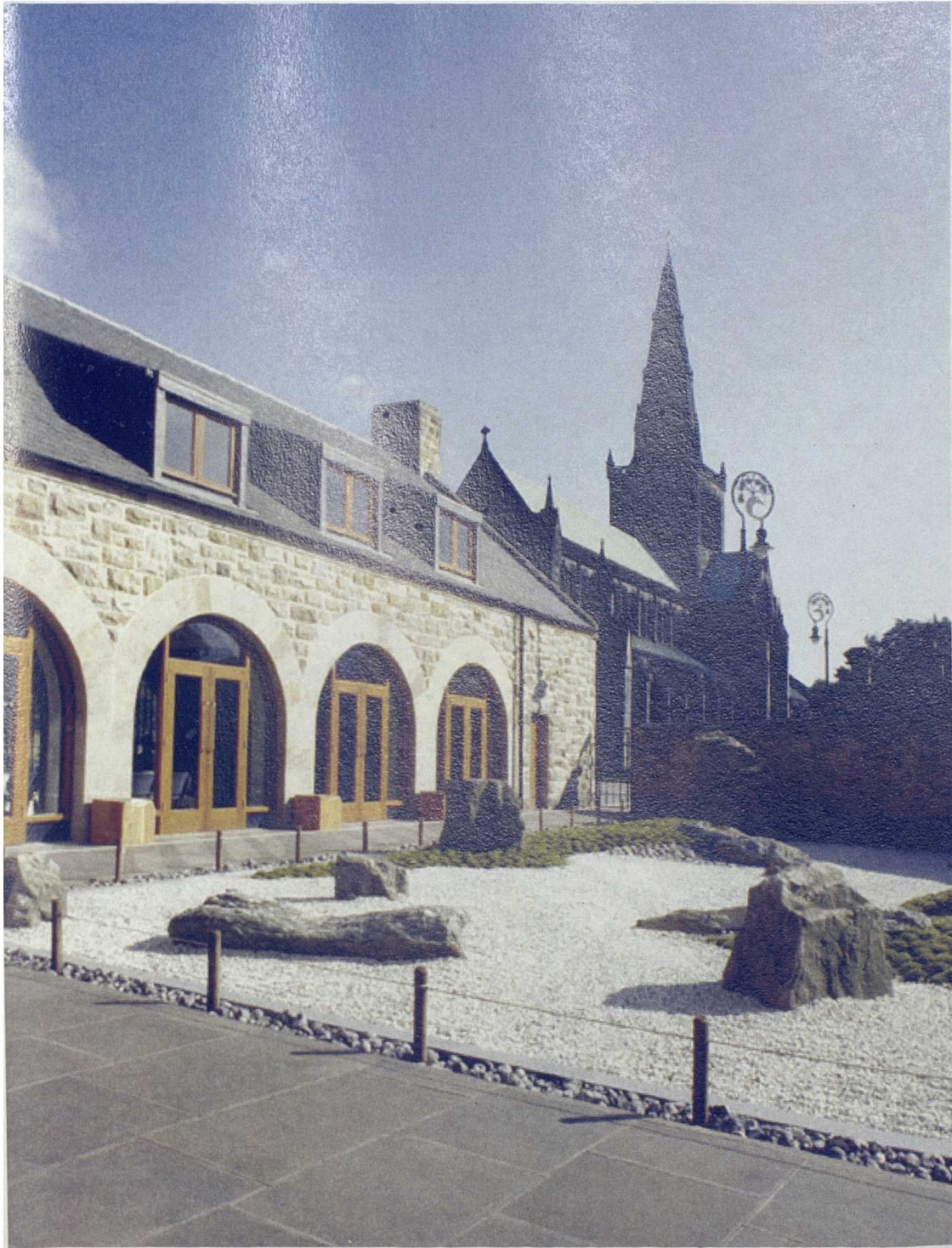


PLATE 5 THE ZEN GARDEN

Chapter 7 The Pilot study – Analysing the comments

‘Meaning arises when we try to put what culture and language have crystallised from the past together with what we feel, wish and think about our present point in life’.¹

Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced the St Mungo's Museum and described how visitors to the museum's three main galleries had responded to the museum's invitation to fill out comment cards and pin them up so that they became part of the display. I argued that these comments are units of meaning. The visitors' search for meaning in the St Mungo's museum is the focus of my study.

St Mungo's is a useful case study since the subject matter intensifies the potential for visitors to become engaged with the exhibits and to make meaning. Belief systems (including non-belief in religion) are an integral part of the individual and collective identities of many, if not all visitors, and are key contributors to the meaning-making process. Research has shown a strong link between the identity of individuals and their belief system.²

I described how the interior of the St Mungo museum has been shaped and created as a series of special architectural spaces with the intent of heightening the impact and maximising the potential for visitors to engage with the museum meaning. I argued that these environments have the potential to act as ritual spaces.

In this chapter I shall begin to search the data for evidence of the role that visitors adopt in the museum, what they reveal about themselves and how they feel in the museum; what indication they give of the interpretive communities from which they come and the values and attitudes of these communities; signs of tension and drama as conflicting or corresponding values and attitudes and different meanings are transacted within the space; and evidence of the nature of the visitor experience as the ritual unfolds and visitors use their individual resources in enacting their meaning.

¹ Turner, V. 1986:33

² Silverman, 1990; Perin, 1992; Hooper Greenhill, 2001.

The museum team through the mission statement displayed in the foyer are explicit about its hegemonic values and assume an active visitor. The team were aware that their stated aim, 'Mutual respect and understanding for all religions' departed from the 'natural' dominance of the Christian tradition in Scotland. By articulating their meaning so clearly, I should be able to identify from the comments if visitors are accepting of this meaning.

Initially, I shall try to get an overview of what people say in the comments by dividing these into categories. I hope that the emerging categories will enable me to understand the relationship between the visitor and the museum, the visitor and the displays, the visitor and other visitors and their own and other communities. These categories will be determined, as far as possible, by what people say, rather than my theoretical framework, though that can never be wholly absent.

Developing the categories

From the 4000 comments recorded between 1993 and 1997, I chose to analyse a 5% sample, 200 in number, and develop categories which would give me an overview of what visitors said about their visit. I read through the entire sample and began to take notes using a card system. I did not begin with fixed categories but tried to examine the cards 'literally' and allow the categories to emerge. Of course this is not entirely achievable as I am interpreting these categories as 'literal'. This is a grounded theory approach which I use to try to temper the influence of my interpretive frame and listen first to what the visitor had to say in response to the displays. The literal, interpretive and reflexive stages of analysing the comments were not entirely separate and often overlapped, but in my analysis I tried to be consciously aware of where I am using the different techniques.³

Using the card indexing system I began to create a set of headings and subheadings from which larger categories emerged. As an illustration of the process I shall take as an example one of the longer comments from a visitor.

'As I went through I was stuck with amazement that all these items could be gathered together from all sorts of places to form St Mungo museum, as the building did not

³ Mason, 1996:109

set out to be a museum in the beginning. It is a beautiful building inside and out. The appointments are delightful to touch and to the eye, the stair treads are high and steep. I love the doors and windows. The Zen Garden FANTASTIC. Christ of St John of the Cross? This had more mystic in the dark corner in Kelvingrove, with its pin points of light. At St Mungo's it is lost in a waste of white emulsified wall. It no longer grips me.

Please display your lower case subject descriptions on sloping stands. Then one may read them without bending down to peer at the flat cards. Also -the big windows on upper floors are excellent - what a rare sight over the Cathedral. However, it is spoiled by the hideous pink ruffles of Austrian blinds at the upper flat (top) corner of the old people's dwellings. A rule of no colours of curtains (lined curtains) would solve this problem. The museum is modern and yet sympathetically in tune with ancient days. It is clever. I like the big iron gates on the stair cases. I like the wooden seats in the Zen Garden. Very fitting for the seat area of one's anatomy. I'll be back soon. I'll have the pakora in the cafe. It's a real delight. I was amazed!' (202)⁴

In a long quote such as this, I separated out different parts and recorded these on separate cards under different headings - the museum building; the Zen Garden; the painting 'Christ of St John of the Cross' by Salvador Dali; and the museum displays – along with other similar quotes. I created cards for emotional responses, positive and negative, and those which showed allegiance to a particular belief.

Some comments are included in more than one card, because I used sections of comments where appropriate. While I might feel that these categories seemed a 'natural' choice at the time, emerging from the data, I have argued throughout that there are no such things as 'natural categories', since my interpretive framework influences all my decisions of what to choose and what not to choose as categories. While accepting that all categories are ideological, constructed within a socio-historical framework at a particular time, I have nonetheless striven to remain aware as possible of my preconceptions and located perspective in order to represent the comments as fairly as possible. Below are some examples of these cards, evidence of the complexity of meaning-making and the range of possible connections and meanings that visitors make.

⁴ Kelvingrove in this quote refers to the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow where the Dali painting hung from 1952 –1993 when St Mungo's opened.

Museum displays

As I went through I was stuck with amazement that all these items could be gathered together from all sorts of places to form St Mungo museum. Please display your lower case subject descriptions on sloping stands. Then one may read them without bending down to peer at the flat cards. (202)

An excellent display and fascinating. However a few of the points about the Christian faith are incorrect. (e.g. "Veronica" offering her veil - who is Veronica? She is not mentioned in the Bible. Also, Christ did not reclaim the body of his cousin, John the Baptist (see Bible.) The comments from the Christians are particularly liberal. I doubt whether their comments represent the majority of Christian views. (4864)

Really thoughtful display. A good cross section in a small museum (it's a shame it's not bigger). What about books, texts? (4964)

In this display it would be better to present all of the exhibits in segregated sections. It is confusing to mix angels with Buddha, etc. Keep all Christian art together and all other arts separately. White backgrounds would be better than black. (4984)

The Zen garden

The Zen Garden – FANTASTIC. The museum is modern and yet sympathetically in tune with Ancient days. It is clever. I like the big iron gates on the stair cases. I like the wooden seats in the Zen Garden. Very fitting for the seat area of one's anatomy. I'll be back soon (202)

**View of Necropolis, cathedral and Zen Garden - excellent. Very well done! (3421).*

The Painting by Salvador Dali

Christ of St John of the Cross This had more mystic in the dark corner in Kelvingrove, with its pin points of light, at St Mungo's it is lost in a waste of white emulsioned wall. It no longer grips me'.(202)

It is a brilliant museum. Could it have a clone in Belfast? It seems to me a pity that the Christians objects are nearly all so banal (including the Dali). Surely there are Christian artefacts of real beauty and power like the Shiva? (4153)

The first section was brilliant, informative and full of beautiful artefacts. The Dali was breathtaking of course. I was distressed by the representation of Christianity in the second section on 'Life,' which focussed on the bizarre. There religion was described as the cause of the N. Ireland war, when we all know it's about RACE, POWER and MONEY. Moreover as a black person, I was disturbed to see that yet again Christianity is seen as a white religion with replicas of white western origin. Get real! Jesus was brown you know. (4695)

**Very impressive. I think the Salvador Dali painting is breathtaking and the fact it is positioned so as to allow viewing from different viewpoints allows a greater appreciation of it. (4670)*

Museum building

As I went through I was stuck with amazement that all these items could be gathered together from all sorts of places to form St Mungo museum, as the building did not set out to be a museum in the beginning. It is a beautiful building inside and out. The appointments are delightful to touch and to the eye, the stair treads are high and steep. I love the doors and windows.(202)

I don't come to see the religious art, I came to see the architecture. The architect of this museum should be congratulated for his/her design. It is very sensitive with respect to displaying works – also the displays are very well organised. (4472)

Within quotes like these, visitors were revealing parts of themselves (4695), the interpretive communities to which they belonged (4153), the values and ideals that they held (4984) and the emotions and thoughts that were aroused in the visit to the museum (202). In some this was expressed in a simple statement (3421), in others it was a more complex argument and assertion in which the visitors made direct connections with their experience (4472). In some cases visitor comments agreed with the museum (4670), in others they disagreed (4864). In some they asked for information (4964), in yet others they rejected the classifications of the museum, asserting that the category of their religious community should dominate and rejecting the museum meaning.⁵ For example,

The comments from the Christians are particularly liberal. I doubt whether their comments represent the majority of Christian views. (4864).

In this display it would be better to present all of the exhibits in segregated sections.(4984)

These traits were again apparent where visitors made connections with their beliefs, whether religious or non-religious. I developed cards under the various headings with regard to belief or non-belief systems - Judaism, Islam, Christianity, God and Atheism for instance. St Mungo visitors wished to see information about their own religion or that of other people; to give information about their own beliefs or say how they felt about how religion in general was presented.

As I would have expected from the visitor profile, the majority of comments imply a Judeo-Christian background, though there was also mention of people from many other backgrounds and of interests in many other religions and beliefs - Aboriginal beliefs, Atheism, Bahaim, the British Humanist Association, Buddhism; ancient Egyptian beliefs; Hinduism, Islam, Mysticism, North American Indian religions, Paganism, and Quakerism.

The comments provide evidence that faith communities form interpretive communities who have specific ways of looking at their own faith and that of others. These specific ways are not always internally consistent since there is disagreement within, as well

⁵ These reference numbers refer to quotes in the preceding cards.

as between, religions - the Sunni and Shia Muslims and the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Christians for instance. The comments suggest that members of these faith communities read the text and the objects in and through these communities. The boundaries of these communities are very strong and act to construct and limit the meaning that visitors make. This was evident in the quotes (3743), (3815) and (3802) from the card on Christianity below that shows how visitors from different traditions from within that faith, make completely different meanings.

Christianity

It is a brilliant museum. Could it have a clone in Belfast? It seems to me a pity that the Christians are nearly all so banal (including the Dali) surely there are Christian artefacts of real beauty and power like the Shiva (4153)

One would assume that Roman Catholicism was the dominant religion in Glasgow, not only from the imagery but also interpretations of belief and sainthood. The photo of an injured mother in Londonderry bears no relation to the subject matter. (3743)

Very interesting but where is the Billy or a Dan or an auld tin can! (3802)

**What No Catholicism? All Christian references appear to relate to Protestantism with the exception of pejorative references to Heresy in the upper display. Hardly an unbiased view. (3815)*

The first comment shows that the overall museum experience was a positive one and there is evidence of individual transactions with objects where the visitor is relating impressions of the objects to her own idea of power and beauty. The other three comments are at variance with one another. Visitor (3743) interprets the meaning of the displays in an exact opposite manner to visitor (3815) while visitor (3802) sees neither Christian tradition represented.⁶

⁶ This is a children's rhyme used to challenge strangers about what faith they belonged to. The Billy referred to in quote (128) is King William 111 who in Northern Ireland and in the West of Scotland has been adopted as a symbol of Protestantism while the Dan is possibly an abbreviation of 'Danny Boy' the popular Irish folksong associated with Roman Catholicism.

The meaning made by the museum seemed to be rejected by these three visitors. The values of their interpretive communities conflicted with the perceived values presented by the museum and their expectations of the museums were not met. They did not see themselves or their community reflected in the museum displays with appropriate status, and there is an implied sense of disappointment barely masked by jibe (3743), irony (3815) and humour (3802).

The comments illustrate the strength of the visitor frame. Bartlett, in his book on the social psychology of remembering wrote about the effect of framing, 'Every social group is organised and held together by some specific psychological tendency or group of tendencies, which give the group a bias in its dealings with external circumstances. The bias constructs the special persistent features of group culture... (and this) immediately settle(s) what the individual will observe in his environment and what he will connect from his past life with this direct response. It does this markedly in two ways. First, by providing that setting of interest, excitement and emotion which favours the development of specific images, and secondly by providing a persistent framework of institutions and customs which acts as a schematic basic for constructive memory'.⁷

Patterns continued to develop as I began to organise the cards around the three largest categories – comments on the objects, on visitors' belief systems and general comments relating to the museum environment including the displays in general and the building. These patterns clustered around sub-categories - the values, attitudes and emotions which visitors expressed, which I labeled positive or negative depending on whether they agreed or disagreed with the museum; and those comments which sought more information, corrected the information which was available, or identified additional information which they had which they thought should be in the display. This pattern of subheadings were not hierarchical but formed a web within which there were a number of relationships. I constructed the web in Figure 3 to show some of these relationship patterns.

⁷ Bartlett, 1932:255

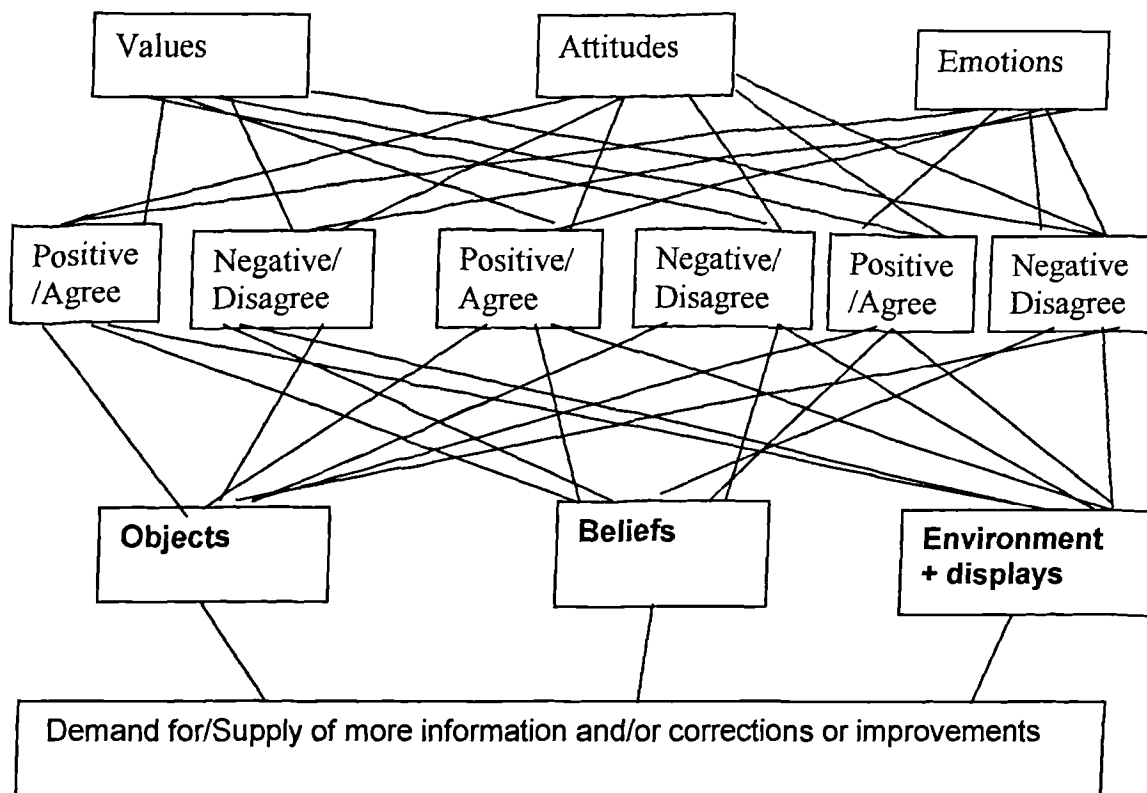


Figure 3 Web to show patterns of relationships found in a preliminary study of a sample of the St Mungo comments.⁸

The comments analysis thus far shows overwhelmingly that these St Mungo visitors have been *active* in making meaning on their visit. They have responded both mentally and physically to the invitation to share their meaning-making experience with other visitors. This methodology has produced a matrix of relationships linking visitors' cognitive knowledge, values, emotions and beliefs to the meaning they make of the display and the museum environment. This matrix is consistent with my epistemological and ontological view that knowledge is constructed and that people make meaning by building on prior experience and knowledge within the frame of their interpretive communities, that the museum environment affects the visitor

⁸ In the chart I am using these terms as defined in the Chambers Dictionary 2003. *Value* is the recognition of relative worth or goodness generally relating to moral principles or standards. *Attitude* is a posture or position expressing some sort of feelings. *Emotion* is feeling as distinguished from cognition or any phenomena of the mind such as anger, joy, fear or sorrow which can be associated also with physical symptoms.

meaning-making and that the meaning made contains personal and cultural associations.

It confirmed what I know already about the visitors meaning-making process and does not advance my understanding of the power relationship within the museum environment. It is less sophisticated than the Worts model and no less complicated.

The grounded theory approach has enabled me to have an overview of the comments and corroborate much of the theory base. I now analyse the comments using the other main thread of my approach – that of the museum visit as a drama in which a ritual is enacted.

The St Mungo visit as a drama.

I should like to return to the long comment I used at the beginning of this analysis - comment (202), which I shall break down in separate sections to clarify the points I make.

**As I went through I was struck with amazement that all these items could be gathered together from all sorts of places to form St. Mungo Museum, as the building did not set out to be Museum of Religion in its beginning. It is a beautiful building and outside. The appointments are delightful to touch and to the eye. The stairs treads are high and steep. I love the doors and windows. The Zen Garden - FANTASTIC. (202)*

This whole statement could be seen as a personal narrative in which the visitor is recording the transactions she is making within the museum environment. She uses the first person singular, and in a process of self-reflection identifies and relates how she feels and what she sees to previous perceptions, knowledge and emotions. She is writing the comments as if she is telling this story.

**'Christ of St John on the Cross'. This had more 'mystic' in the dark corner at Kelvingrove, with its pin points of light. At St. Mungo it is lost in a waste of white emulsified wall. It no longer grips me! (202)*

In the case of the Dali her experience was disappointing and did not have the transformative effect of a previous visit, which she remembers and expects to re-enact. This is an example of the kind of experience where the aesthetic and the spiritual overlap and which is often associated with art. In Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery the painting was hung at the end of a long dark corridor on a deep red background and the visitor ritual entailed moving towards the specially lit painting until she stood in front of the work which towered over her. In St Mungo's the painting is equally prominent, but is arranged against a white wall on one side of a room which has simple architectural proportions. (see picture no 1). The gallery is evenly lit and initial view provides a reasonably close encounter. For this visitor, the St Mungo space has not created the same aesthetic/ritual experience as in Kelvingrove which the visitor describes in physical, almost visceral terms, 'It no longer grips me!'

**Please display your lower case subject descriptions on sloping stands. Then one may read them without bending down to peer at the flat cards. And also-The big windows on upper floors are excellent - what a rare sight over the Cathedral. However, it is spoiled by the hideous pink ruffles of Austrian Blinds at the upper flat (top) corner of old person's dwellings. A rule of no colours of curtains (lined curtains would solve this problem).(202).*

As well as commenting on the difficulty of reading the labels, this visitor gives a strong indication of the experience that she expects from the museum, of what is appropriate and how this should be accomplished. The comment shows elements of social drama where the visitor's values and the museum surroundings conflict. This visitor sees a breach of etiquette that upsets her sense of 'what is right' aesthetically for the museum environment and she uses the comment to counteract this breach and reinstate her emotional equilibrium. She is taking control of her environment and saying how things could be changed to make her feel comfortable.⁹

This visitor uses positive language – 'excellent' and 'rare sight' - where the transactions with the museum environment and the objects meet her expectations and standards. Her language is more negative and judgemental - 'peer' and 'hideous' - where her standards are not met. The museum experience is about herself and she

⁹ Turner, 1974: 33-45. He identifies four stages of social drama - breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration. See also footnote 12 later.

actively makes meaning in the museum through a series of transactions, with the museum providing the trigger for her experiences.

The museum is modern and yet sympathetically in tune with Ancient days. It is clever. I like the big iron gates on the stair cases. I like the wooden seats in the Zen Garden. Very fitting for the seat area of one's anatomy. I'll be back soon. I'll have the pakora in the cafe. It's a real delight. I was amazed! (202)

The whole comment shows how this visitor has responded to the museum ritual – she has given the museum and the objects her attention, recognising that the museum is a special place and that the objects in the museum can give her positive experiences. She has adopted a role of sympathetic critic where she expressed a degree of physical discomfort and emotional disappointment in the space but overall is satisfied and ready to return. The dominant visitor experience, the outcome of the series of interactions and transactions, has been that of amazement and satisfaction.

This visitor responded positively to the St Mungo's museum ritual. She has used the museum environment in an active way to create her own meaning, stimulated by but not overwhelmed by the museum meaning. The dominant role is that of 'museum visitor' in which she sets boundaries on the way the museum should behave, on the practice of the museum - its aesthetic standards, the 'correct' layout of the cases and labels, the type of facilities it provides, even the appropriate food in the café. The boundaries are symbolic and provide her with a degree of comfort against which she can measure the museum, accepting most of it, but finding fault with specific elements.

Such boundaries exist for all individuals and relate not just to standards of behaviour or aesthetic presentation but to values and attitudes and deeply held views which are part of his or her identity, derived from their interpretive communities. 'The consciousness of a community is encapsulated in the perception of its boundaries, boundaries which are largely constituted by people in interaction'.¹⁰ Symbolic boundaries can become reified in the manufacture of artefacts such as the faith objects which are found in St Mungo museum, and in the museum institution itself.

¹⁰ Giroux, 1992:133-141

The museum aimed to represent the meaning of the individual object as that of the community which produced them by emphasising this in the labels and by using witness testimony and statements on the video. Visitors took different views about the degree to which the museum succeeded in doing this. But the overall meaning of the objects as they are displayed together in the museum is not necessarily the same meaning as they had individually in their originating community. The power the museum has is to reinterpret that meaning and imbue it with authority and status given by society, in order to recruit it to support a philosophy of respect for cultural and religious diversity.

St Mungo's adoption of a stance which gives all religions equal respect rather than giving precedence say to the established Christian faith, is an exercise of that power. This stance has values and attitudes associated with it, which may challenge or reinforce, wholly or partly, the values and attitude of visitors. It is in transacting with the displays and with the museum itself and comparing the values and attitudes presented in museum meaning against those of their interpretive communities that provides the opportunity for drama in the space.

The comments in the initial analysis show that visitors' meaning-making depends on their interpretive communities; the identities they hold within these communities; the roles they construct and how they interact with the museum situation. The visitors' ability to 'own' the meanings they make involves, in fundamental ways, their experience and the relations of power within the museum environment.¹¹ The extent to which the intended meaning of the museum aligned with the religious, emotional and aesthetic frames of visitors' interpretive communities shaped their experience of visiting, strongly influencing whether or not it was a negative or positive encounter which they would seek to repeat or recommend to others.

Social and aesthetic drama

The encounters of visitors with the Dali painting, which I have described, is an example of (more or less successful) aesthetic drama within the ritual space. Aesthetic drama occurs when the visitor feels completely at one - intellectually, emotionally, psychologically and (where relevant to the individual) spiritually - with the

¹¹ I am using the phrase 'to own' as meaning 'to know for oneself'.

museum. The integration of formal aspects of the museum and the individual objects with their contexts means that the visitor transaction with the object or the environment evokes a special response which is memorable. Whether this experience is described as aesthetic or spiritual or some combination of both may depend more on visitors interpretive communities than on technical epistemological distinction between these categories. Many of the comments in Table 2 describing some of the aesthetic experiences of visitors to St Mungo's elide the categories of beautiful and spiritual. For example, in the moment associated with this liminal space visitors might imagine a perfect world (3261); have a moment of deep spiritual significance (2.35); make a personal connection with family or friends (4512); respond in a significant way to an object (84); or be transported in moments of introspection and aspiration (322) (1798).

Transforming experience	<i>When I look at creation I cannot deny that there is a God. In creation there is enough for us to know what he is like. He is beautiful and creative. He created harmony not war, not female circumcision. We can make our own Gods or worship and love the God who created us.(2.35)</i>
Personal introspection	<i>The museum is an important contribution to peace and harmony through understanding the different interpretations of the deepest aspects of our common humanity. (3261)</i>
A special place	<i>I could spend days in this wonderful shrine of world religions. This museum is certainly enough reason to make the journey from Australia to Scotland again in the future – with friends to also enjoy. Thanks to all who contributed to St Mungo Museum. (4512)</i>
Aesthetic/spiritual	<i>Very spiritual and beautifully presented. (84)</i>
Reflection	<i>A lovely display of different religions. But isn't a shame the fights over religion, when we mostly pray to the same God, father of Jesus, Jehovah? There are too many man-made religions, etc., get back to Jesus. (322)</i>
Contemplation / Imagination/ aspiration	<i>May there be peace and understanding between all religions throughout the world. One religion must not</i>

Table 2 **Comments showing moments of aesthetic drama.**

In making these comments visitors have responded positively to the museum ritual and have used the ritual to create for themselves a memorable and a meaningful experience. In these comments the visitors have all responded to the spiritual/aesthetic aspects presented by the museum ritual, though not all accepted fully the museum meaning of mutual respect and understanding of all religions, preferring to contemplate and reflect on their own religion. The museum had given these visitors space and time away from their everyday concerns and selected resonant objects laid out in carefully chosen themes and spaces to provide opportunities for visitors to use their imagination in self-reflection and to enact the museum ritual in personally dramatic ways. The meaning made was inspired by the ritual and the beautiful displays of objects, but was not necessarily the same as the museum meaning. The museum ritual broke down only when visitors found the museum meaning more than merely something they were not interested in or did not agree with, i.e. when they found the museum meaning unacceptable and alienating to a degree which spoiled their visit.

Ritual is often associated with aesthetic response, but Turner has identified the dramatic nature of social encounters in which values and attitudes may be presented which conflict with deeply entrenched loyalties and beliefs.¹² There is evidence of this drama in many of the comments associated with the photograph relating to female genital mutilation, which is shown in the Religious Life gallery.

The photograph of the young girl undergoing clitoral mutilation is - rightly - very disturbing. More information is needed to elaborate on the extent of the practise geographically, and the appalling consequences of the pain and mutilation. It cannot be left as one foot note in 'Childhood'. At least a comment on the move to abolish it should be made. 3.20

¹² Turner 1974:35. Turner outlines four stages through which the drama enacted, breach – when normal behaviour in a community is flouted; crisis – when the breach is recognised; redressive action – when action is taken to limit the crisis and reintegration when there is either a solution to the crisis or resulting schism.

I am absolutely horrified and furious that there is a picture of a young woman, who is obviously in pain and the commentary/text completely ignores this, making reference to celebration of female power etc. I see a young woman being tortured. Female circumcision is a practise intended to disempower women - not an initiation right. It is a tool of misogyny. Do something about this. 3.10

In these comments there are deep emotional responses as evidenced in the words used by visitors to express themselves and to describe the meanings they were making – appalling, disturbing, horrified, furious. Visitors were relating to themselves as individuals, rather than necessarily identifying themselves as female. The writing of the comments is one way of resolving the conflict and dealing with the strong emotions aroused in the dramatic experience.

Other social dramas were enacted in response to the museum's stated aim to give equal respect and understanding to all religions. People wrote comments like *I think the room with the Dali paintings should only have Christian objects in it and the other room the Buddha and other statues. It creates a chaotic impression and disturbs appreciation of the painting. (2090)*

It would be better to separate out all religions (3862)

In my interviews with the St Mungo team the curators said that they recognised that in treating all religions with equal respect, they were challenging the deep religious convictions of many visitors. To this extent it can be said that the museum has prepared the ritual space for social as well as aesthetic drama.

Although the museum has attempted to give equal respect and understanding to all religions and religious objects on display, sectarian issues did arise and produced moments of social drama as visitors made their own meaning from the values and ideals of their own communities. As well as providing an opportunity for visitors to take part in the museum display, one of the intended purposes of the comment boards was to enable visitors who disagreed violently with the museum meaning to vent their feelings of anger in a positive way.

In the light of the peace process taking place in Northern Ireland surely its become appropriate to display blatant sectarian items as the Orange drum.(2202)

I take particular offence at the reference to Bloody Sunday in your exhibition, at least show both sides of the suffering. (4260)

Non-fulfilment of visitors expectations could also be dramatic -

You announced that you intended to inform us about different forms of religion in Scotland nowadays. To my regret I cannot find this information.(4039)

It is unacceptable that there is no translation in Hebrew for all the artefacts. If the museum decided to write translations in Hindu, Arabic and Japanese, English, French and Spanish, why is there no place for Hebrew? (4052)

This visitor recognised the power of the museum to represent the Jewish faith through the Hebrew language and prioritised the ethnic aspect of her identity, adopted that role and entered into a dialogue with the museum to pursue the absence of this language.

Roles

One of the most striking aspects of the comments was the number of times that the visitors used the personal pronoun 'I' and the word 'me' as well as the frequency with which they addressed the museum as though it were a person through the use of the words 'you' and 'your', as if the museum was a person.¹³

I especially like the skeleton (I'm not sure how to spell it) and the stained glass windows.(1728)

Once again I feel I must draw your attention to the lack of focus on the many aspects of Mormonism. (1253)

Visitors have personified the museum and their comments represent a dialogue between the museum and visitors in which they reveal their expectations of the museum, some of which I have shown in Table 3 .

¹³ McManus, 1989: 174-189. This phenomena of addressing the museum as a persona has been identified by McManus in her study of how visitors read labels and interact with exhibit texts. She reported that people felt 'that someone was talking to them'.¹³

Political – willingness to confront issues	<i>Why no mention of Salman Rushdie presently persecuted by Islam? (137)</i>
Social – with a strong emphasis on the educational role	<i>I pray that such museums would be set up to foster understanding. (2163)</i>
Personal – willingness to listen	<i>Once again I feel I must draw your attention to the lack of focus on the many aspects of Mormonism. (1253)</i>
Comprehensiveness and scope	<i>What about all the standing stones all over Scot/and and the islands - I'm sure one must know something about the religious meaning. And what about the clear green marble that many west coast islanders carry for good luck from death by fire or water. (302)</i>
Accuracy	<i>Factual mistake: (1) the pyramid photographed is that of Khephren, not Cheops - common mistake but inexcusable. (116) *</i>
Staff attitudes	<i>I was delighted to see how friendly and professional the service of the museums are. (3022)</i>

Table 3 Comments showing visitor expectations of the museum

By identifying their expectations visitors were also attributing roles to the museum i.e. they anticipated that the museum would meet, not meet or exceed their expectations; give them accurate information (116), friendly and professional service (3022), reflect their concerns (3362) and reinforce what they knew (302).

The comments below show that when the museum behaved in a way appropriate to their expectations, visitors felt a sense of belonging (3084), became engaged with museum (3582) and had positive experiences (3084, 3582,2120).

It's a very nice place. I enjoyed being here and I liked the collections and especially the picture of the Dali Thank you (3084).

We have enjoyed our visit to the museum. We are local residents and did not know about this museum on our doorstep and will visit again, again (3582).

Absolutely fantastic. I have been around half the world and I've never seen such a wonderful display. There is complete harmony and acceptance of others' beliefs that is very unique. Thank you very much. (2120).

On the other hand, visitors felt uncomfortable and disappointed when the museum did not meet their expectations (3702), and failed to provide this sense of belonging (1679).

You have tried to please too many sects. It hasn't worked. The whole thing is a mish mash and has a very uncomfortable feel –weird and eerie. Religion should make me feel comfortable. (3702)

**Okay, not my kind of thing though. (1679)*

All of these comments, positive and negative, are the result of transactions which visitors made with the displays, comparing their experience in St Mungo's against previous experiences, their perceptions of the role of museums in general and their expectations from their life experience within their own and other communities.

The museum as ritual

Though there is considerable evidence that St Mungo's museum is a ritualistic environment, visitors do not accept a passive role prescribed by Duncan in relation to such hegemonic institutions. In fact they are active within the space choosing what to accept or reject of the museum's ideological position, constructing roles for themselves as part of the meaning-making process. Roles provide a link between the perspective and behaviour of individuals and the social situation in which they find themselves. The roles they construct take account of previous experiences they have had, for example of museum visits or similar situations, and provide a measure and memory against which subsequent experiences are assessed.¹⁴ Table 4 lists some of the visitor roles I have identified within the sample of St Mungo comments.

Roles	Comment
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¹⁴ Hewitt, 2000:59

human rights activist	<i>Female circumcision is a practice intended to disempower women - not an initiation right, do something about this. (3.0)</i>
learner	<i>It was extremely educational and fascinating. Thank you for providing such high quality standards. (4575)</i>
Historian/curator	<i>*Mary Queen of Scots did not resist the Protestant Reformation, It had already happened before her personal rule in Scotland. She insisted on the right to practise her own Roman Catholic religion in private, but granted freedom pf religious worship to her country. (3562)</i>
souvenir shopper	<i>*We had heard a lot about the museum and would have liked to buy postcards of most of the exhibits. The shop in the museum however only had a very limited stock of cards. Please update this sorry state! (3004)</i>
believer	<i>Jesus said - "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whosoever believes in me will never die." John 11: 25 (181)</i>
non believer	<i>As an atheist, I feel neglected here. Surely atheists have artefacts too – paintings, writing, sculptures inspired by Humanist or Darwinist thought? I'd like them to have their place here. (357)</i>

Table 4 **Comments showing visitor roles**

Within this process visitors are seen to construct roles for themselves which protect, enhance or preserve their self esteem and asserts their identity in terms of their knowledge, perceptions and expectations. 'Role making is a self-conscious activity in which the person is creatively engaged in making an appropriate role performance not a blind activity in which a script is routinely enacted.'¹⁵

In writing the comments, visitors could be perceived to be enacting or performing their role in the story of that part of their visit. They were 'making meaning' through

¹⁵ Hewitt, 2000.62

their links with or through the frame of reference of their own lives, their values, their attitudes and their feelings - their culture and interpretive communities.¹⁶ The story becomes part of the repertoire of the visitor's life history to be used in other, subsequent situations.

The roles provided a framework within which they could prioritise part of their identity, relating what they know, feel, perceive, recognise or believe to that situation and making meaning at that moment in time. Where there was a fit between the museum meaning and their identity the comment was positive, less so to the degree there was a mismatch.¹⁷ These comments have shown that a key influence on the visitors' meaning-making process was their self-identity.¹⁸ Visitors seek out the experience offered by the museum to affirm, express and enhance their sense of self and they expect the displays to act as a trigger for this act.

Visitors who write the comments are self-consciously making meaning in relation to themselves. Their meaning is experiential, self-referential and is made in and through their culture and relates to those parts of themselves, which form their personal and social identities.¹⁹ Their expectations and interpretations are rooted in an understanding and perception of the museum environment and they have a view of what is appropriate within that environment from their interpretive communities.

The comments are evidence of the ritual aspect of the St Mungo visit, particularly what Chaney refers to as the aesthetic drama.²⁰ In the museum, the physically and symbolically bounded spaces have become a setting for dramatic performances. The architect and designers have arranged the distances between the objects and the visitors and their location in particular places to heighten the sense of surprising encounters, reverential looking and the sense of drama. The performances of these

¹⁶ Maclachlan and Reid, 1994

¹⁷ Silverman, 1995

¹⁸ Self-identity – the way the visitor thinks or talks about her self. This may be different from the way others see her. People construct who they are, their identity, by bringing these perspectives together in the constant work of negotiating oneself. Wenger, 1998 :151

¹⁹ Michel, 1999:66 This is again consistent with the findings of Michel.

²⁰ Chaney, 1993:18-19 Chaney describes classical theatre, for instance, as aesthetic drama in which the audience and the performers are separate and the script is tightly defined. In the art gallery the objects are arranged in cases or on the wall, separate from the visitors and have been arranged so that visitors look at them in turn as an individual experience. The art gallery he maintains, is set for aesthetic drama.

objects have been given dramatic significance and the transformed spaces have encouraged aesthetic responses in visitors.

Duncan has argued that concept of the ritual nature of the museum space implies the dominance of the museum meaning over that of the visitor. She believes that while fulfilling its declared purpose – that of displaying and preserving art works - the museum also carries out broad, sometime less obvious, political and ideological functions. Duncan argues that 'Museum goes today, like visitors to these other sites bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity.'²¹ She says that this receptivity is a consequence of the ritualistic aspect of the museum visit and that museum visitors accept the underlying messages and do not contest them.

The St Mungo museum has an explicit political and social agenda – *'to promote respect and understanding among people of all religions and of none; to change attitudes, provide inspiration and encourage the appreciation of the points of view of others'*.²²

St Mungo visitors are active in their meaning-making and have made a variety of responses which reveal a degree of complexity not acknowledged by Duncan. The meaning that the visitors make is not solely determined by the museum displays. The displays and parts of the museum environment seem to serve in some cases as a framework, and in others as a trigger, for the meaning making process.

Summary

In this pilot study I have shown how the first set of categories which emerged from the comments were consistent with the perspectives of other researchers, but they did not enable me to understand more deeply or precisely how visitors used their responses to make meaning or the nature of the symbolic and ideological power of the museum and its effect on the visitor meaning-making process.

Meanings are embedded in the objects by their originating communities and in the museum as an institution. The original meanings of objects have others imposed on

²¹ Duncan, 1991:91

²² Interview with Mark O'Neill

them by the museum team, who create the displays with the architecture. The ritual space embraces all these meanings and drama ensues in the encounter with visitors who both make and take roles in order to make sense of the museum visit.

The St Mungo comments contest Duncan's notion of the passive visitor and show that the power associated with the museum ritual influences but does not dominate the visitor meaning-making processes. The meanings visitors made were complex responses in which the key factors that emerged are how visitors see themselves, the roles they adopt depending on which aspect of their identity they wished to use, and how they see the persona of the museum within society. The meaning is made by a series of transactions, in which individual and group identities are prioritised. Where there is a mismatch between the values and ideals of the individual and those of the museum, there is a struggle against the ritual power of the museum in which the individual accepts, negotiates with or rejects the museum meaning in a social drama.

Where there is a harmony between the values of the museum meaning and the visitor meaning then there is opportunity for the visitor to have a positive social and aesthetic experience within the liminal space provided by the museum ritual.

This is a new way of examining the meaning-making process which has the advantages that it acknowledges the relationships between the sociocultural, personal and environmental aspects of the visit which have been identified by other theorists, and additionally introduces an important element which has been less well expressed in previous models – the symbolic power of the museum, the social and aesthetic drama of the museum ritual and the active role of the visitor, constructing her role and identity within it. In the next chapter I shall develop this argument more fully, expand on the idea of the museum visit as a ritual and begin to construct a theory of the meaning-making process.

Chapter 8 The Development of a Theory of Meaning-Making

'People not only construct their world but watch themselves doing the construction and then enter and believe in their constructed worlds'.¹

Introduction

My research data consists of comments from visitors to St Mungo museum who took the opportunity to say what they wanted about the museum visit and what meanings they made of the displays. Visitors entered into a dialogue with the museum, which they had personified. Many of the comments though ostensibly about the museum, reflected the knowledge, ideals and values of the individuals and their interpretive communities and I described the meaning-making process as a series of transactions in which the values, ideals and information that the museum presented to the visitors were mentally measured against those they held from previous experiences. These values, ideals and knowledge are what make up the identities of the individuals, and in responding to the displays and to the museum environment, visitors drew on these resources, adopting roles and prioritising those aspects of their identities which were triggered by the displays - sometimes ethnic or religious, at others intellectual or emotional. Transaction and identity are two key factors in the meaning-making process.

The museum environment has been ascribed a symbolic power within Western society and visitors recognised that power both when they identified their expectations of the museum and described boundaries within which they perceived it should operate - boundaries of taste, of knowledge and of practice. This symbolic power, enhanced by the architecture and the design of the displays, gives special meaning to the museum environment and to the objects within it, so that the whole becomes a ritual space. Visitors create meaning in a series of social and aesthetic encounters in which meanings are transacted through the power of peoples' relationships with objects, with the power of the museum and with their own identities and power. Ritual and power are another two key factors in the meaning-making process.

¹ Bruner, E.M, in Turner V. and Bruner. E.M. (eds.), 1986:25

Ritual and power, transaction and visitor identity are the most prominent features to emerge from the pilot study. St Mungo's visitors considered the museum as a special place, acknowledged the authoritative, but not prescriptive, presence of the museum persona and constructed their roles as they moved through the galleries, at times contemplative, at others combative and sometimes conversational. Visitors engaged with the museum, negotiated and used their imagination to make a variety of meanings, not accepting passively as described by Duncan the covert agenda of the museum. *This is the museum drama and ritual.*

In this chapter I shall show the relevance of the vocabulary of the drama in exploring 'dramatic performances' of the visitors as 'actors' within St Mungo museum and shall begin to construct a hypothesis of meaning-making in the museum.²

Issues of identity and power

The meanings of such concepts as nation, identity and self are symbolic and like symbols in general, 'are not categorically fixed but grow and change through time and place'.³ The anthropologist Geertz asserts 'Something is happening about the way people think about who they are, who others are and how they wish to be portrayed, named, understood and placed by the world at large. "The presentation of self in everyday life," to invoke Erving Goffman's famous phrase, has become less of an individual matter, more a collective even a political one'.⁴ In Europe, collective identities – religious, ethnic, linguistic, racial and other cultural differences - have become salient most especially in the decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the end of the Cold War which shattered the balance of power which suppressed many such collective identities.

² I am using the word 'actor' in the way it was used by Mead. Mead proposed the *I* and the *Me* as names for the alternating phases of consciousness that human beings experience in the course of their acts. They stand for the perspective the acting individual takes towards self and others. One can either be an acting subject, an *I*, whose attention is focussed on events outside oneself or one can be an object of one's own action a *Me*, with one's attention focussed on one's own real or imagined actions. One cannot be both simultaneously, so interactionists argue that there is an alternation between these two phases of consciousness as one decides how to act. (Hewitt, 2000 :74).

³ Geertz,2000:221

⁴ Ibid:175

The dictionary defines the word 'identity' as 'the state of being the same' 'who or what a person or a thing is'. Maalouf in his essay on identity defines it as 'that which prevents me from being identical to anyone else'.⁵ If identity cards were introduced into the UK, they might carry the holder's name, date and place of birth, photograph, certain physical features, the holders' signature and perhaps his fingerprints, blood type or DNA - a whole array of detail designed to prove without doubt or confusion that he is not someone else. However, each individual's identity is made up of a number of elements and these are not restricted to the particulars set down in official records. The statement by Maalouf continues 'For a great majority these factors include allegiance to a religious tradition, to a nationality – sometimes two; to a profession, an institution or a particular social milieu. A person may feel a more or less strong attachment to a province, a village, a neighbourhood, a clan, a professional team or one connected with sport, a group of friends, a union, a company, a parish, a community of people with the same passions, the same sexual preferences, the same physical handicaps or who hate the same kinds of pollution or other nuisance'. While each of these elements may be found separately in many individuals, the same combination is never found in different people and it is 'this that gives every individual richness' and value'.

I have quoted this statement in full to emphasise the diversity of human identities including those of museum visitors, who are equally diverse in their allegiances to different interpretive communities. Not all of the allegiances are equally strong and at certain times and in certain situations different affiliations will come to the fore and influence the sense people make of a situation, an event or a person.

A focus on interpretive communities does not mean that the role of the individual is not important in the meaning making process. Individuals construct their identities within their communities through the mores and accepted practices within these communities. Although the visitor may or may not, negotiate meaning through engaging with the displays; see or imagine himself aligned within the museum message; or understand his place within it; the meaning that he makes will contribute to his identity. This meaning will affect how he feels about the museum or about the displays or the people or the ideas and attitudes that he has encountered and will help to shape his identity, both individual and collective. The museum visit can be

⁵ Maalouf, 1998:10-11

seen as a shared practice in which both individual and collective identities are constantly negotiated relative to their status within the larger society. This is the museum performance.

This process of negotiation for ownership of the meaning between the visitor and the museum, introduces aspects of power into the construction of identity which will influence the meaning making process. As has been argued in previous chapters, museums are instruments of civil power and reflect that power within the institution. The space within the museum has been shown to be a political space. This power has influence on the visitors' meaning-making process and their response to the museum reflects their relationships with the dominant power groups within society.

The performative society

The premise that everyday life is a performance has been studied from numerous standpoints.⁶ The early theories of Goffman introduced in the last chapter, have been used and developed by anthropologists such as Turner and Geertz⁷ as well as by sociologists like Abercrombie and Longhurst.⁸

The notion of social life as a performance has been most closely associated with the work of Goffman whose studies are dedicated to an analysis of the rules, strategies and tactics of social interaction. Goffman employs stage analogies routinely in his analysis especially in his *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1969). Goffman treats everyday interaction as performance which he defines as 'all activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers'.⁹ Such a very

⁶ Carlson 1996; Chaney, 1993 ;Shevsotva, 1989; Sennett, 1977.

⁷ Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1970 and 1974. Clifford Geertz was particularly interested in interpretive anthropology and he drew on Goffman's work in his early work on the Balinese cockfight. (Geertz, 1993:424, 436). While he was later to criticise Goffman, he pointed out the ingenuity of Goffman's game strategy and its application to various environments like a psychiatric hospital and a school. (Geertz, 1993:24-27) Turner used the ritual aspects of drama theory in a series of works in which he drew on Goffman's ideas on status and rank in his research on circumcision rites in Zambia in Central Africa. (Turner, 1969:44-93) He developed a conception of social drama as a structured performance that provides continuity on the one hand and on the other has the potential for schism which brings about change.

⁸ Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998.

⁹ Goffman, 1969:19

general definition indicates that performance is entirely pervasive in everyday life and makes it difficult to separate performance from non-performance.

In recent years, research has moved from the study of the external role and representation of the individual to the construction of the identity of the person within the role. Abercrombie and Longhurst argue that influence of the mass media in western society in particular contributes to an awareness of performance in people's lives and that society itself has become performative.¹⁰ In this new paradigm the individual performance is not, in the Goffman sense, a mask or a role for that occasion – a representation of a person's identity. It is in fact the active continuous and active process of defining and constructing one's identity.¹¹

Derrida, Foucault and Butler have developed the concept of the performative society and argue that in certain cultures at particular times there are acceptable practices, ways of doing and ways of being. The ways of being form some of the values, ideas and beliefs of the culture and are formed as practices which are repeated within that culture. These practices perform the values of the culture, set limits on them and make only certain discourses available to the members of that culture.¹² A performative gesture depends on a deeply woven web of social relations that renders it intelligible, believable and acceptable. Culture is more than an interpretive resource, it is a recognisable and distinctive set of practices which are forms of knowledge.¹³

I have described the museum visit as a series of transactions within a ritual space in which the visitor constructs a role in response to the displays using the resources of his identity and makes meaning. The notion of the performative society indicates

¹⁰ Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998:70-73

¹¹ The performative society is a term coined by J.L. Austin in 1962 in which she uses the term performative as a semiotic gesture or activity that creates what it describes. The example most often used are the words 'I do' in the marriage ceremony where the couple become man and wife through saying these words.

¹² Butler, J. 1999:178 Butler explores gender as a performative act whose practice is the re-enactment of a set of meanings already established in society. Butler argues that gender ought not to be construed as a stable entity or a source of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition* of acts. (*italics in the original version*).

¹³ Chaney, 1993:10

that visitors not only construct roles from aspects of their identity but constitute their identity in and through these roles in the process of making meaning

Abercrombie and Longhurst have developed a theory of performance in social situations where 'people simultaneously feel members of an 'audience and performers; they are simultaneously watchers and being watched' ¹⁴ They argue that due to the pervasiveness of the mass media and the constant exposure of people to dramatic performances of 'ordinary' lives (through soap opera and extraordinary lives (through the worship of star personalities), performance in everyday life is more prevalent in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than it was in earlier societies. It may well be true that social action in any society can best be described by the notion of role, but there is something peculiar to modern societies that give the performance involved a particular twist . ¹⁵

For instance they cite examples of people taking part in demonstrations and rallies; the popularity of reality TV programmes; the creation of impromptu shrines at roadside deaths; young people emulating the dress and behaviour of their idols; and the different coloured ribbons worn by campaigners for various different interest groups. These symbolic activities confer group or individual identities on the people involved and in the external performance of the act – marching, laying flowers or wearing ribbons – there is an internal performative activity which creates or reinforces the identity of the participant.

The performative society is one in which 'human transactions are . . . structured through the growing use of performative modes and frames'. ¹⁶ In wearing coloured ribbons people communicate and signal meaning to others and they recognise that signal on others who are wearing similar ribbons. The symbolic connection becomes part of the interpretive frame of that group or community through which they interpret and make meaning out of other people's actions. This act also creates an identity for the wearers as supporters of the cause.

¹⁴ Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998 :75 They call this their Spectacle/Narcissism Paradigm which I shall expand upon in the next chapter.

¹⁵ Ibid: 74

¹⁶ Kershaw, 1994:167

Not only are Abercrombie and Longhurst arguing that people perform in everyday life, but that people are both performers and audience and that this audience / performance paradigm is characteristic of modern life. It is the result of the interaction of two processes – the construction of the world as spectacle and the construction of individuals as narcissistic.¹⁷

Using their terms the museum displays can be viewed as a spectacle – ‘something to be paid attention to’. The displays of objects are carefully framed, interpreted and controlled by the museum for the audience to look at, pay attention to and make particular meaning of. The museum environment can be metaphorically portrayed as the performance of a spectacle through which the objects are semiotically framed and from which visitors may make meaning.¹⁸

Visitors too as audience and performers, behave as a spectacle when they perform, acting as if they wished to be looked at or indeed to look at themselves; and as audience for themselves, other visitors and the museums. These acts are performative, constitute their identity and are meaningful.

The museum as spectacle ¹⁹

In Chapter 6 I described in detail from interviews with the museum team, the way that the museum team had decided to arrange the galleries so that each had its own character and was designed to be ‘looked at’ in different ways, each gallery was a different spectacle. Spectacle is closely associated with the aestheticisation of everyday life in which societies are dominated by style and design. In the museum,

¹⁷ Abercrombie and Longhurst :57 Narcissus, the subject of a Greek myth, fell in love with his reflection in a lake and died because he could not possess it. The white narcissus flower grew where his blood soaked the earth. Abercrombie and Longhurst use the term in a restricted sense to describe a way of behaving characteristic of society as a whole, which is not restricted to a particular personality type.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 74-78

¹⁹ Debord, 1967 *The Society of the Spectacle*. Spectacle is a key concept for analysing the condition of art in the era of the mass media and develops directly out of a tradition of Marxist cultural criticism of the role of the mass media in the twentieth century. The world as spectacle is a world that can be owned, where capital is accumulated to the point where it becomes image. I am using spectacle as used by Chaney (1993) and by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) as ‘something to be attended to’. For a discussion and extracts from ‘The Society of Spectacle’ see Edwards, *Art and its Histories: A Reader*, 1999.

the team create the spectacle and use the objects as images to perform meaning. Many of these images are also 'owned' by the originating communities and there is an inbuilt power struggle for control and ownership of the image and hence of the meaning. The challenge for the museum and for the architect and design team, was to respect the symbolism of each object in its religious and social sense while using the objects to tell their story of 'equality and respect for all religions'. The cultural institution of the museum has an authority, power and legitimacy conferred upon it, which the visitors to St Mungo's acknowledge. The team, principally the curators exercise that power in the selection and presentation of the displays as a spectacle for visitors.

The museum team have tried to frame each encounter so that as people move around, individuals could have time to pay attention to each object, register it and move on. The museum visit was constituted as a performance of the objects for people to give due attention to. In the Art Gallery, paintings, sculpture, textiles and stained glass all have their own space so that visitors may encounter each individually. Each object is evenly lit and the ambience is hushed as in a sacred place. The architect suggested that the two largest objects – the painting of the Crucifixion and the Shiva sculpture – should be placed in separate areas so that they would not compete for visitors' attention. The Crucifixion dominated one wall of the main space while the Shiva was placed in a separate room on its own, with an additional flickering light effect to give the impression of the dancing god. Flowers were placed in front of the sculpture in a gesture of reverence and respect. The objects were made to perform individually for the visitor, while the art gallery as a whole had a coherence and quiet ambience and ethos to encourage individual contemplation of each object.

In the Religious Life Gallery objects were designed to perform in a different way as they were arranged in groups according to different themes – either as groups of artefacts from specific religions or related to the events of the human life cycles such as birth, marriage and death. The relationship between objects from different religions was emphasised within different themes in a series of cases stretching along the gallery and principally around the walls. The themes are developed by placing groups of objects in a series of large cases in a linear arrangement, each case individually lit, so that visitors moved from one illuminated area to the next,

participating in each in turn as they made progress through the gallery. The museum team have created the themes and stories that they wish visitors to pay attention to.

In the Scottish Gallery the objects were again grouped in themes and were designed to perform together almost socially. Seats were placed in the centre of the area from which visitors could view all of the cases, while they listened on audio loops to the voices of 'ordinary' people who told stories of their lives among religious communities in Glasgow.

I know from interviews with the team that as they designed the galleries, they had imagined the procession of visitors through the museum and had anticipated the visitor experience. In so doing, they had structured the displays so that visitors' participation would be facilitated.

In a spectacle there should be the opportunity for the whole self, physically, emotionally and psychologically to be involved. In St Mungo's the museum team tried to encourage visitors to participate in the spectacle as they moved around the galleries by creating opportunities for visitors to respond to sights and sounds, to marvel at some displays, to become angry or excited by others, to write comments and share meanings, to reminisce and imagine, as part of the whole performance of the spectacle of the museum, the objects, other visitors and themselves.

Visitors did not show externally what their beliefs, ideals or values were, but internally they had an image of self, which acted as audience for the museum meaning and for the meaning of the objects within it. As audience, visitors looked for parts of themselves in the displays, recognising the power that the museum had within the performance of their spectacle i.e. within the display of the objects, to endorse their identity and their beliefs. By taking part in the spectacle visitors revealed their expectations which are similar to those they would expect from taking part in a ritual - that their beliefs, and hence they themselves, would be endorsed and that they would feel enriched and refreshed. People still 'need to know that their actions matter, that their existence forms a pattern with that of others, that they are remembered and loved, and that their individual self is part of some greater design beyond the fleeting span of mortal years'.²⁰

²⁰ Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:145

Many of the objects in the spectacle are representations of unseen deities or religious attributes like loyalty, or human aspirations like peace; visitors seek to make these abstract values have permanence either in an image such as in buying a postcard or in their memory.²¹ Visitors may hold in their memory the feelings, sights or sounds associated with a particular object or place in anticipation or expectation that the positive feelings of participation would be repeated, or the negative feelings redressed, on a subsequent visit. The image and the meaning they made of the object, by participating in the spectacle, also becomes part of themselves to be used in other situations and experiences. Visitors experience the museum as a ritual spectacle in which they participate to make meaning. The symbolic power of the spectacle creates a ritual event and images which forms part of the drama of their lives.

The spectacle/ narcissism paradigm and individual power

Self-identity is a ' key influence on the visitor's meaning making process. In every realm of activity we seek and make opportunities to create, express and affirm who we believe ourselves to be – our sense of self.'²² The pilot study shows evidence that the ritualised performance of individuals in the social and aesthetic drama of the museum visit is one in which they reinforce, modify or transform their sense of self to maintain a sense of continuity and self esteem. One of the strongest influences on individual meaning-making is the extent to which the individual acknowledges the power, legitimacy and authority of the ritual.²³ The meaning that individual participants make will vary as to their interpretive community and the degree with which they are actively and consciously engaged in the drama.

The St Mungo comments show that it is through social and personal identities and their interaction that visitors made meaning and arranged and ordered the roles they constructed, causing them to give priority to some and to relegate others to a lesser position. Through these roles they expressed who they were as members of various

²¹ Baudrillard (1984) argues that images (signs) come to have a life of their own independent of the objects of which they are images. For example, Glasgow Museums hope that the image of the Dali Crucifixion will become synonymous with Glasgow.

²² Silverman, L. 1995.

²³ Turner, 1984

interpretive communities, their identities and the aspect of their identities that they wished to prioritise at the moment of writing. 'Identities are organised into hierarchies of salience, and the more prominent an identity is, the greater the persons' propensity to seek out opportunities to act in terms of that identity'.²⁴ These identities were constituted in and through their performance.

The notion of a narcissistic society where people act as if they are being looked at, as if they were at the centre of a real or imagined audience uses concepts developed by Mead.²⁵ Whereas Goffmann says that a person 'presents to others what is approved by them and absorbs their image of him', Mead stressed that people interact and negotiate with themselves within a cultural situation to produce a response which will be acceptable to others who in turn can negotiate a response.

The individual is active in creating his/her own meaning but within cultural limits set by his society. While researchers like Lasch and Sennett²⁶ see narcissism as a pathological deviation, a distortion of the self, Abercrombie and Longhurst see it as a cultural condition in which the self is central to an audience, real or imagined.²⁷ The individual performs for herself and constructs or maintains her identity in her own reflection. Narcissism provides the motivational and individual side of the spectacle. People see themselves simultaneously as performers being watched by others; narcissism is the treatment of oneself as spectacle.

The spectacle/narcissism paradigm enables me to articulate the process by which visitors construct their identity and make meaning, consciously or unconsciously, in response to the displays. On the museum visit visitors make connections to themselves and reflect back the responses to these connections in a meaning-making process through which the meaning is worked or reworked into their own life narrative, and becomes part of it, becomes part of themselves, their identity – their story which they can retell. This transaction process is performative - they make sense of the displays and the events which happen on the visit through the

²⁴ Stryker, 1980

²⁵ Mead, 1934

²⁶ Lasch, 1980 and Sennett, 1977.

²⁷ In all types of human behaviour there can be extreme forms which can be described as deviant.

Abercrombie and Longhurst emphasise the narcissistic tendencies of people in contemporary society but the wearing of items to reflect personal and group identity is not a new phenomenon nor is the expression of strongly held views and beliefs through particular behaviours like martyrdom for instance..

affirmation or, in some circumstances the modification or even transformation, of their identity. The result for the visitors is a 'trajectory of the self', an understanding of their past or what might happen in the future and a potential to tell others about it.²⁸

The spectacle/narcissism paradigm reflects the discussion by other social theorists about the notion of reflexivity – of self-reflection.²⁹ The reflexive project of the self which consists in the sustaining of coherent yet continuously revised biographical narratives takes place in many contexts of which the museum is one. 'A person may make use of this diversity in order to create a distinctive self identity which positively incorporates elements from different settings into an integrated narrative'.³⁰

In this process 'identity is constructed by the reflexive ordering of self narratives'.³¹ Individuals understand themselves and construct their identity by working and reworking their interpretation of their own life history in a self-narrative or story. In interviews shortly before his death Foucault made reference to what he calls the practice of the 'techniques of the self'. These are specific techniques or practices through which individuals may realise their own subject positions. Foucault suggested that these techniques 'permit individuals to effect their own means or with the help others a certain number of operations. . . to transform themselves'.³² These 'techniques of the self' are still conducted within a field of power and knowledge and within the domains of a discrete number of discourses, in my case the cultural framework of the museum discourse. In spite of the potency and authority of the discourse, individuals, visitors for example, are able to be actively self-reflexive and self-transformative. Although the curator writes the script in an institution which embodies knowledge and power, the comments show that individuals can in performance, make meaning outwith the curator's meaning and can accept or reject that meaning either wholly or partially.

I have previously argued that some visitors do not feel comfortable in the museum because of their education and background. Minority groups often argue that

²⁸ Ibid. 70-108

²⁹ Giddens, 1991; Lash and Urry 1994.

³⁰ Giddens, 1991.190

³¹ Giddens, 1991:244

³² Foucault, 1988. A contemporary application is the use of video diaries in the production of reality TV programmes.

museums do not represent them and that they cannot see themselves identified within the museum ritual. In recent years, marginalised groups such as black groups, feminists, gays and lesbians have generated a group consciousness and campaigned for equal opportunities and equal representation in society and in cultural institutions like museums. Geertz argues 'What we have here is a contest of kinds'.³³ This is sometimes referred to as 'identity politics'.³⁴

Although the phrase 'identity politics' has different connotations, I have taken it to represent the views and actions of those groups of people who do not feel that they have been represented in museums, with the result that their voices have not been heard and they have no locus within the museum environment.³⁵ Museums, which traditionally have supported the 'dominant political voice' of the cultural establishment, have had to become more and more aware that their displays rather than offering 'the discourse' are only one in a series of discourses which represent different viewpoints and interests.³⁶

The meaning-making process within the museum environment which I have described departs from Goffman's view of social life as 'presentation of self in everyday life' and reinforces the spectacle/narcissism paradigm. In making meaning the visitor is not just expressing her identity but performing an identity as a self-constituting act. The visitor is not just presenting herself but performing herself for an audience. The meaning making process is performative; enacting at a particular moment in time the meaning she has made, giving expression to her power to make that meaning and reinforcing or recreating her identity. If the museum presents an identity that she can perform then she is affirmed; if not, she may reject or feel rejected by it.

³³ Geertz, 2000: 175

³⁴ Identity Politics has an extensive bibliography including Giroux, 1992; Goldstien, 1994 and Mercer, 1992.

³⁵ This argument has been expanded in Chapter 1. Clifford, 1988; Karp and Lavine 1991; Bennett, 1995.

³⁶ Discourse is a way of talking about something that makes it a reality for a group of people. For example in traditional museums the way groups of people outside Europe were presented was often the reality of that culture for people in Britain and became a source of knowledge about those cultures. The power associated with choosing what to say about peoples and the way they were represented became the focus of much of Foucault's work who focussed on the production of knowledge rather than shared meanings. Foucault, 1980

Summary

This argument draws on a range of role and sociological theories and presents a museum visit within a performative society as a combination of social and aesthetic drama. The museum team of curators, designers and educators initially author the drama. In the museum performance, the objects and the architecture are key players while the visitors are simultaneously audience and performers. Within the spectacle of the museum visit I have argued that visitors actively perform in the museum and make meaning in a process where they acknowledge the power of the role of museums in society; make connections with important aspects of themselves and seek to affirm their identity and self esteem; and take ownership of the meaning they make through a process of identification and reinforcement of their self and group identities.

I have proposed that meaning-making is a performative act in which people construct their identity by prioritising those aspects relevant to that particular situation. Visitors act as audience to themselves simply by being in the museum; they are also audience when they assess the literal and symbolic meanings of the displays and the symbolic gestures of other visitors. They are performers when they visit the museum on their own and make meaning for themselves as an imagined audience; or when they are with others in the museum environment, or when they signal to others their meaning making process through gestures, conversation or in the case of St Mungo's through writing their comments

The external performances express *ve* of the internal performative act of making meaning, of constructing or reinforcing their identity. Identity, power and ritual have become keystones in the construction of my model of meaning making which I present in a visual way in Figure 4 below.

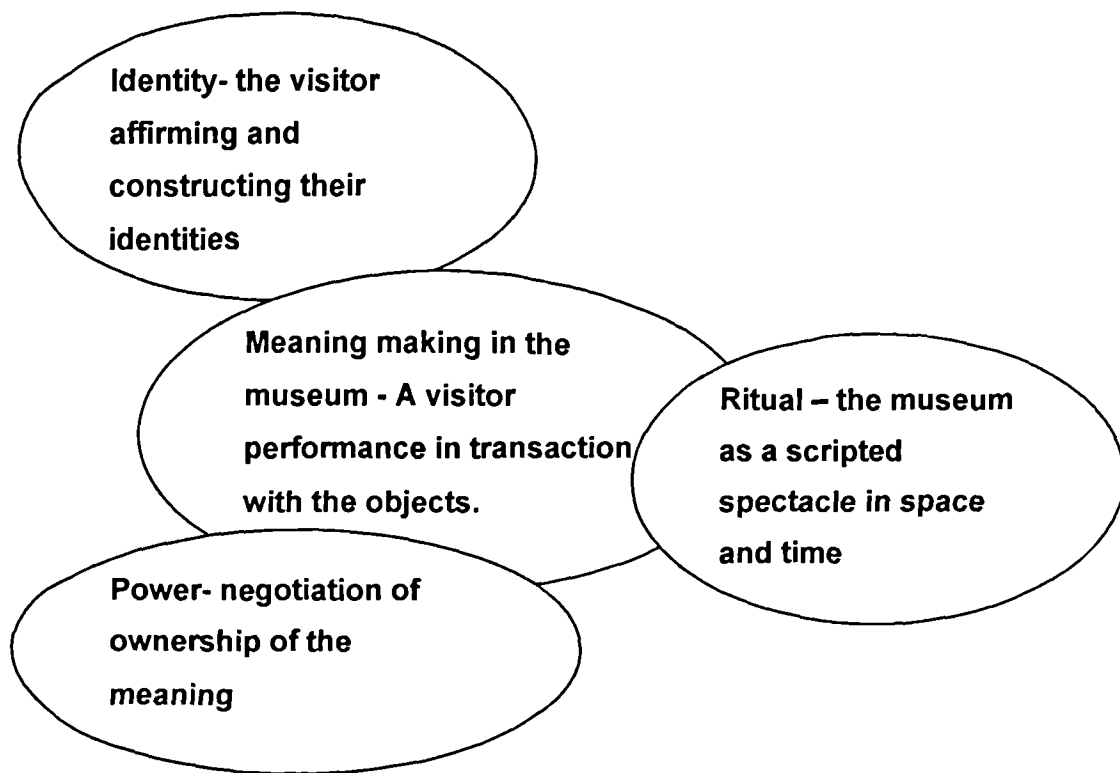


Figure 4 A hypothetical model for meaning making in museums.

In my model the performance of meaning-making is central to the process. The construction of visitor's identity is one component in this process; the ritual of the museum visit which constitutes the practices in which museum visitors take part, is another; and the power struggle between the visitor and the museum to take ownership of the meaning which is dependent on the community of which the visitor is part, is the third.

This is my hypotheses built up initially from interviews with the museum team, an examination of a sample of comments from St Mungo's museum and expanded upon and supported by an examination of role and performance theories. My task now is to take this model and test it against another sample of the comments data to see if it is still valid using other comments. To support my hypothesis I shall look for evidence of visitor's constructing their identity, the power struggle between the visitors meaning-making and the museum and signs of drama and power play on the visit.

Chapter 9 Testing the Model – Ritual and Power

‘What we have now is drama as habitual experience; more in a week, in many cases, than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime’.¹

Introduction

In this thesis so far I have developed key arguments that have enabled me to build a performative model of the meaning making process which proposes that ritual, identity and power are three main constituents of the meaning-making process, which is itself a performance of transaction. The ritualistic nature of the museum environment derives from the physical architectural spaces and the especially designed displays as well as from the powerful cultural symbolism of the institution in Western society, which has been built up over at least two hundred years.

Objects placed within the museum take on aspects of the museum power as well as their own intrinsic power or that of the communities they represent. Within the museum, the objects are carefully situated and perform the museum meaning for the visitors, who act as audience for this performance. This is the museum as spectacle. Visitors in their turn, perform their identities as they make meaning, drawing on the knowledge, ideals and values of their interpretive communities, in a series of dramatic encounters whereby aspects of their identities are reinforced, challenged or negotiated. Visitors are spectacle and audience for themselves in this performance which has the potential to be transformative.² The visitor can add the experience to his or her own life history in a process of becoming, of meaning making and of learning in an holistic sense.

My task now is to evaluate and test the coherence and validity of this model against a new sample of the comments. I shall take this in two stages over the next two chapters. In this chapter I shall examine the St Mungo museum as spectacle and analyse the museum ritual in three scenarios – the Art Gallery, the Religious Life Gallery and the Scottish Gallery - to see if I can elaborate on or have to change the model. This chapter will ask questions about the museum as spectacle and the

¹ Williams, 1975

² As in Chapter 8. In the interactionist sense this is the two phases of consciousnesses ‘I’ and ‘Me’ as one decides to act. (Mead , 1934)

visitors as audience, the first half of the Spectacle /Narcissism Paradigm, discussed in the last chapter.³ Do the visitors pay attention to what the museum wants them to pay attention to? Do visitors make the museum's meaning? Is the museum ritual enabled by the museum as spectacle? Where does the power lie?

In the following chapter I shall investigate identity and power, the other half of the spectacle/narcissism paradigm and test if the model applies to this same second set of comments or needs to be changed.

When the administrative staff were transcribing the comments, those relating to different galleries were not kept separate, but some visitors did locate themselves in their comments.⁴ For the evaluation of my model I shall use fifty new comments relating to each gallery, which emerged from a search of the full comments data. I shall also examine fifty comments relating to the words 'tolerance' and 'respect' to find out visitors response to these abstract concepts. The team at St Mungo's did not use the word 'tolerance' or 'bias', which they considered pejorative terms, but instead aimed to encourage 'mutual understanding and respect'. Visitors, in their turn, used the terms tolerance or bias, qualities they associated with having or not having, understanding and respect, to express some of the meaning they made of the museum displays. By examining how visitors used these words, I should be able to find out whether or not museum visitors agreed with the museum's main aim. With 150 comments relating to the galleries and the latter 50 comments, I had selected another 200 comments for my analysis, another 5% of the comments data.

I shall focus particularly on the visitors' performance within the space as they negotiate for ownership of meaning. I shall look for evidence of the power play between the museum exercising its symbolic power and creating meaning in the performance of the objects, and the visitor making and taking ownership of meaning in the semiotic spaces created by the ritual. The museum script will be identified from the interviews with the project team and the visitor repertoire of responses is exemplified in their comments.

³ Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998.77-98

⁴ Chapter 6, I have described the comments data in detail.

This chapter will examine visitor comments in each of the three galleries – the Art, Religious Life and Scottish Galleries – and use the findings to begin to verify or develop the model.

The St Mungo museum

The overall performance that the museum team have choreographed is one of 'mutual respect and understanding' and individual galleries are designed to support that central meaning. Within both the Religious Life and the Scottish Galleries objects are grouped thematically. In the Art Gallery each individual object is displayed to enhance its individual aesthetic qualities and create liminal space in which visitors had the potential to have a flow experience. The museum team were aware that their overall aim of 'mutual respect and understanding' was not one that every visitor would agree with, so the displays were also designed to challenge deeply held attitudes and values which placed one religion in a superior place to another, and valued one religion against another. The museum stage was set for drama. The museum were aware that their own identities might enact bias as part of the ritual.⁵ One curator in St Mungo said, *'I was only too aware of my bias but in a way looking back I was glad of that bias. Members of the team had different bias, ...that meant we were able to challenge one another.'*⁶ Another said, *'Coming from an Irish Catholic background, I was aware that the messages were not unbiased'.⁷*

Tolerance or lack of bias seems to be generally regarded as a good thing by visitors and there is recognition that the museum is a place for the exchange of ideas and values which may lead to increased understanding.

*We want people to come in here and see that all these faiths are practised by people who live in the City and to get them to understand a bit more about other people's faith.*⁸

⁵ Chambers Dictionary defines bias as an abstract quality which can mean a one sided mental-inclination, prejudice any special influence that sways one's thinking, or an unevenness or imbalance. Tolerance is an ability or willingness to be fair towards and accepting of different religious, political etc beliefs.

⁶ Interview with Harry Dunlop, Curator, April 2003

⁷ Interview with Mark O'Neill, Senior Curator, May 2003

⁸ Interview with Harry Dunlop, April 2003

The success of the transaction will depend on the extent to which the concept within the visitor's experience matches the concept in the mind of the museum team. Visitors use their understanding of the concept to evaluate the actions of others including the museum in a process of transaction which it is a crucial part of the visit meaning making performance.

*I feel that your depiction's of Christianity and its beliefs lack diversity - too much emphasis upon the Roman Catholic denomination while excluding others. This is biased. *3786*

What No Catholicism? All Christian references appear to relate to Protestantism with the exception of pejorative references to Heresy in the upper display. Hardly an unbiased view. 3815*

The museum helps to confirm that we are all part of one big family - the message is one of tolerance and love. 3830

*I have been truly surprised and delightedly pleased by this exhibition! Your attempt to increase tolerance and understanding for persons of different colour and religion is wonderful. * 3750*

Why has the Protestant religion not been given a bigger showing, it is pushed into a corner. It's an insult. (86).

The transaction between the visitor and the objects in the displays exists in the interchange between those meanings ascribed to the object by the visitor and the effect of the museum meaning of the objects on the visitor. The transactions in these quotes show that the visitors are transacting with the displays as part of their ritual, negotiating meaning and constructing or affirming their identities. These identities reflect the values, ideals and values of their interpretive communities. The transactions illustrate the power of the visitor's own frame of reference which in some cases dominates their meaning making.

The Art Gallery

In an interview, the architect described how the museum team tried to create a physical space which enhanced and acknowledged the symbolic power of the object and gave equal respect and dignity to every faith. *'In the Art Gallery it was about respect. I understood that one faith was not predominant. We were saying - in the world there are different ideologies so let's create a pluralist respect for all and give each object its space and place. The equilibrium of the space was dominated by Christianity from the stained glass windows, so we had to build an inner room which has an inner core to try to dilute the imbalance of the Scottish Presbyterian faith on the space. We were seeking a kind of balance so we had to dilute that effect'⁹.*

This museum script says that no one faith is predominant over another. It is an integral part of the identity of the museum persona which has been ritualised in the museum space and is performed by the displays. Although there is the physically and semiotically dominant presence of one religion – Christianity – from the stained glass windows and the Dali, depicting Christian stories, the museum has prepared its performance and structured the ritual - the objects, text and design - to convey their meaning that all faiths are deserving of equal respect and to create the possibility for the mutual involvement of participants in that meaning. It is an exercise of museum power which is acknowledged by the great majority of visitors (4722), accepted by most (4524) and rejected by others (4420), depending on the interpretive communities that they come from. The museum spectacle is not only saying 'pay attention to me' but has a political intent recognised by some visitors in the comment below, for example.

This museum is dedicated to the idea of balance and mutual respect for those of varying religious beliefs. This father Daly photo does not reflect impartiality. Is Glasgow City Council making a statement? (1758)

The museum is a credit to Glasgow - beautiful displays and set out in periods of life as built in various religions (3650)

⁹ Interview with David Page, Architect, April 2003

Ritual power supports the ideological stance of the museum team. For the visitors (see below), who share the intended meaning (66), (4722) and (4524) the tone is affirmative and affirming; for other visitors (86), (4420) and (4087) their responses are questioning, seeking affirmation and showing signs of disappointment.

An interesting and uplifting experience! Within our society today, religion is often marginalize; too difficult a topic to tackle. How unfortunate to see so many negative criticisms among the comments. You have raised awareness and tried to illustrate 'religion' and why it is still meaningful to so many in our world today. Well done! (66)

Excellent balanced treatment of a sensitive subject. Very simple yet intelligent layout of display and use of different languages within labelling. Highlights - Dali painting, metal representation of Shiva, view of Necropolis from top of stairwell. (4722)

**Wonderfully refreshing experience in comparison to the typical art gallery or museum. Well done! First time I have ever read museum labels in more than one language! (4524)*

Why is the 'Saint' included in the room with the huge Shiva?¹⁰ (4420)

Alas its quite obvious that the art gallery portion was created by a Christian, which is overwhelmingly represented. The lack of Jewish art was quite disappointing .The most memorable Jewish spot is that of persecution – not how we want to be known. Thank God we survived and our faith, nation and spirit are alive and well. (4087)

Those visitors who welcomed the pluralist approach perceived that the museum values were aligned with their own, their identities were confirmed and they expressed a satisfying engagement with the museum ritual. The museum meaning was their meaning. For others it was not always evident if they disagreed with the script (86) or just had not noticed it in the cacophony of meaning in the environment.

The Shiva statue, artist unknown and the Crucifixion painting by Dali, were the two displays that created the most comment in this gallery. Visitors had physically attacked both objects on separate occasions, which illustrates the power of individual

¹⁰ Saint is a shortened version of 'Christ of St John of the Cross', the title of the Dali painting

objects. The Dali painting was slashed (and subsequently repaired) not long after it was hung in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in 1954. The Shiva statue weighing around 500kg, was pulled over by a visitor and damaged in 1993, the opening year of St Mungo's.¹¹ The Dali painting bought in 1952, has a long history in Glasgow and many local people have established a personal relationship and a proprietary sense of ownership with it. The different aspects of power of the meaning of these objects are evident in almost all the comments relating to them. Table 4 below shows some of the innate power associated with objects (4838) and the powerful associations people attribute of them. (4854, 4502, 4624, 20)

Power to stimulate the senses and the imagination	<i>The Dali and Dancing Shiva are breathtaking. (4838)</i>
Political power	<i>Concerning the Shiva (Hindu) statue, I would like to know whether it forms part of the items stolen by the British from India (4854)</i>
Emotional power	<i>*My wife has admired the 'Christ of St. John of the Cross' We have not seen it since the Art Gallery - it was a wonderful experience again (4502)</i>
Power of reminiscing	<i>*I remember the Salvador Dali painting in its setting at the Art Gallery in the 1960's. I went often and it was my inspiration as a young wife. In its present setting it loses so much (4624)</i>
Intellectual power	<i>Generally fairly impressed with the art, but we are concerned with inaccuracies in the captions (such as by the Diva engravings - Christians do not believe</i>

¹¹ Press release from Glasgow Museums, 19 May, 1993

	<i>that they will overcome suffering by belief, and, historically, Erasmus was not a Reformer). (20)</i>
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Table 4 The power associated with the objects.

In each of these quotes visitors take ownership of the task or authority of making meaning by relating the objects to themselves explicitly or to their experience. This 'taking ownership' is an expression of the visitor power and reinforcement of their identity. These visitors are comfortable within the space and confident members of their interpretive communities, enabling them to negotiate within that membership. While not all visitors agreed with the museum, they did not seem to be alienated from the museum but were able to negotiate the meaning.

As in my analysis of the first set of comments, some visitors (4624, for example) compared their experience of seeing the painting in St Mungo's unfavourably with their encounter with it in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum and they expressed regret at its effect in its present setting. These visitors criticised the hang of the painting in St Mungo's – they criticised the museum spectacle. They used phrases like '*it loses so much!*' (4624). The museum spectacle had not allowed the visitor to perform the ritual that they had previously experienced. This visitor performance was less successful and the visitor's own identity, that of a young wife, was affected. The experience with the painting was associated with her youth, and the desire for continuity of the experience in the ritual was strong as it seemed to express a desire for a passing youth. Ritual, identity, power and transaction in Kelvingrove had worked together to create a memorable visitor experience, which this visitor longed to repeat.

On the other hand the husband who wrote about the experience that he and his wife had (4502) seem to be satisfied with the performance of the object in its present position and they had 'a wonderful experience'.

Visitors wanted a feeling of drama and impact, a similar experience, to that which they had when they saw the painting in Kelvingrove. This heightened sense of impact, which arises from experiencing a symbolic object in a special place and which evokes strong emotional feelings and creates memories is part of a ritual

response. The story of the experience of the painting becomes part of the visitor life story, part of their identity. For some visitors there was strong desire to repeat their experience, and their sense of disappointment and frustration or their delight in the re-experience is evident in what they say. The lack of the experience, of the stimulus to perform at a peak level is a break in the ritual, which affects the meaning-making process, and subsequently the way the visitor feels about the museum. A repeat of their experience can produce heightened awareness and flow.

In the St Mungo's art gallery, the spectacle has been designed to use the art to bring into focus for the individual a liminal space so that the individual's current state and situation is transcended.¹² The ensuing ritual experience has been described by Cziksentsmihalyi as 'flow' and by Turner as liminality. The comments below show the result of a 'flow' experience'.

**Love and only love. We cannot forget our being. (327)*

Nice way to link people of every time and of every country. We're making history ourselves.(1272)

The museum helps to confirm that we are all part of one big family - the message is one of tolerance and love. (3830)

The museum spectacle has performed successfully for these visitors. It has enabled them in self-reflection, to raise their awareness and extend their imagination, reaching into their memories and heightening their experience. These visitors have performed mutual respect in their comments and have made similar meaning to the museum. The comments on the Art Gallery have been principally in response to the spectacle, the symbolism of the objects and the ideological layout of the objects in space. The dominant ritual has been an aesthetic drama with the objects providing a rich symbolic meaning to which the visitors have responded.

In the St Mungo Art Gallery the objects are situated to 'show off' their power to the audience of visitors. While some visitors accepted the meaning that the museum tries to make about the overall equality of religions, other visitors tended to focus on

¹² Kapferer, 1996:191.

the performance of those objects which have associations for them, intellectually or emotionally. They relate this performance to that which they remember, rather than respond to an opportunity to make new meaning; they wish their identities to be reinforced and for the ritual to have continuity, rather than provide opportunity for change. There is a tension between the museum meaning and the meaning that the visitors bring with them, which is performed in transactions in the space. It seems to be the resulting experience that the visitor remembers. Transaction performs with the ritual, the power and individual identity in the meaning-making process to constitute a memorable experience.

The Religious Life Gallery

The aim of the Religious Life gallery is to show the importance and meaning of religion and religious objects in people's everyday lives across the world and across time. Visitors enter the Life Gallery from the Art Gallery and the architect has deliberately created a change of mood to which visitors responded in various ways.

Absolutely beautifully designed. The Gallery of Religious Life was phenomenal. Loved the blend of the sacred and secular! (4759)

The layout in the Religious Life section seems a little haphazard and generally negative in tone, although you have much good material. (19)

In this gallery the museum team have made a particular stand on human rights, the museum ritual has been organised to show links between people of different religions and variously produce, project or stimulate social conflict in relation to specific topics. Contemporary photographs were chosen as examples to illustrate situations involving controversial issues. One curator said, '*We wanted to express clear values which are displayed in the foyer. We condemned those acts of evil which were done in the name of religion – sectarianism, genocide and female genital mutilation*'.¹³ Visitors engaged with the photographs, a spectacle in their own right, as part of their ritual. The comments in Table 5 are examples.

¹³ Interview with Mark O'Neill, May 2003

sectarianism	<i>Also, am I wrong in feeling there is some religious bias in the section under the heading <u>Divine Rule</u> (Religious Life Gallery) where a Catholic priest is shown with a croup carrying a body on Bloody Sunday? How does the heading 'Divine Rule' relate to this incident? Would it not have been more appropriate to put in the section War and Peace with, for instance, an illustration of the Enniskillen incident? To give a balanced picture?*3779</i>
genocide	<i>Brilliant displays, well presented, though as a non-believer I see them more as brilliant works of art rather than symbols of religion. I hope that some day we will all have respect for each others beliefs, stop killing in the name of religion and live together in peace. 4159</i>
female genital mutilation (FGM)	<i>This exhibition is very inspiring and interesting. I noticed that the theme makes me reflect about religious life of other people but a lot of things make me sad, for example, the removal of the clitoris (Islam) and all these controls about sexual relations. I can't understand that. 4829</i>

Table 5 **Examples of comments relating to social issues**

Where the museum meaning and the visitor meaning did not coincide it caused visitors to question the institution's competence (3779), examine their values (4829) and outline their hopes (4159). Visitors related the museum meanings to themselves and constructed a role in which they could negotiate the meaning with the museum, conscious of other visitors. They were revealing and projecting their identity so that others could approve of them and share their values. There is a sense in which

'humans beings as social actors in their cultural worlds take for granted that they are acting in relation to others who share a history and a set of common experiences and understanding of experience'.¹⁴

In the comment regarding sectarianism the visitor begins by questioning herself , but she uses her political knowledge and social awareness to make the meaning, which is a meaning shared by the museum. In the comment of genocide the response is a personal one in the context of the wider social group of human kind. There is a consciousness of self and a conversation with self in the context of this comment. With the third issue that of female genital mutilation, the visitor is self-referential and the comment is more of a reflection and an exploration of self, in an aesthetic experience. The exploration of deep meaning associated with complex social issues has been encouraged by the ritual space and the preparation of the objects as spectacle. The comments show some of the power of the ritual and also the power of the individual to relate the meaning and take ownership of it in a process of transaction with herself. Some visitors questioned the appropriateness of the inclusion of the photographs in the display.

The photograph of female circumcision is out of place. It is not a religious practice as such - it is simply to ensure women are subjected to the will of their men. It is barbaric. It is nothing to do with coming of age and is not part of Islamic law. In the UK it is illegal (13)

In reference to people finding the 'Bloody Sunday' picture 'offensive' - all killing of that nature is 'offensive'. An area the size of Glasgow would be needed to commemorate all killings of that nature that is if people really require such a 'balanced approach'.

2.00

The aesthetic ritual has been interrupted by the social drama initiated by the museum. Visitors were self-consciously engaged in the ritual and made demands of the museum to redress the emotional disturbance caused by the inclusion of the photographs. There is a conflict between different interpretations of the situation and each visitor is involved in making meaning that will reconcile their interpretations with their life experience and interpretive communities. They use words like '*barbaric*' and

¹⁴ Kapferer, B. 1986.

'illegal' to condemn what they see. They negotiate or reject the museum meaning outright to feel better about the situation and about themselves. The words to express these values have been learned in their interpretive communities and they draw on this language and its cultural meanings in making meaning.

The different comments illustrate the repertoire of ways of responding that people have built up from previous experiences to deal with their reactions. When they communicate their feelings and thoughts, that act is a negotiation and a performance which is part of their ritual process. The negotiation is used to promote a positive outcome - a restoration of self. Visitors to the museum seem to seek to make meaning of the situation they find there, to make sense of the displays. They bring their own memories and expectations to the experience of the special event, which is the museum ritual. Sometimes the objects that they pay attention to, are ones they have come especially to see. They are well disposed to the ritual and hope to have their expectations fulfilled.

In response to my question as to why they had included the various photographs one curator said *'The photographs have been used to give a visual punch to the displays and they seem to have succeeded. There was a lot of discussion among the team but it (the practice of female genital mutilation) had been condemned by the World Health Organisation so we felt we were on firm ground'*.¹⁵ The museum team, in using this object have prepared the way for this drama. 'People prepare backstage, confront others while wearing masks and playing roles, use the stage for various routines and so on'.¹⁶ The inaugurating act of the ritual is the inclusion of the photograph in the first place. The museum has focussed attention on a particular aspect of the display, which the team recognised as potentially controversial. In this case, visitors are influenced directly but not overwhelmed by the museum script; the visitor ritual is enacted in the negotiation of their responses.

The displays in the Religious Life gallery have intentionally encouraged the visitor meaning making process as part of the museum ritual. Visitors have constructed roles and identities for themselves and negotiated with the museum to take ownership of the meanings they made relating to those issues, personal and social, which affect them and with which they connect through the values of their

¹⁵ Interview with Harry Dunlop April 2003

¹⁶ Goffman, 1958

communities. The museum has exercised its power, heightened the drama and created opportunities for meaning making to which many visitors have responded. The museum has created experiences for the visitors which they take away when they leave, and which they can use and retell in other situations.

The Scottish Gallery

This gallery on the second floor is devoted to the history and development of religion in Scotland and deals principally with the Reformation, the practices of religion supported by a variety of institutions and the expansion of diversity of religion in Scotland with the influx of different waves of immigrants principally, though not exclusively, from the South Asian continent. For example in one case display called *Protestants and Catholics* curators selected an Orange Order drum, a scold's bridle¹⁷, a communion cup and statues of St Patrick and John Knox¹⁸. Other cases showed a temperance badge, a Band of Hope pledge, and paraphernalia associated with the two main local football teams, Rangers and Celtic.¹⁹ The museum meaning was the diversity of ways in which religion touched the social lives of ordinary Glaswegians. This resulted in a confusion of spectacle – what were the most important objects which one must pay attention to? Visitors framed individual objects rather than the whole and made their own meanings. For example the Orange drum evoked a mixed response

¹⁷ A scold's bridle is a metal frame which was placed over the head of a woman as a punishment for gossip or 'loose' talk. As well as the head cage, there was a metal spike which went through her tongue and made it painful for her to speak.

¹⁸ St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland and has close associations with Catholicism in the West of Scotland and John Knox is the 16C minister and leader of the Protestant reformation in Scotland.

¹⁹ Orange Order Drum - marches are an important feature of radical Protestantism in Scotland. Bands usually lead divisions of lodges of the Grand Lodge of Scotland on their march to celebrate the victory of the English under King William III of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

The aim of the Temperance movement was to foster abstinence from alcohol. The Band of Hope was one of the largest of these movements aimed specifically at children and young people.

**In the light of the peace process taking place in Northern Ireland, surely its become inappropriate to display such blatant sectarian items as the orange drum. The so-called orange lodge is nothing more than an embarrassment to the West of Scotland and although I appreciate that this museum has to show some of the more negative sides of all religions, this does nothing to help bring people together - it can only drive them further apart and the sooner all sectarian marches are banned the better!*
(2202)

Enjoyed display - very good - did not think necessary to give so much space to orange walk. Have attitudes really changed at all? "Lets all live together in peace"
(1782)

Why not a mention of the Tercentenary of William Orange "The Glorious Revolution" of 1690 after all it re-enforced the Protestant faith of Scotland against the papal Tyranny of Rome. (3731)

These quotes reflect the values and ideals of the visitors' interpretive communities and meanings they made through the frames of those communities. The museum has asked the objects to perform a particular meaning, but visitors have been distracted from this performance by their own performance. Visitor power through the values of their community had dominated in these transactions.

Many visitors had particular expectations of this gallery, particularly its Scottish aspect. When I interviewed the curators, one said he felt that in retrospect, the members of the museum team and the public alike were most dissatisfied with this gallery, since it seemed their meaning of Scottishness in respect of beliefs were unclear.²⁰

²⁰ Interview with Harry Dunlop, April 2003.

As this exhibition is in Glasgow, Scotland, I think it is a pity that Scottish religious items are on the top floor and that other foreign religions are before it. (279)

*Interesting but thought there should be more on Scottish native religion. More Scottish stuff please! (*515)*

I miss, that medieval Scottish religion, Scottish Saints are underrepresented. (3574)
Scottish Religion - disappointing not much background regarding the Reformation or disruption of 1843 (very important to Protestant religion) or 1900 controversy. (520)

Very good museum but why are there no exhibits on ancient Celtic beliefs? This would help make the museum more "Scottish" too. (963)

There is no consensus on the meaning of 'Scottishness' and no one particular view. Some visitors defined it in opposition to others - they used words like 'foreign' and 'native religion' for example, while others identified it in terms of what was missing - information on the Reformation, Scottish saints or Celtic beliefs. Their ritual is incomplete because their aspiration of what is Scottish is not reflected in the displays. They cannot enact their idea of 'Scottish'. They seem to want more.

**What about all the standing stones all over Scotland and the islands - I'm sure one must know something about the religious meaning. - And what about the clear green marble that many west coast islanders carry for good luck - from death by fire or water. (32)*

In these comments the visitor tries to find meaning in the objects on display by referring back to her cultural frame and his identity – the social and personal image she has of Scottishness. The visitor is in transaction with herself. When they use words like 'miss' and 'disappointed', visitors describe feelings of being dissatisfied with their experience. The displays have not had the meaning or the symbolism that the visitor expected or wanted. This visitor wants the objects to perform in a particular way so that she can respond to them. The visitor is in transaction with the objects and what they symbolise, a transaction which leads to a disappointing experience. If the feelings are strong enough this experience will live in the memory

and become associated either with the museum or with the objects. The experience seems to be the whole outcome of the ritualistic search for, and transaction of, meaning through the formation or reinforcement of visitor identity in the power struggle between the museum and the visitor.

A concept like Scottishness is part of the visitor culture and cultural practice, which forms part of their identity. Associated with it are the values and ideals of the community from which the visitor comes. Transaction is a way of learning about mutual concepts which affect a way of life; it assists people to continuously construct their individual and social identities; and it is a vital constituent in the meaning making process, and contribute directly to the visitor experience.

Discussion

The series of spectacles creates different responses from visitors. In the Art gallery visitors had freedom to wander in the space and discover each object in turn. They seemed to want to be reflective and to have an expectation of some sort of transformative experience. This association of an aesthetic experience with an art gallery is part of the symbolism that Duncan has made explicit, a symbolism which she says is cultural as well as ideological, social and political.²¹ The comments show that St Mungo visitors have this experience which is part of their cultural framework. It is part of their practice in visiting an art gallery; it is one of the ways that they make meaning in an art gallery.

The Art Gallery script is tightly prescribed to enable this ritual to take place, the walls are light and the gallery spacious; the objects are placed where they can best be viewed, singly and at their best vantage point; the ambience is one of beauty. The museum team prepare the gallery so that individual visitors may make meaning associated with the religion that the symbolic objects represent. Where the ritual is not successful visitors have not been able to perform, as they would have expected. They, as audience for the spectacle, expected to participate, to perform in a certain way. As performers through the comments they express their frustration and suggest ways that the museum can improve the situation drawing on their experience in other art galleries. Their response is cultural – what they have come to expect of art

²¹ Duncan, 1995:5

galleries, social - how they expect the art gallery as representative of society to cater for their needs; aesthetic – their personal response to beauty; and political – they demand redress since the museum is part of the public amenity.

In the Religious Life galleries the ritual was designed to enact both an aesthetic and a social response. There are two distinct types of display in this gallery - those which deal with the artefacts from each of the six religions and those which address the stages of the human life cycle – birth, ceremonies associated with different life stages and death. The gallery restricts the movement of the visitor in that they may only enter at one point and walk through a prescribed route to the exit. The museum script is varied and only has a few aesthetic highlights such as the Day of the Dead skeleton, beautifully lit in a single case, and the procession of Egyptian artefacts representing the journey into the after life.

Drama in this gallery is heightened by controversy. The museum script has provided different meanings which interface with the visitor's frame. Where the visitor frame resonates with the museum meaning, the visitor ritual promotes a sense of well being. If not, the recall of latent attitudes, values and knowledge may result in a disruption of the visitors' intellectual and emotional journey. The museum script has influenced, but does not dominate, the visitor experience aesthetically, cognitively and emotionally. The comments are evidence of the disruption and the act of writing has the potential to restore visitor equilibrium. The ritualised meaning-making process is influenced by the extent of the visitors' emotional investment in the visit, their background and their life experience. The visitor's response in self-reflection takes account of the experience of other visitors and anticipates their response to her enactment of her experience.

In the Scottish Gallery aspects of Scottishness led me into a discussion of the symbolic meaning of objects within the ritual spaces of the museum. In this gallery, visitors had preconceived notions of the symbolic meaning of many of these objects and in the process of meaning making they transact meaning with the museum. This transaction affects their perception of the museum and whether or not they and their ideal and values – their identities – are truly represented. In the transaction visitors perform their own perception of abstract qualities like respect and fairness and make a judgment as to whether or not the museum is aligned with their views. This judgement is an outcome of the transaction in the performance.

Summary

In this chapter I have taken another 5% of the visitor comments to St Mungo and used the model which I proposed in the previous chapter to see if it could explain the kind of meanings that visitors made in the three galleries in the museum. I focussed particularly on the museum as a spectacle in which the museum team prepared the galleries for ritual and the displays so that visitors would pay especial attention to them. The museum as spectacle treats the visitors as audience for the meaning that the museum team have created, which the objects perform on their behalf in the hope that the visitors will share the museum meaning.

This chapter has shown that visitors do not always share the museum meaning and often focus on objects of interest to them from previous experience or those displays which have a meaning for them because of their interpretive communities. Visitors have a satisfactory experience if the ritual enables them to reaffirm or increase their self esteem and if they see themselves reflected in the performance of the objects. Their meanings are personal and collective. The meaning they make draws on their individual and social identities as visitors relate to themselves and to communities of which they are a part. The values embedded in these communities can dominate the ritual and reinforce prejudice and give the visitor an experience exactly opposite of the meaning that the museum intended. The combined power of the values, cultural practices and objects associated with these communities can be sometimes stronger than the power of the museum as an institution or the museum as a spectacle.

Visitor responses to the spectacle can be positive and transformative where the objects perform in harmony with the visitor and she has a 'flow' experience; can be disappointing where the visitor receives the performance of the museum favourably but something interferes with aesthetic ritual and the visitor is disappointed, or feels 'at odds' with themselves. Sometimes in this situation the visitor will perform to make themselves feel better and challenge the museum to reinforce their own self esteem. There are examples of visitors also using the objects and the display to reinforce the values from the community which are opposite to that of the mutual understanding and respect that the museum intends. When visitors use the museum ritual to reinforce prejudice they reinforce and strengthen their identities. This is the kind of negative experience which Dewey cautions against in his educational theory. As the museum is in the main a self-directed learning environment it is essential that the

museum team recognise the potential for the displays to be used in this 'mis-educative' way.²²

The performative model of meaning making can be used to explain and understand the responses that visitors make in St Mungo's. The whole visitor experience is a result of the meaning-making process within the ritual experience and can be described as a power play between the museum and the visitor. Transactions within the space are an integral part of the whole experience of meaning-making and would be an important addition to a model of the visitors' museum experience.

I shall explore this more fully in the next chapter when I analyse the same set of comments with respect to the other half of the spectacle/narcissism paradigm, where visitors transact with themselves as audience and performers.

²² Dewey, 1938:20

Chapter 10 Testing the Model - Identity and Power

‘Making meaning with objects can transform understanding and the stances one takes with objects, but more than that, the transaction with objects provoke reflection and reconsideration of one’s beliefs that extend one’s knowledge’.¹

Introduction

The last chapter focussed on the museum as a spectacle devised by curators for visitors to pay attention to. The museum architecture and the displays were designed to nurture social and aesthetic drama performances in which visitors drew on their repertoire of cultural frames to transact, negotiate and make meaning which created a memorable experience. In testing the model I had developed from an initial examination of the comments, I identified a fourth component of the process that visitors use to make sense of what they see and what they take away with them when they leave - that of transaction, which together with ritual, power and identity constitute the visitor experience.

In this chapter I shall look at the other half of the spectacle/narcissism paradigm where visitors perform as audience and actors. Abercrombie and Longhurst argue that spectacle and narcissism are two sides of the same coin and mutually reinforcing. ‘Both demand and produce performances. Individuals are seen as performers and see themselves in the same light. Spectacle and narcissism constitute a circuit.’² I will use my second comments sample as outlined in the last chapter again, and will shift the focus of my analysis from the ritual to the visitor identity focussing on what visitors reveal of themselves as they make meaning in the museum. My study of the visitors’ self-narrative as evidenced in the comments will enable me to focus on the links between the formation of identity and the meaning making process.

¹ Mezirow. 1991

² Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998:98

Situated identity.

In chapter 3 I introduced the idea of situated identity which I described as learning within a culture, learning its signifying systems like language, so that an individual's identity is affirmed in the practice of that culture. Stone defines identity as a 'coincidence of placements and announcements'. When a person has identity 'he is situated, that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of his participation or membership in special relations'.³

Visitors enter a museum with a variety of motivations, expectations of and interests in the museum visit. As members of the museum community with whom they feel a sense of belonging, there is a perception that the museum and the people who visit will share their ideals and values, ways of behaving that are acceptable in that environment. However each visitor brings her whole life experience with her and the interaction in the museum will draw on all aspects of her identity, personal and social, in the process of making meaning.

Social identity refers to that sense of self, which is built up over time as a person participates in social life and identifies with others – a set of real or imaginary others with whom she feels a sense of community. This can be a faith community, a certain place, a hobby or an interest group for example, which fosters a sense of belonging and self worth for the individual. Social identity is anchored in a sense of belonging and likeness, whereas personal identity emphasises a sense of separateness and distance - that which makes a person unique - and engenders a sense of individual autonomy.

Personal and social identities are forms of biographical identity that underlie, and in a sense make possible, the variety of situated identities the person assumes. It is the underlying sense of continuity and essence of self, expressed either in social identity or personal identity or both, that permits the person to become temporarily absorbed in the situated identity. The St. Mungo comments illustrate the deeply rooted emotional states embedded within social and personal identities.

³ Stone, G. 1981:188

I believe that as a Christian - being a Christian is from the heart and has nothing to do with what 'act' I've done. This is the essence of my being. It seems that religion is truly depicted here as the following of ceremonies and rituals. (1705)

**Interesting. Unfortunately all religions are not the same and all cannot be right. What we think about what is right is at the end of the day an irrelevance. It is what god thinks that counts and he thinks that there is only one way to get to him. (3306)*

The concept of situated identity is like the pivot between the visitor's social and personal identities. For example, a visitor who is a member of a faith community adopts the social identity, Christian, Jew or Muslim as part of her situated identity, as part of the way she sees herself. In St Mungo this aspect of identity is prioritised when visitors write comments such as 'A Concerned Christian (64) or 'All Muslims must'. (505) A range of visitor identities are prioritised in these comments in Table 6

Gender	<i>*I applaud the section on 'War & Peace' but I condemn the depiction of female genital mutilation as a cause for celebration. There is a world-wide involvement appraising this form of violence specifically directed against women. And what of the 'witches' buried in Scotland? (1.30)</i>
Ethnicity	<i>A beautiful museum. Why is there no Jewish article in the main room (on the 1st floor). (2007)</i>
Nationality	<i>*Now I am studying religion at my University in Japan. I enjoyed, and learn many things. Thank you. If I have another chance I want to come back here.(3301)</i>
Religious tradition	<i>I would like to mention that there are various spellings of the deities etc. Shakyamani - as a Zen Buddhist, I know him as Shaykya – muni. (4416)</i>

Race	<i>* The people of Indian continent vary in skin colour from very light to dark. The display models on the third floor are BLACK, which is perhaps not the most tactful colour.(107)</i>
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Table 6 **Range of visitor identities prioritised in thee comments.**

Visitors are announcing that part of their identity to themselves, to the museum and to other visitors. This has the dual purpose, described by Abercrombie and Longhurst, of reinforcing their own self esteem whilst displaying their identity for others and seeking reinforcement of that identity in a wider social milieu.⁴ Visitors use their roles to emphasise parts of their identity and add to their self-image and self esteem.

Tensions may arise among the different facets of membership of different groups, as visitors reconcile identities beyond those of the situation in the museum. This tension contributes to the drama and the endeavour to achieve ownership of the meaning of the displays. The comments show signs of this conflict.

Got a bit confused by all exhibits from all religions being mixed together. Enjoyed the video as an introduction but needed more specific information on the various religions through the exhibition. (4040)

To glorify Bloody Sunday is an absolute disgrace and an affront to all members of her majesty's forces who served (some died) in Northern Ireland. (4384)

I am from Australia. My Father was born in Glasgow and changed his religion from Catholic to Protestant when he arrived in Australia because he did not believe in the Church and its teachings. Fantastic Exhibition and gave me an insight. (4814))

A grim reminder of the rigours of a FP childhood in the islands. (4143)⁵

⁴ Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 95

⁵ FP is abbreviation of Free Presbyterian Church which is a sect of the Scottish Presbyterian Church which broke away at the Disruption in 1843. It has a strong following particularly in the Highlands and

These comments show visitors negotiating their identity, their images of themselves both for themselves and for other visitors including the museum persona. Visitors feel comfortable if they see the image of themselves – an autobiographical image they have created and are creating through and in response to their culture. If they cannot see their self image, their identity, then they negotiate with the museum or with themselves to make changes. These negotiations have resulted in a variety of responses such as resolving the mismatch between themselves and the museum (4040); providing them with new insight (4814); totally rejecting the museum's perception of themselves as they see it (4384); and taking the opportunity for self reflection (4143).

This negotiation of their self-image and identity is a central part of the process of visitor making meaning during the museum visit. It is also part, as I have shown in the previous chapter, of the visitor ritual. The negotiation is a sign of contest between the meanings made by the museum and the meanings made by the visitors. Visitors who are used to visiting museums and who feel confident of their membership of the community of museumgoers, may challenge the museums' authority.

Unless I have missed it, no mention has been made of spiritualism - which is one of the main recognised religions in the UK today. Lord Dowding - from Glasgow and Arthur Findlay are only 2 of Scotland's names worth a mention. (4073)

The challenges may be a demand for more information (4073) or a change of detail in the label (95) and (4183) or it may be a more complex transaction involving abstract concepts such as bias, neglect and prejudice. (4206)/(4183)

Also in this room, the coming of age part also mentions that only boys have Bar Mitzvahs. In the modern world of Judaism, young women also have Bar Mitzvahs (except in orthodoxy). (95)

I think I would like to know more about other religions but not just the ones I know about. If you find you've been negligent in presenting one religion more than another

Islands in Scotland and is noted for its rigorous implementation of tenets of the Christian Bible including observation of the Sabbath (Sunday) as a day devoted to worship of God.

- then this might be construed as prejudice. What about the Mormons for instance there seems to be a case there! 4183

Excellent, intelligent and objective. I love the juxtaposition of the images but I found the 'comments' heavily weighted toward Christian and Muslim. Where is your representation of Agnostic and atheist belief? 4206

Visitors expect their self-image to be reinforced by the authority and knowledge of the museum. The knowledge that visitors bring with them to the museum, what they know, is part of their identity and in challenging what they see as misinformation or a lack of information or interpretation they are prioritising their own self narrative. Those for whom knowledge is an important part of their self-image will prioritise that aspect of their identity within the comments.

In this section I argue that the visitor by participating in the museum ritual in a society which values museum visiting, reinforces and confirms that she shares the values of that society and is affirmed in membership of that group. I have identified from the comments, visitors using the museum situation to manifest aspects of their social and personal identities, which they prioritised within the museum situation and in interaction with the objects. They reflected on their own self-image and performed that image for themselves and others for the purpose of reinforcing their self-esteem. Tensions arose when there was conflict between the images of self and that presented by the museum, which visitors responded to in different ways. Visitors used the transaction process to decide how to respond to the museum meaning and I shall discuss this more fully in the next section.

Transaction

In chapter 6, I introduced the interactionist concepts of theorists like Mead to explain how a person's sense of self is an object created in interaction with others in concrete social situations.⁶ Many of the comments visitors used the 'I' and 'me' pronouns referring to themselves as the object of their feeling or attitudes. Visitors are in a self-conscious way, paying attention to themselves and calling on others to pay attention to them. Where there is tension the visitor negotiates towards establishing a sense of

⁶ Mead, 1934.

belonging within the museum ritual at the same time reinforcing the ideals and values of the other communities, which constitute their personal and social identities, to which the visitor belongs.

**For me - Salavador Dali - Christ on the Cross represented in the true meaning of our Lord, who looks down on the world from on high. Shows me the ultimate sacrifice Christ made for me. What can I give in return - my soul cries. (2076)*

From an academic point of view it is interesting and informative to look at other faiths - a study of religion but as Christians we feel particularly sad that within the cathedral founded by St Mungo - a Christian who preached Jesus as the way of life who said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life', there is an impression of looking at striving of other ways. (2.9)

I believe that as a Christian - being a Christian is from the heart and has nothing to do with what 'act' I've done. This is the essence of my being. It seems that religion is truly depicted here as the following of ceremonies and rituals. (1705)

Visitors as audience to themselves, try to find meaning in the objects on display by referring back to their cultural frame and identity – the social and personal images they have of themselves. These comments all refer to Christianity and draw on the visitors' images of that concept. They transact their understanding of 'Christian' with that performed by the museum in a similar way to the transaction discussed in relation to Scottishness in the the last chapter. Here the abstract quality is being Christian, which is an integral part of the personal identity of these visitors and which they have used to make meaning.

In (2076) the transaction has been affirming and transformative of the visitor's identity as a Christian. The other visitors in the museum are almost irrelevant as she reveals the extent of her response to her faith. She has performed for herself and in that performance has revealed part of herself to others. The transaction with the painting has enabled her to use her imagination and reflect back positive self-images which have resulted in a liminal experience of deep meaning associated with ritual.⁷ The transaction exists at that moment in time, reinforces her concept of being Christian

⁷ Turner, 1984.

and creates a symbolic association with the painting, which is an important outcome of the meaning-making process. The transaction has contributed to a memorable experience.

Comments (2.90) and (1705) show visitors trying to make sense of their understanding of Christianity and that which they perceive in the displays. There is a mismatch which results in a feeling of personal sadness in one comment (2.90), and in another (1705) the visitor reasserts her belief with vigour - *'This is the essence of my being'* - as if countering a personal attack. These feelings, arising from the transaction, become associated with the museum visit and form part of the museum visitor narrative on leaving the museum. The success of the transaction is a measure of the engagement of the visitor with the museum and the displays, the strength of the connections they make and the confidence they feel in their own beliefs and values to seize opportunities to present, make and reflect upon their own self-image. In the transaction, they reinforce their identity or constitute a new identity, add to their own self-narrative and establish a relationship with that situation which affects how they act in subsequent similar situations. .

In other comments below visitors compared their views and understanding of tolerance and compassion against the museum's portrayal of these qualities. This comparison related not only to their understanding of the concept but also of themselves as people with these qualities.

Glasgow must be a town of extremely tolerant people. It wouldn't be possible to open such a museum in many places in the world. We admire how tolerant you are and how you teach to live different religions together. Thank you. (4806)*

**Wonderful and Compassionate exhibition which offer vivid insights in to a number of influential world religions. While one museum cannot cover all the variants within these faiths, this museum succeeds brilliantly at capturing a feeling of the sense of our search for spiritual knowledge and meaning. (1652)*

Very well done giving an outline on some religions. One observation I've made with most religions, God according to religions is a perfect being - Question to all religions - how is it possible for a perfect being to make such imperfect beings as human beings. A section for Agnostics would be welcome. (2097)*

These visitors act beyond the immediate situation, drawing on their whole life experience and make judgements and ask questions with wider implications. Their own self-esteem is acknowledged by their own appraisal or performance. These transactions enable a realisation of meaning and are integral with the meaning-making process.

Visitors transact in different ways with the objects in the museum, which I shall illustrate using the comments.

Engagement

These examples show visitors in performance engaging with the museum as a person.

I was very surprised with the museum as I thought it would be very boring, something only adults or holy people would enjoy (I am neither). I went never the less and found it quite interesting and wasn't bored at all. 956

**Could we have a copy of the "Jeely Piece Song". Is it available? We have thoroughly enjoyed this superb presentation. 976*

I think it is very interesting because it educates children about faith. Also I learned a lot which I've been-forgetting about Holy Communion. 1333

I stand open to correction on this, but I thought Quakers do not celebrate communion (see last paragraph) of banner to left of "Lord let Glasgow Flourish"1987

In each of these comments the museum is being addressed as a person with whom visitors engage. They recognise, criticise, or congratulate the museum on their practice – labelling (1987), selection of content (976); purposes of the displays (1333) and the overall impression of the museum environment (856), using their knowledge of museum practices constructed from previous visits or images built up of museum visiting. This gave them a competence which they used to evaluate and make a judgement on St Mungo's.

Sometimes this competence can result in too narrow a view of what museums can or cannot do. For example those visitors who criticised the move of the Dali painting from Kelvingrove to St Mungo's.

The Dali painting looked better in the Kelvingrove Museum - it had a more dramatic impact there! Put it back where it belongs please. 4179

Very good but the Salvador Dali cross picture is spoilt in this museum. The walls are too modern and it has lost its magic. Looked much better in the Art Gallery 3912

These visitors had a perception of the painting being associated with one museum, not how about the painting could have different meanings in a different place. The association was so strong that it seemed to prevent them from looking at the painting in a new way, making new meaning. Their museum practice had become an obstacle to meaning making by constraining visitors in membership of an older identity rather than allowing them to exert personal power to make new meaning of the object. These visitors had knowledge of the painting in another place; they knew what it had looked like. As part of the museum community in Glasgow this knowledge was part of them and had currency for them. The move to another place had not been negotiated with them individually and some of them resented the change. They had invested part of themselves in the old hanging which had become part of their biography, and they were not prepared to change and reinvest in the new place. The move affected them personally. For the time being they are marginalised by the museum since, for as long as the painting remains in St Mungo's, their views are not taken into account and their identity is not validated, unless they make the change themselves in a transaction of new meaning.

Where visitors have engaged with the museum ritual they exert their own power to make meaning and take ownership of that meaning. As well as reinforcement of their self-image, there is a process of active engagement, a performance, in the ritual to make meaning. The meaning making process takes into account not just the museum as an environment, but the museum as a powerful institution with symbolic power with which the visitor actively negotiates or rejects. Visitors engage with the museum and constitute their identity as they make meaning.

Imagination

Some of the comments below illustrate visitors using their imagination to identify with or negotiate with the museum.

Very nice Karma within the building. Does a good job of dispelling myths and suspicion. I think having representatives from different churches within the museum staggered over the year would take us another step towards unification. (1888)

**I have been truly surprised and delightedly pleased by this exhibition! Your attempt to increase tolerance and understanding for persons of different colour and religion is wonderful. In view of our past 3 weeks visiting here in Scotland and witnessing the past cruel religious problems of the past - ditto for So much in Europe as well as, still, in parts of the USA. 3750*

Interesting display on all religions. I am a Christian. One statement I find interesting is 'All other religions are striving to meet God, in Christianity god has come down to meet us, the human race.' There is no need to strive - God is a God of love. (60)

These visitors display many of their inner feelings, their enthusiasm, their values and ideals. Although the museum is a public space they feel comfortable enough and supported enough in that environment to perform aspects of their personal identities – their attitudes to race and religion for instance and their belief in a personal God.

Where the museum does not enable the visitor to use their imagination, there may be a barrier to meaning-making. This visitor (4390) is alienated by the interpretation and the connections that the museum has made and cannot use her imagination in a meaningful way – she cannot relate the museum's meaning to her own meaning.

Why the inclusion of the two contemporary photographs of 'man's inhumanity to man' is the 'Belsen' and 'Bloody Sunday' photographs? The first is a subject that could fill all the museums in Glasgow with photographs. The second is placed so far out of context with the 'troubles' as to be meaningless - and to view the visit of being thought one balanced propaganda. (4390)

In using their imagination, visitors identify or negotiate with the museum and reinforce or challenge their membership of the museum community and its values. They judge whether the museum values concur or not with their own. They perform their identities negotiating all the time with how they will be seen by the other visitors and by the museum. They are acting as audience for the objects and performers for themselves and other people in the museum, extending the experience to make meaning from the wider stage of their life.

The comments are an exercise of power by the visitor to affect or control some of the museum ritual. As they exercise that power they reaffirm themselves and endorse their self-esteem. The power of the museum as an institution is recognised in the comment below in which the visitor opposes the museum message and warns other visitors against it. The visitor perceives the power of the museum message and tries to counteract it.

Visitors be warned. Don't buy the sentimental falsehood promoted here that all religions are basically the same. Not so, look at their teachings, not their baubles and knick-knacks, Peace. (4744). (Underlining in the original text)

In exerting their imagination visitors may reinforce positive images of themselves, evaluate negative images, see connections with the past and possibilities for the future. They are responsive to the museum ritual and feel comfortable and confident in the meaning-making process. In using their imagination visitors extrapolate from their own experience and create images of the world, of themselves, the roles they play and the meaning they make.

Alignment

Visitors align themselves with the museum messages according as to whether or not they see themselves portrayed in the displays. In aligning with the museum they see how they can contribute to the broader enterprises of the museum and coordinate their activities to fit within the museum structure.

While the selection of objects is impressive - the text only deals in generalities - often conflating different religious groups and being systems in addition the exhibit is

dogmatic as it never discusses atheism agnosticism, paganism or non-belief groups. The power of art is in its ability to represent and advocate for all perspectives. (4113)

** Very unique museum - one which informs and makes you think. I believe unshakeably that God created the world and my faith has taught me that true 'joy' is serving Jesus, others and yourself. He also has made foolish the wisdom (or science) of the world. Would you give your son to die for the likes of us? 4033*

The former visitor is not aligned with the intended museum meaning and remains on the periphery of the ritual while the latter visitor is in a state of 'flow'.

In these different modes of performance, visitors seek to identify themselves in the displays and when this does not happen, they negotiate a compromise to modify the museum meaning; alternatively they may distance themselves from the museum either by seeming to act on the periphery of the group, or by aligning themselves against the museum meaning. In deciding their response to the museum script visitors exercise their power.

Summary

In this chapter I have focused on the visitor identity. I have recognised that the visit to a museum is a particular situation in which the visitor has a role to play and where the values and ideals of her community raise particular expectations and feelings of the situation. Situated identities of visitors have to be reconciled with other aspects of their identities – social and personal, since, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the meaning-making process is affected by their whole life experience, during which, in interaction, they have formed personal and social identities which incorporate the values, ideals and beliefs by which they live.

When visitors negotiate with the museum through their interpretive communities, engage with the museum, use their imagination, align with or alienate themselves from the museum, they are exercising individual power to make and take ownership of the meaning. In some cases, this may be the same meaning as the museum intended. In others, visitors will make their own meaning depending on how they see themselves mirrored in the displays. When visitors' identities are affirmed by the

museum, they have a sense of well-being, where there is conflict; it may result in a negotiation with or an alienation from the museum group.

The performance by the visitors enacted in these comments is not only a description of how the visitor perceives, thinks and feels it also constitutes the meaning that the visitor makes. The visitor is constructing her self-narrative which will become part of her personal narrative, her biography of the self. She will be able to tell the story to other people after the visit.

Finally, I have shown the importance of the transaction between the object, the visitor and her own self image within the symbolic museum environment which results in an enactment of meaning and an outcome of the meaning-making process. In defining these outcomes as a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging, an ability to communicate and contribute as a result of an identity building process, I am describing a potential new partnership in which museums encourage their visitors as partners in learning, within a specific culture and historical practice, to engage in activities and make meaning in transaction with the objects, the museum and with themselves.

A new model

In Chapter 8 I developed a model of meaning-making from a consideration of role and performance theory. This model presented the components of meaning-making as identity formation, ritual and power. I have now tested this model using a different sample data which led me to identify a fourth component of the meaning making process which encompasses the visitor experience - the transaction between the visitor and the museum which happens at the moment of making the meaning and may enact change. My model now becomes

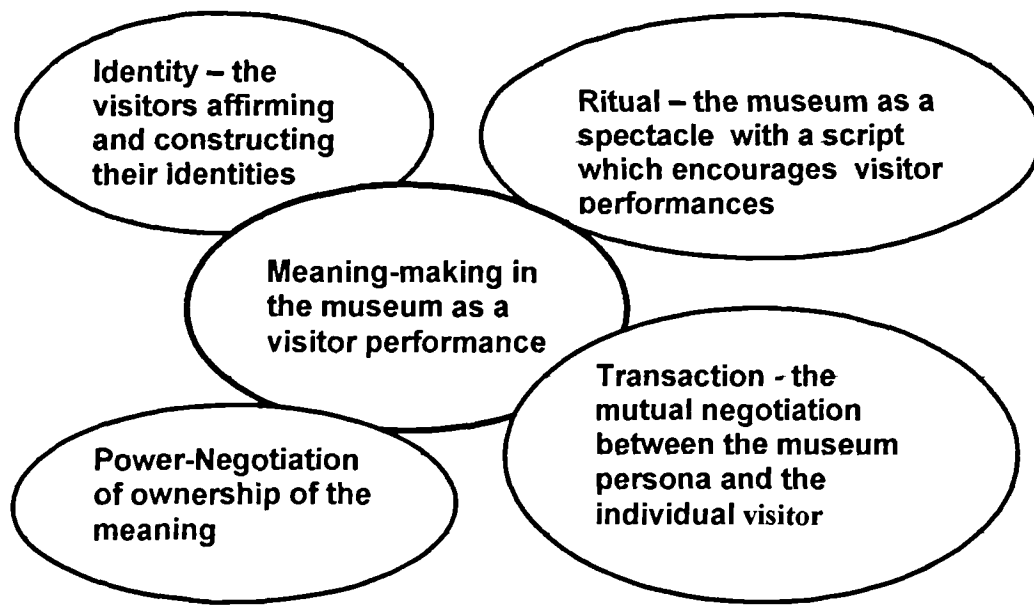


Figure 8 A Model of the Visitor Experience

While the components are diagrammatically shown as equal in size, each in turn may dominate depending on the museum ritual and the degree to which the visitor interacts with it. Each component can change in size, become more or less important in the meaning-making process depending on the museum practice and the visitors' perception of that practice.

I have used the visitor comments to support my premise that in a museum the visitor performs the meaning-making process as part of the ritual which consists of the visitor constructing, renewing or affirming his or her identity within the museum space, triggered by the museum script which is carried by the objects, architecture and text on display. The meaning-making process is a power struggle for ownership of meaning, and abstract concepts such as values and ideals may be constituted in the transaction between the museum and the visitor.

‘The realm of meaning making is not always a comfortable one. This discomfort provides the impetus for drama where we construct new forms and negotiate new meanings’.¹

Introduction

Meaning-making is a complex idea with many as yet unresolved issues. It is similar to, but not the same as learning, though they are moving towards each other as both are redefined and re-examined. I have reviewed different models of museum learning principally that of Worts, and argued that they either do not take fully into account the powerful and symbolic role of the museum environment or have become too unwieldy to be practical. I have also contested the model described by Duncan which overemphasises the political role of the museum and presents the visitor as passive in the museum space.²

My model acknowledges the position and the authority of the museum’s role in society and focuses on the power of visitors within the museum environment to draw upon the knowledge, values and ideals of their own life experience and use the specially prepared displays as a resource to make and take ownership of their meaning. Their meaning-making process embraces all the cognitive and affective effects of the museum experience that make it memorable and that establish a pattern for the individual’s subsequent practice.

My model recognises the validity and integrity of the meanings made by all visitors who engage with the museum and presents those factors that must be taken into account in order to encourage meanings that are rich and varied and contribute to the positive growth of the individual. This positive growth, I submit, is museum learning and it may encompass intellectual, emotional, psychological and moral growth.

I have developed this model from performance and other theories and I use a drama metaphor to encapsulate the visitor experience. In my model the museum prepares the objects to perform symbolically for visitors who perceive them through their own

¹ Bruner, 1986.

² Duncan, 1995

cultural frames, engage with them intellectually, emotionally and psychologically, use them to construct or reinforce their identities and enact transactions with them, depending on how confident and comfortable they feel within the museum space. In my model the meaning-making process is an individual process that is influenced, but not wholly determined by the museum ritual.

Visitors' responses to the objects will be affected by their perceptions and expectations of the museum and the museum visit. Visitors' performance may be conscious or subconscious and can have positive or negative affects on how they subsequently view the museum and similar objects. At best the museum drama, a product of the whole staged performance scripted by curators, educators, designers and architects, may enable visitors to experience powerful meanings if their emotions and imagination are engaged, leading them to construct new knowledge, new identities and new experiences which lead to growth. At worst, visitors may have negative experiences which alienate them from the museum and lead them to construct knowledge and experiences which adversely affect whether or not they visit museums in the future.³

In my research I investigated the visitor meaning-making process in one particular museum, the St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow. I interviewed two curators and the architect from which I was able to establish the aims of the museum, the project team's understanding of the social and political role of the museum within the City of Glasgow and also the display strategies that were used to communicate the museum message of 'tolerance and equal respect for people of all religions and of none'.⁴

The decision to make use of a drama metaphor came from a study of comments collected from visitors to St Mungo's during the period from its opening in 1993 to 1997, which I used as evidence of visitor meaning-making. From a preliminary 5% sample of the comments I built an initial model, which I reviewed against another further 5% sample of the comments.

³ Dewey identified this type of experience as 'miseducative'. Any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. Dewey, 1938;25

⁴ Part of St Mungo's Museum vision statement displayed in the foyer of the museum.

I found that in many instances visitors were writing to the museum as if it were a person, a phenomenon already highlighted by other researchers.⁵ Not only did the visitor give the museum a role, but also they themselves adopted different roles which were illustrated in the comments – learner, believer, atheist and historian for instance. Within these roles visitors wrote about how they felt, gave opinions on faith related and other topics, agreed or disagreed with the museum and had a variety of experiences which they described in some detail. This insight led me to examine role and drama theory to see if it would lead to a new perspective on the museum visit and the meaning-making process.

Applying the drama metaphor to the research enabled me to use a different language to describe the visitor experience. The aim and messages within the galleries become the script; the museum team, consisting of curators, designer and architect – are the producers and directors of the drama spectacle; the visitors and the objects are the actors and sometimes the audience; what they do, mentally and physically, can be described as their performance and the galleries are the stage or the scenarios in which the performance is enacted.

Visitors seemed to respond to the museum environment as if it were a ritual space. They recognised the special nature of the space, used expressions like awe and wonder and actively reflected and used their imagination in making meaning in the galleries. The ritual nature of the space was a metaphorical way of explaining the symbolic power of the museum within society and the power and authority with which its interpretations are imbued. The displays and the architecture work as part of a larger whole, as part of a dynamic dramatic environment in which people perform meaning for other visitors and/or for themselves in response to the symbolic messages of the museum and of the objects within it. 'This ensemble (is) like a script or score - or better, a dramatic field'.⁶

I identified instances of aesthetic and social drama within the different galleries depending on how they had been scripted. The comments show that the St Mungo museum visit is neither exclusively aesthetic nor social drama, but a combination of social drama within aesthetic spaces. The three galleries have been scripted to enable different performances.

⁵ McManus, 1989

⁶ Duncan, 1995:1

In the Art gallery the aesthetics underscore the symbolism of the objects and the symbolic power of the museum environment and emphasise the ritualistic nature of the spaces. This has encouraged many visitors to be reflective about the objects, about themselves and to use their imagination.

The Religious Life gallery which contained many of the symbolic objects associated both with individual beliefs and also with the human life cycle also encouraged visitors to be self reflective and to make associations and connections with themselves and their own identities. Some visitors responded vigorously to the museum stance on many ethical issues.

The drama continued in the Scottish gallery where the display arrangement of cases round a wall and the visitors in the centre with central seating, reinforced the social nature of the drama. Many visitors to this gallery prioritised issues of national and ethnic identity and their comments were evidence of their transaction with the museum through which they evaluated whether or not the displays were fair or biased or aligned with their own perspective on fairness and bias.

In the dynamic, dramatic environment of the visit, visitors are mentally actors interacting within the galleries, making personal connections and relating the objects to their life experience. The meaning-making processes are framed by the visitors' expectations, ideals and values from their life experience and meaning is made in the interface of this with the museum frame.

Visitors move within the spaces sometimes as performers, sometimes as audience for themselves and for other visitors. In St Mungo's, when a visitor decides to write a comment and pin it up, she moves from the periphery of the cast to centre stage, and other visitors become her audience. This public act changes the way that the visitor continues with the visit because consciously or subconsciously she is aware that other visitors will see what she has written.

The act of writing has changed the nature of the visit – she has potentially influenced other visitors and has been influenced by this act – she has performed within the space and it has affected her reality. This practice, that of writing and posting the comment has been the outward sign of the inner enactment of her identity; it is a semiotic and significant practice. This overt act of meaning-making is the external

evidence of an internal activity in which the visitor was making meaning through identifying or negotiating and evaluating images of herself within the museum space and measuring these images against those portrayed by the museum and by other visitors.

The comments provided evidence of visitors using the displays to question or endorse their cultural values. These values form part of their identity, and the museum provided the opportunity for them to reinforce their practice of identity, of who they were.⁷ Visitors who were not comfortable in the galleries either because of what the museum was saying either symbolically through the arrangements of objects or actually in the label text, responded with varying degrees of emphasis, depending on the extent to which they perceived their own identity and self esteem was threatened. Angry or disappointed comments, as well as congratulatory and positive ones, were evidence of the struggle for power for ownership of the meaning of the object and the displays, and of the extent to which the visitor meaning-making process is an internal and personal process in which the visitors' identities are constituted and reinforced in their performance.

Using drama and role theory and with evidence from the interviews and the comments I have been able to build up a model with four interdependent components which together throw a valuable light on the meaning-making process in the museum. The components are transaction, ritual, identity and power.

Meaning-making as transaction

The first strand in my model is that of transaction. Bruner defines culture as 'the way of life and thought that we construct, negotiate, institutionalise, and finallyend up calling reality to comfort ourselves'.⁸ Bruner argues that the cognitive revolution, with its emphasis on the mind as an information processor, has led researchers away from the deeper objective of understanding the mind as a creator of meanings. He argues that only by breaking out of the limitations imposed by this, can one grasp the special interaction through which mind both constitutes and is constituted by culture.

⁷ Butler, 1999.

⁸ Bruner, 1990:11

In the St Mungo comments individual visitors spoke of different abstract concepts like 'trust' for example between the museum and themselves. When the visitors discovered that they disagreed with the museum in one aspect of the display, they began to question if they could trust the museum message in general. Where the visitor feels pride in what the museum is doing, then she shares that pride with the museum. These abstract values constructed in culture, are evaluated and reconstructed or reinforced in the transaction between individuals, in this case between the visitor and the museum. This transaction is part of the meaning-making process, and the understanding of these values and abstract ideas exist only in the mutual performance between them.

In this performance, the museum is also changed through interaction with the visitor. For example the perception of the museum as an authoritative institution may be diminished or enhanced by the transactions described above. My model proposes not only the possibility of change in the visitor but also the visitor in transaction may act on the museum to produce change.

All four components of the model are interdependent, transaction is 'meaning-making as assessing and evaluating'.

Meaning-making as ritual

The second perspective looks at the museum visit as a ritual performance with specific outcomes. St Mungo's, like many museums, has been built so that its architecture symbolises a separation between the outside world and the world of the museum. This marks the museum out as a special place. Visitors seem to endorse this quality as they move or journey through the museum. The narrative or the script for that journey has been written by the museum team, who themselves have been involved in a meaning-making process to decide what to display, how to display it and what to say about it to convey its meaning. Society has given curators the authority to choose the script, to choose the objects, which together with the labels, cases, lighting and architecture, form the grammar of the script language. My interviews with the curators and the architect revealed their intended use of that language in St Mungo's. The enactment of the text is the performance of the ritual.

The visitor ritual is fragmented. If, consciously or unconsciously, a visitor does not assess a display to be interesting then they move on. Just as in a play whose rhythm takes the audience through various emotional and cognitive stages, visitor responses to the exhibitions in St Mungo's revolved round particular displays where the attention was focused either by the script or by their own interest. Visitors wrote of a sense of well being, of belonging, of affirmation, of wholeness in some cases, while in other comments there was evidence of frustration, of unfulfilled expectations, of being alienated or of complete rejection.

Not all visitors had a positive experience. This phenomenon of a 'mis-educative' or negative experience described by Dewey, has the effect of arresting growth or distorting further growth.⁹ It may produce exactly the opposite effect to that which the museum is trying to achieve, so much so that the possibilities of that visitor having richer experiential encounters in the future are restricted.

The curators in St Mungo's took the opportunity within the displays to pace the visitor encounter. Certain issue-based photographs were deliberately placed so as to reinforce the museum meaning and encourage response. The comments show the success of the tactic. Visitors did pay attention to them. All good drama has highs and lows and has rhythm. In pacing some of the displays, curators were able to draw attention to certain issues and to use the ritual space to support their meaning – a high risk strategy, which did not always succeed.

The recognition of the dramaturgical and ritual nature of the meaning-making process endorses the potential of the museum visit to have a profound effect on the whole individual. The museum is a special place, displays laid out as spectacle encourage visitors to engage with the displays, use their imagination, find out about themselves, examine their ideals and values and reflect on how they relate to other people and other cultures. Visitor performances will be successful if visitors feel they belong in the museum and can make connections through the displays to their life experience. The museum experience is not just a learning experience in the cognitive sense; it has the potential to be a more holistic experience which includes the making of intellectual, social, emotional, cognitive and ethical memories.

⁹ Dewey, 1938:25

The ritual component of the model challenges museum professionals to use the museum ritual imaginatively and creatively to enrich the spectacle and encourage those visitor performances which produce memorable meanings. The ritual element of the model is 'meaning-making as enacting'.

Meaning-making as identity formation

The museum is a powerful symbolic cultural institution which ranks alongside educational establishments in representing the cultural modes, knowledges and behaviours of people in that society and uses this frame to display objects of meaning. Visitor surveys, representations in the media, government papers and interviews with visitors provide evidence of the close connection in people's minds of the museums with education – it is part of the museum identity. The practices of the museum, which enact meaning and symbolise authority, reinforce that identity as do visitors when they pay attention to the museum meaning and engage with the ritual.

The identity of museums has been built up by signifying practices over the past two hundred years and 'it is only within the practice of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible'.¹⁰ If museums are to change, develop their audiences and enter into dialogue with them, then they must address the performative role of museum practice. Recognition of performativity provides an underlying principle with which to understand the museum meaning-making process and the role of identity within it.

I am using the word identity as the sociologist Wenger uses it, referring to it as a dynamic entity. Identity exists, not as an object in and of itself, but in the constant work of negotiating oneself, from birth to death. Identity in this sense is defined socially from the communities of which visitors are members like family, faith and interest groups; historically from the experiences they have had in the past and those they would like to have; and culturally from the experiences, behaviour and mores acceptable to the society in which they live.¹¹

The information that visitors acquire, the feelings they have, are part of the experience in which they reaffirm or re-negotiate themselves, their identity. During

¹⁰ Butler, J. 1999

¹¹ Wenger 1998 :148

their visit, St Mungo visitors are actively negotiating their identity as they move through the museum – they are performing their identity, they are making meaning.¹² Meaning-making is a self constituting act.

Performance of identity by both visitors and the museum is the third element in my meaning-making model. Identity is socially constructed within a set of signifying practices of which museum visiting is one. Within the traditional museum only the performance of certain identities has been possible; by recognising the importance of the museum in the practice of identity formation whole other discourses become possible. Identity is the third component of my model and is 'meaning-making as becoming'.

Meaning-making as 'power play'

The fourth interrelated strand in my model deals with the extent to which the visitor adopts the museum script and the dialogic nature of the 'power play' between the individual and the museum and between the individual and him or her self in the construction of identity. Writers like Duncan stress the power of the museum's role in society as part of the established dominant voice in the society. The comments showed that St Mungo visitors were aware of the political role of the museum script and in many cases, were willing to celebrate or challenge it.

The symbolic power of the museum is not only associated with the institution itself but also with the objects and the expertise and knowledge of the curators. Museums have exercised responsibility in the selection and interpretation of those objects which they identify as most important, socially, historically, aesthetically, economically or politically and whose stories they legitimise. These objects are also objects which have significance in the wider culture and with whom many visitors have developed an association and meaning in their life experience. The museum visit provides an opportunity for visitors to make connections with their life experience and to have their ownership of meaning(s) and hence have their self-esteem, endorsed and enhanced. The data illustrates the visitor experience when there is concord and when there is conflict.

¹² Silverman, L :1990

Visitors prioritised certain ideological aspects of their interpretive frame and created boundaries within which they could make meaning. The power of the visitor frame in many instances was the determinant in the meaning-making. If the values or symbolism of the museum meaning was perceived to oppose visitors' values then there was little negotiation; where they were similar, reinforcement or even transformation could result.

Visitors in performative mode struggled to take ownership of the meaning. The conflict or concord was of ideas, of values and of ideals. It related to them personally, affected their individual and collective identities and how they presented themselves to others. In congratulating or challenging the museum they acted on behalf of themselves and other people like them. Their performance was one of solidarity with their interpretive practice.

'Power play' has to be recognised by museums as a strong and powerful part of the meaning-making process, which impinges on how people see themselves, other people and the museum and affects the outcomes of the museum visit. The fourth element of the model can be seen as 'meaning making as negotiating'.

The 'TRIP' model of the museum experience.

My model is a model of the museum experience and describes the meaning making process of the whole museum, linking curatorial and visitor experiences in a performative and active process of meaning making. The four components themselves are active and performative - transaction as evaluating and assessing; ritual as enacting; identity as becoming and power play as negotiating.

My 'TRIP' model draws from sociology, psychology, particularly educational psychology, anthropology and performance studies. I have incorporated the interactionist approach of Dewey and Mead where learning is experiential, self referential and takes place in the mind as a process of growth of the individual, and the social construction of learning where the meaning is made in and through the culture into which one is born, as part of a shared experience. The four components – transaction, ritual, identity and power are interrelated and constitute a meaning-making process which I believe can provide a theoretical underpinning for changing educational practice in museums.

The 'TRIP' model is not just applicable to the case study museum but contributes to the general debate about meaning-making in museums. The current discussion among museum professionals concerning the practical applications of the theories associated with meaning-making was highlighted in sessions at the American Association of Museums Conference first in 2000 and again in 2001.

Kathy McLean, the Director of Public Programmes and Exhibitions from the Exploratorium in San Francisco, a strong advocate of museums as information providers, and a meaning-making sceptic, summed up her understanding of meaning-making thus far. She said that supporters of meaning-making say that it *'encourages us to explore the notion of the visitor's experience of the exhibition as a powerful vehicle for exploring meaning; that meaning-making highlights the difference between the cultural transmission notion of teaching and learning and the highly individualised process of interpretation, a two-way interaction in which meaning is constructed anew each time.'*¹³

McLean goes on to say that discussions on meaning-making may be an antidote to the simplistic learning goals that are established for some exhibitions. In American museums, work on the evaluation of the success of exhibits from the work of Screven in the Smithsonian Institute through to contemporary research by Borun in Philadelphia has focussed and tried to measure cognitive outcomes of museum visits.¹⁴ Their methodologies are becoming increasingly sophisticated and involve complex measurements which appear objective, but are essentially subjective.

For example, Falk in the application of his model to the effect of visitor agendas on museum learning has introduced Personal Meaning Mapping. This methodology strives to show that visitor's cognitive meaning-making maps are changed in the encounter with displays.¹⁵ It utilises a mind mapping process whereby individual

¹³ AAM 2001

¹⁴ Screven, 1974 and Borun, 1998

¹⁵ Falk, J. Moussouri, T and Coulson, D, 1998:107-120

'Personal Meaning Mapping (PMM) is not a test; it does not assume or require that an individual produce a right or a wrong answer. Instead PMM starts from an individual's ideas and perceptions about a concept or experience and measure differences in the quantity, breadth, depth and quality of responses either before or after an experience. PMM measures learning as a result of a particular concept or

visitors are questioned before and after visiting the exhibition and mind maps are constructed about a topic, using visitor responses. The researchers agree the definition of change over four fields – extent of vocabulary, concepts, depth of knowledge and feelings and mastery of the topic - and calculate to two decimal places the percentage change over these criteria.¹⁶

Such complexity in the task of evaluation seems to me to defeat its purpose. It is masking the judgements made in the initial definition of the concepts and in their subsequent use under the guise of an objective or mathematical process. It is based on an essentially positivist philosophy which, while acknowledging the visitor as active within the space, does not acknowledge the meaning that the visitor makes nor treat it with equal status to the meaning which the museum intends.

If museums continue to test firm learning outcomes as if there was a fixed curriculum they will continue to make more and more didactic exhibits which are not using the visitor experience as partners in the learning. Dewey emphasised 'the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process.'¹⁷ I believe any understanding of the visitor role in the meaning-making process has to be underpinned by an interpretivist philosophy founded on experiential learning, which is the basis for my model.

Using my model to explain experiences in other museums.

At the AAM conference in 2001, McLean went on to describe her reaction to two recent exhibits which she had visited. The first was the *Armani* show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which she visited during the holidays when it was very crowded. She described gorgeous floor to ceiling apparel, mood lighting, amazing fabrics but no information other than small labels which, as there was no chronology in the lay out, was confusing and difficult to contextualise. She described the meaning of the museum as a celebration of Western culture values and the cult of the celebrity which presented her with a dilemma. Although she hated the idea of the

experience along a series of semi independent dimensions; scoring follows prescribed valid and reliable rubrics for each of the dimensions.'

¹⁶ PMM is described in more detail in Chapter 5 where it was used in an evaluation of *Visitors' Understandings of Transport* at London's Transport Museum in 2001.

¹⁷ Dewey, 1938: 25

exhibition, in particular the fifteen million dollar sponsorship by Armani, as it went counter to her own identity and values, Kathy said she had a great time and came out of the museum with a feeling of well being and belonging.

The other exhibition *Without sanctuary - Lynching Photography in America* she found in a forty-year-old style of history exhibition - small photographs on walls, labels text in small type beside each photograph, a few dark brown objects in cases. As she went round she became distressed by the images and looking up caught the glance of another visitor - an African American woman - whose eyes she described as seeming 'to sear right through her'. Feeling uncomfortable she made her way to the comments book to which Afro-America high school students had spent some time contributing. One comment caught her eye. '*Having people look at these photos is like doing the lynching all over again*'. She finishes her narrative – '*No longer a museum visitor but instead a voyeur I had to leave*'.¹⁸

McLean offered the assembled museum professionals no explanation for her different responses. I believe that viewing McLean as performing in a transactional meaning-making mode gives an insight into her experience and supports my model of the meaning-making process. In the first Armani exhibition, even with her intellectual reservations about the huge commercial funding, she felt comfortable, knew she belonged and she had a positive and identity affirming experience. The situation within the exhibition was not threatening to her either as an individual or as a member of the museum profession. She had the power to counteract the commercial aspects of exhibition making in her own museum and in her own network. She could appreciate the aesthetic ritual of the exhibition and enjoy the company of peers, other visitors and the occasion. The exhibition reinforced her identity as a white professional American female with the power of choice. In the model of meaning-making in this event the ritual component is dominant along with that of identity.

In the second exhibition, her role in the museum drama changed from museum visitor and even museum professional to one where she felt excluded. The meaning she made was that she no longer belonged. She had become alienated in a performative process— not by the objects and the actions of other people in the museum but by the meaning she made of them, the transaction she had made with the photos and other

¹⁸ AAM 2001

people in the museum, the drama she had enacted. The boundary between herself and the Afro American woman was not 'a boundary at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that for which something begins its presencing'.¹⁹

The transaction component of the meaning-making model dominated in this case along with the power of the museum as an institution. She felt identified by the museum and by other people in the museum with the racial hatred which had perpetrated the lynching and other atrocities in the photographs. Her alienation was produced performatively within the engagement, she felt powerless and she excluded herself from the ritual. In this museum the challenge for Kathy was to move beyond the boundary of race, to move into the liminal space which the exhibition created, to cross the boundary of her cultural frame.

My meaning-making model based on a performative society can explain the meanings made by this same person in the two exhibitions in the USA as well as the many comments to visitors to the St Mungo Museum in Glasgow. My case study museum deals with belief systems which in today's world are often the source of conflict, misunderstanding, war and political instability. The comments data showed that, like Kathy, many of the visitors were unable to challenge the boundaries that were set for them particularly by their allegiance to one religion. Their own frame restricted the discourse available to them to make meaning.

The task of museums is to continue to open up the range of discourses and give visitors an opportunity to use their boundaries as bridges across which they may explore new understanding and tolerances. The application of my model will complement and accelerate the re-examination, already begun, of the educational role of museums in today's society.

A new pedagogy for museums.

Museums today are under scrutiny. In the United Kingdom, as Government and the museums' professional body the Museums Association among others call for change, more public focus and best value, powerful voices such as those in the Institute of

¹⁹ Heidegger: 1927/1976

Ideas are being raised against such change. 'Museums should stick to what they do best – to preserve, display, study and where possible collect the treasures of civilisation and of nature. They are not fit to do anything else'.²⁰ My premise is that they are. In a re-examination of their educational function museums can incorporate much of value in their original ethos and embrace the creativity and innovation of a future role.

I have constructed a theory of the museum visit, which examines the museum visitor experience and uses the metaphor of performance to describe the components which constitute that experience – transaction, ritual, identity and power ('TRIP'). The outcome of the museum meaning making process – evaluating and assessing, enacting, becoming and negotiating - is performative, not just for the curator and the museum team but for visitor and curator alike. Each contributes to the process. The meaning made by both at a conscious or unconscious level becomes part of her or his future meaning-making repertoire, part of her of his self.

I believe that this understanding of the reciprocal nature of meaning making as well as the identification of the factors which contribute to the process presented in the 'TRIP' model, encourage a fundamental shift in the way people see the educational function of museum. Only by adopting a museum pedagogy which recognises the way that the practice of drama, ritual and power construct and offer human beings particular views of themselves and the world can museums truly fulfill their potential. These views are always implicated in the discourse and the relations of ethics and power. To invoke the importance of pedagogy is to raise questions not just about how visitors make meaning but also about how curators construct the ideological and political positions from which they speak. Giroux, an American educator, defines pedagogy as 'a configuration of textual, verbal and visual practices that seek to engage the processes through which people understand themselves and the ways in which they engage with others and their environment.'²¹ This seems to me to be exactly the purpose for which museums exist and if museums can understand the pedagogical practice, which can be used to bring this about, then they may fulfil their educational purpose.

²⁰ Appleton, J. 2001. 'Institute of Ideas' is a group who rose to the fore with a conference on *The Social Responsibility of Museums* in July 2000 in the British Museum and since then have continued to take part in public debate around that topic.

²¹ Giroux 1992: 3

Definitions like that of Giroux move away from the older pedagogy which used the information transmission model for mass education, rooted in the UK in the needs of an Industrial Age and Empire and embedded in the single dominant white British culture. As educators recognised and took on board changes in thinking in a variety of disciplines, pedagogy in formal institutions slowly changed from subject-centred to child-centred throughout the twentieth century. The holistic development of the individual and her involvement in her learning, championed by Dewey has become the goal of education.

Globalisation and the movement of people across geographical and cultural boundaries has accelerated and made this process more urgent.²² In many countries people of different cultures are rubbing shoulders with one another. They belong to different cultures, different interpretive communities, but live alongside each other. They have to learn new practices and new ways of being, in order to recreate their identities and ways of knowing and being. The transactions between peoples are active and performative - they affect and are affected by the process.

Jerome Bruner, the American psychologist, writes that the critical enabling factor, the one that brings the mind to focus, is culture.²³ He argues 'What now comes to the centre of attention is the individual's engagement with established systems of shared meaning, with the beliefs, values and the understandings of those already in place in society as he or she is thrown in among them. The critical "test frame" from this point of view is education – the field of practices within which such engagement is, in the first instance, affected. Education is not simply a technical business of well managed information processing, nor even a matter of simply applying learning theories to the classroom or using the results of subject-centred achievement testing. It is a complex pursuit of fitting a culture to the needs of its members and their ways of knowing to the needs of the culture.'²⁴

²² 'Globalisation is the closer integration of the countries and the peoples of the world which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of transportation and communication, and the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital knowledge and (to a lesser extent) people across borders'. Stiglitz, 2002 :9

²³ Bruner, J.S. 1996:87

²⁴ Ibid: 43 I have used some of this quote earlier, and is quoted again for emphasis.

My model of the visitor meaning-making process has been developed within a drama metaphor - the exhibition as the staging of a production: a production which recognizes the ideological and social basis on which meaning is constructed and creates an environment in which new meaning is formed and new identities transacted. By focusing on the visitor in performance the museum team can create environments where the boundaries of different cultural frames are made explicit and the opportunity to explore those boundaries are presented. Through the medium of the museum drama visitors can explore their feelings, values, identities and knowledge just like the audience for a dramatic play. In the exhibition visitors can confront, contest or collaborate with the museum, making their boundaries explicit. Bhabha writes that it is by 'focusing on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' that 'provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself'.²⁵ The museum exhibition as a dramatic production can provide such moments.

The role of curators is central to the visitor meaning-making process. Curators should assert rather than retreat from the differences presented by visitors. A curator does not have to 'be one to know one'.²⁶ By this I mean that the expertise of the curator is such that while he may be a white middle class male he can still speak about, and to, the experiences of racism, sexism, and class discrimination in a way that mobilises rather than destroys mutual hopes for the future. The curator can distinguish knowing from being. Knowing an experience means being able to say what it is. The curator interprets the experience through a process of understanding, rather than necessarily, having the experience himself.

This new pedagogy shifts the knowledge/ power relationship away from the limited emphasis on transfer of knowledge towards the strategic issue of engaging with the ways in which knowledge can be reconfigured in the minds of the visitors. Visitors must be offered scripts that both affirm and interrogate the complexity of their identities, and enable them to use their interpretive strategies.

²⁵ Bhabha, 1994:10

²⁶ Fay, 1996: 9

A new pedagogy is more than simply opening up diverse cultural narratives and spaces to visitors, it means understanding how the multi-layered and often contradictory voices and experiences intermingle with the weight of particular histories that will not fit easily into the master narrative of a single culture. The value of the museum is its fragmented character, which can enable the reading of many stories and narratives, even previously unknown ones. Museums and their curators should be seen as sites for both critical analysis and as a potential source of experimentation, creativity and possibility. Foucault's notion of the specific intellectual taking up struggles connected to particular issues and contexts must be combined with Gramsci's notion of the engaged intellectual who connects his or her work to broader social concerns that deeply affect how people live, work and survive.²⁷

Curators must acknowledge and use the relationship between knowledge and power and create an environment that will allow visitors to have their voices heard in order that they can create new meaning within a framework of explicit values. It is in the creation of a meaningful ritual that visitors make connections with their own experience and are willing to make an investment in the display - that is taking time to make meaning and to create knowledge. This is akin to the flow experience, which has been described by Csikszentmihalyi where the challenge of the task is appropriate to the knowledge and skills of the visitor and he is said to have a flow experience.²⁸ Emotional investment in the display is essential for the creation of meaning. The museum task is to create displays where the curator enables the visitor to look critically at the meanings on display, examine their context and create new meaning.

A new museum pedagogy based on the perspective of human beings making meaning as a process of enacting their identity will open up the possibility for incorporating into the museum cultural and social practices that no longer need to be mapped or referenced solely on the basis of the dominant models of western culture. Visitors will be encouraged to cross ideological and political boundaries as a way of furthering the limits of their own understanding in a setting that is pedagogically safe

²⁷ See earlier discussion in Chapter 2 and Giroux, 1982

²⁸ Csikszentmihalyi M. and Kermanson, K. 1995: 67-79.

and socially nurturing rather than authoritarian and infused with political correctness.²⁹

Giroux argues that 'Pedagogy is about the intellectual and emotional and ethical investments we make as part of our attempt to negotiate, accommodate and transform the world in which we find ourselves. The purpose and vision that drives such a pedagogy must be based on a politics and view of authority that links teaching and learning to forms of self and social empowerment that argue for forms of community life that extend the principles of liberty, equality, justice and freedom to the widest possible set of institutional and lived relations'.³⁰

Raising awareness among museum staff of the potential and the nature of the meaning-making process that they share with each other and with visitors is key to the successful application of this model. The museum team must articulate their own meaning(s), acknowledge and exploit the ritual they are constructing by using the objects in space with the technologies of text, lighting, audio and visual elements to enable responses and meaning-making from a wide range of visitors. The team must imagine their audience, those who are aligned and those who are not, those who might or might not engage and those who might negotiate with the museum persona. The focus must be to enable the visitor experience – mental, physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual – and to design exhibitions which encourage visitors to grow and become enriched through their encounters with the objects.

My model which provides a theoretical understanding for the museum experience could underpin the development of a new museum pedagogy which could make a real difference in people's lives. This model is only the beginning of an exciting task of better understanding the museum experience and exploring the process of meaning-making which is at the heart of culture, to its full depths. What I have offered here is, I hope, a clear account of a set of complex ideas in a new model of the museum experience which will contribute to that task

²⁹ Political correctness is a term coined to describe language that acknowledges the implications, racial or sexual for instance, of some terminology. It is often thrown into disrepute when it is applied as the 'letter' rather than the 'spirit' of the phrase.

³⁰ Giroux, 1992:81

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