

Exploring the Museum: A Comprehensive Approach

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To understand what role a museum, such as a National Museum, plays in society this paper proposes the approach of looking at museums in a comprehensive way. An exhibition can be seen as a process of mediation and three phases of this process can be discerned and analysed. Different actors and conditions connected to these phases have the potential of shaping the story told and the way it can be understood. This paper underlines the importance of analyzing each of these phases separately, but also of looking at the process in its entirety. Questions such as “What are the intentions of the museum staff or exhibition producers?” “What is narrated and reproduced in the exhibitions?” “How does the visitor make meaning of the mediation in the museum?” can then not only be answered, but also be seen in the light of each other, promoting a greater understanding of the museum itself, of the museum’s role in society and of the museum experience. Using examples from research on the exhibition *Afrikafararna* this paper proposes that this comprehensive approach is a fruitful method to apply when analyzing and comparing different museums, and when trying to understand what the concept of a National Museum really is.

Exploring the Museum: A Comprehensive Approach

A National Museum can, from a historian's point of view, be described as an institution entrusted with preserving the memory of a nation's past. An *official memory* of the nation's past that is – an *official memory of a common heritage of the majority of the people of the nation*. The institution can, as such, be seen as the foremost interpreter of which stories of the past that should be called 'common knowledge', 'significant symbols for the characteristics of the people and the nation', and 'important to remember today and tomorrow'. But does that mean that National Museums only mediate the aspects and stories of history that have *positive* connotations and are character building – in the interest of consolidating the notion of the nation and in the interest of uniting a large group of people and define the community, as well as defining who is part of it and who is not? For sure, it doesn't have to be that way, but I must confess that this is an image that comes to mind when I reflect upon the idea of a National Museum. Are those prejudicing thoughts of mine an outdated legacy from a time when a more nationalist ideology was predominant in, for instance, my country – Sweden? Have National Museums in fact renegotiated their understanding of their task and purpose in the 100 - 150 or so years since many of them were established? Have National Museums changed to meet demands from a new society, demands for fundamental democratic values, such as for example equality? When thinking of National Museums it is easy to assume something preserving and static. But is this always the case? Are National Museums perhaps more than willing to continuously renegotiate their mediation of history, or are they in fact worse than other institutions (perhaps than more modern museums) when it comes to interacting with the present? What is the impact of National Museums in society today and what messages are mediated in these institutions?

A Comprehensive Approach

All of these questions have their rightful place in the programme of the series of conferences of which this one; "Setting the Frames," is the first. In order to be able to compare and discuss these matters, examples and studies from several National Museums are needed. This, however, does not necessarily have to mean that researchers or scholars have to agree to look upon the objects of study in exactly the same way – ask the same questions, focus the same aspects, or use the same methods. In fact, the comparison of different National Museums in different contexts will probably be a lot more interesting if differences are explored rather than common traits compared.

However, if we want to be able to discuss National Museums from different contexts, and assess or understand their role in the society that they are working in, this paper proposes that a comprehensive approach is needed. In order to be able to see and analyze if, and how, a museum interacts with society – is influenced by, as well as have an influence on, society – it is important not to focus only the obvious, that is the exhibitions and their message, but rather to try and gain a broader understanding. When conducting research on the mediation and use of history in society, using the museum as an example, I have tried to put this broader approach into practice. This paper would like to discuss how this could be a fruitful method to apply when analyzing and comparing museums, and when trying to understand what the concept of a National Museum really is.

A Process of Mediation

The exhibition is the heart of the activities in the museum. The exhibition can be described as a process of mediation, or a process of communication, depending on how the museum chooses to work. Professor of history Klas Göran Karlsson states that:

Pedagogy of history [...] always includes aspects of production, distribution and consumption of history. The principal questions for the pedagogy of history are thus: Who writes history or produces it in another way? About what is history written? For whom is history written?¹ (my translation)

From this statement can be understood that there are phases to each mediation process, and that different actors can be connected to different parts of the process. This means that to understand the mediation of for example history it is important to look not only at the tangible things, such as how the exhibitions are laid out and what artefacts are displayed in the museum, because they are only one part of the mediation process. Focus needs to be widened and include questions of how different actors both influence and make meaning of the mediation. Karlsson and professor of history Peter Aronsson both (separately) suggest that the mediation process can be divided into three phases. These could be labelled:

- The phase of production or shaping
- The phase of distribution or mediation
- The phase of consumption or reception (my translation)

All three phases are equally important and need to be considered to gain a broad understanding of the interaction between the museum and its context. In all three phases the questions *What?* *How?* and *Why?* can be asked.

What? How? and Why?

The *What?*-question concerns the historical content in the mediation or teaching – the subject matter itself. The answer to this question clearly shows what has been considered important content in this particular situation or mediation. Furthermore, the aspects or content that is *not* part of the narration – the content that has been omitted – appears as if on a negative.

The *How?*-question asks with which method the chosen content is dealt with or mediated through. The answer to the question *How?* will expose what methods have been considered useful and successful in the mediation of the particular message in question. The connection between the method and content is impossible to disband and might be fundamental for reaching the goal of the mediation.

The third question – *Why?* – is also inextricably connected with the other two. The answer to this question will reveal the idea behind the whole situation of mediation – intentions and purpose. This question can also be used to problemize the other two. It is for instance possible to ask the question *What?* to the mediation situation and see what aspects are included, perhaps at the expense of other aspects. If we then ask *Why what?* – that is; Why this content? Why this story? – interesting conditions are exposed. These can uncover underlying structures, motifs, and ideologies that can say quite a lot about dominant values, norms and power structures in present society. Examples are, for instance, what significance nationality is given, what the limits of the concept of democracy are, or how gender and class relations are reproduced.

1 Karlsson, K-G. "Den svenska historiedidaktiken och den dubbla historiska paradoxen." In Hans-Albin Larsson (ed) *Historiedidaktiska utmaningar*. Jönköping University Press, Jönköping (1998) p 12.

To these three questions can also be added the question of *And then?* How does the mediation actually influence the visitors that take part of it and the society that it is presented in? Does it, in fact, influence it at all?²

Mediation or Dialogue

One way of understanding the mediation process is a didactic one; that learning is about passively receiving an unproblematic subject matter from someone who has the priority of interpretation.³ Another way of looking at it is that learning involves an active learner in a social and societal context. Professor Peter Aronsson suggests that the mediation process can be seen or interpreted in (at least) two different ways like this:

- a) Mediation or implementation
Intention – design – mediation – reception – use
- b) Dialogue
Dialogue – design – communication – reflection – use⁴ (my translation)

The first way of looking at the process can be characterised as linear whereas the other could involve a more complex pattern of communication. Other variations of the process can be considered – perhaps even combinations of the two examples. What is interesting, of course, is to see how the museum in focus works and mediates history; in a way that can be described as didactic and linear, or in a way that can be described as being in dialogue with its visitors and its context – a dialogue in which the historical content is the topic?⁵ Or perhaps in a third way? Needless to say; if we can describe with some accuracy the way in which the museum in focus actually operates in these matters it is easier to discuss whether or not the mediation in the museum has any impact on the surrounding society at all.

Three Phases – Example Afrikafararna

A close study of each of the three phases of the process can give the researcher a solid basis of knowledge to start from when discussing the museum in its entirety. A focus on the first phase of the mediation process – the phase of production or shaping – can clarify which actors have the most influence in the process of defining and forming the exhibition and the museum's work. It can also reveal what specific inner and outer factors that set the frames for the work in the museum. History, for instance, is used by different groups, parties, communities in our society, and these can be of an ideological, political, economical, cultural etc, nature.⁶ Such factors also, to a greater or minor extent depending on the museum in focus and the situation, influence the mediation in the museum. In my previous research I have looked at a museum exhibition – Afrikafararna, produced and shown at the Swedish Emigrant Institute, Växjö Sweden, and Kalmar läns museum, Kalmar, Sweden, in 2004-2005 – as a mediation process. I have focused and explored each phase in itself and discussed how

2 Discussion on *What? How? Why?* etc from my unpublished licentiate's thesis *Afrikafararna. Historieförmedling och historiebruk på Svenska Emigrantinstitutet och Kalmar läns museum*. Växjö university (2006).

3 For a discussion on different approaches to knowledge, teaching and learning in the museum, see for instance Hein, George E *Learning in the museum*. Routledge, London och New York (1998) p 25-36.

4 Aronsson, Peter. *Historiebruk – att använda det förflutna*. Studentlitteratur, Lund (2004) p 100.

5 This discussion from my unpublished licentiate's thesis *Afrikafararna. Historieförmedling och historiebruk på Svenska Emigrantinstitutet och Kalmar läns museum*. Växjö university (2006).

6 Karlsson, Klas-Göran "Den svenska historiedidaktiken och den dubbla historiska paradoxen" in Hans-Albin Larsson (red) *Historiedidaktiska utmaningar* (1998) p 13.

they relate to each other and how the narration of history has been shaped by the conditions in each of these phases. I have worked mainly with interviews but also analyzed the content of the exhibition and the pedagogic program. When focusing the first phase I contacted the producers of the exhibition and the persons in charge of the exhibitions in the two museums. I interviewed them and could then discuss how their convictions (or in fact lack thereof, in some aspects) about such matters as theories of teaching and learning, history and democratic values have made crucial impacts on how the history of *Afrikafararna* – men and women from Sweden who migrated to southern Africa – was told. From the interviews it was also possible to discern what outer factors, such as time frames, economy and political ambitions, set the limits for the visions of the producers for the exhibition. It would also be possible to consider public and perhaps political debates, which might precede the exhibition, in this first phase.

For the second phase – the phase of distribution or mediation – I analyzed the content of the exhibitions – the product of the producers' efforts. The results of these analyses could then be discussed in relation to the visions that the producers' had had, but also in relation to the goals of the museums; goals such as being a proponent of democratic values and a multicultural society. In the case of *Afrikafararna* it became clear that the mediation in the museum did not correspond with many of the visions and goals set up by the producers and the museum. Outspoken goals were for instance to work for integration and equality but the content and mediation in relation to the historical content could be described as stereotyping different groups of people, separating for instance whites from blacks and subordinating women. The story told was in many ways told in lingering patterns from a colonial ideology.

This second phase does not only include an analysis of the content but also the methods used in the exhibition to present the artefacts and the narration to the visitors. The *Afrikafararna* exhibition was mainly a traditional exhibition presented with texts and photos on screens and some artefacts in display cases. There were few open ends or unanswered questions in the story, and there was little opportunity for interaction between the visitors and the exhibition or museum staff.⁷ The story about the travellers to Africa was mostly unproblematic and I argue in my thesis that it did not really challenge the visitors' previous understanding of migration history or of "Swedish identity." The mediation process could be described as being informative rather than challenging or problemizing.

In the third phase – that of consumption or reception – the visitor to the museum is obviously the most prominent actor. As I am interested in what happens when the mediation in the museum is used by schools and in the teachings of history in school, I interviewed schoolchildren and high school-students about their experiences and learning in the museum exhibition. In this phase a number of methods for assessing or discussing the reception or interaction could be employed. I do not believe that the method of interviewing people necessarily gives a comprehensive answer to the question "What did you learn in the museum?" – but then again few methods probably do. The answers from the interviews were interesting enough and for example uncovered the fact that the students did not remember very much at all from the exhibition, hadn't really grasped the narration, as it were, but mixed *Afrikafararna* up with other exhibitions in the museum. Another revelation was that even though many of the students specifically brought up and discussed 'evaluation of sources' and 'scepticism' as some of the most important things they had learned in history class in school, they talked about the museum in terms of "a place where you get to know how it really was" and "where you get to know the truth." In this third phase it is also interesting to discuss questions such as why the visitor chose to come to the exhibition in the first place and, in the

7 Not entirely true for the pedagogic program where guides in clothes typical for the time that guided the children in the exhibition hall.

case of the school children and students – how did the teacher use the exhibition as part of the curriculum?

From my research around *Afrikafararna* it became clear that the communication process between the visitors and the museum (the school and the museum) around topics such as content, methods and intentions were virtually non-existing, in this case. Based on the answers from my interviews I thus feel I can make a case arguing that the students and school-children probably didn't learn so much about Africa, or migration, or the conditions in Sweden in the 19th century, as one could have hoped, from the exhibition. And about democratic values, or the benefits of a multicultural society – almost certainly nothing at all. This was possibly due to the fact that the museum staff seemed not to have a strong conviction about teaching- or mediation methods that permeated their work in constructing the exhibition. It was probably also due to the fact that the teachers didn't seem to work the visit to the museum into their curriculum, and that there was little or no communication or cooperation between the museum and the teachers. The visit became a solitary “happening” and the students and school children had a difficult time relating this new information to previous knowledge, on their own. From this point of view, discouragingly enough, the museum's impact on the students' learning and on the surrounding society can thus seriously be questioned. However, in the interviews the producers of the exhibition were excited to talk about the many spin off-effects that the exhibition had caused. They told me of new contacts and plans for cooperation between the community councils in their town and the town in Africa that the emigrants had ended up in. They told me about coming agreements between the universities and plans for study-visits to learn about each country's work with democratization, health care, and so on. This means that it most certainly is possible to look on *Afrikafararna*, and the mediation in the museum, as having a very concrete impact on, and perhaps even as being a sort of motor in, processes in the surrounding society. It also makes it interesting to again look at *what* is narrated in the exhibition and ask if the choices made when constructing the exhibition had anything to do with pleasing political and economic interests.

Conclusion

The above example shows very clearly that discussions around museums' interaction with, and impact on, the surrounding society can be made more balanced, varied and probing by adopting a comprehensive approach when exploring the museum. By looking at the exhibition as a process, and by exploring each phase of this process, it is easier to see and discuss how the phases are related and how they make an impact on and are formed by conditions in other phases. Had I only, in the case of *Afrikafararna* focused one phase, such as for example the phase of distribution or mediation, I would not have had the opportunity to see how the museum interacts with the community in other ways than just the mediation in the exhibition itself.

When discussing the notion of the National Museum and in assessing whether or not the National Museum interacts with or has an impact on the surrounding society the comprehensive approach can thus open up for many interesting revelations and discussions. In using this approach questions such as “What are the intentions of the museum staff or exhibition producers?” “What is narrated and reproduced in the exhibitions?” “Who uses the museum?” and “How can the visitor make meaning of the mediation in the museum?” can be not only answered, but the answers can be seen in the light of each other, so that they promote a greater understanding of the concept of the National Museum.

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