

VISITING MUSEUMS, MUSEUM EDUCATION AND SELF-ETHNOGRAPHY EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: The idea of this paper is based on the fact that visiting museums always creates different experiences. According to Marc Augé,¹ the museum space can evoke emotions related to the anthropology of mood or stimulus-induced behaviours. The experience of visiting a museum or an art space is a rich, dynamic, and interesting field for drawing experiential and research data. This cultural practice incorporates an expressive component which refers to aesthetic and creative capacity but also to the knowledge of these dimensions to relate different cultural, and artistic codes. Self-ethnographic practice is used in the learning process for the audience (students, teachers) in order to be able to understand the museum as an educational and cultural institution, but most importantly to feel the experience of the visit as a means of a personal dialogue with artworks. In this presentation, we will develop our reflection on the possibility of applying self-ethnographic practice as an additional and extended methodological tool for the interpretation of cultural artefacts in cultural institutions such as museums and art exhibitions places.

Keywords: museum perceptions, museum experiences, museum education, cultural artefacts, self-ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary multicultural societies, the institution of museums seems to have significantly renewed its relationship with visitors and its interlocutors, emphasizing the "conversational" role and deeper concept of museum exhibits - objects through the structure of presentation, i.e., the frame of reference, the thematic integration and narrative. These are elements that visitors usually seek in every visit, either consciously or unconsciously. However, to determine as Heidegger² states, in *The origin of the work of art* "the reified nature of museum objects does not only required reference to, or emphasis on the presentation of their properties" but also an attempt to elucidate the meaning they embody and convey.³

The problematic of the present research starts from the assumption that museum exhibits-findings do not easily develop a dialogue within the museum spaces. Instead, they are present in a museographic order, arranged by display case or side by side, with their identity in the caption, perhaps waiting for someone to assign them a role and an additional thought.⁴ This limited dialogue is the key factor that shapes the characteristic openness felt by the visitor-viewer of museum institutions, which prevents the exhibit from being truly an "exhibit".⁵ Indeed, many of the museum experiences tend not to be aesthetically and conceptually complete, as a possibility of aesthetic enjoyment or cognitive appropriation is not always ensured. Such is often the nature of visiting places of art and culture, where reading comprehension is not associated with significant opportunities for meaning making. We must not forget that our sense of art, changes the density of their context, depending on the distance and depth we have from the present.⁶ To

¹ Augé 1995, 42-56.

² Heidegger 1986, 117.

³ Paley 2014.

⁴ Alpers 1991.

⁵ Micheli 2023.

⁶ Gombrich 2018.

fill the absence of understanding, therefore, we need to stand long enough in front of the finding or be supported by additional information in order to build the code that will allow communication.

The paper presents the use of the auto-ethnographic method as an alternative tool for museum pedagogy approaches, in order to understand the personal engagement of museum visitors with artworks and museum finds. The approach explores the interdisciplinary possibilities offered by the combination of a pure anthropological-sociological methodological research tool (auto-ethnography) with pedagogical practice in museums through the activation of personal self-reflection.⁷ The application of an auto-ethnographic tool enables, through the development of a dialogical practice of reflection, to retrieve a wealth of historical, social, cultural data, which on the one hand constitute personal memories (self-experiences) and on the other hand are based on elements that emerge associatively from the biography of the objects⁸ and lead to the connection of the self with the museums and the exhibits.

THE ASSOCIATIVE - ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE

Speaking of auto-ethnographic experiences we refer to experiences that placed the self as an "object of research".⁹ In essence, the recollection of the experience is placed at the centre of the process, turning visitors or external observers into direct participants. This effort, on a methodological level, differs from the classical form of autobiography, in which there is full awareness and acceptance of the subject's situation.¹⁰ Despite the fact that it is not structural, it is however able to create conceptual structures that pre-exist in the biography of museum visitors, and which are repeated in their associative narrative (by viewing museum finds or objects or works of art). In this case, the associative narrative is a 'channel of communication' with elements that form dialogical links with the subjects and objects of reference, either consistently, or through strong bonds of dialogue, or even through occasional interactions. In essence, the association appears at the substrate of the process of self-ethnographic thinking as a form of narrative dialectic.¹¹ This form of dialectic is the central means of preventing the monological, one-dimensional acceptance and establishment of a single (right) interpretation, and which usually creates a single, dominant knowledge of the vision objects.

Self-ethnographic practice in museum pedagogy, is applied as a narrative medium¹² of approach and communication that contains elements of descriptive, thymic, and especially free pre-conceptual interrelationships and networks that lead to a state of creating strong links through valid reflections of lived experience.¹³ These reflections of free associations are largely reproductions and reconfigurations of general representations¹⁴ and established personal beliefs. They are also capable of leading to new conceptual interpretations and the emergence of new dialectical reflections. In particular associative narrative, exclusively engages the experience of a museum object in a surplus of narrative discourse.¹⁵ This reveals authentic moments and the activation of inner experience as its external dimension describing events of social experience, but as a precognitive imagination and desire.¹⁶

This dialectical function brings the museum visitor into daily contact or convergence, or into dialogue and counter-dialogue with the museum objects. In essence, focusing the gaze on them is an introspection of the representation of the Self, but also of the world and the social relations and networks that have been created, by the embodied and constructed ontologies with the aesthetic multiplicity. Therefore, the dialogue with the museum object or an artwork is an important step towards the self-consciousness and awareness of the material world and our physical environment. At this point, the self-ethnographic

⁷ Anae 2014.

⁸ Friberg, Huvila 2019.

⁹ Ellis, Bochner 2000.

¹⁰ Miller 2005.

¹¹ Ricoeur 1984.

¹² Elliot 2005.

¹³ Manen 1990.

¹⁴ Moscovici 1984.

¹⁵ Ricoeur 1976.

¹⁶ Crowley 2003.

narrative is directly linked to the social and cultural context of the experiences presented as it emerges at every point and in every partial or total recapitulation of the life experience.¹⁷

THE AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY OF EXPERIENCE IN MUSEUM SPACES

In archaeological and cultural management, the experience of the cultural and museum audience is included in the qualitative methodologies of enhancing active participation, through the dimension of observation and in the activation of multimodal sensoriality, mainly in the sense of the appropriation of real mental memories gained from visits and trip tours to the places of antiquity and art. At this point, the self-ethnographic narrative resonates as a museum practice with a deeper need and aim of the cultural visitor to acquire by any means a solid consciousness of the museum object through the possibilities offered by art, museum exhibitions and museology in general.

The issue has preoccupied cultural experts in seeking constructive ways in which museum findings and art exhibits are experientially inscribed at a first coherent level in memory, remaining firmly in view as the necessary substrate for the search for a permanent reference and conscious anchoring in them.¹⁸ This shift is theoretically linked to the views of many cultural management experts according to whom, the understanding of an artifact or artwork cannot be an objective process in the sense of scientific objectivity¹⁹ but depends on the emphasis on the construction of pre-understandings, on the empathy of the viewer's consciousness²⁰ in order to produce a dialectical cycle between sensation and understanding of the gaze. In this case, knowledge is based on a theory of practice²¹ that regulates our activities in grounded cognitive processes.

THE RESEARCH

The present study was conducted within the theoretical framework of auto-ethnography as a part of a broader social research on issues related to the En-vision theory of the social and cultural experience in the view of antiquities.²²

The methodological approach includes two broad perspectives: A socio-psychological perspective, which refers to the activation of the reflective memory of cultural visitors and which is approached from the perspective of the socio-cultural experiences that constitute the personality of the visitors and, a structural approach that concerns the internal mechanisms that activate the reflective processes of the self-ethnographic narrative. In particular, we sought to verify whether the activation of a self-ethnographic narrative of the participants in approaching the artefacts can modify the organization of their memories but mainly the associative perception of the content of the museum objects in relation to the ethnographic experience.

The present research was conducted online in the year 2021 and involved a total of 20 participants (14 women and 6 men) with studies in the broader field of culture and art, aged between 23 and 65 years old. The participants were given a total of 10 photos of museum findings and artworks (ancient Greek vases, statues, figurines, ancient inscriptions, etc.), asking them to choose the one that made the biggest impression on them. The collection and analysis of the participant's opinions and observations in relation to the museum objects was carried out in parallel to the research process through notes, adapting the context of the discussion to the story that gradually developed during the research. The questions were open-ended, (based on key ideas, terms and concepts related to the archaeological history and content of the museum artefacts) and were constantly modified and adjusted according to the flow of the discussion and the progress of the research. The research process started with the selection of the museum objects by the participants and continued with the description and interpretation of the object. The researcher undertook to ask questions considered to be important, based on the meaning given by the participants

¹⁷ De Certeau 1984.

¹⁸ Micheli 2020.

¹⁹ Bourdieu 1977.

²⁰ Gadamer 2004.

²¹ Bourdieu 1977.

²² Micheli 2023.

per content and category of the selected object, in order to help them to engage further with the object and understand its meaning through their self-ethnographic narrative. The data processing was based on interpretive phenomenological analysis.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The mechanisms discussed and analysed in the self-ethnographic approach range from the simple understanding of museum objects to the activation and transformation of complex perceptual experiences schemas.

Specifically, the process focused on the emergence of self-ethnographic descriptions concerning a) the types of the experiences, b) the historical content and aesthetic dimension of the objects and, c) the idea of the internal ideal character and content embodied in the museum exhibit as personal, unrevealed experiences.

Some of the preliminary results that emerged from the analysis were identified as follows:

- The auto ethnographic experiences are divided into 5 main categories: 1. Social Bonding, 2. Social interaction-communication, 3. Social representations, 4. Socialization and control, 5. Social Self representations. More specifically, the experiences are broken down into the following sub-themes:
 - Representations of the body-motor (illness, disability, violation, appearance);
 - Representations of social Ego;
 - Emotional and affective situations;
 - Important life changes events (maternity, marriage, love, divorce, profession, family ties and bonds, sexuality).
- Mainly, it is the stylistic features that seem to shape, influence, and set the approach in a relational background of sign-objects that emerge and are influenced by the social beliefs and interests of the participants. In particular, material, colours, volumes, lines (as elements of style) were imposed on the empirical content as symbolic forms of knowledge and general culture.
- In several narratives, signs of expressed emotion were identified as emotional "charges". The emotional life of the conscious of personal life appears as direct awareness and expression. This expression was particularly characteristic in the narratives associated with figurines and statues, projecting subconscious experiences relating to personal and family ties and life-stage journeys.
- The description of the self-ethnographic experience is neither strictly defined nor total. It seems to be more theoretical and always depends on the intrinsic qualities and characteristics of each object-exhibit. The phenomenon of the refraction of experience is not fully revealed, as it seems to be subordinated to external necessities that weigh directly on the subject.
- Self-ethnographic experience functions as an emotional judgment of experiences and personal life events rather than as a basis of personal knowledge. Considering other related museum-pedagogical practices, we expected that this kind of transformation would involve a shift of a more active sense of self as the main character in the process, greater expression of emotions associated with specific events, greater narrative coherence and organization, and greater awareness of self as narrator.

CONCLUSIONS

The choice of objects and the creation of associations and identifications with them, seem to reflect or incorporate elements of the individual's personal self and history. The process of dialectical reflection in self-ethnography, when applied, seems to offer an intellectual framework for generating and decoding concepts, and enters in contemporary museological theory and in the field of cultural management, as a powerful tool for research into the relationship between subject and museum object. Incorporating personal narratives²³ into museum education activities, in order to approach exhibits, can articulate the

²³ Ricoeur 1968.

structures of sensation and perception associated with the final understanding, interpretation, and connection to the object of viewing. In particular, to the extent that auto-ethnographic narratives become flexible and subject to a relational – social-aesthetic processing with museum objects, the experience of "conversation" and educational knowledge with the museum exhibit becomes a creative and experiential act. This process, as a more general educational application, can be a gateway to the arts and culture by introducing new dimensions of continuous development of the identity of museums. By expressing and exploring (ourselves) through artworks and exhibits, we can not only better understand and improve our own identity but also find the thread of connection between creation, expression, performance, and museum knowledge.

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