

Oral history, museums and history education

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Introduction

Opening the fifth theme of our conference *'Education and Oral History – How can it benefit museum outreach programmes, educational activities, multimedia and the Internet?'* I would like to pose some questions rather than to discuss relevant educational benefits.

Contemporary museums tend to collect and exhibit both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and to use oral history not only as part of the contextual display of objects, but as a 'museum object' as well. The broad current discussion on museums relates to our transitional world, in which history, education, cultural institutions, social structures, social relations and communication are undergoing continuous change. Among others, by redefining the museum in relation to contemporary 'information society' and 'media-based culture', we observe an increasing importance of the narrative, which is accompanied by a relative 'displacement' or even 'disappearance' of objects (Witcomb, 2003).

Contemporary museums tend to use oral history, visual means, electronic multimedia and the Web, besides objects, to present particular themes and histories. By integrating tactile, visual and oral sources, together with electronic moving images and hyper-texts, museums seem to become more democratic, allowing recognition of different communities and cultures, and approaching several different audiences. In this way, history, also, in museums seems to become more democratic and effective,

the past seems to interrelate with the present, and objects with their meanings and values in people's social and personal lives, in subjective or inter-subjective terms. Objects gain meanings in the context of human thoughts, feelings, fantasies and memories, but on the other hand they provoke human thoughts, feelings, fantasies and memories. Thus, we could argue that the interrelation of oral history with objects, especially within the museum space, can serve both as content and as a two-way process, which both contextualizes objects and provokes new thoughts and ongoing memories. This situation is considered very important by contemporary history education, which, among others, aims to develop students' historical thinking by enabling and encouraging them to develop a critical interpretative dialogue with historical sources.

As Pearce (1992:47) argues, 'objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be otherwise impossible [...] Our idea of identity resides more in objects than in ourselves'. Based on Material Culture, Museum Education and History Education Theories, we can argue that objects, although dump, can be involved in a dialogue with us, when placed within open interpretative contexts.

On this basis, the main question I set for discussion is: *Can Oral History Facilitate Our Dialogue with Objects, in general, and in historical terms, in particular? Can it allow a dialogue between different people in the present and different people of the past?*

1. The materiality of oral history

As a starting point of our discussion let us explore the following question, referring to the materiality of oral history: *How far is the material character of oral history involved in our dialogue with objects and people of the past?*

We could hypothesize that the advantages of museums' interface with oral history, especially in terms of their educational role as institutions which use, construct and communicate history, seems, among others, to rely on the materiality of oral history, i.e. on the materiality of human voice, of human bodies and human relations, on the interrelation of memory with the material world, within the three dimensional space. In other words, we could hypothesize that oral history can enhance our dialogue with objects especially if it is not deprived from its material nature; if it is not presented as

a cold, fixed virtual, written or oral text, deprived from live human voices, body expressions and relations, from live human feelings, emotions and memories, from live words and silences, from its live complex interrelations with the material world, capable of provoking new ongoing memories, feelings and thoughts.

But the process of any form of dialogue, among others, requires multiple, different voices. We could argue, then, that oral history can enhance further our dialogue with objects if multiple different narratives are presented in ways that reveal their multiple explicit and implicit or tacit meanings, related, among others, to the spatial, material, social, cultural and historical parameters, which shape memory and the ways it is both conveyed and understood.

The environment within which we ask people to describe their experiences will have an effect on what they are able to remember and on what they will forget, on what they say and on what they do not say, while, on the other hand, the environment in which we listen to oral narratives will have an effect on what we feel, think and understand. (The shape and the light blue colour of the ceiling of the hall, in which we are meeting these days and which served as an Othoman mosque before it housed the First Greek Parliament after the Greek Independence War in early 19th century, influences our physical, social and intellectual communication; the way our words are being articulated, heard, perceived and understood.)

On this basis, and against contradictory theories (MacDonald, 1992), which decrease the importance of materiality within the context of information society, in general, and within museums, in particular, we could hypothesize that oral history in museums can enhance visitors' historical knowledge and thinking not only on the basis of the content of the particular narratives they are presented with, but also by their direct or indirect communication with the informants, the bodies, faces, expressions, words and hesitations of which visitors can see, hear, and even touch or feel.

2. Oral history and museums' exclusive character

Another question I would like to explore is: *On what basis museums' interface with oral history can limit museums' exclusive character?*

Displays based on the material value and the relevant authenticity of objects have associated museums with privileged access to knowledge, open only for those who know how to read museums, museum objects and rituals (Duncan, 1995). On the other hand, museums' interface with oral history and new electronic media, as well, is

supposed to limit museums' exclusive character, on the basis that they offer museums the tools to broaden their public and reach global audiences (anyone can visit a museum even without physically being there), to become more democratic, among others, by bringing different sources of information together, a practice, which seems to break the authoritative voice of the museum, by allowing information to adapt to particular audiences' questions, and even by allowing a 'walk right into exhibits'. Paraphrasing Witcomb's (2003:130) arguments, this development does not seem as being absolutely dependent on the use of multimedia interactives or oral history within exhibition spaces. Multimedia or oral testimonies cannot necessarily challenge a one-way flow of communication, which the museum as a whole may be premised upon. Nor does multimedia or oral history in itself necessarily represent a more democratic, open medium of communication, which can in itself challenge the linear narrative structure behind exhibition design. Instead, we have to re-conceptualize museum spaces as having to be more interactive, polysemic and open ended in themselves.

Accordingly, we could argue that it is not enough to use electronic media and oral history. We have to carefully examine how we use them, because they can, potentially, enhance a museum's strong, authoritative and linear narrative.

3. Historical interpretation and the material character of museums

The third question I would like to discuss is the following: *How can the museum, as a 'three-dimension' cultural space, allow for multiple historical interpretations in terms of its material and spatial character, on the basis of which museums are distinguished from electronic virtual spaces?*

The museum's space is primarily characterized by its spatial and material character, which allows for sensory and sensual experiences. The three dimensional museum space, related to material reality and presence, is further interrelated with the dimension of time, allowing our physical movement through it, in the speed we choose to follow, and, thus, it enables us to explore by all our mental, physical, emotional, social and cultural abilities museums' meanings and to actively synthesize, step by step, our views, questions, interpretations and hypotheses, in the context of social communication and dialogue.

Moreover, as Huyssen (1995:33) argues, electronic mass media, and especially television, have created a virtual world in which the museum can function as its

counterpoint. ‘The need for auratic objects, for permanent embodiments, [...] seems indisputably a key factor of our museumphilia. Objects that have lasted through the ages are by that very virtue located outside of the destructive circulation of commodities destined for the garbage heap. [...] The materiality of the objects themselves seems to function like a guarantee against simulations.’

On this basis, we could argue that multimedia could be used in museums to provide more layers of visual and auditory experiences, different visual and auditory fragmental representations rather than to replace or limit our physical experience of the materiality of objects and oral testimonies.

Generally, we can argue that the material character of oral history presented in museums, underlined by the materiality of the exhibited museum objects, can potentially positively affect visitors’ thinking and knowledge, on the basis of its function as a counterbalance to the virtual character of contemporary presentations and perceptions of past and present realities.

The question whether museums are about static individuals looking at moving virtual images and listening to rapidly appearing and disappearing sounds and voices, or about critical social subjects actively involved in the production of meanings through their physical and social experience of moving through the museum space, in the speed of an open dialogue with objects, different people, voices, languages, sounds and images, becomes central.

Among others, and besides its advantages for quick, broad and non-hierarchical communication, and easy access to an enormous quantity of facts, contemporary electronic technology has altered both the nature of communication and the nature of messages themselves. As MacLuhan (1967) has argued, technologies have cultural effects through their form as well as through their content. Among others, electronic media, producing a digital, non-material image of reality, a virtual, ‘not physically existing as such but made to appear to do so’ reality, give a relevant visual and virtual form to our perceptions of past and present realities.

Moreover, the development of a feeling of direct access to information, to events, to people, to time and space, form the illusion that what we see or hear is exactly what there is to see or hear, what really happened or what really happens or exists at the moment we observe it.

On the other hand, we can suggest that material culture, ‘physically existing as such’ objects and sites, as well as material representations of reality seem to obtain great

significance for education, in general, and for museum education, in particular, especially within our virtual world, mainly because they can reconnect us with the material, complex and tacit parameters of past and present realities, by calling us to interpret their material nature, in order to approach the complex reality they partially represent.

On this basis, we could argue that oral history in museums would have more fertile results if its material, partial and subjective character is underlined by the presentation of different, alternative and even contradictory oral narratives and human reactions related to particular themes, events or situations. By distinguishing different social groups' and subjects' ideas, acts and cultures from relevant monolithic national, western or global versions, museums can support all present and past groups' and subjects' right to history and to difference. They can also further allow an understanding that history constructs narratives about the past, which do not directly relate to what anyone ever experienced as the present (Lowenthal, 1985), as well as that 'history does not relate only to events [...] but also to the ways different people participated in events and kept them in their memories and imagination. The ways people remember what happened in the past, according to their experiences and imagination, and the ways they believe that the past could have happened – their imagination about an alternative past and thus about an alternative present – can be as important as the past that “really” happened’ (Thompson, [2000] 2002:205, Greek edition).

In this way, oral history in museums could contribute to the building of elaborated concepts by stimulating subjects' mental skills, senses and emotional, psychological and social abilities, required for alternative types of historical questioning, analysis and synthesis.

4. Oral history and museums' background

Accordingly, we could argue that the educational benefits of museums' interface with oral history seem, among others, to relate to the following set of questions, referring to each museum's background:

Does the museum challenge the established order, or defend it?

Does it realize that it both represents and produces cultures, and that representation is a constructed rather than a natural process? Does it recognize the politics of making meaning?

Does it believe in the objectivity of objects, of reality and of history, or does it tend to represent the diversity of different historical interpretations, by using a diversity of approaches appropriate to the diversity of cultures, groups, communities, relationships, themes and sources of information involved?

Does it construct versions of history that people want to see, or does it wish to enhance the depth of human understanding, by presenting contradictory and problematic issues?

Does it realize that the interrelation of memory with objects traces economic, social and emotional patterns?

Does it tend to tell a closed fixed story to be absorbed by an undifferentiated public, or does it recognize the right of different audiences to carry and produce deferent alternative meanings, within the 'cognitive', 'social' and 'dream' spaces that museums embody (Annis, 1987)?

Does it recognize that the past is, both, remembered and forgotten, represented and produced, by both history and museums?

The use of oral history could enhance museum audiences' historical understanding by encouraging museums to present the past through open-ended explorations, which are comfortable with plural, alternative and even contradictory histories, and which offer the possibility for multiple, alternative readings (Horne, 1989). Instead of offering closed answers to questions that visitors may have not asked, by presenting fixed truths through closed narratives, oral history can help museums raise fertile, interesting and stimulating questions, which can allow visitors follow different alternative paths for approaching the past in historical terms.

5. Can Oral History facilitate our dialogue with objects, in general, and in historical terms, in particular? Can it allow a dialogue between different people in the present and different people of the past?

Going back to our main question, we could argue that oral history in museums cannot make objects speak. It can facilitate or prevent our dialogue with objects, especially if we aim to get involved in such a dialogue in historical terms. For, among others, as Lee (2005) argues 'history is counter-intuitive. This may seem a strange argument, given that history is often understood as being more 'common-sense' than other subjects. [...] For History the past is not available to be a touchstone. What we say about the past is a construction more or less justified on the basis of evidence, and the

'real past' is *regulative*, playing no *methodological* role in history. This means that students have to abandon their 'default' common-sense understandings to make any sense of how History works.' Thus, a basic aim of contemporary approaches to history education in schools or in museums is to enable students to learn how to go beyond everyday assumptions and preconceptions - built, among others, by the broad public use of history in contemporary world - by allowing them understand what is History and how History works.

Because, among others, the word 'history' in many languages, as in Modern Greek, means both history and story, and it is used both as content and as a scientific process, both as the 'real past' and as the 'historical past', as our narratives or knowledge about the past. (It is interesting to mention, here, that the etymology of the Ancient Greek word 'Historia', relates the word 'history' to the notion of deep knowledge based on investigation.)

Moreover, History and Oral History, in particular, as scientific processes, should be distinguished from written, material and oral sources, which require interpretation to become historical evidence about the past. On this basis we could argue that oral testimonies in museums cannot by themselves enable visitors, and especially children, to develop historical knowledge, thinking and understanding, unless they are presented within a museological, historical and educational context which implies a) that sources have to be interpreted in historical terms to become historical evidence about the past; b) that objects, images and oral testimonies carry messages beyond the restricted meanings taken from them in any personal, social or museological interpretation (Kavanagh, 1996:39) and c) that we have to 'read' the museum as a narrative in which objects, oral testimonies, images, tangible and intangible heritage, are fitted according to museums' closed or open interpretations.

Epilogue

Oral history is generally regarded as the cornerstone of contemporary history and therefore it is accepted as a 'good thing'. But it is not enough to use oral history; we should carefully examine how we use it. We should also investigate if and how different groups of people and in different environments handle oral history in historical terms and how they can be encouraged to progress from one level of historical understanding to another.

Moreover, as Lowenthal (1985: 168-273) argues, and recent research results imply (Nakou, 2001), contextual displays of objects do not only influence our visual historical images, and written labels and any oral information do not only influence our verbal images; they influence the way we see and realize things. They ‘orchestrate and at times dominate the view.’ Therefore, ‘to be temporarily ‘lost’ is often better than to be over-informed.’

Oral history can help visitors approach museums’ objects and themes, but it cannot by itself guarantee the historical quality and depth of this approach, because, among others, it may limit potentially endless alternative meanings of objects and historical themes. This seems to be especially crucial for young children, because from the age of 4 to 11 years they seem to have a photographic type of memory and great ability to memorize information, even information they do not understand.

Learning in the museum environment could be enhanced by carefully observing and listening to things, important skills that museums could aim to encourage, especially within our fast moving virtual reality. As Liakos (2004:60-61) suggests: ‘besides handling cultural heritage, according to our needs, we can leave a door open, so that we, who are specialists, and people, who are not, can listen to messages for which we had not thought to ask. [...] Fewer and fewer people seem really to enjoy looking at objects in museums, to stay without speaking in front of museum objects and archaeological sites and to carefully listen to their messages. Fewer and fewer people escape from the way we choose to show them cultural heritage. [...] The problem is not *what* we expect to hear, but *how* we can hear that that we do not expect to hear. For this reason, we need to question our self-evident categories that organize research or reading, archives or museums. Not only once, but as constant deconstruction. But questioning the obvious requires standing away from our selves and self-questioning. Let us see things from opposite points of view; here is the educational value of carefully listening. In this way, what we call ‘cultural heritage’ could not only serve as a positive affirmation, but it could gain a critical dimension as well.’

Can oral history in museums enable visitors to realize that meaning is as much in the silences as in the words used, as much in the objects, the images and the narratives they are presented with as in themselves?

Can museums enable their audiences to recognize that oral history neither offers a direct access to the ‘real’ past nor to the ‘historical’ past, but offers recorded

memories to enable the processes of historical enquiry, understanding and interpretation?

But using oral sources as historical evidence requires both knowledge and a systematic critical approach to enquiry. As Kavanagh (2000:159-160) argues ‘better knowledge of the past depends on how we are exposed to that past. A systematic and critical approach depends on the intellectual freedom and rigour we are encouraged or enabled to develop, as well as the span of histories to which we are exposed...

Finding a useful path through the histories presented needs some introduction to different ways of thinking about the past. It also needs an appreciation of primary sources so that the dominant or alternative narratives can be checked, validated or refuted. [...] It is the role of museums to question these stories (rooted in myths about the past and issues of identity) and to promote a more critical awareness of the past.’

The use of oral history in museums can be destructive or constructive for the development of audiences’ historical knowledge, thinking and understanding, depending on the sensitivity, depth of understanding and scholarship museums apply. This parameter becomes crucial for contemporary museums, because by using oral history in sensitive ways, they can enable their different audiences to approach the past in meaningful ways. Moreover, by using a wide spectrum of sources - objects, pictures and moving electronic images, written texts, oral narratives, smells, sounds, songs and voices – museums can allow a multi-sensory approach of the past and provoke a live and critical historical dialogue about the past.

But education in informal contexts is a complex and hard to grasp process. It does not only require other means of planning, measurement and evaluation, but a very different set of questions, as well.

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