Beyond The Comparison between Archive and Exhibition: Textual and Non-textual Communication in Museums

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INTRODUCTION

In the tourism concepts represented by "archive" and "exhibition" are, in fact, not rarely discussed in both museum practices and academic research. In terms of museum practices, the Pitt Rivers Museum (the PRM) is an exemplification of "archive" mode, which encourages visitors to explore, like the experience of visiting a library. By contrast, some museum may narrate according to geographical and chronological orders to tell story in a "temporally linear and spatially intimate" way, which offers an "exhibition" mode. In terms of academic research, what underlies the two concepts is more likely to be the study of objects and their meaning and value, which deepens a series of missions like "assembly, preservation and display". Objects are raw materials to be organised in some specific manner. And those manners have been embedded with specific thoughts, which were products of curators learning about "object biography". It should be noted that researchers can glimpse history through objects, just as truth can manifest itself. This is the task that "archive" in the museum should be. However, the "exhibition" mode is to express thoughts and messages from a wider perspective or even to reconstruct histories and counter-memorial facts in a reverse way [1].

DESCRIPTION

The way of manipulating objects in curation has been put into Roland Barthes' theories of syntagm and system, which interpret the difference between "archive" and "exhibition" modes from a perspective of taking objects as the minimal unit in structural narrative. Nevertheless, there is another perspective on understanding how objects facilitate the meaning-making process in museums, namely, using the "double meaning" of objects introduced by Baudrillard to excavate their nature in two aspects of value: "Atmospheric value" and "symbolic value". This can help explain the transformation of objects' meaning. Although some collections in the PRM are purely historical ritual objects, others are artefacts with everyday practical functions that, when incorporated into the group of antiques, lose their practical function and become symbolic of their historicalness. The transformation of their meanings, under the supervision of time, is a primary entry point for visitors to explore those collections' anthropological and archaeological value [2].

Overall, those studies that concentrate on the comparison between "archive" and "exhibition" modes argue from a perspective that is outside of objects. Abundant structuralism-based approaches have been applied to guide curatorial methodologies. No matter the structural narrative proposed by Barthes and Bal or the syntagm and system referred to in studying the PRM, comparison is made by looking at the outside properties of objects. It means that they haven't unfolded the concept of objects, while Baudrillard's theory provides an inner perspective of objects, expanding our understanding of the representation of "archive" and "exhibition" experiences and more importantly, how the two modes communicate differently [3].

Relying on theoretical analogy to depict the logic and nature of the two modes has laid a foundation for describing communication in museums, which has been illustrated in the article "Archive or exhibition? A comparative case study of the real and virtual Pitt Rivers Museum", such as how communication happens, how to understand it and how to distinguish differences between its components. Besides, many scholars have already contributed to some similar aspects, which can be broadly classified as studies in regard to textual and non-textual communications. The textual emphasises the analysis of the structure of communication from a structural linguistic perspective, while the non-textual seeks to explicate it from angles beyond certain aspects of structuralism, such as phenomenological ideas absorbed since the late 20th century [4].

The textual format is to say that curation can be compared to novel-writing, which may contain linear or post-modernist narrative, such as what Barthes calls the "readerly" and the "writerly" texts to classify literary works. But there also exist some other formats of communication beyond the description of textual format, namely, non-textual. This refers to visitors' bodily perception and embodiment in museums. No matter how museums may change in the future or how curatorial methods

develop, the receiver-the human body of those dynamic and unpredictable museum contexts will not change [5].

CONCLUSION

If the concentration of studying the language in museums could be transferred to the relationship between museums and human bodies, the analysis would be easier than separating the language in museums into so many branches affected by multiple forces. Thereby, it is meaningful to embed phenomenology into museum studies, to resolve problems that linguistic models cannot, to facilitate a way to understand communication in museums and to adapt to the coming digital era.

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