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IMPOSSIBLE

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Contents

The next issue will feature:

Interpretation as Entertainment

For more information about the Association for Heritage Interpretation [AHI], send an email to admin@ahi.org.uk or write to the Administrator, AHI, 54 Balmoral Road, Gillingham, Kent ME7 4PG. Tel: +44 (0)560 274 7737. Individuals can join AHI as Associate or Student Members or can apply to be elected, subject to qualifications and experience, as Full Members or Fellows. Businesses can join as Corporate Members with the same rights as individual members. All members receive *Interpretation Journal*, and other mailings. They can participate in AHI events and (if paid-up) can vote at the Annual General Meeting. Printed in UK © AHI 2016.

Foreword

'On our way to the impossible, we might just find something eminently doable.'
National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

Setting ourselves challenges that are apparently impossible might seem like an absurd enterprise. If it is out of reach, unachievable or frankly plain ridiculous then why even attempt to do it?

Recently, however, I heard from psychologist and magician Dr Gustav Kuhn (at the Also Festival, 2016) that the definition of magic is experiencing the impossible. As interpreters, I think we all want to create something magical, so in this edition of the Journal we explore the difficult, the complex and the impossible. I hope that within it you will discover new ways of thinking about interpretation and find that difficult situations and impossible challenges can actually help us to improve. I would argue that the 'impossible' encourages risk taking, fosters invention and ultimately leads to new paradigms in managing and interpreting our heritage.

To me one of the more 'impossible' aspects of our practice is knowing our audience and giving them what they want – which isn't always what they think they want. In this regard the interpreter is a signpost, rather than a weather vane; an inventor with a deep understanding of people's psychology across ages and across cultures. Now that's not so impossible is it?

So what should an interpretation journal on the impossible contain? My starting point was a series of questions which I've faced over the years.

- Can interpretive experiences actually change behaviour and inspire audiences to act? (Charlotte Pratley)
- What motivates audiences to visit 'dark tourism' sites? How should we interpret them? And how does interpretation work alongside memorialisation? (Dr Philip Stone)
- How adaptable are our interpretive planning methods for creating new museums in other parts of the world? (Dr Karen Exell)
- How can we successfully reach out and attract audiences who currently do not visit our heritage sites? (Annette Simpson)
- Can you plan, design and build an exhibition in six weeks? (Emily Hall)

In addition to addressing the impossible, in this edition we continue to debate key interpretive issues. Here we feature John Verveka and his take on whether interpretation is becoming stagnant, lacking new ideas and approaches. If this article strikes a chord or fires you up, please get in touch.

For me it raises some key points on whether there is a lack of thought, leadership and training in interpretation today, and it touches on the importance of global perspectives in interpretive practice – all subjects we as a profession have to wrestle with.

We are delighted to have an interview with film director, Peter Webber. Peter is best known as the director of *Girl with a Pearl Earring* but has numerous feature films and documentaries under his belt. He has also worked for museums and heritage institutions and so has a unique insight into the power of film as a communication tool, the role of moving image in heritage and the relationship between cinema and exhibitions.

The next Journal is all about entertainment, and I am looking forward to exploring the fun, playful, wonderful and entertaining side of interpretation.

I would welcome contributions to show how today leisure and learning are colliding in new and profound ways – a rebirth of edutainment perhaps? I am also looking to showcase the blockbuster, the multi-dimensional and the interactive alongside the participation, drama and 'hard-fun' that underpins many of today's heritage experiences.

Eric Langham
Founder, Barker Langham

Website Members' Section
The AHI website has a 'members only' section full of useful resources for the practising heritage interpreter. This is the place where you will find back issues of *Interpretation Journal*, conference papers, best-practice guidelines and a host of other materials relevant to professional development. We are adding more resources all the time and will publicise them in the AHI e-News as well as on the website.

You need to be a member of the AHI and register with the website to access this section. To register, you will require your AHI membership number (shown at the top of your e-News) and the email address your copy of the e-News is sent to.

You then enter your membership number and the common case-sensitive password to log in. The password will change with each issue of the journal and the password is **Impossible2016**.

The resources link is http://www.ahi.org.uk/www/resources.

News & Views

Since Spring, AHI and the Trustees have been busy on a number of projects and activities to improve the service we offer members and to promote AHI within the heritage sector.

Advocacy and liaison

We had an enhanced presence at the Museums + Heritage Show in May. This saw us with a stall, table in the Ask the Expert area, speakers in the Design Theatre and sponsorship of the Learning Theatre. Thank you to all members who volunteered their time to tell the show's attendees about AHI and to provide their expertise for interpretation enquiries. We received lots of positive interest in both AHI and the profession.

We have begun liaising with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and with the Association for Independent Museums (AIM) with a view to supporting and increasing interpretive good practice in HLF projects and for AIM members respectively.

Training

AHI has delivered a successful range one-day training events on interpretive planning, Bannockburn Visitor Centre and using mobile apps in remote landscapes that received great feedback from attendees. Our next training day is on evaluation in November, and we will run a similar series of events next year. AHI is delighted to be a partner with Group for Education in Museums (GEM) in the Learning and Sharing Centre to develop an intermediary interpretation course for museum staff. We will also turn our attention to how we can deliver an enhanced training programme for non-interpreters working within the field of interpretation, for early career interpreters and interpreters requiring ongoing continuing professional development.

Awards

The AHI 2017 Discover Heritage Awards are now open for entries. The online entry form can be found on www.ahi.org.uk. Winners will be announced and presented with their awards at a gala ceremony to be held during the joint AHI-Interpret Europe conference. You have until the end of February to enter.

The Annual Conference and AGM

By the time you read this we will have held our 2016 Annual Conference. Over three days in Belfast we looked at different perspectives on how interpretation can change behaviour. We hope that you all gained insights useful for your own practice from the workshop, speakers and site visits, as well as having the chance to swap ideas and opinions with your fellow interpreters. We hope the AGM was a good opportunity to find out more about recent developments within AHI and ask questions of your Trustees. The conference organisers now turn their attention to next year's joint AHI-Interpret Europe conference to be held in Scotland during October 2017. The theme of the conference will focus on the natural world and landscapes.

Bill Bevan
Chair, AHI

Reviews

REPORTING RESEARCH

Philip Ryland focuses upon the research into the training needs of guides with the results discussed with reference to older, but related studies.

The challenge for any organisation offering guided interpretive activities is keeping their guides up to date, not only with the resource itself but also in the techniques of interpretation as well as the broader aspects of their role. Indeed, over the last twenty years, numerous studies have focused upon the training needs of guides in terms of their personal and professional development as well as their on-site role. The research conducted has also offered a commentary on the value and nature of in-house skills training, the alternatives of using external courses, accreditation and certification schemes as well as experienced consultants, trainers or managers from other organisations.

This article reports on a recent study by Yamada (2014) focusing upon the training needs of guides in Japan. Its results are compared with other studies, including the work of Weiler & Walker (2014), Christie & Mason (2003), Weiler & Ham (2002) and Ballantyne & Hughes (2001).

Yamada (2014) initially interviewed 24 guides, coded the responses and used the resulting data to inform the design of a questionnaire which was completed by 54 guides in Japan. A 5-point Likert scale was used, where 'want to learn very much' (scored 5) and 'do not want to learn at all' (scored 1). The resulting data identified the top responses for the future training needs of these guides as; 'the management of interpretation' (x=4.70), 'understanding the audience' (x=4.67), 'enhancing inter-personal relations' (x=4.65), 'improving communication skills' (x=4.61), 'design of guided walks' and 'evaluation of interpretation' (x=4.57), 'risk management' (x=4.44) and 'an improved knowledge of the resource' (x=4.15). These responses closely aligned with the work of Weiler & Walker (2014) who also asked about areas requiring support, for the 68 guides who participated in their training programme in Tonga, 'enhancements to the interpretive experience' was mentioned by 57%, 'risk management' by 50% and 'improved interaction' by 18%.

Ballantyne & Hughes (2001) used a pre- and post-training questionnaire on 65 ecotour guides in Queensland, Western Australia, when asked about the role of the guide, the responses (based upon a 5-point Likert scale) revealed 'programme content' (x=4.7), 'audience awareness' (x=4.6) and 'use of interpretive techniques' (x=3.5) as the key priorities. Christie & Mason (2003) commented specifically upon the importance of guides understanding the 'varied needs of their audience' (p11) but also in discussing the role of the guide in detail, they suggested that they are there to 'facilitate learning as well as to entertain' (p9), indeed they suggested that a good guide should encourage their audience 'to see the world differently' (p9).

A further element of Yamada's research (2014) focused upon the main problems guides encountered whilst delivering their activities, 39 guides responding to this question. A 5-point Likert scale was again used with 5 being 'very problematic' and 1 'not at all problematic'. The most common responses were; 'insufficient opportunities for evaluation' (x=4.11), 'a lack of experience from other sites'/'lack of interaction with other interpreters' (x=3.97 & 3.84 respectively), 'lack of research on the resources to be interpreted' (x=3.61), 'insufficient training' (x=3.61) and 'lack of feedback' (x=3.47). Some of the actual comments recorded included:

> *'I'm working alone' and 'I don't get to experience interpreters outside of this site'* (p49);
>
> *'I don't know how to evaluate the effects of my interpretation... so I haven't evaluated'* (p49);
>
> and also:
>
> *'I wish someone would take the time to give me feedback on my daily performances'* (p54).

Understanding how to evaluate is vitally important, Christie & Mason (2003) talk about the skill of 'critical reflection' (p12) which when undertaken in a supportive way, they suggest can be hugely beneficial to the personal and professional development of the guide. They explain that it should be conducted using a journal or note taking, through the use of case studies, external consultants and trainers or, through group discussion (p13).

Ballantyne & Hughes (2001) asked their ecotour guides to identify any areas requiring further development, 90% identified at least one skills weakness in 'interpretive techniques', 28% in 'subject knowledge' and 15% in 'audience awareness' (p6). Some of the specific responses included; 'encouraging visitors to interact with each other' (40%), 'involving visitors through the use of questions' (23%), 'using models and diagrams' (23%), 'public speaking and communication skills' (18%), 'developing themes for tour content' (9%), 'using props and/or technology' (6%) and 'interacting with visitors from other cultures' (6%) (p6). The questionnaire of Yamada (2014) also explored broader subject areas and skills which their guides felt would be useful, five broad categories emerged, namely 'product knowledge', 'interpretive skills', 'understanding of audiences', 'supplemental skills' and 'miscellaneous' (p49). Supplemental skills included 'managerial skills' (13%), 'risk management' (7.4%), 'problem solving' (7.4%) and 'ethics' (5.6%). The 'interpretive skills' identified included 'better communication skills' (38.9%), 'arts, performance and music' (22.2%), 'broader knowledge of interpretive techniques' (18.5%) and 'public speaking' (18.5%).

The work of the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI) on the Grundtvig In-Herit Project in collaboration with Interpret Europe will provide a clear set of standards for the interpretive profession from which can easily be derived a set of competencies specifically for guided interpretive activities.

In considering the training of guides, Ballantyne & Hughes (2001) recommended that a basic training programme should cover resource-based knowledge, risk management, interpretation techniques and communication skills. They suggested that this resource-based knowledge should be delivered through in-house training but that external agencies and/or consultants should deliver much of the core training associated with interpretive techniques, communication skills, risk management and most importantly of all, evaluation. Christie & Mason (2003) suggested that at the heart of effective interpretive communication lies 'enthusiasm, confidence and good delivery' (p5), they remind us that a training programme should therefore do 'much more than just offer skills development' (p10). To this end, Weiler & Walker (2014) report on their in-house training programme which they developed and which focused upon seven areas of guide practice as listed below.

1. Introduction to tourism (understanding visitors, their expectations and needs from on-site experiences).
2. Tour planning (logical flow, a story with a beginning, middle and end).
3. Interpretive guiding (using the IT-REAL principles).
4. Group management (observation, leadership, non-verbal communications).
5. Sustainability (contemporary perspective and goals – the 'take-home' bit).
6. Resource and site knowledge.
7. Risk management, operational skills etc. (p94-95).

They used the acronym 'IT-REAL' to remind guides of the key interpretive principles of good guiding, namely; Involving (sensory and active), Thematic, Relevant, Enjoyable (through diversity of experience), Engaging (emotion and empathy), Accurate and Logical (p95).

Looking beyond initial guide training, Weiler & Ham (2002) explored the importance of succession planning through the concept of 'training the trainers', such that individual guides were trained who could then build capacity on site by providing training and development needs for the next generation of trainees. They argued that the benefits of this included providing follow-up training, on-going support for queries and problems as well as establishing longer-term professional development systems through one-to-one mentoring arrangements. They also discussed the advantages of groups of guides being brought together from different locations such that the shared reflection enhanced the learning and development experience. In their study, the trainers were selected based upon a number of criteria including their guiding experience, establishing a diversity of the guide pool in terms of age, gender and location as well as their individual potential as a mentor/trainer (personality, skills, availability) (p63).

Christie & Mason (2003) agreed with this longer-term strategy suggesting that it takes time to develop a good guide, through the careful study of other interpreters in action, the gaining of personal experience and regular training and skills development (p6). Weiler & Walker (2014) also reinforced the importance of guides experiencing interpretation and interacting with guides at other sites.

The work of the Association for Heritage Interpretation (AHI) on the Grundtvig In-Herit Project in collaboration with Interpret Europe will provide a clear set of standards for the interpretive profession from which can easily be derived a set of competencies specifically for guided interpretive activities. It is anticipated that once published, together with the interpretive guide training already being delivered by Interpret Europe, these will lead to the refinement of training materials which should help to inform in-house as well as off-site training for guides. In addition, a best practice guide on the principles of the evaluation of interpretation is being published by the AHI in summer 2016.

Dr. Philip Ryland (MAHI) teaches tourism and is also Associate Dean (Student Experience) in the Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University.

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

MUSEUM OF SIAM BANGKOK, THAILAND

Sarah Court looks at how the fun of questioning history and identity are tackled in the Museum of Siam.

Story! Inc

Questions prompt visitors to think for themselves from the minute they arrive at the welcome desk. The roong *(rainbow) then flows throughout the museum, taking people to discover the answers*

NDMI

Visitors are involved in exploring identity and diversity through the insertion of people-shaped mirrors within this display of portrait faces

'Our challenge in designing the National Discovery Museum of Thailand was to create an experience where visitors could understand how the identity of Thai people, their customs, beliefs and civilizations has developed over millennia of continuous habitation in this place.

And that long, continuous heritage led us to think of a river, a bolt of silk, a rainbow (or roong*), with no beginning and no end, as a metaphor to show that Thailand always was and always will be – right here.' Museum of Siam Design Concept* (http://www.museumofsiamproject.com/portfolio/#/about/)

A new approach

The minute you walk into the Museum of Siam, you know you are going to get something different, something exciting. From the thought-provoking questions written large above the welcome desk to the introduction given by staff who invite you to touch everything and take as many photos as you want. More an interpretation centre than a traditional museum, the story of Thailand is told over 3,000m² of displays and interactives that sweep you along in what is arguably one of the world's best interpretive experiences. And one that demonstrates that the Asia Pacific region has a lot to inspire European interpreters who want to get people engaged in discovering the past.

The Museum of Siam is an exciting experiment within a fairly traditional museum scene in Thailand. Launched by a government agency known as the National Discovery Museum Institute (NDMI), it was intended to be a prototype for showing what can be done when learning is intentionally made fun and how this can engage a new generation of Thais. Indeed, young Thais are the core audience the museum seeks to cater for, allowing them to explore national and individual identity through a series of historical and cultural themes. However, the focus on exploratory learning – and bilingual content – means that international visitors can also gain a rich and complex understanding of the country and where it fits into the wider region. Currently undergoing renovation 10 years after its original launch, visitors can expect to enjoy the museum again next year.

A magic recipe

The exhibition concept was developed by a consortium made up of New Zealand's Story! Inc together with Thai design company Pico, supported by a strong client team from the NDMI. A collaborative process also saw input from various international and national specialists and companies. This blend of the best of international approaches to experiential learning rooted in deep understanding of the national context is a magic recipe.

The choice to name the museum after the country's former name of 'Siam' was a decision made early on by the client. It underlines an approach that recognises a more diverse and pluralistic society that goes beyond a 'Thailand' inhabited by Thais and explores the influences of neighbouring countries at this crossroads

Sarah Court

What food is typically Thai? Displays include street food, tuk tuks and other popular culture

Sarah Court

The clean bright graphics of the pictograms used for the museum logo and signage become art in this installation that leads visitors up to the upper floor of exhibits

in south-east Asia. Yet such messages are given a light touch, such as the display of Thai cuisine that starts by asking visitors what food is typically Thai and finishes by showing how many ingredients and culinary traditions have been adopted from elsewhere and then adapted. Women and children are represented throughout the galleries, again with the same lightness that gives the impression of gaining a well-rounded view of the country without being forced into a politically-correct agenda.

Gentle surprises

The sequence of galleries could have risked becoming a basic chronology, as the visit spans prehistory to the present day (with a nod to the future). Yet there is more a feeling of a science centre to this museum and the generous range of media employed allows regular changes of pace that keep the visitor's attention throughout. Exhibits include a judicious selection of objects, beautifully illustrated panels, models, videos, costumes, musical instruments, well-maintained functioning interactives and even completely reconstructed scenes that you can enter, such as a street food stand or a US-style diner. In addition – and perhaps more importantly – the use of questions as prompts throughout keeps the visitor's attention, while the interpretation gently surprises with well-timed quantities of tiered information.

The delightful museum logo deserves special note: the bright red pictogram of a man in a frog-like position (*Kon Kob Daeng*) is the NDMI's institutional logo and variations on this theme are successfully used on signage throughout the building. In particular, the cascade of bright pictograms down the stairwell is a truly beautiful way of encouraging people up the stairs, turning the wayfinding constraints of the historic building in which the museum is housed into an invitation to explore.

Past, present and future

The final stop on the tour is a room dedicated to the Thailand of tomorrow. As visitors enter their shadow is cast upon a big screen in front of them and thought bubbles appear out of their shadow heads, provoking new questions on leaving about the country's future and what role the individual can play in shaping that future. It is this moment that perhaps holds the key inspiration for the interpretation of other heritage places: starting with questions and then helping people find their own answers is the holy grail of interpretation and never easy to achieve. The Museum of Siam should be congratulated for managing to do so in a way that even after the visitor has left the building they will still be reflecting on Thailand's past, present and future.

The delightful museum logo deserves special note: the bright red pictogram of a man in a frog-like position (Kon Kob Daeng) is the NDMI's institutional logo and variations on this theme are successfully used on signage throughout the building.

Acknowledgements:
Many thanks to James McLean of Story! Inc for his insights into the exhibition concept development process.

Project information and credits
Project: Museum of Siam
Website: www.museumofsiamproject.com
Client: National Discovery Museum Institute
Design team: Story! Inc and Pico (Thailand) Public Company Limited Consortium
Budget: 150 million baht

Sarah Court is an archaeologist and heritage specialist based in Italy.

FILM REVIEW

Colin Sterling reviews *Innocence of Memories* (Grant Gee, 2015),[1] a film that explores with hypnotic intensity the relationship between memory and the places and objects that surround us.

In 2012, Orham Pamuk opened *The Museum of Innocence* in his home city of Istanbul. Gathering together ordinary objects of Turkish life, the museum tells the fictional story of Kemal and Füsun, a young couple whose doomed romance Pamuk chronicles in a 2008 novel of the same name. Museum and book exist in close symbiosis here. As Pamuk describes, 'I wanted to write a novel whose form resembled the objects in a museum, so that when you wandered around the museum, you would see the exhibits and remember the novel'. Now, British filmmaker Grant Gee has added a further interpretive layer to Pamuk's compelling literary/museum project, collaborating with the author on *Innocence of Memories*, a film that explores with hypnotic intensity the relationship between memory and the places and objects that surround us.

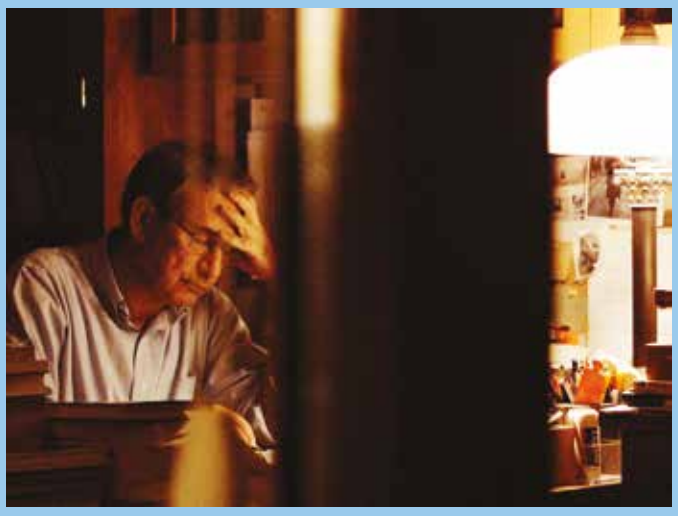
Taking Pamuk himself as a starting point, the film begins in the author's apartment, overlooking Istanbul by night. We then move through the streets of the city; a restless camera on the trail of a story half-told. At the museum's entrance we meet Pamuk again, this time in the form of a disembodied voice on the audio guide. It is here that the narrative begins to unfold, woven together from fragments of speech, individual objects, passages from the novel, historic photographs and the very streets of the city. The film's momentum – its urgent melancholy – emerges from this sense of moving through both space and time. This provides an allegory for the museum experience as a whole, the greatest happiness of which – Pamuk tells us – comes from 'seeing time turning into space'.

Our guide through this intricate web is a minor character from the book, fleshed out here with a backstory written by Pamuk. This gives rise to a misleading multivocality, with three narratives overlapping, each crafted by the author. When the film ends in a room at the top of the museum – a room in which, we are told, Kemal narrated the story of his love for Füsun to Pamuk – the story has turned in on itself like a hall of mirrors, never allowing the viewer to fully isolate artistic invention from personal memory.

Away from the monumental spaces of heritage, *Innocence of Memories* implores us to look at things and places anew: silent corners of the city; discarded cigarette butts; the wrecked vehicles in a breakers' yard. 'There is a story to tell every time people and objects meet', implores Pamuk, who is more interested in the mysterious details of the old and the battered than the carefully laid out spaces of a traditional museum. Moreover, the city itself is a museum. But while we meet various 'real life' characters from Istanbul throughout the film, including a taxi driver, a ferry operator, a ragpicker and a photographer, it is Pamuk who takes centre stage. Most notably, we find him on TV screens furtively glimpsed through shop windows. In this way he is placed in the city, becoming part of its topography. And just as Pamuk's novels have shaped how others see and remember Istanbul, so the film creates a new stratum of interpretation – part history, part biography, part fiction.

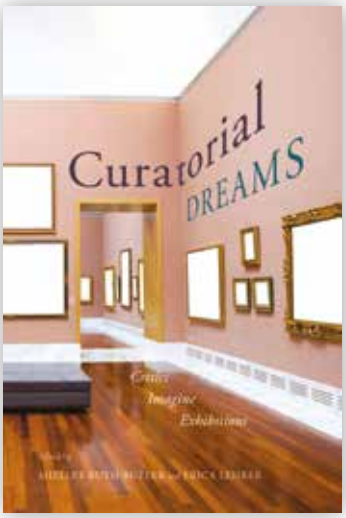
Earlier this year Pamuk gave the keynote address at the International Council of Museums' conference in Milan. Outlining his own modest manifesto for museums, the author suggested that rather than represent states or societies, museums must speak to the humanity of individuals. While the 'innocence' of this project becomes harder to maintain in the context of Turkey's recent upheavals, Pamuk's philosophy is played out to beguiling effect in this film. Ultimately, *Innocence of Memories* speaks to the power of the museum as a space of subjective exploration – an often puzzling realm in which the slippery nature of the human condition might be grasped, if only for a moment.

Colin Sterling is a Project Curator at the Royal Institute of British Architects and lectures on photography, film and memory at University College London.



1. *Innocence of Memories* is available to buy on DVD, and to watch online via iTunes and the BFI Player.

BOOK REVIEW



CURATORIAL DREAMS, CRITICS IMAGINE EXHIBITIONS

Shelley Ruth Butler & Erica Lehrer (eds),
McGill-Queen's University Press, Canada, 2016

What if museum critics were challenged to envision their own exhibitions? In *Curatorial Dreams*, fourteen authors from disciplines across the social sciences and humanities propose exhibitions inspired by their academic research and critical concerns to creatively put theory into practice.

The editors of this dream compilation are university anthropologists based in Montreal, Canada but their own academic work, and that of their fellow contributors, spans the globe and is concerned with the interplay and contested relationships of different cultures. The various contributors offer innovative theoretical projects, carefully devised for a specific setting in which to translate critical academic theory about society, culture, and history into accessible imagined exhibitions. The proposed locations range from named museums, scientific institutions and art galleries to an airport and a hospital. Geographically we move from North and South America to Australia, the Caribbean, Europe and South Africa. Essays explore political and practical constraints, imaginative freedom and experiment with critical, participatory and socially relevant exhibition design.

The contributions contain many thoughtful and creative insights into how some particularly sensitive and complex issues that mainstream museums tend to ignore or avoid might be tackled. But how useful are these ideas outside the academic bubble of scholarly discourse? Butler and Lehrer are well aware of what they call the 'theory-practice gap' but argue that their aim is to 'enrich dialogue between academics and museum practitioners, and to develop an understanding of the particular 'interface' between specialised scholarly information and the diverse publics that exhibitions assemble'.

Curatorial dreaming, the writers claim, is an important exercise for the museological imagination because 'it inhabits an in-between space, free from the constraints that real exhibitions regularly face on account of politics, hegemonic templates for presenting culture, available technologies, bureaucracy and funding'.

Yet dreams rarely become a reality. Transformative ideas and new approaches tend not to emerge in museum exhibitions and presentations except at the margins. Even the suggested dichotomy between 'curator practitioners' and 'academic scholars' that this dreamy 'thinking outside the box' might supposedly bridge ignores the important role of designers, educators, interpreters and, above all, audience participation and engagement. Some of these dreams can begin to look a little rarified and self indulgent, a long way from the actuality of exhibition production. Who are they for?

Neither academics nor traditional curators are necessarily the best people to communicate ideas to a wide audience through an exhibition. They need help. Their natural inclination is towards using text rather than images (never a good start for an exhibition, where a strong visual and immersive appeal is usually an essential hook). Whatever curatorial dreaming might be indulged in, an exhibition may not be the most effective medium to convey a new approach to a difficult subject unless it is created by a team with multiple expertise and communication skills. Much of the thinking here does not get beyond the first base of wordy intellectual argument, which underlines the limitations of so much academic debate. All of these drab monochrome dreams need the colour and visual flair of a sensitive designer and interpreter to turn them into an effective display, whatever the subject.

Oliver Green is an independent curator and historian, and a research fellow of the London Transport Museum.

Typology

One of my favourite interpretive devices is...

soundscapes in exhibitions!

Stuart Frost's choice of interpretive media was selected with this edition's theme – interpreting the impossible – at the forefront of his mind.

Ambient sound in an exhibition, heritage or historic building can be a very powerful interpretive tool. The spoken word, soundscapes and well chosen pieces of music can be exceptionally effective at creating atmosphere, engendering emotional engagement and signalling narrative change. However, ambient sound can also provoke strong polarised reactions and generate starkly contrasting opinions.

I'm going to focus on sound in special exhibitions, partly due to space constraints, but also because I can draw on extensive formative and summative evaluation from my work at the British Museum. This means that hopefully I can offer thoughts and tentative conclusions based on visitor feedback rather than just my personal opinion.

A longer history

The use of soundtracks has a longer history that might be supposed. Visitors to the *Treasures of Tutankhamun* at Seattle Art Museum in 1978, for example, experienced an exhibition soundtrack created by Professor Ali Jihad Racy. Racy used traditional instruments to create an evocation of what ancient Egyptian music may have been like. Compositions were used to create an appropriate mood for the relevant section of the exhibition.

The use of sound in special exhibitions has become ubiquitous in recent years; clearly exhibition developers believe sound has an important role to play. This view is reinforced by my experience of formative exhibition evaluation where visitors frequently cite sound as something they'd like to be included, to help them immerse themselves in an exhibition.

Contemporary practice

Sometimes the imperative to include sound or music – like the British Museum's Akan Drum or the game-changing *David Bowie is...* exhibition at the V&A – is so obvious that its omission would be perverse. In most instances, the use of sound in exhibitions is less central and confined to only one or two moments. Ambient sound can be subtlety deployed to great effect.

A personal favourite was the soundscape in *Devotion by Design* at the National Gallery. The show's central room featured a series of altarpieces displayed in an evocation of their original devotional context, lit by 'candlelight' as they would have been seen in a church. Unseen speakers filled the room with sounds recorded in Westminster Cathedral, sometimes just a cough or the sound of chairs being moved. Labels were located in one location away from the works intentionally, encouraging the visitor to look and feel, applying the knowledge they'd accumulate earlier rather than reading a text alongside an object.

The recent *Russia and the Arts: The Age of Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky* at the National Portrait Gallery included in one room short audio extracts from symphonies written by some of the sitters represented in the portraits. For some visitors, this will have been a reminder of the great achievements of Russia's composers, for others it may well have been the first time they'd heard a work by a particular composer. In either case, the music was being used as an integral part of the interpretive framework, to help evoke the world to which these great cultural figures belonged.

The average dwell-time in this small exhibition focussed on a single object, the Akan drum, was around 6 minutes, almost exactly the same length as the display's audio-visual soundtrack

The use of audio in the introduction to Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam *was cited by many visitors as a highlight*

In examples such as these, where sound is not present throughout, where audio is thoughtfully used and the connection between the subject and sound is so strong, the case in favour of including audio is surely compelling. However, despite the best intentions, sound can be counterproductive. If sound isn't choreographed or rotated it can become repetitive, inappropriate music can irritate and distract, and sound levels can be difficult to get right. Where several audio installations are included, they can merge into each other creating a constant cacophony. Sometimes soundtracks are poorly interpreted; there is no explanation of what the soundtrack is or why it has been included. Thought also needs to be given to access for visitors with hearing impairments. Sound requires as much research, planning and interpretation as any other element of an exhibition, but it doesn't always get the attention it needs.

Divergent opinions: music or muzak?

'More music would have been nice... it creates more mood and atmosphere...'

'I didn't hear any music... I didn't notice any music at all'

'The muzak is incredibly irritating and detracted significantly from my enjoyment.'

The preceding three quotes are all comments from visitors referring to the use of music in special exhibitions at the British Museum. In fact, despite the divergent views, all three refer to the same show. Qualitative summative evaluation usually captures a range of frustratingly diverse responses. Most visitors seem to welcome sound, some visitors don't remember it afterwards, and a few visitors seem to really, really hate it. Quantitative data, however, is usually overwhelmingly in favour.

The three quotes refer to the *Hajj: journey to the heart of Islam* exhibition at the British Museum. Visitors entering the exhibition passed along a curved corridor, flanked by life sized photographs of pilgrims and accompanied by a soundtrack consisting of the 'Adhan' (call to prayer) and the 'Talbiya' (a prayer). The exhibition evaluation identifies this experience as one of the highlights of the show, and arguably one of the most successful uses of sound in an exhibition at the British Museum to date. For the vast majority, the audio was very positively received; 89% expressed satisfaction, 5% dissatisfaction. For Muslim visitors, many of whom had been on Hajj, the sound brought back treasured personal memories. For non-Muslim visitors, the entrance corridor helped them feel part of something that might otherwise have felt remote and distant.

Visitors to Treasures of Heaven *felt the medieval devotional music created an appropriate atmosphere for the exhibition*

The majority view?

Based on around a decade's worth of exhibition evaluation my feeling is that the vast majority of exhibition goers appreciate the sensitive and appropriate use of atmospheric or ambient sound. A very small proportion of visitors will usually vehemently dislike it. The objections usually focus around an inability to block-out distracting sound, frustration about repetition or sound spilling into other areas. The last two points can be dealt with thorough choreographing or appropriate hardware, the first cannot. But, surely a small minority should not dictate the removal of something that most people enjoy?

Sometimes, of course, audio doesn't quite work in the way that was intended, but formative testing can minimise unexpected surprises. Investing in appropriate hardware makes it easier to direct and focus compositions. Sound isn't appropriate for every exhibition, and mobile devices offer other options, but even so I think it is unlikely that ambient sound will become obsolete any time soon.

Stuart Frost is Head of Interpretation & Volunteers at the British Museum.

Benchmark Project

The Tower Bridge Family Trail App

Dirk Bennett writes about the future plans of Tower Bridge, the process of finding an app developer for the creation of new family trail app.

Tower Bridge is a working bridge, a listed monument and a heritage site, an events space and – still surprisingly unknown for many – an exhibition (since the early 1980s).

Amazing assets

So, how do you make a bridge an experience and an attractive visitor destination? Apart that is from its sheer imposing presence, its location in the heart of London and its astonishing views, especially on an early summer's evening when the lights go on and London puts on its evening gown?

Maybe it has been a bit easy in the past to rely on these assets, but visitor numbers have grown – hitting 800,000 for the first time last year – and have become more and more demanding and varied in their background. And for most, it does come as a surprise that there is so much more to this bridge than meets the eye.

Tower Bridge is an essential part of London's infrastructure; a workplace, a marvel of Victorian architecture, a giant engine, a national icon and catalyst for popular culture. There is no end to the fascinating stories, unique characters, amazing facts and particular (and peculiar) asides which make this such an exciting and engaging site.

On-site screens advertising the Family Trail app as visitors buy their tickets

As part of our new Interpretation Plan, which we put together in 2015, we had a hard look at what we offer and how; the narrative and themes present at the site; our audiences, and where we want to go in future. As a result, we now have a roadmap in place for the coming years in order to make the bridge 'sing' even more for our visitors. Not surprisingly, more than half of them come from abroad, many first- (and only-) time visitors, and there is a large proportion, growing during the high season, of families and groups.

Engaging families with digital

One of the first new elements of our new provision was for the family segment: a digital exploration of the bridge, developed with families with 5 to 11 year-old children in mind. The emphasis was to be entertainment and fun, using the bridge and its features as a hook, and combining these with the technical possibilities of modern smartphones.

An important point was testing: we intended to spend the time required going to our audiences, to evaluate what we were doing. This became one of the key requirements of the brief. And finally, we wanted this process to serve as a pilot of how the Tower Bridge teams worked together on a fairly complex multimedia project, while at the same time maintaining its operational role.

In a closely-fought tender process we eventually appointed Bristol-based mobile app developers, Calvium Ltd, who took over the development of the new Tower Bridge Family app in August last year.

Screen shots of some of the app's games: collecting sounds, completing London's skyline, repairing the engines

Kieron Gurner of Calvium writes of his experience of the project:

'Calvium's approach is to co-create apps with our clients. We took the time to sit down with the Tower Bridge team and generate ideas together. We were then able to take advantage of their in-depth knowledge of the bridge itself and its audience. Taking inspiration from the ingenuity of the bridge's Victorian engineering, we wanted to find ways to bring physics and mechanics into the trail.'

'In a day-long workshop learning about the bridge, generating ideas and working those ideas through, we agreed on several ideas for games that could make it into the app.'

Prototyping and interactions

Based on our discussions, we suggested that using the phone's hardware sensors could provide ways to make the experience more engaging for users, helping draw metaphors between the digital and physical location. As such, the device's microphone became a way to blow a sail boat along the river and through the closing bascules of the bridge; the accelerometer transforms the phone into a spanner, as you tighten bolts on the steam-powered engine by cranking the device.

In these interactions, the phone becomes more than just a window into a game – it begins to draw parallels between the different environments of the exhibition and the action required.

We developed working prototypes to see what ideas would work in practice, and what wouldn't. These prototypes helped illustrate how the initial ideas would feel to the users, and better explain the concepts to the wider Tower Bridge team. Refining those prototypes after an initial round of feedback, we were ready to see what the staff and visitors of Tower Bridge thought.

Researching visitor behaviour

We conducted user research with some of the staff and at three different points with visitors. Talking to a variety of the exhibition's Welcome Hosts who engage with visitors everyday was incredibly helpful. Those conversations helped us understand the behaviours, attitudes and challenges that visitors could have with some of the activities we were proposing, before we presented prototypes to the visitors ourselves.

The research sessions we conducted helped us test the concept at the start and fine tune the games during the process. We were thrilled with the response: parents loved the idea of games that would engage their children with the themes of the exhibition, and in many cases were keen to try the novel interactions themselves. Families laughed and talked about the app together, and how they related to the exhibition, which was exactly the desired effect.

Following this last round of feedback, we made final tweaks that would ensure the Tower Bridge Family Trail app was ready for the general public.

Dirk Bennett concludes:

'Initial responses have been good, particularly from our target audiences, but we don't intend to stop there. Plans are being made to build on our experience, add new games e.g. a bus-jump game, (after the famous occasion when in 1952, bus driver Albert Gunter had to 'jump' the no 78 bus across the bridge as it began to open and avoid falling into the Thames), and carry out formal evaluation once the app has bedded in.'

'Finally, we'd like to think our Victorian forefathers would have approved of using digital technology on the bridge, and that we are adding to the experience in their spirit of curiosity and inventiveness.'

Dirk Bennett is Exhibition Development Manager at Tower Bridge.

Digital Update

THE DARK ART OF INTERACTIVE EXHIBIT DESIGN

An interview with Simon Lucas at Spiral Productions.

I'm[1] at the Spiral HQ in the top floor of a lovely old brick Victorian warehouse situated across the road from a genuine Camden council estate, a stone's throw away from leafy Kentish Town's nascent café society.

Hi. What would you like to talk about today?

Hi. I'm not sure. What would you like to hear about?

We want to find out a little about the methods used at Spiral to create Interactive Exhibits for museums

Like, the Method of Indirection?

Yes

[Laughs] It's a bit hard to explain. Could we start somewhere else?

Ok. Well, let's ease into the subject. How long have you been working in Interactive Design?

Almost since year zero. Probably around 2 AC.

AC?

Anno CD-ROM. Since the interactive CD-ROM. I'd say around Anno CD-ROM plus 2.

Do you still have memories of the CD-ROM

Yes. The Residents' *Freakshow*, Laurie Anderson's and Hsin-Chien Huang's *Puppet Motel* and Monty Python's *Complete Waste of Time* CD-ROM. To me these were the call to arms and showed what can be done with interaction. Humour, intelligence, poetry and wit. It was all there, twenty years ago.

Best moments at Spiral

I love them all, but there are two that might be useful to discuss in the context of interactive exhibit design. *The Tate Art Games* and *The Three Bears*.

I watched someone playing *The Three Bears* on the opening night of *Who Am I?* at the Science Museum. This experience is what makes it worthwhile. Seeing people using the designs.

This particular occasion was special. A young woman played the game, which was a game about DNA testing. Very dry, but we had decided to make it into *Goldilocks and Three Bears*. Anyway, in that game we play a trick on the visitor right at the end of the story. The person I saw playing it, got to the end and the look of genuine emotion on her face was something I won't forget. And it showed that you could go deeper with games, with educational games. They can work on the level of films by creating emotional responses. I thought – if you can do that then you have connected with the audience.

Let's explore that game and it's ending more later. What's your favourite kind of interactive exhibit?

There are two. Ones that follow the Wallpaper* Process and the ones that exemplify the Tardis Effect.

Those don't sound like standard design or museum terminologies. Can you explain?

Yes. The Wallpaper* Process is where all interactives in a museum are designed to fit seamlessly in with the overall graphic design scheme, becoming part of the texture.

That sounds a little self-defeating. Do you like that?

No. Not really... I just think it needs to be questioned.

...and the Tardis Effect?

The Tardis Effect is a well-developed traditional technique for putting visitors off. The basic premise has always been to put everything that you cannot fit elsewhere into the one exhibit. Pack it in. They always end up requiring the patience of a dung beetle and the multi-dimensional navigating skills which frankly, most museum visitors above the age of five simply no longer possess.

1. This article's auto-interview format acknowledges its debt to Peter Blegvad's 1977 Amateur No. 1 pamphlet and to Michael Craig-Martin's work – Oak Tree.

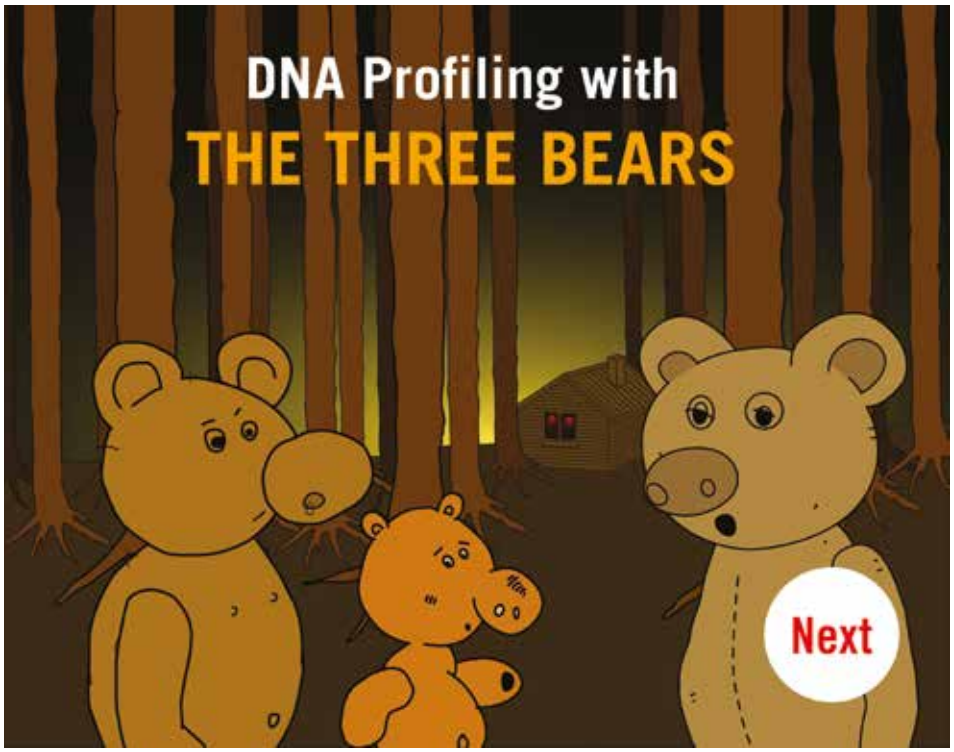
Is a lot of content always a bad thing?
No. We have a lot of arguments at Spiral about this. My stance is that there is a point where content itself becomes the message. It's Marshall McLuhan at work. The volume of content becomes the signifier. But for this to work, the display and the interaction mode have to be able to make that kind of information-made-palpable statement and then probably make it large. I want to do that.

I detect a certain irony at work here. What could or should we be doing?
Well method won't get us there. We need PLAY. To return to play, to re-discover play, to re-invent play. Play in content, play in presentation and play in design process.

Before we get to that, has it got easier since 2AC as you call it?
No. It's probably got harder. The reason is more people are looking at the process today. Before, we could work in secret, knowing no one was paying much attention to interactives. But now everyone has understood the potential to engage the visitor through interactive media. People study the subject, people create methodologies and people run evaluations. There are what are now stake-holders – the curators, the exhibition designers, the Visitor Advocates. Stake-holders, opinions and rules.

There's a lot more knowledge amongst the team
Yes, an increase in understanding has taken place, but has it been accompanied by a potential reduction in possibilities?

As the team understand more, briefs and design schemes begin to get more detailed, even prescriptive. Sometimes the brief can leave little room for movement or imagination. It's hard to work with that at times. You have to become cunning.



The Three Bears, *a game about DNA profiling for the Science Museum, London*

***Can you tell us more about* The Three Bears *and the* Tate Games**
I think these two games are useful examples of why we love this kind of work and also how we can approach this work in interesting, varied and playful ways. Humour has always been an important weapon.

You mentioned* The Three Bears *game. Can you talk about humour in the context of that game?
Humour is hard. Often the jokes or certainly the best jokes develop late in the production cycle. The client may not always like them. They might over-think or try to second-guess what their audience will like. Also they will collectively worry about how it fits with the museum's voice.

The Three Bears is a good example of how it can work. It was not until the end of the job that I knew how to write the ending of the game. The client (the Science Museum) had a story board but I seem to remember that the ending was suitably vague. A godsend, because once I was able to see the whole game, I knew what had to happen. The culprit (one of four suspects in the game) who stole the porridge HAD to go to gaol. I saw the image instantly. The girl holding the prison door bars, sobbing. The camera pulls back and see the Three Bears all dressed as policemen. Yodelling starts as the game fades out to dark Alpine forest scene. It was a bit scary, a bit funny and a bit sad.

And to this day I'm not sure how we got away with it (thank you Science Museum team!) but when people tell me that they remember the game, I feel we did something good, something interesting with it. Something that could have easily ended up like an episode of CSI.

Humour is an attitude that can't be designed. No amount of 'productionist thinking' makes a funny game or produces jokes in an exhibit. It takes time and space. A client who will allow this process to unwind on its own is a gift from heaven. And it takes a bit of fool-hardy bravery and sheer cheek from the exhibit designers to follow it through.

The Tate Games?

There were many ideas in the multi-player Tate Arts games, which I co-authored with Yoshiko Yano, a colleague, at Spiral. We presented the Tate with the idea of mini-games. The Nintendo Wario influence. The Wario influence is deep and goes back further. The underground Japanese games on floppy disk and the independent manga scene of the '70s. Again, humour everywhere.

Personally, I sensed we could go further with the Tate than usual. They trusted us. So we introduced a deliberately non-aestheticised drawing style and artist jokes...

The idea was to do the art content quizzes that the Tate Education Department wanted but to fold them in with a set of quite irreverent artist games.

Irreverent?

The games were mad. They were fast and a bit unusual, and I'm not sure I thought the public would know what was going on. But it worked as instinct. I thought if kids can play Mario Kart or they can play Sonic then they can play these fast, abstract art games which are also like jokes. Like the art cartoons they used to publish in the newspapers. And adults like them too. The games were a statement in how we do not need to take things too seriously to be serious about learning and communication.

What about the content?

It was in the game play. First we knew we could not just do games. We had to fold in the quiz element. The games were the reward for the quiz.

But then I realised that the ideas about the artists would be in the games. The games would create a single memorable image The image of how the artists approach their work. The meaning was implicit and the image was also like a joke – an art cartoon. And I thought this is how people remember things. Make them laugh or smile and create a memorable image.

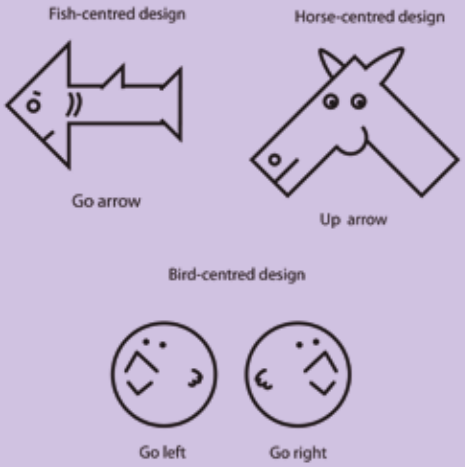
Can you sum up your attitude?

Interactives can be bland. They can act as Wallpaper*, work in the Tardis Effect or act as technological spectacle. We want to make another way. We want to make people laugh or cry. Laughing and crying are human affects that persist after the shock of the technical orgy has worn off.

What's the future for interactive exhibits?

The application of Deleuzian design principles.

Tate Art Games at the Tate Modern



Some of the UI elements that animals most enjoy

Deleuzian? You mean the French philosopher???

Yes, Gilles Deleuze talked about the concept of 'Becoming' as a way of re-thinking the world. Becoming Woman, Becoming Animal, for example. To re-think the world from a new perspective. Thankfully, there are already many women in this industry, so I'm promoting the idea of Becoming Animal – designing for animals. The question is – what kind of interfaces and content design would the animals most enjoy, and how might that idea allow us to re-think interactive design?

This is just the start, of course. We also need to develop concepts of Animal Personas and Animal-centred User Journeys in our desire to further the Art of the Interactive Exhibit.

Anything else?

Yes, how about an alternative to User Journeys? I call it User Drifting. Casting the visitor adrift in a sea of interactive happiness, horror or humour with no beginning, middle or end.

You mentioned The Art of Indirection?

Did I? Sorry, it looks like we ran out of time. I'm afraid that subject will have to wait for another day.

Simon Lucas is designer and developer at Spiral Productions London.

In conversation with...

PETER WEBBER

© Peter Webber

Peter Webber is an award-winning film director who creates films for the box office, television and for the cultural sector. He gives Rachel Teskey his perspective on the relationship between museums and film, and the power of museums to affect visitors.


© Peter Webber


© Peter Webber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Could you explain your role?

That's something I ask myself on set every day. Fundamentally it's about being a storyteller and providing a unifying vision for all the creatives on set, from writers to camera operators to actors. But mostly I have opinions about other people's work and boss around people who know much more than I do! Film directing is as much about project management and people management as it is about vision.

You've created films for cinema and for the cultural sector – what parallels do you see between the film industry and the museum world?

There's an incredible commonality between film and museums. They're both about telling a story and crafting a reality. For me, making films is all about creating worlds, and it's the same for museums. Museums have incredible opportunities: there's something special about having visitors walking through a space and having the power to create atmosphere and change people's mood in so many different ways – through lighting, writing, what information you give and withhold, everything.

Films and museums are facing similar challenges too. Museums have to fight for the attention of a generation that have spent more time looking at screens than any other experience. It's the same at the box office: with budget cuts and streaming you have to appeal to a wide audience, and that often means having to be big and noisy in order to compete.

That idea of creating worlds is an interesting one. How does that feed into your work?

I work on a lot of historical films and I like the heft that history gives. It's more than storytelling, it's recreating a past world. For *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, we reconstructed Vermeer's studio in minute detail and for a new mini-series on Tutankhamun we made an exact replica of his tomb – we could've opened that as a museum. Figuring out how to create not only that detail but also the atmosphere, it's as close as you can get to a time machine. I find that very beguiling, which is why I keep coming back to historical films – that and I don't get offered many superhero movies!

How do you balance historical accuracy with entertainment value?

Historical accuracy is the most important thing when making film for museums – they have that duty of public service. When it's pure entertainment, other things take over. The more mass market and big budget a film is, the less important historical accuracy is. But audiences are sophisticated enough to understand that historical liberties are taken in blockbusters.

With museums, it's still important to have that balance between accuracy and entertainment. As a director, you need to please both the curators and the people working on the creative vision of the museum, and they don't always have the same priorities. I have to take suggestions widely, from everyone involved, but be selective in what influences the final film.

Where does your inspiration come from?

It depends on the context. Normally scripts come to me via an agent, and they're mostly historical because of the work I've done before. When I'm making decisions about what to pursue, it's about the story but, as I said before, for me what really appeals is creating a world where I can shoot that story. If it's an independent project then my inspiration comes from all over. For one of the projects I have in the pipeline, the idea came from one of those Wikipedia black holes – I was waiting for a friend, clicking through links and came across this really interesting book which we ended up buying the rights for, and now we're working on the script. In film-making, you have to kiss a lot of frogs to get success. My path has been shockingly random – I didn't set out to do historical films or work with museums but it's fantastic. I'm a very lucky man.

How do you think the increasing demand for entertainment and competition for audiences will affect museums in future?

Museums do need to continue to be relevant, and to cater to increasingly technology-literate audiences, but if the stories and the content get lost, the push for entertainment can be very dangerous. There's great potential with things like virtual reality to create tailored, individual experiences for visitors. But museums are special places, and they shouldn't lose sight of the excitement that they can create. I still remember playing with the – then pretty basic – interactives in the basement of the Science Museum as a kid, and that kind of experience can't be beaten.

Rachel Teskey is a researcher and writer in the cultural heritage sector.

Debate

Is interpretation stagnant?

John Veverka throws down the gauntlet and suggests that much of what is taught about interpretation is stagnant and offers ways in which it could be bought alive again.

The golden age of interpretation

When I discovered the interpretive profession back in 1974 after having a summer job as a seasonal interpretive naturalist, I got lucky. When I went back to Ohio State University as a zoology major I was able to change my major to interpretation. Yes, way back then you could get a B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. majoring in interpretation. We had six interpretive courses in the undergraduate program, and two graduate courses in interpretation, including a course on 'Interpretive Research and Theory'. I still have my notes from Interpretation 510 – the introduction to interpretation course. Later on I had the opportunity to teach the advanced Interpretive Master Planning course at Ohio State and then later, while working on a Ph.D. in interpretation, teach the introductory and advanced interpretation courses at Michigan State University.

During the 1970s and early 1980s – I call the 'golden age' of interpretation – there were many universities teaching interpretation, and at the Association of Interpretive Naturalists (now NAI) National Conference those universities brought vans full of their interpretive students to present their research papers in the 'interpretive research tracks' of the conference. The profession was 'hot', had great leaders within the profession as coaches and teachers, and super interpretive research programmes at universities going full throttle.

Fast forward to 2016

I recently attended an interpretation seminar with a presentation on what is interpretation. As I listened to the presentation it was like the person was using my course notes from 1974. Where was all the new stuff, new ideas, new theories, new models of the interpretive communication process? The person doing the presentation had no professional training in interpretation themselves. And this is one of the stagnate areas – people teaching interpretation who have had no actual training in it – teaching old ideas (30+ years old) as 'new' and state-of-the-art of the profession. The profession is stagnant because there isn't a large cadre of interpretive experts working to keep it fresh and advancing. So here are some problem areas causing stagnation that we need to work on.

Where is 'thought leadership' in interpretation?

I have observed that in today's interpretive market of organisations and heritage sites, we are still stuck for some reason in 'the way we've always done it'. This assumes that the folks in the leadership roles in interpretation simply don't feel or know that there actually is anything else we can do to advance interpretation – not just focus on what it is, but focus on what it can be. We need leaders to try new approaches, conduct new research into visitor learning psychology, recreational learning theory, motivational psychology, experience-based learning and planning, for just a few examples. Here are some other areas that are progressive speed bumps.

- There are fewer universities teaching more than one 'general' course in interpretation.
- Research (M.S. thesis and dissertations) in new interpretive theory, techniques and visitor studies.
- Most interpretive organisations are not focused on interpretive training, and those that do, such as the National Association for Interpretation, are only doing a few entry-level courses.
- There are too many interpretive consultants that have no training in interpretation and magically become experts when their business cards arrive, and don't have any ideas about advanced levels of interpretive communications to apply to projects – so keep doing things the same old way… over and over again.

Advancing and growing the interpretive profession

Back in the '70s there were three interpretive organisations: Association of Interpretive Naturalists (now NAI), Interpretation Canada, and AHI's precurser, the Society for the Interpretation of Britain's Heritage in the UK. Today there are more international interpretive organisations. The issues are that rather than share and build upon what the earlier organisations

have learned to develop and try to advance interpretation, they all seem to want to 'start from scratch'. And while what is published may have a 'western' perspective, there is nothing being written or researched, or shared in a more focused way, other than annual conferences where 'we tell each other what we already knew' as opposed to exploring how to export the interpretive profession, professionalise the profession and energise the profession to attract new and talented folks into our fold. You can't discount the western interpretive perspective if you haven't yet built a unique solid base of your own.

So use one to build on the other. Having done interpretive training and planning in many different countries I have seen that we are alike more than we are different. But we are terrible at marketing the interpretive profession as a real career option. What are the benefits of a career in interpretation, and what makes a great interpreter (field staff to managers to teachers)? We have work to do on that don't we? Regardless of what country you live and interpret in, there are some key attributes of being a professional interpreter. We just need the professional interpretive coaches to bring out the best in young interpreters.

A fresh start?

So how do we begin to unplug the drain, then let in and keep fresh water flowing, using new opportunities for teaching and advancing the interpretive profession? One key option is training interpreters to actually 'be' interpreters. What are some of the new concepts and topic areas today's interpreters need to be trained in? Here are a few.

- The experience economy and experience-based programme/services development.
- Marketing and visitor studies for heritage sites and attractions.
- Interpretive writing and advanced interpretive writing (museum labels, etc.).
- Financial aspects of operating and managing an interpretive organisation.
- Cost/contact and cost effectiveness of interpretive programmes and services. If you spend $1.00 on interpretation for your agency, is your agency receiving $5.00 in benefits from that interpretive investment?
- Creating recreational learning environments and experiences to enhance memory retention.
- Visitor psychology (how visitors learn and remember from their visit).
- Conducting interpretive operation feasibility analysis for new facilities.
- Interpreter training and interpretive coaching techniques.
- Updates on new interpretive services and media technology.
- Conducting evaluation studies (pre-and post-test evaluation for exhibits, media, services).
- Management of volunteer programmes (how do you fire a volunteer?).
- How to plan and conduct interpretive research studies and programmes.

We currently teach, through the Heritage Interpretation Training Center, 33 college level courses in heritage interpretation. So these courses already exist. What can we/agencies and organisations do to unplug the drain and get the profession moving again creating more jobs and opportunities for interpreters and success for interpretive organisations? Here are a few ideas.

- If you're an interpreter and have little or no formal training in it – get more training.
- If you're doing any visitor research, trying new techniques, etc. present your work and findings at a conference or write an article about it to share what you learned.
- If you're an individual interpreter, join any/all interpretive organisations you can to receive their journals, take their courses or webinars and attend their conferences.
- If you're an organisation, try to lobby local universities or colleges to offer interpretive courses and majors. There are several universities that offer interpretive courses in the US, Canada and the UK. Support them in these efforts and market them to your membership. Otherwise, develop and offer these courses yourselves.
- If you're an expert in interpretation (with training in interpretation and years of experience doing interpretation) become a coach or certified interpretive trainer. Share what you have learned and encourage new interpreters to build on what you know to help advance the profession further.

Here are a few resources to help get innovative interpretation flowing again.

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InterpNEWS – The Heritage Interpretation e-Magazine. Subscriptions are FREE. Back issues can be read at: www.issue.com/interpnews. Write an article for us: http://www.heritageinterp.com/interpnews.html

The National Association for Interpretation: http://www.interpnet.com/ Workshops and training.

Association for Heritage Interpretation: http://www.ahi.org.uk/

Interpret Europe: http://www.interpret-europe.net/top.html

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Editor's note

This article is the personal opinion of John Veverka, who works mainly in USA. Is he right or wrong – especially in a UK and Irish context? Both John and AHI would welcome feedback so please comment via AHI Facebook and LinkedIn groups. We will collate and publish a full set of replies.

And don't forget...

AHI runs a programme of one-day training events and a conference where delegates present work and have the opportunity to share and discuss current ideas, approaches and advances in the field. We are currently researching HEI provided courses in the UK which contain formal taught components covering the field of interpretation and we have plans to enhance our links with such institutions. The AHI has also just begun the process of developing a proposal for a more intensive AHI training programme in a number of interpretive fields. An edition of the journal next year will include a more detailed explanation of our plans with regard to enhancing our training offering.

Interpreting the 'impossible'

Enlightening the 'dark' in dark tourism

Philip Stone considers the increasing use of 'dark' tourism to intellectually frame difficult heritage, while remaining divisive as a concept as well as being ethically contentious in practice.

Introducing dark tourism

Within socially sanctioned dark tourism sites, visitors now tour the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, fire rifles on former battlefields in Vietnam, inspect human skulls at Cambodian stupa memorials, gaze at preserved corpses in Rwanda's traumascape, or purchase commemorative trinket souvenirs of tragedy at Ground Zero. Consequently, dark tourism as a term to denote the act of travel to sites of death, disaster or the seemingly macabre has gained significant traction in scholarly and media parlance over the past twenty years. Yet, despite its increasing use to intellectually frame difficult heritage, dark tourism remains divisive as a concept as well as being ethically contentious in practice.

Much of this discordance is shaped by taxonomical and definitional disagreements of dark tourism, the conceptual frameworks that it adopts, as well as the imposition of 'darkness' on those who both produce and consume 'heritage that hurts'. I argue in this essay, therefore, that those who fret about dark tourism typological and conceptual frameworks should focus more, perhaps, on how dark tourism can traverse disciplinary borders, challenge social scientific subject gatekeepers, and engage directly with heritage-producers and tourist-consumers. In so doing, dark tourism as an identifiable context to connect site interpretation with visitor experiences enlightens the (im)possibility of (re)presenting death and disaster for the contemporary visitor economy.

Heritage sites that interpret death and the causes of such dying, whether untimely, or in violent or calamitous circumstances, often exist for memorialisation or educative purposes.

Enlightening dark tourism as a typology

There is no such thing as 'dark tourism' – or at least there is no universally accepted definition of what dark tourism actually is or entails. Indeed, tourism may simply be defined as the movement of people; whilst 'dark' has so many subjective and contrasting connotations and linguistic complexities that it is almost futile to define 'darkness' in dark tourism. Nevertheless, despite inherent cultural and semantic intricacies of the terminology, dark tourism represents a branded scholarly typology of heritage sites, exhibitions, and visitor attractions that all have a single common denominator. This commonality is an interpretation of death for the modern visitor economy. Heritage sites that interpret death and the causes of such dying, whether untimely, or in violent or calamitous circumstances, often exist for memorialisation or educative purposes. However these sites are also part of a broader service sector whereby tourism and the commodification of culture and heritage has been a mainstay for many years. Of course, issues and impacts of commodifying cultural heritage are well-rehearsed and are not repeated here; yet the problems of 'packaging up' diverse global *sites of death* or heritage sites *associated with dying* remain.

It is here that lays the conundrum of whether we can actually classify 'dark sites' and identify which tourism destinations are dark. To some extent it matters little if agreement cannot be reached amongst the intelligentsia of what is or what is not 'dark' in tourism. Arguably, what matters more is scholarly recognition of heritage sites that seek to interpret death-events which have perturbed the collective consciousness. More importantly, academic rigour is required to ascertain visitor behavioural reactions to such sites as well as identifying fundamental inter relationships with the cultural condition of society. That said, however, there has been a concerted academic effort to offer typological frameworks of death-related tourism.

Much of this effort has focussed on the conceptual shading of dark tourism and whether some sites are darker than others. An obvious point of course is that the notion of a death-event being more despairing and distressing than another is open to a multitude of idiosyncratic meanings and selective heritage interpretations. What is less obvious is how particular sites can be allied by various conceptual parameters that can lead to a fluid, if not subjective, continuum of intensity – both for producing such heritage sites as well as for divergent visitor experiences. For instance, sites with explicit political or commemorative interpretation, sites that are anchored in edification, memorialisation or edutainment, sites that possess locational authenticity or have chronological distance to the actual death-event, as well as the extent of sites adopting neo-liberal business marketing to drive visitor footfall. While this list is not exhaustive and open to evident critique, particularly how to determine such intrinsic features, conceptually positioning sites that portray death, dying and death-events allow erudite enlightenment of the politics, history, management and socio-cultural consequences of difficult heritage.

Enlightening dark tourism as a concept

Dark tourism is concerned with encountering spaces of death or calamity that have political or historical significance, and that continue to impact upon the living. Moreover, dark tourism has, to some extent, domesticated death and exposes a cultural institution that mediates between the ordinary Self and the significant Other dead. Yet, the production of these 'deathscapes' within the visitor economy and, consequently, the consumption of recent or distant trauma within a collectively-endorsed tourism environment raises important questions of the associations between morality, mortality and contemporary approaches to death and representation of the dead. In a Western secular society where ordinary death is often sequestered behind medical and professional façades, yet extraordinary death is remembered for popular consumption, dark tourism mediates a potential if not complex and relative social filter between life and death. Furthermore, ethical ambiguities inherent within dark tourism are systematic of broader secular moral dilemmas in conveying narratives of death.

Moral boundaries and ethical relativity are often questioned and renegotiated in places of dark tourism. In turn, the secular institution of dark tourism signifies a communicative channel of morality whereby dark tourism may not only act as a guardian of (tragic) history, but also as moral guardian of a modern society which appears to be in a midst of a collective ethical interrogation.

Kutna Hora Ossuary at Sedlic, Czech Republic

Auschwitz, Poland

9/11 Light Memorial, New York City

Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial

Difficult heritage and its representation should allow visitors to feel alive in their reconnection with the past and to feel empathy with victims. Indeed, within the context of business practice and consumer research, dark tourism experiences will always evoke emotional tensions, albeit to varying degrees, between diverse stakeholders.

While dark tourism as an academic field of study has brought the interest of visiting deathscapes into the contemporary imagination, numerous conceptual challenges are evident. These multidisciplinary challenges remain outside of the scope of my essay, yet dark tourism in its broadest sense can be considered dialogic and mediatory. Dark tourism exposes particularities of people, place and culture, where visiting sites of mortality can reveal ontological anxieties about the past as well as the future. Dark tourism also symbolises sites of dissonant heritage, sites of selective silences, sites rendered political and ideological, sites powerfully intertwined with interpretation and meaning, and sites of the imaginary and the imagined. Therefore, analysing distinctions of dark tourism as a concept and researching its mediating inter relationships with the cultural condition of society is important in contributing to our understanding of the complex associations between (dark) heritages and the visitor experience. It is these associations that provide the rationale to study dark tourism where scholarly investigations can enlighten critical approaches to a contemporary social reality of death.

Enlightening dark tourism in practice

Dark tourism sites exist within the milieu of Other death. Arguably, therefore, dark tourism sites are unique auratic spaces whose evolutionary diversity and polysemic nature demand managerial strategies that differ from other visitor sites. This notion of 'aura' from a visitor experience perspective calls for an affective design and interpretation on the part of heritage memory managers.

Difficult heritage and its representation should allow visitors to feel alive in their reconnection with the past and to feel empathy with victims. Indeed, within the context of business practice and consumer research, dark tourism experiences will always evoke emotional tensions, albeit to varying degrees, between diverse stakeholders. Even so, dark tourism in practice should extend unbiased, if not balanced interpretation that offers an opportunity for catharsis and acceptance, as well as grieving for a sense of loss of both people and place. Therefore, while dark tourism as a term may exist within academic imaginations and signifies a broach church of death-related heritage attractions; there are no corresponding 'dark tourists'. Dark tourists by implication of so-called dark tourism do not exist – only people interested in the social reality of their own life-worlds.

Dark tourism in practice is identifiable where social scientists may scrutinise multidisciplinary quandaries that impact on death and the dead as contemporary commodities. Subsequently, dark tourism exposes a cultural practice that blurs the line between commemoration of the dead and commodification of death. In so doing, those professionals who work on the front line in what might be considered dark tourism sites, attractions, or exhibitions are confronted with unprecedented moral, managerial and doctrinal challenges. The management of political remembrance, the interpretation of suffering, distinctions between difficult heritage and tragic history, and the effect of time and the fading of the significant Other dead into the past are just some of the complex issues memory managers are facing. Moreover, visitor encounters at places of tragedy and death and, crucially, the consequences of those encounters for broader society remain a crux for future dark tourism research. Dark tourism can enlighten an understanding of how contemporary societies deal with and represent their significant dead. Ironically, therefore, dark tourism is concerned with death and dying, yet through its social scientific study and its empirical practice, dark tourism tells us more about life and the living.

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Interpreting the 'impossible'

Mission Impossible:
Interpretation in a place where anything's possible

Karen Exell recounts the challenging reality of interpreting history in the Arabian Gulf.

The Arabian Gulf countries are building spectacular new museums due to open across the next few years: the National Museum of Qatar in Doha, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the Zayed National Museum in the United Arab Emirates, and the suite of museums that form the Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem Cultural Center in Kuwait.

Media coverage of these planned museums has focused on the ambitions of the countries to fast-track the creation of new artistic and cultural centres, and the utilisation of 'starchitects' to design the museum buildings (including the Pritzker-prize winners Jean Nouvel, Frank Gehry and Foster + Partners). The museum developments are facilitated by the region's vast oil and gas revenues (though progress on some projects has slowed down with the fall in oil prices over the last two to three years), and foreign expertise to deliver the museography – content development, interpretive planning and design.

The renderings of these new museums widely circulating on the internet suggests a rapid and smooth realisation of regional ambitions. However, the daily reality can be anything but smooth. Indeed, the word 'impossible' could be applied to almost every aspect of these projects – the expectations of the client (the ruling family), the timescale and deadlines, access to essential specialist resources and expertise, Kafkesque bureaucracy, globally-dispersed international teams, the weather... From my own experience of Gulf museum development projects, when it comes to interpretation, the impossible emerges conceptually and in practice, in attempts to explain its meaning and necessity and to implement the required processes, amidst accelerated schedules, differing levels of expertise, and varied expectations of what museums are and should be.

Msheireb Museums, Qatar

Objects, history, memory

Interpretative planning as an area of professional expertise has emerged over the last decade in Europe and the US, and is now regarded as essential to carefully manage the communication objectives of museums and exhibitions. Until recently, Arabian Gulf museums housed archaeological and heritage collections with interpretive material limited to labels and text panels often written by local experts or foreign academics intent on capturing accurate scientific information. The recently opened art museums in countries such as Qatar, home to the Museum of Islamic Art (2008) and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (2010), follow the Euro-American art museum paradigm of limited interpretive material to allow direct communion with the artworks. In both cases – the earlier heritage museums and the more recent art museums – the learning objectives and the visitor experience were not initially a central concern, and interpretive planning had no real place.

In contrast, the current investment in new museums that address the region's history strongly emphasises education; this, coupled with limited tangible collections and a focus on the spoken word in the preserving of history results in a need

Msheireb Museums, Qatar

In many of the Gulf states, even though museums have been in existence in the region since the 1950s (Kuwait opened its first museum in 1954), museums are not central to the local population's daily leisure or cultural experience where the focus is on family and the home.

for creative interpretation. Museums such as the Msheireb Heritage House Museums, opened in Doha, Qatar in December 2015 to narrate the local urban and social history, the story of Qatar's oil industry, and the Indian Ocean slave trade and contemporary human trafficking, rely heavily on interpretation due to the intangible and sometimes sensitive nature of the narratives. In these museums, text is supplemented with animations, oral histories and digital and hands-on interactives aimed at a clearly-defined Qatari audience. In a regional context where the paradigm of the museum as a place to display objects remains robust in many people's minds, such an approach, which values memory, stories and experience as equal to or greater than the tangible object, requires courage on the part of the local museum authorities, and persistence and persuasion on the part of the (usually foreign) project directors and interpretive planners.

Interpreting interpretation

Defining interpretation or interpretive planning can sometimes be challenging, but a description something along the following lines usually does the trick: interpretation in the museum equates to the multiple different media used to communicate information, from simple object labels to complex interactive multimedia experiences, considering how the visitor will respond to the medium of communication and the desired learning objectives or key messages. However, such an explanation of interpretation depends on an assumption of a broader understanding of the role, function and nature of museums, of the development and varied contemporary iterations of museums, of concerns such as museum learning and audiences, and at minimum of familiarity with museums as a visitor, if not as a professional.

In many of the Gulf states, even though museums have been in existence in the region since the 1950s (Kuwait opened its first museum in 1954), museums are not central to the local population's daily leisure or cultural experience where the focus is on family and the home. Add into the mix that jobs in the regional cultural sector are allocated to people drawn from outside the sector, perhaps the oil industry, engineering or aviation, or directly from university, with museum experience not required – museum training is still in its infancy, and skilled local professionals few – and we enter a heady world where the key decision-makers and local museum staff find themselves working on complex museum development projects intended to wow on an international level when they may never have visited a museum.

Accelerated schedules to meet what would be considered impossible deadlines in other parts of the world allow little time to learn. The foreign consultants bringing specialised expertise are also under pressure to deliver with little time to communicate what they do and why. During the development phase of such a project a curator may be less useful than an exhibit construction manager or an

Msheireb Museums, Qatar

Msheireb Museums, Qatar

interpretive planner, but the former has more conceptual currency in the Gulf museum world whilst the latters' niche areas of expertise carry little meaning.

A final twist is language – many of the technical and specialist terms used in museums and museum development projects have no direct equivalent in Arabic, so that either the term remains untranslated – and its associated meaning therefore also often untranslated – or a rough equivalent is found that may carry a variety of contradictory associated meanings. Out of courtesy to the foreign consultants, day-to-day business on the museum projects is conducted in English with the result that any failure of communication may go unnoticed. Confusion can reign.

Creative communication

The end result is that the expertise and processes essential to develop a contemporary narrative history museum are challenging to convey and to implement given the relative infancy of the sector in the region and the ambitions of the projects. The processes required to create a successful exhibit – from the exhibit brief writing, the exhibit content mapping and scriptwriting, the design and construction, the multimedia development, and so on – require a complex repertoire of skills. In moments of frustration when what appear to be essential requirements to move the project forward are blocked, I remind myself that if I were suddenly tasked with running, say, an airline company, I may struggle to grasp the essential processes, their necessary order of occurrence, the terminology and required expertise.

Requests for contracts and consultants to ensure that the appropriate activities are implemented at the right time therefore require a creative approach. In this context, challenged with explaining what interpretation meant in order to secure the institutional approvals to hire interpretive planners on a recent project, a colleague suggested that I use the analogy of a restaurant: the content (another area of terminological confusion) is the raw food; the gallery is the dining room. In order to present the diner with a meal, the raw food needs to be cooked – or, the content needs to be interpreted in order for the museum visitor to be able to absorb it.[1]

1. Many thanks to Pamela Erskine-Loftus for this creative analogy.

In order to make the impossible happen, and to realise these new museums in the Arabian Gulf, which introduce spectacular architectural design and innovative contemporary approaches to display and interpretation, the creativity around interpretive planning therefore needs to begin well before the interpretive planning itself. This is particularly the case given that successful interpretive planning results in a seamless learning experience for the museum visitor, where communication is everything and the mechanics of communication should remain as unobtrusive as possible. Attempting to persuade senior management to pay for something that is not an object, not a showcase, and not a building, and is to all extents and purposes invisible requires creative communication indeed.

Dr Karen Exell is a consultant and academic based in Qatar. She is author of *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* and co-editor of *Museums in Arabia: Transnational Practices and Regional Processes* (both Routledge 2016).

Interpreting the 'impossible'

The Inzovu Curve

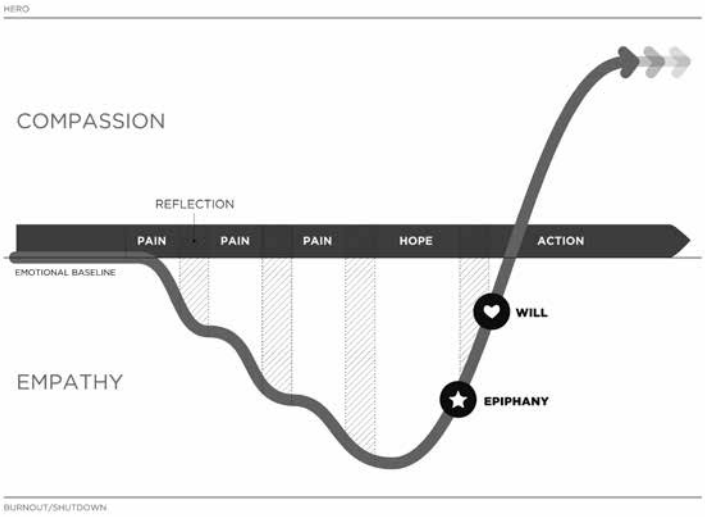
Charlotte Pratley asks how can interpretation turn emotion into action?

In 1994, Rwanda's outgoing government littered the country with the bodies of men, women and children. Survivors agonised over how to lay the dead to rest while retaining the raw sense of tragedy that could act as 'an antidote to genocide.' On the site of a mass grave for 250,000 people, they created the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre. It embodies heritage as a powerful aid to remembrance and therapy: developing and contributing to the site enabled survivors to heal together. On the 11th anniversary of the genocide, the bodies that had been starkly and symbolically displayed at the Memorial Centre were spontaneously buried by families and survivors.

The UX for Good team help to solve pressing issues, using the UX (user experience) discipline. When they experienced the memorial's interpretation, they felt unable to speak, let alone act. They were emotionally burnt out from the relentless misery and shocking nature of the exhibits. After meeting survivors, they regained hope and the ability to act. They heard stories such as that of Grace Uwamahoro, a ten-year-old Hutu who rescued a Tutsi baby from its dying mother's arms and raised it as her own in defiance of her family's ideologies. The team's observations on their emotional journey inspired the Inzovu Curve.

Like all good models, the Inzovu Curve is a piece of slick graphic design succinctly framing tried and tested methods; best practices observed during the period of healing in Kigali, as well as techniques familiar to formal educators and curators.

Beginning at a neutral level of emotion unique to each visitor, interpretation on a difficult subject leads the viewer into an increasingly intense empathetic state of emotional resonance.



Painful content is alternated with opportunities for reflection. Just before the viewer reaches emotional burnout, a crucial point where negative responses can overwhelm the viewer and create a sense of hopelessness, the introduction of hope and empowerment creates an epiphany that action is possible. This turns introspective empathy into extrospective compassion and the motivation to contribute to positive change.

The model hinges on solid interpretation theory: moments of reflection echo Professor Graham Black's advocacy of social seating (Black, 2010) and Nina Simon's conviction in contribution (Simon, 2010), giving the user time to collect their thoughts and discuss. These mini-decompressions give the museum an opportunity to gather feedback on the exhibition and can empower the viewer through co-production and contribution.

Jennifer Moon, an expert in the role of reflection in learning, uses the eloquent phrase of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule to describe the role of an effective teacher:

'The teacher helps to deliver the pupil's words into the world and they use their own knowledge to put the pupil into conversation with other voices – past and present – in the culture.'
Moon, 2013

This echoes the relationship between museum staff and viewers. According to Moon, the best conditions to promote personal development are:

- Reciprocal interaction
- Unpredictability
- Challenge
- A social learning environment
- Safety to take risks and cognitive exploration
- Support to understand the emotional concomitants of reflection.

With risk and unpredictability comes the opportunity to take a viewer out of their comfort zone and explore alternative perspectives. While the Inzovu Curve can encourage the optimum conditions for learning and development, the consequences of overt use could be akin to a RomCom-style narrative, where predictability undermines the impact of a film and leaves the viewer with a sense of neat resolution. Similarly, if a curator were to follow the model too prescriptively, the creative benefits of experimentation, both for the viewer and the staff, may be endangered.

The Inzovu Curve is apparent in curation of the 9/11 Memorial Museum. The visitors' journey begins with themselves: a soundscape floods the ramp down to the twin towers' foundations with recordings of other visitors remembering the attacks. Although communal, it triggers powerful, personal memories, placing the viewer back in the moment they first heard of the attacks. When describing her visit, my heritage colleague at Nottingham Trent University, Suzy Harrison, recalled descending into the building, reaching increasingly deep levels of emotional engagement (Harrison, 2016). Her emotional response peaked at an enclosed room in the heart of the museum which displayed minute by minute accounts of the event, including victim's last voicemails and damaged possessions. When she had almost reached burnout, stories from the rescuers were introduced. The exhibition ends in a subdued contribution space where visitors can digitally add their comments, tagged with their home location, before ascending into the light In Memorial space. The impressive architecture of the memorial complements the interpretive vision, precisely echoing the Inzovu Curve both physically and curatorially.

Where the 9/11 Memorial Museum may fail is in the creation of *sustained* action. Suzy remembers the interpretation effectively conveying the horror of the attacks but could not recall being moved to act beyond the comments activity. Conversely, at the International Slavery Museum, I pledged that I would never buy from certain retailers as the final temporary exhibition, *White Gold*, laid bare the appalling conditions of modern slaves in the cotton industry. Both spaces made use of the physical act of writing, creating bodily engagement with exhibition content through kinaesthetic learning. Both included elements of co-production, allowing the viewer to add their reflections to a community. Both had personal, emotive content with intimate access to individuals. Both organisations, like Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, exist to promote a shared humanity and educate against similar tragedies. But perhaps the difference is in the narrative and real-life risks taken. In sticking resolutely to its interpretive focus, the 9/11 Memorial Museum appears to miss an opportunity to turn the viewers' attention on a singular period of tragedy outwards to the wider world, where large scale tragedies still occur on a daily basis. Suzy was not given the opportunity to integrate the feelings that led her to contribute into a broader ethos by which to live her life, while at the International Slavery Museum, I contributed to a movement against Uzbekistan's poor labour practices.

Five years on, I am wearing clothes of dubious ethical origin. After a few months of commitment, I lapsed back into old habits. The power of the exhibition still resonates strongly with me so to inspire more sustainable action, the museum (or charity partner) needs to continue building the relationship beyond the gallery by reminding me of my pledge and connecting me with the local or online community as an outlet for my compassion.

How useful is the Inzovu Curve in doing this? It exposes curation and engagement as an emotional journey, inspiring confidence to deeply engage the viewer almost to the point of emotional burnout and leave positivity until the final stage of the exhibition. The deliberate emphasis on reflection has powerful connotations for personal development and allows space for viewers to enjoy constructive silence or active debate. The use of relatable heroes can create strong emotional connections between viewers and protagonists, and avoid viewers leaving the museum feeling unable to contribute. It may help avoid 'mission drift,' focusing the exhibition by leaving the wider context until the final stages of the exhibition. Perhaps most importantly, particularly in the current European climate, it reminds us that our organisations should address tough subjects head on with the goal of increased community cohesion. The key is to take risks, experiment with new ways of empowering audiences, inspire users to learn through taking risks themselves and integrate museums in communities beyond the gallery walls by being an active part of causes that really matter.

Charlotte Pratley is a Director of Culture Syndicates CIC and a visiting lecturer at Nottingham Trent University's Master's Degree in Developing Museums.

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Interpreting the 'impossible'

Inner city interpretation:
Stories from Birmingham's canals

Annette Simpson looks at the vastly different canalscapes within Birmingham's Heartland and discusses how the gap might be bridged.

'In the heart of the urban inner city, surrounded by litter and graffiti, doubt, poverty they observed fishes breaking the water surface, they lay down and enjoyed the sun shining on them. They commented that the sunlight glinting on the water surface looks like hundreds of diamonds falling…'

Steve Stanier, Youth Worker, Sparkhill

People danced in the streets when the first canal opened in Birmingham in 1769. It brought supplies from the coalfields and the price of fuel fell dramatically overnight. Coal became plentiful and cheap and the canals provided a safe and easy way to transport goods all over the country. Soon there were so many canals and new factories in Birmingham that it became the heart of Britain's manufacturing industry.

From Venice to vandalism

Today the canals in Birmingham city centre have undergone a massive transformation; bars, smart flats, restaurants and visitor attractions line the towpaths, people flock to visit the area and it is often likened to Venice. But not far away from the city centre other canals sneak alongside dumps, through unlit tunnels and past run down residential areas. Here the canals are very different associated as they are with vandalism, rubbish and anti-social behaviour. Many of country's most ethnically diverse and deprived populations live alongside these canals. They often know nothing about them or have little traditional cultural connection to them.

Bridging the gap

The Canal & River Trust is dedicated to helping ensure that these wonderful 200-year old waterways will be used and enjoyed by everyone for generations to come. So how do we use interpretation to help us meet our ambitions for both the Trust and the local communities living alongside our waterway network?

In the past, the Trust has been very good at working with people already committed to waterways. Our role now is to reach out to new audiences, especially in areas where people are perhaps the most in need of the social benefits which our waterways can provide.

But, if we are to encourage people to learn and care for their canals we must first get them there. Making contact with people from many different backgrounds and encouraging them to visit and to see canals as a free community resource is essential.

Separate and secret

We all understand how important visitor experience is and how important it is that we get this right before any meaningful learning takes place. So the challenge for interpreters working in places such as Birmingham is to identify why people don't visit. It soon becomes clear that the physical constraints of inner city canals and accessibility can be difficult. There are often no facilities such as toilets, a lack of open space around the canals, constant vandalism, littering, and damage to the historic buildings and environmental assets.

There are also perceived threats to identify and overcome: canals are havens from the bustle of the city, but this also means they can be seen as separate and secret. Towpaths are felt to be unsafe, especially for women and children, there is a fear of crime and also safety concerns around the dangers of water.

Graffiti and litter are a constant problem

Adults float rangoli, an Indian art form that uses shapes to create beautiful patterns, on Birmingham canals

Planting on Birmingham's Main Line canal

Teaching children to fish on Birmingham's canals

Getting to know you

However, I believe it is the cultural issues which create the biggest barriers to engagement. Identifying these cultural barriers should be a key part of any interpretive planning – if we don't understand our audience then how can we hope to deliver effective interpretation?

The only sure way of building understanding is to get out there and talk to people. Make the most of community contacts and go to where the people are. In Birmingham we made contact through youth workers, faith leaders, artists, schools and refugee charities. We attended events, activities and meetings, all so we could talk to people and gain a deeper understanding of our potential audience. We wanted to understand why they don't visit the canal, what we could do to encourage them to visit and what type of interpretive media would be effective.

Overcoming big hurdles

And what did we discover? Well, lots about how we can overcome the physical and perceived threats. For example, guided walks or boat trips are better than trail leaflets, audio tours or interpretive panels as a guide helps to overcome the fear of crime or getting lost. Language barriers can be overcome with the support of family or friends and routes can be carefully planned to suit an audience's needs, including comfort breaks.

We learnt lots too about the social aspects to engagement. Faith can play a part in what type of activity people will want to take part in: for refugee and migrant families the costs associated with visiting can be prohibitive even if the activities themselves are free. Language can be a barrier especially for women, toilets and refreshments are important, cold and wet weather can be off-putting and web based interpretation may not be appealing or attractive.

Getting it right through cross cultural theming

We also came to understand that we needed to move away from our typical interpretive themes and search for shared cultural stories. Luckily for us water is a strong cultural theme bringing people together from all different backgrounds. It has faith connections, therapeutic qualities and through it people can make contact with the natural environment. Using this theme we can investigate our local canal in new ways – guided walks focusing on exploring the traditional medicinal plants to be found along the canal, environmental activities such as planting and harvesting parties, activities with an emphasis on engaging the senses through water such as using natural sounds, storytelling and creative writing, arts projects using traditional crafts or linked to environmental activities such as dyeing using natural dyes. Hopefully each activity will help to build confidence to visit and an understanding of canals amongst the community.

One last learning point for us was the importance of graphic design clearly reflecting the theme and the cultural identity of the local community. It is important that we use design to build relevance for our audience so that they instantly see that this interpretation is for them.

Annette Simpson is Education & Interpretation Manager at the Canal & River Trust.

Toolkit

IMPOSSIBLE PROJECTS

I like a challenge, particularly one you might describe as 'impossible'.

Towards the end of December last year I arrived in Abu Dhabi with my team to lead the curation of the exhibitions for the 2016 Qasr Al Hosn festival – an annual celebration of Emirati heritage centred around Qasr al Hosn, a historic fort in the heart of the modern city. With the festival set to open at the beginning of February, we had barely six weeks to develop one major and three sizeable temporary exhibitions, a dramatic sound and light show, and a series of interpretive installations and tours across the site. No mean feat. I felt like Anneka Rice, only my mobile phone was a lot smaller.

Needless to say, it was an intense couple of months – yet, we did it and I am incredibly proud of what we achieved. But beyond the satisfaction of a job well done, the experience allowed me to consolidate a few thoughts as to what we, as interpretation professionals, can do in the face of an 'impossible' project. I hope these prove helpful in grappling with your own Herculean tasks...

- **Set the narrative** – perhaps the biggest risk when you are working to an 'impossible' deadline is moving too fast and losing stakeholder buy-in along the way. While a good brief works wonders on most projects, for the signature exhibition at the festival we developed a new approach: a curatorial narrative. Scripted as a story with chapters, this narrative set out the journey and tone of the exhibition in an engaging and democratic way. It required a good investment of time to get it just so, but it paid dividends later on, becoming the roadmap for the exhibition – so long as we didn't stray too far from the 'approved' route we were good to go. In the end, it also made scripting a breeze, more or less providing the top-line text for each area of the exhibition.

- **Value expertise** – while it goes without saying that a great project is dependent upon a great team, when you are up against a deadline it is not just about knowing *what* your team can do, it is about *letting* them do it. This is not the time for second guessing, so make sure you know who to call on and when, and that everyone knows they are valued and supported. From my incredible content manager through to our Arabic poetry expert, I was fortunate to have just the right expertise on hand when needed.

- **Expect the unexpected** – again, this is true of most projects, but the pace of change on my 'impossible' project was almost hourly. For me it really helped to keep the big idea for each of the exhibitions in mind – by visualising where I was headed, finding a new route through on the fly became a lot more intuitive (think *Labyrinth*, complete with moving walls and a goblin city). Again, being able to call on my team for an alternative take on things was crucial – knowing your own limits and when to ask for help is always half the battle.

- **Collaborate in real time** – it was a pleasure to work with a range of world-class designers on the festival. Although each had their own creative process, they all shared a commitment to really understanding the content and curatorial vision for their specific exhibit. Working at an impossible speed and across so many different projects, a close relationship between content and design was vital. It also helped to be in the same place. Given my atrocious carbon footprint, I am a big fan of remote working, but on this project, being on the ground (often in the production tent until dawn), led to a truly collaborative experience – something I believe was tangible in the final exhibitions.

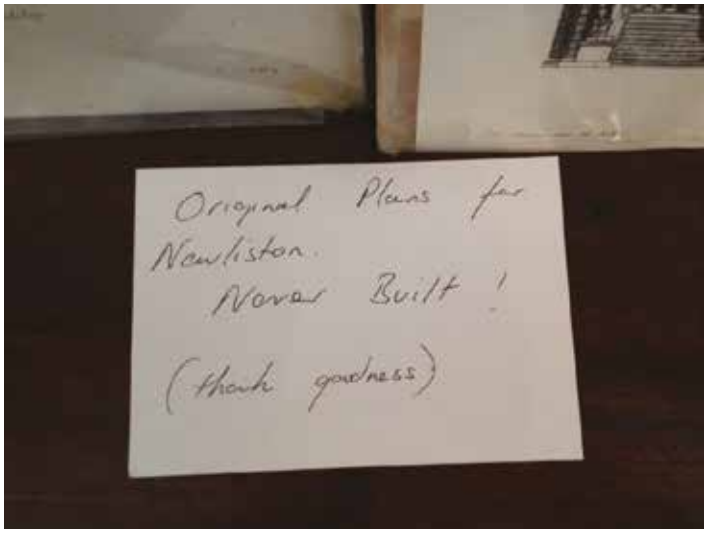
Qasr Al Hosn festival 2016 © Richard Hunt

Emily Hall interacting with one of her exhibits in The Story of Abu Dhabi & its People – an exhibition planned, designed and installed in six weeks

Emily Hall is Associate Director at Barker Langham – based in Berlin, she directs, curates and interprets exhibits worldwide.

Revealed

Interpretation that amuses and inspires...



Newliston House near Edinburgh. Privately owned, very much still a family home, this note regarding an ancestral decision is obviously deeply felt! From Linda Francis

Expecting Giants? Parque Nacional de la Caldera de Taburiente, La Palma, Canary Islands. From Clare Sulston

Venice. From Richard Godley

Ramsay, Isle of Man. From James Pardoe

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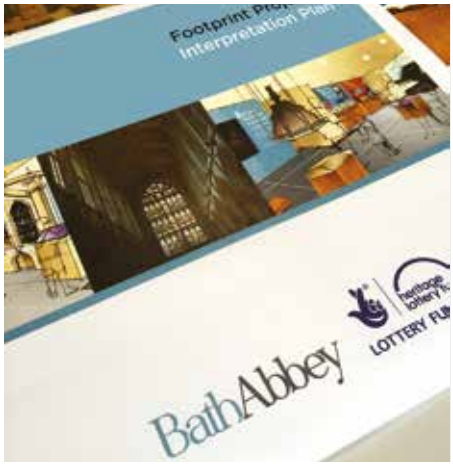

Interpretation plan Bath Abbey

Visitor signage & orientation Heaton Park, Manchester City Council

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