

VISITOR PERCEPTIONS OF »THE REAL THING« IN MUSEUMS

As museum professionals across the world are aware, the notion of authenticity is very complicated. Defining authenticity is fraught with difficulty as it is not only a target that moves over time, but it also changes with who you ask – a museum visitor's response may be different from a museum professional's response, for instance. One of those terms used in conjunction with authenticity in the museum context is »the real thing«, but even this term is not clearly defined or understood.

In the interest of investigating these perceptions in an empirical way, I conducted a study on museum visitors' perceptions of »the real thing« (TRT) in museums. My study shows that there is not a singular conception, and that visitor conceptions are not necessarily the same as museum professionals' conceptions. In this paper, I will summarise the results of this study and discuss their implications¹.

BACKGROUND

The seminal work of B. J. Pine and J. H. Gilmore on the changing meaning of authenticity is well known. In 2007, they specifically addressed authenticity in museums. In this article, when speaking in general about consumers (the world of business), they said: »[...] in a world increasingly filled with deliberately and sensationally staged experiences – an increasingly unreal world – consumers choose to buy or not buy based on how real they perceive an offering to be«². They claim that the number one challenge today is »the management of the customer perception of authenticity«³. Pine and Gilmore immediately equate authentic with »real«, and claim that authenticity is an »emerging standard« for museums.

My interest in conducting this study was based on many years working in and teaching about museums. Over the years, I heard the term »real thing« loosely bandied about, especially by museum professionals, and it occurred to me that we are making assumptions not only about its importance but also about what is meant by it beyond our own conceptions. I consider myself a student of phenomenology and this perspective also led me to wonder what the visitors themselves had to say. How do they define it?

THE STUDY IN A NUTSHELL

This study began in 2011 with a single research question: How do people experience »the real thing« in the museum? Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as outlined in Smith/Flowers/Larkin (2009), I conducted 21 intensive one-hour interviews with self-selected visitors (ranging from 20 to 80 years old; six male, 15 female) at five museums (history, natural history, living history, art, science centre) and asked them about their conceptions of »the real thing« in museums. Several participants' contributions and/or quotes are offered here as examples; their pseudonyms are Melissa, Sasha, Howard, Steve, Harley, Barbara, and Becca.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a naturalistic (qualitative) research approach that focuses on the lived experience of participants, attempting to make sense of the meanings made around certain

events, experiences, or states⁴. IPA focuses on the ways a phenomenon is experienced; it uses data directly from participants. It is phenomenological in that it examines particular lifeworlds and personal experience, values personal perceptions, and does not result in objective statements. It is interpretive in its acknowledgment that research is a dynamic process in which the researcher plays an active role. Generally, a study using IPA involves a small number of participants and uses intensive, semi-structured interviews to gather data⁵. The analysis process is iterative and simultaneously one of discovery and of construction. The results are not known in advance, nor tested in the study, but rather emerge from interview transcripts, constructed iteratively from the voices of the participants. In this sense, IPA is an inductive way of working from the data to the results. The phenomenon of interest in the current study is how people experience TRT in museums.

FOUR WAYS TO UNDERSTAND TRT

As a result of the analysis, four qualitatively different ways of understanding »the real thing« in the museum were identified (these are not mutually exclusive). I called these: Self, Relation, Presence, and Surround. Below, I will define each one, elaborate on the definition, and then provide examples of quotations from participants that provide a richer understanding of their experiences (fig. 1).

Self

The Real Thing in the museum (TRT) can be experienced through aspects of one's Self. The experience is related to one's own personal memories, knowledge, interests, imagination, and occasionally »new« learning. It is connected to one's own identity.

When experiencing TRT through Self, participants spoke of:

- my knowledge, my imagination, my identity
- it inspires me
- triggering personal memories
- I can relate
- (minimal) new learning (facts) but mostly understanding

An example of this way of experiencing comes from Melissa, who saw cooking pots at »Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition« at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan. Her background knowledge and experience helped to make something real:

»I guess it's because [...] I cook all the time in my house. I do all the cooking for our family. To me in the last few years – it's so silly – but that's how I take care of my family now. I cook for them. I make sure that they eat good food. I try to not go to McDonald's every night. For me [...] making a good meal for my family makes me feel good.«

In this statement, Melissa is talking about her own identity, spurred on by seeing the artefacts on exhibit.

Relation

TRT can also be experienced by connecting to others – beings, events, times, and things – referred to in this study as Relation. Some features of this way of experiencing are:

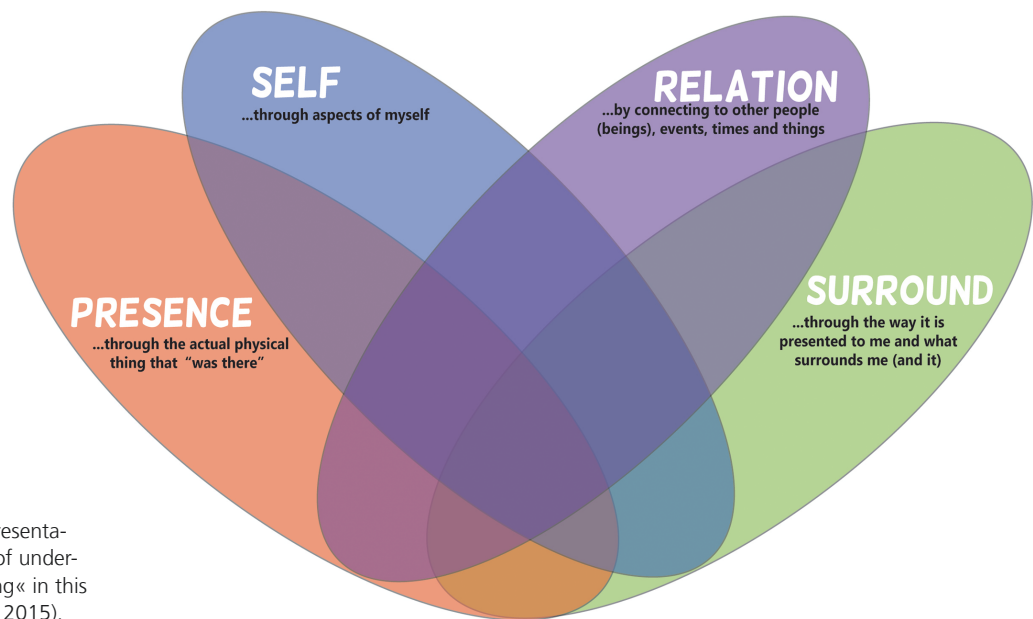


Fig. 1 A graphic representation of the four ways of understanding »the real thing« in this study. – (After Latham 2015).

- it is less personal than experiences through Self
- overall, understandings are loftier – of humanity, existence, and being
- one feels a part of something »bigger«
- it is about being human (empathising) across time and space
- issues of justice, morality, mortality, life are often central
- it is about understanding what it means to [be human] [make hard decisions] [lose a loved one] [work hard] [be dying], etc.

This way of experiencing TRT centres on three sets of relations to TRT:

- with those who used it
- with those who made it
- with those who set it up

Sasha addresses this (those who set it up) directly when talking about the excavation that went on in order to get the dinosaurs to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Wishing there was more background information about this aspect, she said »[...] because connecting it with humanity makes it more real [...] it's part of the process that helps you understand your connection to it, humanity's connection to it«.

Participants who experienced TRT through Relation say that it is the »network of things« that makes something real. Howard provides the most concise statement of all the participants when he says, about experiencing something real, »that's the thereness I think I'm sensing and referring to. It's just the density of that network of connections«. Howard was not concerned with the physical object but rather with this network that is created in our experience of things that are actually there. To him, there were degrees of realness, hence his reference to density. For Howard, density was a matter of degrees.

Presence

The way of experiencing TRT described as Presence involves an actual physical thing »that was there and is right here in front of me now«. It refers to the actual presence of a physical thing that is in the space with

the experiencer; this actual thing that was once in the space with another person at another time holds something different from anything that has not followed the same path. Steve explains:

»If you see it online or in a book or anywhere, it's going to provoke thought. But, I feel like if you're reading it in a book or reading online – you're just one click away from closing it – you're one flip of the page away from not seeing it anymore. If you're physically there, it's almost entrancing – it's like, this is here, this is in front of me!«

Presence is about evidence – captured, preserved, survived, representative, proof. Howard's earlier comment about »thereness« crosses over into this theme and, as Steve says, »it was there doing.« Experiencing TRT through Presence is about Trust and Truth:

- trust in the institution that holds it
- participants trust TRT to be »real«
- perception of TRT as the truth – »it is about the truth«, and that TRT is the truth. For some, truth = real. Many statements along the lines of »A museum wouldn't lie, right?« were made during the interviews. Sasha said she doesn't pay attention to signs about what is real in a museum, »because – I think because I trust it«. Overall, Presence is about:
- materiality and uniqueness – imperfections, marks, craftsmanship, use, wear. All of these things are valued as they are more indications or evidence of past behaviour
- sensory experience – Harley mentions the smell of an old car (stock, of course) as more »real«
- energy, aura, and power – Harley also talks about conflation when he describes how he feels in the presence of something real: »Everything, all the factors and actions and deeds and things that took place in the past concerning this item are there [...] and it just, it can radiate that stuff out [...]«
- agency of the thing – sometimes the object is animate
- reverence, sacredness – Barbara, talking about the chair Lincoln was shot in (at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan) says, »I just remember the sense of reverence, of »wow«, you know, like, this is where it happened [...] One chunk of where it happened [...] Well, the chair wasn't in the place [Ford Theatre, which is another location entirely], but the chair itself was the place«.

Surround

TRT can be experienced in the way it is presented to me and what surrounds me (and it). This is called Surround, a gestalt – a whole that comes together: the idea that the real can only be experienced as a part of a larger scenario or situation, consisting of many parts that come together to create a whole that becomes the real. This was one of the more complex ways of experiencing TRT. A simplified way to look at it might be as involving environmental factors on a continuum from less to more. More information helps a person to imagine; more support (labels, books, computers), holistic elements (dioramas, murals), interaction are all forms of More. Sasha was particularly eloquent in her description of her experience with the dinosaur exhibits at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

»There's a word that writers use. Verisimilitude. It's this – do all the pieces come together to make a believable whole? When you read a book and you feel for that character, then that author has achieved the Holy Grail; they have reached verisimilitude because they have put the pieces together in such a way to convince you it's real. The dinosaur room, and much of this museum, is done in that way. So, a child or an adult, who is interested, can walk through and see it and feel it and imagine it, and it stops being hypothetical or scientific, and it becomes real.«

Interestingly, those who described experiences involving More were less likely to be concerned about objects.

For those on the Less end of the continuum, the museum object is at the centre, highlighted, there are fewer people around, and the surrounding space is more spartan, and there is less information. Becca gives us a clue as to why Less helps her think of something as more real:

»When I'm in the presence of something and I'm really able to consider it, it helps if I can consider it, and it is in isolation. I consider its history and it as an object and how it came to the museum and how it was used, and all of that. I like being able to do that.«

For both of these scenarios – More and Less – the way in which things are presented to the participants matters. The placement of TRT in a museum, »behind glass«, behind a rope, or other situations such as these either helped or hindered the person in feeling it was real. For example, glass was mentioned from both sides, with responses ranging from positive to negative. The participants who wanted Less loved the glass as it signalled importance and truth, and therefore »realness«. For those who wanted More, the glass got in the way of their total picture, producing a barrier to their feeling as if something were real, making it difficult for them to make a connection.

Another aspect of the Surround way of experiencing has to do with museality. Museality is that shift in an object's meaning once it becomes a representation of something in a place such as a museum or other museal institution⁶. Trust, truth, representation, and this shifting focus on an object played into perceptions of »real« in this theme.

CONCLUSION

If we learn nothing else from this study, we learn that – at least in this group of 21 museum-goers – there was not one single way of understanding the meaning of »real« in the museum. This is a very important finding in museum studies. Anecdotally and generally, museum professionals and academics may know this, but empirically, there has not been a lot of systematic investigation into this topic. The study reported here empirically supports the notion that perception of authenticity does not have a monolithic meaning. Rather, the experiences of TRT in the museum are significantly related to how things are presented, interpreted, and understood. Further research stemming from this study could be helpful in further enhancing users' experience of objects, exhibitions and museum encounters in general.

B. J. Pine/J. H. Gilmore think the goal of museums should not be to be authentic but rather to focus on creating the perception of authenticity in people's minds, to render themselves (phenomenologically) authentic⁷. To render oneself authentic, according to Pine and Gilmore, means to: 1) be true to oneself and 2) be what you say you are to others. This is not bad advice and it fits with the larger lesson from the study, namely that there is no universal meaning of »real« (or, for that matter, of »authentic«).

Pine and Gilmore make another good point – and one that matches my study's methodology, that:

»[...] There is no such thing as an inauthentic experience. Why? Because experiences happen inside of us; they're our internal reaction to the events that unfold around us. How we react to what happens at a particular venue – whether museum or theme park – depends on who we are, what we've experienced before, our mood at the time, whom we're with, and a host of other factors«⁸.

»[...] as human beings, we are free to view the experience with any artifact, any edifice, and any encounter as authentic – or as inauthentic«⁹.

And as the well-known scholar Hillel Schwartz said over 30 years ago, »authenticity can no longer be rooted in singularity«¹⁰. This study supports his contention and encourages museum professionals to work with this knowledge as we build exhibits, collect objects, and engage with people in museum settings.

Notes

- 1) Finer details of the study research design and analysis can be found in Latham 2015.
- 2) Pine/Gilmore 2007, 76.
- 3) Pine/Gilmore 2007, 76.
- 4) Smith et al. 2009.
- 5) Smith et al. 2009.
- 6) Latham 2016.
- 7) Pine/Gilmore 2007.
- 8) Pine/Gilmore 2007, 78.
- 9) Pine/Gilmore 2007, 78.
- 10) Schwartz 1996, 17.

References

- Latham 2015: K. F. Latham, What is »the real thing« in the museum? An interpretative phenomenological study. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 30/1, 2015, 2-20.
- 2016: K. F. Latham, Jungles, Rabbit Holes, and Wonderlands: Comparing conceptions of museality and document. *Proceedings from the Document Academy* 3/1, 2016, 9.
- Pine/Gilmore 2007: B. J. Pine / J. H. Gilmore, Museums and Authenticity. *Museum News* May/June 2007, 76-93.
- Schwartz 1996: H. Schwartz, The culture of the copy: striking likenesses, unreasonable facsimiles (New York 1996).
- Smith/Flowers/Larkin 2009: J. A. Smith / P. Flowers / M. Larkin, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research (Los Angeles 2009).

Zusammenfassung / Summary

Zur Wahrnehmung des »Echten« durch die BesucherInnen im Museum

Die Feststellung »Ich gehe ins Museum, um das echte Objekt zu sehen«, ist von vielen MuseumsbesucherInnen weltweit vernehmbar. Aber was ist damit gemeint? Ist »das echte Objekt« dasselbe wie das »originale« oder das »authentische«? Bezieht es sich auf eine physische Sache? Kann ein digitales Objekt, ein Replikat, eine Restaurierung oder Reproduktion »echt« sein? In diesem Artikel werden die Ergebnisse der ersten Phase einer laufenden phänomenologischen Studie über die Bedeutung des »echten Objekts« für erwachsene MuseumsbesucherInnen vorgestellt. Die Studie untersucht mit einem phänomenologischen Ansatz die qualitativ unterschiedlichen Möglichkeiten, die Erfahrung »des Echten« im Museum zu verstehen. Seit 2011 wurden 21 BesucherInnen einer großen Bandbreite US-amerikanischer Museen dazu befragt, wie sie »das echte Objekt« im Museumskontext wahrnehmen. Die Studie erforscht die Frage: Wie erfahren Menschen das echte Objekt im Museum? Dabei konnten vier Zugänge identifiziert werden, wie die Erfahrung des Realen in Museen verstanden werden kann: durch Aspekte des Selbst, in Bezug zu anderen, durch die Präsenz des vorliegenden physischen Objekts, und durch die Umgebung.

Visitor Perceptions of »The Real Thing« in Museums

»I go to museums to see the real thing.« In museums across the world, we hear this statement from many visitors. But what does it mean? Is »the real thing« the same as »original« or »authentic«? Does it refer to a physical thing? Can a digital object, replica, restoration, or reproduction be »real«? This article reports results from the first phase of an ongoing phenomenological study on what »the real thing« (TRT) means to adult museum users. The study uses a phenomenological approach to inquire into the qualitatively different ways of understanding the experience of TRT in the museum. Since 2011, 21 museum visitors, from a wide range of US museums were interviewed about their perceptions of »real« in the museum context. The study explores the question: how do people experience The Real Thing in the museum? Four ways of understanding an experience of »the real thing« in museums were identified: through aspects of the self, in relation to others, through the presence of the actual physical thing, and through one's surroundings.