

Cultural Memory and the Exhibition of Musical Instruments – A Textual Approach

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In a recently published book, David G. Hebert and Jonathan McCollum describe various “locations” in which music-historical sources can be studied. Among others they mention archives, museums, religious institutions and performance spaces like ancient theatres (2014: 38). Archives and museums are related to the importance of collecting. Both are often divided into a non-public section only accessible to the staff and selected peers and a public section. Archives may even be affiliated with museums. The collection of written sources, sound recordings, or material culture involves a process of transformation. When ethnographic objects or intangible sources are stored in a depot and described in files they become artefacts considered suitable to represent cultural heritage. They conduce to transform what Aleida Assmann has called “individual memory” into “cultural memory” (2012: 6). At the same time they can lose their former meaning. Musical instruments stored in museums, for instance, are normally not played. In many cases they are not even playable. Curators follow internationally accepted standards¹ for documentation according to which instruments should be conserved rather than restored (which involves significant technical interventions).

The selection of artefacts always implies a valuation. Some objects may be considered suitable to represent heritage while others may not be. Aleida Assmann in this context points out that the transposition from living memory to cultural memory is embedded in a “deliberate policy of remembering or forgetting” and brings together “temporal extension with the threat of distortion, reduction, and manipulation that can only be averted through continuous public criticism, reflection, and discussion” (ibid.).

This paper deals with the exhibition of culture at museums, the last step of what Gunnar Ternhag (2006:3) has called “museumization” (collecting, describing, storing, presenting). The exhibition leads to further shifts in the meaning of the artefacts. An exhibited musical instrument, for example, might become a sign of an era, an ethnic group or a family of instruments, and it can become part of a comprehensive story when combined with other objects, photographs, sounds, and explanatory notes. In what follows I will present some museum analyses based on terms and methods of semiotics and narratology. I will illustrate the meaning of displayed musical instruments depending on exhibition concepts and their implementation and discuss consequences for museum displays as media of cultural memory.

The analyses offer some initial findings from a research project at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen, Germany.²

Analytical Terms

In 2011 and 2012 I conducted lectures on “Music and Museum Display” at the Goethe University (Frankfurt am Main) and the Folkwang University of the Arts. We formed study groups and visited several German music museums in order to try out and discuss analytical techniques suggested by various scholars.³ Initially we referred to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who generally distinguishes between two kinds of exhibitions, one of which she calls “in context”, and the other “in situ.” An exhibition *in context* is characterised by artefacts that relate to other artefacts, explanatory notes, illustrations, and so on. An object is placed *in situ*, if it is presented in relation to – as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls it – “an absent whole”, for instance a specific environment that may be recreated around the object, a scenic construction of which the object becomes a part (cf. 1998: 19ff).

Secondly we referred to a semiotic model suggested by German museologist Michael Parmentier (2001: 40ff). He identifies various signs important for museum displays: “Examples”, “models”, “metaphors”, and “indices”. Artefacts, he notes, may belong to more than one of these categories. *Examples* are members of a class that can represent each other; *models* are measurably similar to what they represent; and *metaphors* refer to perceptions, feelings, imaginations, memories, etc. *Indices* are – as Parmentier states – “remainders of a past event, the intended or unintended imprints of things that happened”. For our analyses we found it helpful to expand this term, using it in a sense that is more common in semiotic discourses (see e.g. Lyons 1996: 99ff). *Indices* in our understanding refer to something to which they have a causal relationship if in the past or in the present. Smoke, for instance, is an *index* of fire.

Thirdly, we referred to German philologist Heike Buschmann, who describes the way a narrative can be developed in a museum room and uses narratology terms as they were introduced by E. M. Foster: “event”, “story”, and “plot”. A *story* in Foster’s model is a “narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence”, while a *plot* is a “narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality”. Foster illustrates the difference with an oft-cited example: “The king died and then the queen died” is a story; “the king died and then the queen died of

grief” is a plot (1990: 87). In the context of a display the artefacts can be considered *events* and the succession of viewing them can lead to a *story*. According to Buschmann, the *plot* often has to be made by the visitor him- or herself by drawing conclusions (2010: 154f).

Moreover, adopting Gérard Genette’s ideas, Buschmann describes various forms of texts that are used in museum displays: “main texts”, “paratexts”, “metatexts”, and “hypertexts”. The main texts consist of the exhibits and their spatial order or scenic construction. Paratexts – as Buschmann notes – are e. g. remarks, titles, illustrations and numerations. They offer clues for how the “museum narrative” should be received. There is no direct thematic connection between a paratext and a main text. Metatexts comment on the exhibits. They can provide information about an exhibit’s age, technical function, former use, etc. Hypertexts are transformations of other texts. They “are either derived from the spatial narrative or integrated into it and reproduce its content in a different way” (Buschmann 2010: 166). While we found it useful to distinguish between various forms of textuality for our analyses, Buschmann’s distinctions seemed to be insufficiently selective. According to our experiences, titles and illustrations (like images placed next to the artefacts) usually contribute to the understanding of the museum narratives; hence, there is a direct thematic connection between these kinds of texts and the main texts. Furthermore, we hardly found hypertexts in the sense of a transformation⁴. We did find texts that didn’t directly comment on the artefacts but derived from them, like a board with (non-musical) historical notes about an era where an exhibited musical instrument comes from. The artefacts in this case offer the occasion to tell a narrative. These kinds of texts, however, do not coincide with the term “hypertext” introduced by Genette. He understands “derivation” as, for instance, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* derives from *The Odyssey* (1997: 5). I will therefore use other terms for my analyses and differentiate between:

- a. *main texts* (exhibits, arrangements of exhibits, and scenic constructions)
- b. *orientation texts* (texts which explicitly serve as guidance without commenting on the artefacts, e.g. numerations or arrows)
- c. *commenting texts* (notes on the artefacts, illustrations)
- d. *derived texts* (notes that do not comment on the artefacts but derive from them).

Case Studies

The following analyses were carried out in 2013 and 2014 at the Ethnological Museum in Hamburg, Germany, the National Museum in Accra, Ghana, and the “rock’n’popmuseum” in the small German town of Gronau. These museums differ greatly in terms of the exhibition concepts. What they have in common is that all three of them display African musical instruments. Yet they do so in their own unique ways and for distinct purposes.

1. A cabinet of African musical instruments at the Museum of Ethnology, Hamburg

The Museum of Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde) in Hamburg is part of a foundation under public law. It is intended to be “a forum for people of different nations and cultures to come together, as well as an information centre to offer introductory insight into foreign cultures and to facilitate further contact.”⁵ The museum houses a permanent exhibition on sub-Saharan African cultures, the general concept of which apparently deals with the contrast between modern life and traditions handed down from pre-colonial times. There are glass cabinets displaying school supplies and homemade toys, photographs of skyscrapers, posters of anti-HIV campaigns, as well as a scenic construction of telephone cells as a sign for African people living in the diaspora and trying to keep in touch with their homelands. In addition, there are displays with masks, royal symbols of dignity (e.g. regalia from the Benin Empire), and wooden figures traditionally used for various religious purposes. Musical instruments presented in a glass cabinet also form a part of this rather traditional section of the display (both spatially and in terms of content). An arched harp assigned to the ethnic group of the Mangbetu (Democratic Republic of Congo) and a xylophone, the origin of which is unknown, are hanging in the centre of the cabinet. Various instruments, like lamellophones, drums, rattles, bells, slit gongs and some wind instruments from different areas, are draped around them. Most of these instruments came to the museum before 1950. The visitors get short texts to read, providing only a few details. *Commenting texts* offer some, if any, notes on the provenance and rather general and arbitrary information on the usage and the contexts in which the instruments were traditionally played. An enclosed information sheet contains a *derived text* on “Traditional Music and Musical Instruments”. One can interpret the display in several ways. It can be considered a demonstration of musical diversity presented by a range of different instruments. The high number of percussion instruments and the miscellaneous types of drums refer to the importance of percussion music in sub-Saharan cultures. The

uniqueness of each instrument might also lead to exotic associations with African forms of expression, an interpretation supported by the concept of the exhibition with its modern and traditional spheres and also backed by the enclosed *derived text*, which refers to supposed differences between European and African music. In all three cases the arrangement of instruments becomes an *index* of musical quality.

2. Ghanaian Instruments at the National Museum of Ghana

The National Museum in Accra was founded in 1957 on the eve of Ghana's independence. It is divided into three "galleries", which, according to the website of the Ghana Museums & Monuments Board, deal "respectively with Ghana's past; her traditions; and with the country's arts culture".⁶ Similar to the exhibition in Hamburg, the traditional section is devoted to handcrafts (e.g. woodcarvings, textiles, pottery), religious rites and musical forms of expression from pre-colonial times. Some musical instruments are displayed on a big stage. A xylophone is placed in the centre with a set of nine drums of various sizes behind it. Further instruments – trumpets and other types of drums – hang on the walls surrounding the stage. Visitors might read the exhibition as a presentation of variety again. The arrangement is accompanied by an elaborate *derived text* reflecting the wellspring of music and the meaning of music for mankind. The text concludes:

"It is therefore clearly identifiable that music created with musical instruments is an important tool for bridge-building, bringing people either of one common cultural identity or from various diverse cultural fronts together."

At the end the text turns into a *commenting text*:

"The museum plays a unique role by housing the various types of musical instruments from different cultures. In this exhibition an attempt is being made to highlight some of the musical instruments from various cultures in an attempt to build bridges across cultures."

Someone who is familiar with Ghanaian music and Ghanaian history would probably understand the display in a different way after reading these lines. He or she would know that national borders in Ghana were once drawn arbitrarily and the people in the northern parts of the country are culturally related to the people in southern Burkina Faso, northern Togo and

northern Cote d'Ivoire, whereas the people in the south are more closely related to people in southern Togo and southern Cote d'Ivoire. He or she would also know that the presented xylophone comes from the northern regions of the country and that the drum set⁷ belongs to an ethnic group living in the southern half. Finally, he or she might know that, since Ghana became independent in 1957, a cultural policy has been adopted, which became prominent under the slogan "unity in diversity".⁸ Its aim is to support nation building while preserving diverse ethnic features. With this knowledge one can read the exhibition as a political message: Different musical instruments from different areas can come and play together, and so can people from different regions with their respective cultural backgrounds. If the display is first seen as an arrangement *in context*, it might turn into a scenic construction now, an exhibition *in situ*. The stage becomes a real stage and the instruments are placed on stage for a music ensemble to play. Various professional and semi-professional ensembles in Ghana (and Ghanaian ensembles abroad) perform using a similar trans-ethnic instrumentation.

3. Ghanaian drums at the rock'n'popmuseum in Gronau, Germany

Gronau is a small town in northwest Germany known by insiders as the birthplace of German rock star Udo Lindenberg. The rock'n'popmuseum is run by a non-profit organisation. Its permanent exhibition is devoted to the history of pop music in Europe and the United States and focuses on developments in Germany. The entry area of the main room is equipped with monitors, which are placed on a wall, showing films first of African-American dances from the 1920s and then films of soul music and hip-hop, and also of the black power movement in the 1960s. They are accompanied by *commenting texts* and a *deriving text* on the history of "Black Music". Passing the monitors and going along the wall, one reaches two glass cabinets, one containing a saxophone and a trombone, the other one Ghanaian drums (an hourglass drum from the northern part of Ghana and a barrel drum from southern Ghana). They are followed by pictures and accessories of German pop singers from the 1920 and '30s. The order seems to be confusing, but an explanation soon follows. Continuing on, the visitor sees a portrait of Adolf Hitler, a monitor showing an excerpt of Lena Riefenstahl's film about the Olympic games from 1936, a so-called Volksempfänger ("people's radio") which was an important medium for Nazi propaganda, and next to it the poster of the notorious "Entartete Musik" ("Degenerate Music") exhibition organised in 1938 by NS-official Hans Severus Ziegler in Düsseldorf. The aim of this exhibition was to ridicule and defame jazz and modern

art music. Furthermore, there are images of Jewish jazz musicians, among others of Benny Goodman and his swing band. The caption reads, “Jewish bandleader Goodman’s music is banned as ‘Juden Jazz’ by the National Socialists in 1937”. Historical-culturally educated visitors will recognize that some of the German pop singers, the portraits of whom were shown previously, were also Jews. It is then easy to understand the intended plot: African-American styles of music were popular in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s. German pop musicians were highly influenced by these styles, which contain elements of African music. Accordingly, the music was combated by the racist regime and was associated with Jewishness and otherness. In this narrative the exhibited African drums do not represent a class of instruments and they are not *indices* for certain cultural regions or forms of musical expression. They have a *metaphorical* meaning referring to the alleged African elements in jazz and music influenced by jazz.⁹ This is supported by some lines of the *derived text* on black music mentioned before: “The crossing of African and European tonalities generates the ‘blue notes’. The ‘off beat’ and ‘swing’ forms of jazz have their roots in African poly rhythmic”.

Conclusions

The analyses illustrate not only a significant change in the meaning of the objects when presented in a museum, but in some cases also a variety of meanings. A comparable simple arrangement *in context* like the cabinet of African musical instruments in the ethnographic exhibition in Hamburg contains different potential *plots*. They can be considered *indices* of stylistic features, musical variety, and strangeness. The display in Accra also represents variety. The presented *commenting text*, however, illustrates the curator’s political intentions. After reading it, the arrangement can become a *metaphor* of national unity. The African drums shown at the museum in Gronau are completely decoupled from their former meanings. They *metaphorically* represent notions of African musical elements in jazz and pop music. The variety of meanings apparently decreases when the artefacts become part of a narrative targeted to certain messages. In the case of the cabinet at the museum in Hamburg, equivocation seems to be accepted if not deliberated by the curators. In Accra and Gronau the suggested *plots* with their political messages are obviously intended.

Curators (and perhaps other persons in charge) thus have a wide range of possibilities to create cultural heritage, and museumization proves to be a very individual act. It starts with

the selection of artefacts and continues with the conception and erection of a museum display. However, it takes two to communicate messages by exhibiting artefacts. The museum staff needs the visitors as teammates. As Heike Buschmann notes, one often has to draw one's own conclusions to get the *plot* of a museum narrative (see above). The German museologist Gottfried Korff in this context speaks about "a-ha moments" and "choques" (sudden insights) arising from the spatial order of things (2007: 172). Each conclusion, each "choque" requires previous knowledge and maybe also a considerable amount of imagination. The individual way the visitors access the exhibition, e.g. the order of viewing the artefacts, is also important here. It is necessary to follow a certain route to get the intended *plot* at the museum in Gronau. The direction is predetermined by the architecture, since the exhibits are arranged along a wall next to the entrance of the hall (*orientation texts* like numerations would have assigned the route more precisely). Visitors are nevertheless free to refuse the given order and draw their personal conclusions using different constellations of artefacts. The making of cultural memory in a museum is a rather unpredictable process of encoding and decoding. Hence, textual analyses are only the first step in investigating the various meanings of museum displays. In a second step it would be useful to try to come closer to the perspectives of curators and visitors by using ethnographic methods (cf. Mason 2006: 28).

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¹ See e.g. Robert L. Barclay (ed.): *The Care of Historic Musical Instruments* published on the website of the Comité international pour les musées et collections d'instruments de musique (CIMCIM). See also Koster 1996.

² *Music exhibitions – Studies on presentation and reception of musical topics in museums*. Project funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation). The case studies presented in this paper belong to a larger sample of studies carried out in the context of the project; the investigations have hitherto focussed on fifteen music-related exhibitions from various countries.

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⁴ Buschmann mentions accompanying books and audio guides as potential examples for hypertexts. According to our experiences these sources tend to comment on the artefacts and contribute to the understanding of the museum narrative or specify it.

⁵ "Wir sind: ein Forum der Begegnung von Menschen verschiedener Völker und Kulturen dazu ein Informationszentrum zur Vermittlung des ersten Einstiegs in fremde Kulturen und der weiterführenden Kontakte." Quoted from the website of the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg: <http://www.voelkerkundemuseum.com/42-0-Geschichte.html>. Accessed 3 January 2015.

⁶ See website of Ghana Museums & Monuments Board (<http://www.ghanamuseums.org/national-museum.php>). Accessed 3 January 2015.

⁷ A Fontomfrom set as it is played in the Asante Region in Southern Ghana. Cf. Bareis, Meyer 2012.

⁸ Cf. "The Cultural Policy of Ghana" published by the National Commission on Culture in 2004: <http://www.artsinafrica.com/uploads/2011/04/Ghana.pdf>. Accessed 3 January 2015. See also Klein 2007: 88ff.

⁹ The barrel drum from Southern Ghana (called "Kpanlogo drum") is a rather new instrument. It is played for a dance significantly invented in the mid-twentieth century, long after jazz and African-American oriented pop music became popular in Germany. Cf. Collins 1996: 109.