Material Culture in Heritage Narratives

Museum Studies, Case III: MT-CIPE

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Abstract—**This article presents a research on museum exhibitions and discusses one of the case studies approached:** *Museo del Traje - Centro de Investigación del Patrimonio Etnológico*, **Spain. Based on bibliographic references, ethnographic fieldwork, qualitative analyses and interviews, two ways of interaction between a patrimonial collection and the general public are analyzed: the exhibition rooms and the institutional website. The aim is to verify the resources and connections used to communicate the clothing material culture.**

Keywords-component; fashion, design, exhibition, website

I. INTRODUCTION

This article incorporates material that is part of a Ph.D. thesis in design in progress, with advisors Prof. João A. Mota (University of Aveiro) and Prof. Nuno Porto (University of Coimbra and University of British Columbia).

The object of study is primarily the face-to-face exhibition, expanding to other media, in the museological context of costume/fashion, including virtual exhibitions and museums websites. The analysis focuses on narratives and connections based on design products generated within the scope of costume, in order to identify the most relevant narrative models in the recovery of such objects, and in the provision of public information about them and about their associated social universe. Four institutions serve as central case studies: *Museu Nacional do Traje* and *Museu do design e da Moda*, both Portuguese; *Museo del Traje-Centro de Investigación del Patrimonio Etnológico* (MT-CIPE), Spain; and *Victoria and Albert Museum*, UK. Here, we'll discuss, in a very succinct manner, case III only: MT-CIPE.

II. APPROACH TO RESEARCH

In the research process of MT-CIPE, a visit was held on January, 2010 for field recognition and material collection. On November, 2011, a deeper work took place, including field notes, the capture of images and an interview with Juan Gutiérrez from the Diffusion Department. The institutional website [1] was accessed on November, 19 and 20, 2011 and from February the 4th to the 7th, 2012. The following evaluation criteria were adopted for analysis: structure, usability, organization and, primarily, content, degree of interactivity and attractiveness to stimulate an interest, or curiosity, in the Museum and its exhibitions. This qualitative analysis protocol follows the parameters mentioned in [2] based (and not restricted) on the usability guidelines from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology [3].

Given the subject complexity, theoretical references are searched in different disciplines: Design, fashion Theory, Communication, Sociology, Anthropology and Museology, with focus on approaches related to curating, exhibition (virtual and face-to-face), narratives of material culture and also some case studies. These benchmarks support the qualitative analyses carried out on a case-by-case basis, or in comparative considerations.

III. STUDY CASE: MT-CIPE

The *Museo del Traje-Centro de Investigación del Patrimonio Etnológico* is a public institution of the Spanish Government, which has been calling for actions to strategically address the institution towards financial independence. It was opened in 2004 under this institutional nomenclature and retains an extensive collection that belonged to different museological discourses, being the costume collection only part of this ethnographic assemble.

In the storage space, it is possible to discern distinct collections and understand the scale of a closed set. Given the new institutional direction, much of this heritage has no exposition perspective. The institution defines its collection in 10 categories, and the collection of fashion already has more than 30,000 objects: Historical Costume, Contemporary Costume (fashion), Popular Costume, Jewellery and Accessories, Economic Activities, Household Equipment, Fun Activities, Religiosity and Beliefs, Documentary Funds.

Most of the objects come from donations or actions with partners, such as the Association of Fashion Designers of Spain. There are also specific actions, either by purchase or by third parties on tax agreement with the Spanish Government. Based on the items of the collection and the work which is conducted on them, the Museum can project many of its goals and activities.

The MT-CIPE does not directly states an institutional mission for itself, but in some spaces of dissemination some measures adopted or directions may be identified. It is also possible to assess its strategic positioning through actions in

partnership with other entities; proposals and lectures; the criteria adopted in the process of assets inventory. In all these cases we find a unanimous attribute: the valorization by authorial objects as recognized by the international fashion system, or even fashion designers celebrated in the Spanish national market. Declarations in support of an ethnographic, in contrast to such an aesthetic/status symbol approach, are not verified in all of its performances.

The Museum presents itself to the public in the Spanish language. Has English translation not for all the information displayed, and French translation, only for specific information.

Its main exhibiting space is basically formed by three independent cores, either by architectural design or by the narratives as defined above and presently set by the projected sequence. Those three cores are: permanent exhibition, didactic area and space for temporary exhibitions, which shall not be discussed here. The Museum's website will be considered as another exhibition space, with emphasis on the approach to its exhibitions and collections.

A. Permanent Exhibition

An historical narrative is conducted by chronology and the aesthetic concept of the exposure object as a work of art. It is divided into 9 main themes and adopting its own speech, with emphasis on some historical periods or authorial works. It provides information on lit panels, guides of rooms and computer terminals. It also makes use of audio-guide (Spanish) and sometimes video (or audio-video). All text is in Spanish and English languages.

B. Learning Area

This nomenclature is used by the Museum. It makes use of an educational narrative and addresses the universe of fashion in its technical, marketing, psychosocial and physiological components. Presents different interactive thematic approaches with approximately 20 themes. In a more cognitive narrative, it presents some tactile references of the theoretic-practical information (Spanish/English). In this area are realized specials activities, including visitors with visual restrictions.

C. Website

It presents a simplified navigation graphical base under a 6 topics menu. It provides an overview of the permanent collection and some parts of the acquisitions, resembles a data catalog. Variations are to be found for temporary exhibitions.

IV. EXPOSITORY CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Essays on museology criticism may be better understood thanks to MT-CIPE. Of the many museums studied, MT-CIPE is one of those which most emphatically presents himself as an example of Anthony Shelton's critical perspective, when he says that "Narratives are also affected by external contingencies, sometimes reflected in the museum's name change, which might, over time, even resets institutional objectives" [4], this when taking into account the criticisms by Spanish professor and researcher Luis Dias Viana [5] when he

positions himself against the institution's name and mission, and consequently collection, shift. Viana argues that the change would be much more linked to the business of culture professionals, and in this specific case to the textile market, than to the mission to investigate and narrate about the cultures and the collection itself. According to him, and which is clearly noted, the current institutional positioning does not seizes the collection diversity, i.e. anthropological and not typological: costume.

According to Daniel Sherman and Irit Rogoff, by comparing the policies adopted by museums, over time, it is possible to appraise the "cultural construction" [6]. Thus, summarizing Viana's analysis, "culture and cultural heritage are not necessarily synonymous, although some suggest and present as an undisputed fact that what is selected as patrimonial (with the approval and support of the administrations) constitutes the essence and the core of a culture" [7].

Therefore, the permanent exhibits (A, B, C) also reflect this cultural build-up, and, moreover, some dichotomies of discourse, as may be verified by paralleling some institutional positioning and exhibition actions. As an example, the ethnographic objects, from traditional culture, and the fashion system's objects. And it is thus also interesting to reflect about the binary narrative, which, for several reasons and mainly because of conservation, separates some concepts and methodologies. A clear example is the Division of historic/ aesthetic/ artistic and learning/ practice/ use/ touch exhibitions. A reflection of the traditional binary economy between art and science, which narrows or expands according to the social-historical context, also handled by the economic system [8].

However, when the exhibition (A) and its virtual representation (C) are correlated, the whole narrative context is lost, creating a third expository reality, which does not borrows the concept of the first one or at least this hypermedia platform potential tools. However, it may be noticed that the use of communication in cyberspace is a concern of the MT-CIPE, since it has promoted discussions about it [9], in addition to being more active on its social networking page, which sums up more than 5.000 followers [10].

Targeting is another conflict: which public shall be addressed? The didactic exhibition (B) is presently considered as a children's section, as stated in an interview, however the project, designed by Manuel Estrada Diseño Gráfico S.L., was conceived under another perspective, and the ergonomics adopted are for adults.

About the permanent exhibition (A) is worth pointing out a few choices made for its narrative:

First, the space devoted to the last 40 years of fashion. When considering the large chronological journey narrated in the whole exhibition, one may deduce that about 40 years would not exceed more than two rooms. However, it is exactly during this period that the fashion system changes and accelerates in an unsustainable way, and does not follow only an aesthetic line, rather assuming conceptual (aesthetic), commercial and social ramifications.

Another choice assumed for its narrative chronology was not to experience the Second World War and to run forward towards to the glamorous nurturing of New Look. Meaning that after the first three decades of the 20th century, the narrative jumps directly to 1950-60, despite the fact that the Museum owns objects from this period.

Finally, we mention the emphasis given to some names of fashion, with showcases or even specific rooms, mainly to Spaniards, in concordance with the active mission of the Museum.

Like everything else involving a reflection of the sociocultural and psychosocial behavior, such as fashion, it is complex to bring forward or to decide which approach will be worked on in a museum space, no matter how large it is. The MT-CIPE opted for an exhibit, which follows the timeline of Haute-Couture, a facet of fashion which currently has its action more reflected on brand image and cosmetic sales than on the design and production of costumes.

From the analysis of particular sections of each one of the presence exhibitions (A and B), some approaches shall be highlighted, relevant to understanding and increased knowledge and connections relative to costume objects acquisition, and here relevance is given to those outside the expository standard.

- In the underwear costumes section (A) the presentation on a radiographic image of a corset model, a piece of complex drafting technique, is rather enlightening;
- Audio-Video Animation made to show the pattern (planning of clothing mold), from two-dimensional to three-dimensional when it is superimposed on the body. This dimensional transposition and the dressing process bring the object closer to its use and provides an understanding of its structure by comparative reflection;
- Magnifier/screen for viewing details and differences of textile samples;
- Objects to be used (dressed) by visitors;
- Objects to be touched as cognitive information of different materials, techniques and processes described in texts and images.

From the virtual exhibition (the some program interaction applied on computer terminals) nothing shall be approached, since it is much more an informative, as a catalog, than a narrative feature, according to Piacente [11] guidelines. The exhibition of MT-CIPE is much more efficient and well provided museum experience in an attendance context.

However, focus on technology interface, we can discuss about their possibilities to show what is not accept in a real/material situation of conservation with the objects of the patrimonial collection. It means that, paradoxically, the movement and the corporal context of these objects could be better explored, or expanded, in a "virtual" context, different than a direct exhibition of them that restrict the curator through conservation rules [12-14].

The first example highlighted before is just the utilization of an image (radiographic), an old technology, but it also intermediate and communicate about the object, it is an image that show more than an aesthetic perspective. This method is also made recently by *V&A Museum* publications about pattern of women clothes [15].

The second and third examples are two possibilities of interface between the objects and the public (audio-video and magnifier), by characteristics about their structure. Both methods are sustained by the visual language. The video expos a part of the process to sewing clothes by animate movie. The same technique is used in the *Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino* to show how a hat was knitted [research *in loco,* Santiago, Set/2011]. Or in the *Museu Tèxtil i d'Indumentària,* the video presents the transformations of the "natural" body shape by clothes in a clear, quick and easy way [research *in loco,* Barcelona, May/2011]. This kind of communication have been applied frequently to explain a process, a thematic, to contextualize or to immortalize, like the production made to "Schiaparelli and Prada: Impossible Conversations" to the *Costume Institute of Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET)*: "Viewers have the impression of eavesdropping on a fantastical meeting of two great fashion minds" [16].

Other techniques are applied in temporary exhibitions, for example the holography of a shoe and from Dita von Teese (burlesque dancer) by "Christian Louboutin" in the *Design Museum* [17] or in the *MET* by "Alexander McQueen's. Savage beauty" [18]: a woman dressed and in movement with the same garment exhibit in the side by a static mannequin. The Science Museum utilizes a similar technique like a "human guide" (and other interferences) visible just from iPhones/smartphones during the visit [19].

In a website, or in the internet, the options are diverse and there is the prospect of researches and narratives produced by own the internet users. But also here, the video (or visual languages) is an important communication resource that presents not only the object and its patrimonial narrative, but also other narratives, as the backstage of the exhibition production [20], process of conservation or replica [21], lives story, etc. The valuable is the large communication this interface provides, besides acting as a parallel or complement of the exhibition which is held in museum space (not virtual), such as links not available in other forms of interaction. Furthermore, it is in the institutional websites (video sites or blogs) that the ephemeral is perpetuated; the temporary exhibitions are accessible beyond their duration.

Other possibilities are created and recreated (3D, multimedia terminals, touch screen, light/sound sensor, etc.) to tell stories, produce emotions and experiences. What we found is a primary choice for a visual language like a way more natural to make "dialogues", considering the analysis of Grudin and Norman [22].

Clothes, as other manufacture/industrial goods, are produced with a lot of processes and the final products do not show all the knowledge, material and technics, involved to them. How and what to communicate about the possible narratives around an object of the material culture, even a

typology of objects, is a curatorial decision, in concordance with the institutional position. However, mainly in permanent exhibitions – those are made for a long time and reflect the museum mission – it is important the multidisciplinary discussion. It means that to know, study, investigate an object are required specific knowledge, even to communicate the aspects involved (material, technic, aesthetic, social, semiotic, etc.) are need the conjugation of methodologies and studies areas.

Sure that all these possibilities referred here are important to expand the knowledge of the objects and their context, even so do not substitute the direct contact, the touch feeling of the object's textures, the sensation of the body with restrictions of some pattern structure of a garment or, the comfort of another, in a cognitive learning of the different shapes, contexts and beliefs that the body was materializing during the human history. The MT-CIPE considers this perspective in his Learning Area (B), and sure it can be improved.

V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research focus on costume heritage narratives because understand that these objects present particularities that increase the challenges of them exhibition and of the communication of their material and immaterial elements.

The MT-CIPE is a good example of social transformations in a museum institution, primarily by the relationship between its collection and its institutional placement.

It presents itself as a benchmark in the area by the excellent work it develops, both in research of textile objects and in the detailed work of its historical exhibition (A), with the use of tailored mannequins, the whole ambiance and the quality required. It also features innovation considering its exhibition choices by means of a teaching expository area (B) and some of their visitation dynamics.

While seeking to meet different audiences and present different narrative concepts, it is interesting to note that these accentuate some dichotomies and, due to the discourse option, delineates independent and sometimes incompatible narratives. It makes use of technology, on a very punctual basis, appropriate for the understanding of the object in its technical component, but it does not address the psychosocial components of the historical context.

Finally, it appears that, despite the resources made possible by a hypermedia tool, the communication of the museum with its public through the internet (official website and other) is little exploited and does not have the same appeal, investment, or content which is provided to the visitor *in loco,* mainly because there is no effective translations for other languages, in addition to Spanish, which reinforces the local, or national, character of MT-CIPE.

The interaction between multiple agents and interfaces in the production of a heritage narrative make possible an expansion of the perceptions and views about an object or context. The strategic how it is communicate to the public is a challenge linked with choices, technics, professionals and budget. We can tell a story with enchantment and discoveries or, we can just try to make it more accessible and plentiful.

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