

WHAT USE IS THE REPRODUCTIVE IMAGINATION TO THE VISITOR OF A MUSEUM EXHIBITION?

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Abstract

This study focuses on three sub-forms of the reproductive imagination identified by Kant. It is carried out in an exhibition on Beringia based on information gathered from 30 visitors of the general-public type. Its aim is to verify the presence of these sub-forms as visitors go through the exhibition, and to propose hypotheses on their role as well as on the museum interventions likely to promote their production.

Keywords: *Reproductive imagination, adult visitors, museum exhibition.*

1. Introduction

The museum milieu interest in imagination is very real. Two reviews of English-language publications, one carried out in the early 2000s, the other in 2023, identified a few dozen texts produced by this milieu. However, empirical research in this field is rare, probably due to a lack of an adequate definition and means of study (Dufresne-Tassé, 2006). More specifically, the definitions offered are general and focus on the distant repercussions of imagination rather than on its immediate manifestations.

Bedford (2004), for example, considers that imagination helps to understand exceptional characters or situations, and leads to personal transformations and profound social commitments. Such a conception is probably right, but it is of little use when considering the imaginary production of a visitor browsing a museum exhibition.

The second difficulty stems from the impossibility of accessing imaginary production through the means commonly used to gather information from a visitor, i.e. the observation of her/his behavior without her/his knowledge (tracking), a questionnaire or an interview used once visit is over. Clearly, the imaginary production of a visitor is beyond simple observation and only poorly revealed through a questionnaire or an interview used when a visitor is about to leave the exhibition. Indeed, the latter two instruments only deliver the memory of what the visitor has imagined. This memory, which is almost always a "reconstruction", is both limited and highly inaccurate (Savard, Savard and Dufresne-Tassé, 1994).

One will look hereafter at how the two previous difficulties were overcome, then at the orientation of the study that was carried out, and finally at some of the perspectives it suggests.

1.1. Finding a solution to the above difficulties

The development of a means of accessing the imaginary functioning made it possible to develop an adequate definition of this functioning.

Means: In order to access a visitor's imaginary functioning at the very moment she/he is browsing an exhibition, my team adapted a technique known as Thinking Aloud (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). This is an approach widely used to study phenomena such as problem-solving, text comprehension, usability testing or even expert examination (see for example: Boren and Ramay, 2000; Denney, 1989; Khramer and Ummelen, 2004; Kukan and Beck, 1997; Van de Wiel, 2017). Its adaptation consists in asking a visitor who is arriving at the museum to make the visit at her/his own convenience, while saying as she/he goes along what comes to mind - what is thought, imagined or felt - to express it "as it comes", and without worrying about holding it back, explaining it or justifying it, as this will not be asked. What the visitor says – her/his “discourse” – is audio-recorded by a researcher who accompanies the visitor without intervening. The recording is transcribed in writing and analyzed in this form.

Definition: A study of a few hundred visitor's discourses collected as described above, and the examination of recently proposed definitions (see, for example: Abraham, 2020; Tateo, 2015), enabled to arrive inductively at the following definition: imagination is the visitor's capacity or power to evoke and represent that which is not present with her/him in the exhibition room. This may be a phenomenon, a

"thing" occurring prior to the visit, concomitant with it, future, potential or even virtual (Dufresne-Tassé, Marin, Sauv , Banna, 2006). Such a definition makes it possible to identify the parts of a discourse in which a visitor uses her/his imagination. By collecting several of these, one can create a corpus and proceed with its analysis (Dufresne-Tass , 2023).

1.2. Orientation of the present research

Again inductively, two main forms of imaginary functioning were identified in the context of a visit.

Form 1: The visitor starts from what she/he observes or reads, and very quickly adds something that takes her/him away from it. *Example:* "My aunt had this sort of shell on her coffee table. She'd taken me and my cousins to the beach. But we'd bought the shell in a store. It was big, big, big in the luggage. It almost stayed in the house we'd rented!" In fact, an eye-catching element in the exhibition becomes the trigger for a series of associations that feed on the visitor's baggage of knowledge and experience.

Form 2: As before, the visitor starts from what she/he's looking at, but instead of moving away from it, she/he sticks to it; scrutinizes it, details it, deepens it, completes it, enriches it. Less spectacular than its predecessor, this form nevertheless seems highly important. It would act like Roman mortar; it would hold together the elements of the exhibition: objects, texts, light, furniture, which are in fact merely juxtaposed in space. In so doing, it should "make sense" of the juxtapositions and, in so doing, promote understanding of the exhibition's subject and even enriches it. The research presented below focuses on this form of imaginary production as it takes place in the exhibition room.

Turning to Kant: To start investigating the second form of imagination, I borrowed from Kant the sub-forms of reproductive imagination he targets in the Critique of Pure Reason (Kant, 1787-2006), which he calls representational, synthesizing and schematizing. This recourse to Kant is justified by the similarity between the behavior of his reader or listener and that of the museum visitor. To understand what he reads or hears, Kant's subject must make sense of each word he encounters, then go beyond this word by word to make sense of a sentence, and then of several of these. The visitor, for his part, often aided by some text, makes sense of one object, then of the next, then of the following one, and so constructs a "universe of meaning" from elements simply placed side by side.

2. Study outline

The study of the three sub-forms of imagination was carried out in an exhibition on Beringia, a region of the world located at the north-western tip of America. It was on display at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, but on loan from the Washington Smithsonian Institution.

The information required was obtained from 30 general-public type visitors, using the approach described above. These visitors were of both sexes, aged between 20 and 65, had completed a high school degree or better, and used to visit museums less than five times a year. Twenty of them visited the exhibition as originally conceived, i.e., in such a way as to encourage appropriation of its content by all available means (henceforth referred to as the first version). The other ten were confronted with a version prepared just before the exhibition was dismantled; the very same objects were presented, but were surrounded by a minimum of text, in line with what one thinks corresponds to the wishes of the general-public visitor (henceforth referred to as the second version).

Note 1: For the sake of brevity and ease of understanding, the data presented here cover only a group of five objects forming one of the first sub-sections of the exhibition on winter seal hunting. These are a pair of ice snowshoes, a wild goose-skin parka, snow goggles, a group of harpoons and some decoys.

Note 2: The guiding concern of this investigation is threefold: a) verifying the use of the three sub-forms of imagination proposed by Kant in visitors of the general-public type; b) identifying as far as possible the role of each of these forms; c) understanding what facilitates their appearance. It seemed more profitable to approach the information collected from visitors first in a qualitative rather than a quantitative manner. One will therefore not be surprised to find below examples taken from their discourses rather than statistical data; these will be the subject of a future article.

3. Data

3.1. Representative sub-form of the imagination

3.1.1. Definition (adapted to the museum situation). The representative sub-form of the imagination enables visitors to figure, to represent what is physically absent, i.e., to develop images (representations of all kinds) in particular from what they read.

3.1.2. Specific context for gathering information from visitors. Ice snowshoes and their label

Table 1.

<i>Exhibition version 1</i>	<i>Exhibition version 2</i>
Text of the label:	
Ice snowshoes	Ice snowshoes
Beringia, 19th century	Beringia, 19th century
Nelson Collection, Smithsonian Institution	Nelson Collection, Smithsonian Institution
These snowshoes have a very strong frame, and a reduced weave. This is deliberate, as putting the foot in the middle, the Beringian is distributing his weight over a large surface area and reducing pressure on the ice. He thus avoids breaking it when it is fragile, and drowning.	A type of snowshoes widely used in Beringia.

Examples of what visitors say when confronted with version 1:

- "It must be scary to hear the ice crack when you walk and there's deep water underneath."
- "I understand, you have to be as light as possible. I don't know if there's any other way?"
- "It must make a lot of noise with big paddles like that, but if it could keep you from drowning!"

Examples of what visitors say when confronted with version 2:

- "It's ugly snowshoes!"
- "Bah! snowshoes!"
- "I am not interested in snowshoes!"

3.2. Observations and interpretation

1) Visitors confronted with the label of the first version use the representative form of their imagination. Indeed, to be able to express themselves as they do, they must have developed images from what they have read. This is not the case for the visitors who have read the second version.

2) The role of the imaginary production seems to establish a link between what visitors find in the exhibition, the images they develop of it, and their own baggage of knowledge and experience.

3) The way the label is written in the first version seems designed to encourage the use of the representative imagination. Indeed, the text that immediately follows its identifying part quickly invites the visitor to imagine what is happening in a sequence of cause-and-effect relationships, i.e., produce a series of interrelated images. Since this is not the case with the label of the second version, and visitors don't seem to be using their representative imagination in response, one might think that the very content of the label is important and that, in any case, the representative imagination would need a support, an incentive to become productive. On a completely different note, one might also ask whether the explanatory nature of the label in the first version of the exhibition encouraged the production of the representative imagination.

3.3. Synthesizing sub-form of the imagination

Definition (adapted to the museum context): The synthesizing sub-form of the imagination allows to "fill in the blanks", especially the gaps between objects, by inserting images (representations); the objects in an exhibition are thus linked to one another.

Specific context for gathering information from visitors: In both versions, the exhibition presents the snowshoes we have just seen and, right next to them, the goose-skin parka. In the first version, the parka label, like that of the snowshoes, offers an explanation of its characteristics, which is not the case in the second version.

Examples of what visitors say when confronted with version 1:

- "Ah yes, the snowshoes are to keep him from drowning, and the parka not to get cold."
- "I can see the guy walking on the ice in his parka. It's not bad!"
- "It's a pity they wear snowshoes in this country, because walking with the parka must be great!"

Examples of what visitors say when confronted with version 2:

- "Ah! that's a nice parka!"
- "That's a big coat!"
- "A goose-skin parka, it's not possible. They're talking nonsense!"

Observations and interpretation:

1) It seems that visitors to the first version of the exhibition manage, each in its own way, to link snowshoes and parka, while visitors to the second version do not.

2) The link created between contiguous objects increases the exhibition's cohesion, since each object constitutes a semantic island surrounded by emptiness. On the other hand, the repeated creation of links between objects should help visitors to develop the impression that the proximity of objects is deliberate, thought out and meaningful. On the other hand, when this link is not established, visitors should tend to have the feeling that the objects they are looking at are piled up more or less randomly, or placed according to a logic that escapes them.

3) Here as above, one might ask what it is about the exhibition that facilitates imaginary production. Is it the fact that the labels (of the snowshoes and parka) induce the use of representative imagination? Or is it the explanatory nature of the labels, or the fact that these simultaneously possess both characteristics?

3.4. Schematizing sub-form of the imagination

Definition (adapted to the museum context): The schematizing sub-form allows visitors to use one of their schemes, or the concept of scheme itself to make sense of several objects.

Specific context in which information is gathered from visitors: They are observing one last object, and have just completed their tour of the winter seal hunt sub-section. Objects are displayed in each version with the labels seen above, but their order of presentation differs. In the first version, the order closely follows the use a hunter might make of them: snowshoes, parka, goggles to protect against excessive light, then decoys and harpoons. In the second version, on the other hand, the sequence of items - snowshoes, parka, harpoons, decoys and goggles - does not respect this use.

Examples of what visitors say when confronted with version 1:

- "When I want to go fishing, I put on my boots, take my fishing rod and put on some mosquito repellent. Well, with this, he's ready to go seal hunting. The scratchy paw is strong! It's easy to catch him with a harpoon."
- "Oum... it's a good thing he had a scratchy paw, because he would have had to wait a long time for the seal!"
- "Phew, it's scary to have to wait for a seal to come up for air so you can feed your family. Luckily, there was the scraper!"

Examples of what visitors say when confronted with version 2:

- "The decoy is like a bad wolf paw. It's scary!"
- "It looks like simple a harpoon."
- "Back to the parka. It can't be goose skin. It's too fragile!"

Observations and interpretation:

1) What the visitors in the first version of the exhibition say suggests that they have developed a scheme that corresponds to the preparation and execution of a hunt. This scheme constitutes a genuine intellectual construction, crowned by an intellectual leap that both encompasses and surpasses each element of the hunt process. This is not the case for the visitors who are browsing the second version; they are still content to consider each object separately.

2) Because it both encompasses and exceeds the understanding of each object, a schematic vision relieves the visitor's memory, enabling her/him to profitably process several parts of an exhibition encompassing several dozens of objects.

3) It may be thought that the museography details seen above encourage the production of the schematizing imagination, whether through the labels that suggest an understanding of the objects and encourage the use of the representative imagination, or simply through the proximity of the objects, which encourages the synthesizing imagination. If this is true, the production of the schematizing imagination would depend on the successful operation of the representative and synthesizing imaginations.

4. Synthesis and perspectives

It seems that: 1) Visitors of the general public type use the three representatives, synthesizing and schematizing sub-forms of the reproductive imagination as conceived by Kant; 2) These three forms can play significant roles in the economy of an exhibition visit; 3) The texts which directly accompany the objects, the proximity of the latter as well as the sequence of their presentation seem to favor the production of the three sub-forms.

The qualitative-inductive approach of the study presented had the stated aim of ensuring the best possible start of deductive verifications. However, it also expected to generate sets of questions that would enrich these verifications. In fact, two series emerged.

The first series of questions stems directly from the observations presented here. For example: At what frequencies do the sub-forms studied occur? Are their roles limited to those we have seen? Are the museographic elements already identified as favoring them, the only ones to have this property?

The second series arises from a careful examination of the visitor's discourses: A) Can the reproductive imagination be found in museums under other forms than the Kantian ones? For example, would it be possible for interpretations or implications to directly deepen and even enrich the content of an exhibition? B) What roles can the reproductive imagination play vis-à-vis the productive (creative) imagination? Would the first constitute a condition for the appearance of the second? Would the first rather represent a simple enabling condition or, ultimately, in contrast would it harm the processes which underlie the creative imaginary production? C) It seemed that, in an exhibition sub-section, the use of the three Kantian sub-forms of the imagination is accompanied by a real process of construction of meaning. Considering that most exhibitions have several parts, going through them should be a huge building exercise. If this is correct, one can ask under what conditions is this development possible? What does it require from the exhibition? What does it require from the visitor cognitive functioning and what emotional phenomena accompany it? The visitors' speeches analyzed make it possible to identify pleasure and pride. Is emotional functioning likely to appear in other forms? Is fatigue, the famous museum fatigue detectable after a while? D) The observations presented were collected in a "society museum". Are these observations likely to be repeated, and in what forms in art museums or institutions that present living collections? In other words, what roles should the imaginary functioning and its inseparable companions, cognitive and affective functioning, play in these types of institutions?

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