

Aula 2

REPRESENTATION AT WORK: INSTITUTIONS

META

Illustrating how the process of representation takes place empirically by providing students with concrete examples

OBJETIVO

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:

- Understanding how apparently unambiguous objects can be assigned different meanings
- Analysing how institutions that are usually said to impart objective knowledge also make use of representations
- Raising students' awareness about the relationship between representations and power relations

PRERREQUISITO

Familiaridade com os períodos formativos da literatura inglesa;
Conceitos-chave da Teoria da Literatura e da história literária.
Noções de história dos Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

This class is based on a text entitled *The Poetics and The Politics of exhibiting other Cultures*, authored by Henrietta Lidchi and part a book organized by Stuart Hall (2003). In class V, you were introduced to some theoretical notions which tried to account for the practice of representation – that is, how one conveys meaning through language or objects. What follows is, to a great extent, a continuation to it, the only difference being that now we will try to provide you with more concrete examples of the way representation - as a practice - may work empirically. Somewhere along the following paragraphs, you will have to revisit a number of things you have learned so far in this course in order to move forward. Perhaps, the most important of which, for our purpose here, is the constructionist approach to representation. So, if you do not remember much of it, the best thing to do is to review it before continuing the reading.

According to Lidchi, ethnographic museums – and museums in general, which in the past were seen as places where knowledge from other cultures was stored and protected, have recently received critiques which are worth writing about. They are no longer perceived as neutral institutions whose sole interest is to disseminate unbiased information on different and sometimes remote cultures. As it might have become clear at this point, exhibiting (as well as talking, writing about, referring to) a particular culture is inescapably attached to the act of representing it and as representation takes place within the domains of discourse which, as Foucault pointed out, is linked power, the idea that such institutions only impart disinterested knowledge seems ever more unlikely.

That makes them perfect case studies if one is interested in understanding how representation works in a more concrete level and the implications (both social and political) that such a process entails. Therefore, for the sake of exemplification, we will reproduce some of the cases presented by the said author as we move forward into the class, which will be broken down into three main sections. The first is dedicated to defining important terms: museum, ethnography, object, text and context. In the next one, we will see two cases which strongly corroborate the assumption that museums – be it ethnographic or not –, no matter the circumstances, always fail to represent objects or artifacts in totally objective fashion – such a thing is unattainable. And then, we will draw some conclusions.

KEY TERMS

It is usually accepted that museums harbor a myriad of diversified artifacts that, as it is often the case, tell something about a given time period, place, region or culture and that their main mission is to preserve such information for future generations. If you pick up a dictionary and look the word up, you will probably find something like the following definition by Vergo (1993, p. 41): “Museums exist in order to acquire, safeguard, conserve, and display objects, artifacts and works of arts of various kinds”. Such an entry, although true to some extent, does not convey the complexities and peculiarities which are part of the process of gathering, ordering and displaying those artifacts. There is more to it than one can see at first. Moreover, one cannot claim that this has been an unalterable understanding throughout history.

According to Lidchi, if we try to trace back its origins, we will find that it once carried two different meanings: one of which referred to the place (s) where the Muses dwelt, and the other one to a site dedicated to study and research. It was only between the 16th and 17th centuries that museums started to be conceived in somewhat contemporary terms. In this respect, there is a very interesting account given by the author which has a great deal to teach us about what to “acquire, safeguard, conserve, and display objects, artifacts and works of arts of various kinds” could have meant in the 17th century and how such a process was not as simple as one might be led to think while reading dictionary entries as the one just mentioned.

Such an account is that of John Tradescant, an English botanist and gardener, and his collection of extraordinary, unusual artifacts and rarities which eventually would be transformed into a museum exhibition that sometime later would be left under the auspices of his son John Tradescant the younger. The most interesting thing about this enterprise is the way he sorted his collection. Basically, there were two main categories under which each artifact had to fall before being exhibited: Natural and Artificial materials. What is curious is that the 17th-century understanding of what was natural (or artificial) is not quite like the one we have nowadays. So, allegedly specimens of mythical creatures such as the Phoenix and the Griffin would fall under the category of natural materials, which would be unconceivable for modern-day standards. What that reveals is that there is a great deal of interpretation taking place in an apparently simple process (that of gathering and exhibiting artifacts).

Furthermore, such an experience also shows there are some elements which can be said to be part of the nature of museums, namely, representation, because by selecting, ordering and exhibiting particular objects, one wants to represent something, impart some knowledge or curiosity about something (in the case in point, John wanted to represent the diversity of

existence by a sample of it); classification, which is totally context-bound – so it varies according to the knowledge available at a given time period; motivation, since there is always an end behind exhibiting something; and interpretation, which pervades the whole process.

Now that you know that what museums do is not as simple or innocent as it might look at first, we have to address another key term whose meaning is indispensable for you to properly understand how some institutions, even though they tried, are unable to impart knowledge in an objective way. This term is ethnography. If one intends to talk about ethnographic museums, one has to define to what the former vocable refers in the first place. You will notice that the nature of these institutions can turn out to be as intriguing as that of ordinary museums.

The word ethnography is a combination of two terms: *ethnos* which means people/nation/race and *graphein* meaning description or writing. Thus, a simple definition would state that it aims at describing nations of people by making known their customs, habits and differences. One curious thing, which was pointed out by Lidchi, that can help us understand the nature of the work carried out in such a field has to do with its historical constitution. In the British context, it referred to the methods and texts linked to anthropology and ethnology. Also, the author argues that, in the 19th century, ethnographic referred to everything that was seen as novel or ‘curious’ (or, let us put it bluntly, ‘exotic’). What is more, ethnography along with anthropology and ethnology were primarily (though not exclusively) interested in studying non-European peoples or nations. Therefore, ethnographic museums would exhibit for the most part objects that were believed to be ‘exotic, primitive, savage or belonging to a dwindling human group’ from specific geographical regions (e.g. the British colonies).

So, just like “ordinary ones”, ethnographic museums, in exhibiting various objects from other cultures, create multiple representations which undoubtedly affected the way people saw such cultures. And this owes to the fact that they do not simply reflect the natural differences between “European” and “non-European”, but construct cultural ones. And it does not stop there, all the “knowledge” produced will be backed up by specific areas of research whose principal aim is to make it appear more scientific, despite its historical (and therefore disputed) nature. One thing that should never be forgotten is that the whole process is always closely linked to the struggle for power between the “West and the rest” (Hall, 1992).

In other words, such institutions end up contributing to a broader ideological agenda: the constructing of the Other in opposition to the Western self. Edward Said – of whom you might probably have heard in previous courses – made some significant analysis of such a cultural phenomenon which he refers to as orientalism. He also demonstrated how various Western institutions as well as fields of knowledge promote Western values by

depicting the Other as inferior, primitive, uncivilized, un-scientific, feminine, and the list of negative attributes goes on.

Having said that about ethnographic museums, let us now turn briefly to issues pertaining objects, meaning and the way they both relate to text and context. Exhibited objects are usually taken as bearers of unambiguous knowledge of past societies or events. Such a sense of stability as to what they mean is increased by the way people see curatorial practice. For them, a curator's work is an essentially descriptive (rather than interpretive) activity, for which reason there is not much questioning of the meanings to which such objects are assigned. However, as it has been argued before, there is no direct, natural - or if you will - fixed link between an object and its meaning in the same way that there is no immediate or natural link between a signifier and a signified. This assertion translates into the notion that an unmistakable divide exists between an object (as a presence) and its meaning, which is bridged as a result of human effort.

If we apply this supposition to specific settings such as that of museums, we will notice that, even though one might be able to preserve a given object for, say, one hundred years, nobody can guarantee that the primary meaning assigned to it remained unalterable. One object might at first be used to represent something that over time may be "questioned" and, as a result, changed which might mean a total reformulation of its meaning or just small alteration of it.

Texts are key in suggesting stability in the meanings assigned to "ethnographic" objects, because they are responsible for mediating the contact between the viewer and an unfamiliar artifact. In so doing, they determine which reading or interpretation is preferred. Thus, due to their capacity to function as vehicles for such interpretations, they are usually the battleground for many disputes over the most accurate meaning of exhibited objects. At this point, you might ask "where does context come in?" Context is probably as important as texts themselves, since it exerts a strong influence on their production. So, the meaning of such objects is constructed within a particular context, which inevitably leads us back to the historical circumstances under which the meaning-making process takes place.

ASSIGNING MEANING: COMANCHE'S CASE

Let us reproduce one elucidative example offered by Lidchi of how an object can be assigned different meanings over time. Drawing on one article published by Elizabeth A. Lawrence entitled *His very silence speaks: the horse who survived Custer's Last Stand*, she reflects on how one unusual horse became an artifact whose meaning proved to be a contentious issue to say the least. Its name was Comanche (see picture 1) and it belonged to the Seventh U.S. cavalrymen regiment which engaged in a battle against

Sioux and Cheyenne warriors (indigenous groups) in an episode which came to be known as the Custer's Last Stand. It took place on a Montana hillside on June 25, 1876 and it is said to have resulted in the loss of approximately 210 cavalrymen. According to Lawrence's article, little is known about what actually happened then, but it has been said that two days after the battle, Comanche, which allegedly belonged to one of the captains of the US cavalry, was found alive.



Comanche with caretaker Gustave Korn. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress, available from the Denver Public Library's Western Image Collection.

(fonte: https://newwest.net/topic/article/comanche_the_horse_that_survived_the_battle_of_the_little_bighorn_part_1/C39/L39/)

It is unknown why so much emphasis has been placed over Comanche, which would be later referred to “as the sole survivor of Custer's Last Stand”, despite the fact that not only other cavalry horses survived, but also victorious Indians. This alone suggests that there might have been a clear motivation for one to omit such facts and place that one horse as the sole survivor. While alive, the horse came to represent various things. On the one hand, it evoked strong emotions in people, such as anger for being defeated by the Indians and sorrow for the loss of American soldiers. On the other, however, it represented fortitude, endurance and invincibility, for which reason the animal was given many distinctions.

When the animal died, Lewis L. Dyche of the Natural History Museum at the University of Kansas stuffed it and put it on exhibition at the

World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893 (see picture 3). Thus, it was used at first as an oddity at an exposition whose main purpose was to show and celebrate American material progress.



Comanche Restoration Project

University of Kansas naturalist Lewis Lindsay Dyche prepared Comanche for exhibition at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. Following the fair, Comanche was returned to the KU Natural History Museum. Following a major restoration and conservation effort in 2004, the museum began exhibiting Comanche in a new exhibit, where the horse remains today as a popular attraction. (Photo KUNHM)

Fonte: <http://www.custermuseum.org/Comanche.htm>

Later, the animal came to be designated as “the only surviving horse of the Custer massacre”, which, as Lawrence points out, is a very inaccurate rendering of the event whose nature is completely altered by the addition of the term “massacre”. Since both belligerent parties were armed, one cannot speak of massacre.

Little is known about its first decades as a museum specimen, but it remained for a significant amount of time at the University of Kansas at a glass stall for public view. Previous to 1970, there was a label which told the horse's history. It eventually became a contentious issue for its first sentence said “Comanche was the sole survivor of the Custer massacre at the Battle of the Little Big Horn on June 25, 1876”. American Indian students, feeling that the exhibition portrayed the event in an inaccurate and biased way, undertook the challenge to close it down. They argued that it perpetuated the stereotype of the “savage” Indians by stating that they “massacred” the American cavalymen. In other words, the meaning assigned to the “object/stuffed horse” was charged with racism, not to mention the fact that other many survivors were left out of the account.

Eventually a committee representing the students convinced the director of the museum to uphold the exhibition until a more accurate label was

produced. In the reopening of the exhibition, attended both by Indians and whites, the former label had been replaced by a more elaborate text explaining what the horse stood for. It read

... a symbol of the conflict between the United States Army and the Indian tribes of the Great Plains that resulted from the government's policy of confinement of Indians on reservations and extermination of those Indians who refused to be confined... (LAWRENCE apud HALL, 2003, p.212-213)

To some extent, the horse started to represent more than just a US defeat, but the Indian peoples' struggle for existence. What is more, Lawrence adds that it also came to represent what modern Indians can accomplish, since they were able to change the way the artifact was being (mis)used.

According to Lidchi, Comanche is an appealing example of how objects can be given different meanings over time. But not only that, it also makes a strong case as to how such meanings are not as objective as they appear to be at a first glance, especially when they are purposefully intended to be perceived this way – try to think of museums artifacts. Thus, if meaning is not a natural phenomenon, but one which is constructed in and through language and culture at a given time, then the signification of an artifact becomes the ground over which multiple disputes will take place until a more or less stable representation is agreed upon. That, however, does not mean it will last for long, since, as it might be clear by now, representation as well as meaning are context-bound.

Let us dwell a bit longer on this example by remarking on a few aspects of the extended analysis of the aforementioned article undertaken by Lidchi in which she tries to reframe the case by employing some concepts brought forth in Barthes' writings, some of which you might already be familiarized with. She says Comanche started to be assigned symbolic value because it was attached to a relevant event in the history of the United States. Thus, if we are to use the proper terminology, we can safely state that it functioned as a sign. As you know from previous classes, a sign basically incorporates a signifier - always material such as sounds, objects, images -, and a signified, which is the mental representation of something. Therefore, in the case in point, either the living animal or the stuffed object can be said to function as a signifier, whereas the Custer's Last Stand would emerge as its signified, since this is the episode it supposedly referred to. However, there are other levels of signification which are necessary to consider if one wants to find out where the ever-changing meanings can accommodate themselves.

According to Barthes, as Lidchi points out, signs operate within certain systems and these are responsible for creating different orders of meaning. Thus, there are at least two levels of signification which might be useful to bear in mind if we are to understand how it was possible to make the US

cavalry horse mean more than one thing. The first level or order of meaning – to which you were already introduced – is that of denotation. This is the most elementary layer of meaning, since it refers to the descriptive relationship between signifier and signified. It is also the level in which meaning seems to be more stable or less controversial. If we turn to our example, Comanche – which functions as a signifier – would denote a horse, that is, the concept of a horse (a four-footed animal used for carrying things, etc.), which would be our signified. That is the first level of understanding which Barthes refers to. There is another, however, which seems to be even more important, since it can accommodate various – and sometimes opposing – meanings.

Such a level is that of connotation. In it, the objects in appreciation are looked at from broader or more comprehensive perspective. Furthermore, it is closely connected to historical circumstances, such as social life, rules, conventions, ideologies, politics and power relations. That is why the meanings fixed in this level are less stable and more controversial. And as time goes by, they might eventually be called into question and, as it is often the case, be revised. It might also happen an overlapping of meanings, which means to say that one object may connote different things depending on which context it is being exposed or to whom.

It was in this level of signification that Comanche was assigned different meanings and where most of the dispute took place. At first, it represented the US defeat for the Indians who were purposefully portrayed as bloodthirsty savages. At the Colombian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, it symbolized the victory of civilization over the wild savages. For the Native American students, it represented the biased perspective through which white historical narratives painted their ancestors. After being called into question, it became a testimony of the clash between two civilizations, but this time with less racially-charged assumptions and offering a broader picture of Indian peoples' struggle for survival. As you see, all of these meanings owe their existence to historically identified circumstances, i.e., they are not natural or objective, but constructed even though more often than not they are displayed otherwise, as when we go museums exhibitions and stand in front of artifacts accompanied by texts which employ very impersonal language.

CONCLUSION

The first – and more obvious conclusion – we can draw based on the brief exposition undertaken in this class is that museums – ethnographic or not – form systems of representation themselves. Despite what has for a long time been commonly thought, such institutions do not so much safeguard knowledge, as they produce it. And such production, as it was

suggested, is also linked to a particular discourse. It is never disinterested even if those who organize an exhibition are not aware of the assumptions which guided the gathering, selecting and ordering of the objects to be exhibited. Regarding the latter, we can also conclude that they do not hold a natural relationship with the meanings assigned to them. Quite the opposite, they are always constructed, fixed and, most importantly, historical for which reason they may be called into question. Also, the way an object is represented is more often than not in tune with a set of suppositions which form a “world view”. Museums, therefore, do not exhibit objects, but interpretations or, if you like, “readings” of them.



RESUMO

In this class, you will see how representation works empirically by being presented to some concrete cases. In the first part of it, you will be introduced to a few important definitions on which you will have to rely for the proper understanding of it. Next, you will be given some evidence of how the process of exhibiting an object in an institutional setting – such as that of a museum – is less objective or neutral as we might assume at first. Upon doing so, we will reproduce briefly one thought-provoking case. Then, we will set out to demonstrate how a particular object can be assigned or associated with different meanings over time and the way such meanings are a result of ideological disputes.



ATIVIDADE

Answer these questions below in English:

* Based on what you have studied in this class, explain by using your own words the reason (s) why museums, despite what may be commonly assumed, are not able to exhibit their artifacts in a totally objective way.

Esta atividade objetiva verificar se você compreendeu satisfatoriamente um dos principais pontos desta aula.



PRÓXIMA AULA

REPRESENTANTING THE OTHER (PART I)

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