

Now THAT is Evidence: Tracking Down the Evil “Whatever” Interpretation

Cheryl Meszaros

This paper was presented as part of a Keynote Address at the Visitor Studies Association Conference, July 2006, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Interpretation has been part of the modern museum’s mandate since its birth in the eighteenth century (Bennett, 1995), yet it is the least studied of all aspects of museum work. Recently, the American Association of Museums instituted a *National Interpretation Project* to begin the process of “identifying and disseminating standards and best practices” (AAM website). This project will undoubtedly create a new understanding of how museums currently carry out their interpretive work. What I have to offer you today, though, is in a different register. It consists of ideas gathered from some of the greatest thinkers of interpretation—passionate and generous people who have made the interrogation of interpretation their life’s work. I offer these ideas with the hope that *through you*, these ideas will take root in the museum, engendering more informed and self-aware interpretive practices.

Interpretation is a concept—not unlike “experience”—that is highly ambiguous, itself open to wildly different interpretations. Its openness is both its strength and its weakness: the openness of interpretation is what allows cultures to mobilize new ideas and practices and to redefine their canons, but it also allows the dominant forces of the day to direct and eventually colonize interpretation, closing down the very possibilities that they claim to open. Therefore, what I

want to do today is to establish a little haven—an international conservation project, if you will—for the endangered aspects of interpretation. This is a haven where interpretation can be—can just *be*, not in the service of education or audience development, not for the financial health of the museum, or as an outcome of AAM’s strategic planning, however necessary and admirable all of these may be. I want to create a shelter for the endangered aspects of interpretation precisely because they are the most potent forces in a democratic society. They carry a weight and vigor that nourish thoughts of freedom, of engagement, of civility, and of responsibility.

Building this shelter is a collective task: it will take you and me and many others many years to complete it. For my part here today, I offer two things. The first is a brief historical overview of interpretation, from which I will gather up the endangered aspects of interpretation—a motley but powerful crew of figures, forces, ideas, and even a few ghosts—to inhabit our shelter. The second is a brief history of interpretive practices in the museum that culminate in what I call the “whatever” interpretation. In this narrative, the “whatever” interpretation is the villain, the schemer who says one thing but does the opposite. I will argue that on its way to conquering the museum, the evil “whatever” has abandoned some of the fundamental

attributes of interpretation, leaving a host of refugees in its wake. It is to these—the abandoned and endangered attributes of interpretation, which are the very attributes that nurture democracy and sustain civil society—that I extend a most hearty welcome, offering them a room in our shelter.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

At a certain point in the long history of interpretation—specifically, in the latter part of the nineteenth century—the authority of interpretation came to be organized around the author. The centre comprised his thoughts (and it usually was a *he*), his style, and the influences that affected him. At this time, the “truth” or the “real meaning” of a particular text, artifact, or artwork was thought to reside in the creator’s intentions, in the origins or the context of production, or in an object’s human-like emotional properties and its ability to evoke emotions in its beholders. Over time, though, the idea that authorship was the sole interpretive authority was overruled by new authorities (about which I will say more in a moment). What constituted interpretive truth or certainty in the nineteenth century became known in the twentieth century as the three fallacies: the intentional fallacy, which found the “real” meaning of the author’s intent; the genetic fallacy, which posited that intent in the context

of production; and the pathetic fallacy, which credited the intent to empathetic qualities. I bring the fate of the three fallacies to your attention because even though they have been overruled, they still haunt the museum's interpretive practices. They lurk in the subtexts of label copy, surreptitiously condition the goals and objectives of educational programs, and covertly inform many research agendas and curatorial projects. Yet I want to welcome these ghosts, these spectres of the nineteenth-century fallacies, into the shelter we build for the endangered aspects of interpretation. I do *not* invite them in so that they can continue covertly and obediently to *do the work* of interpretation. Rather, I invite them in so that we can face them, face up to them, see them, name them, and perhaps even tame them. I invite them into our shelter in order to let them *be*, to give substance to what they are: *repositories of meaning-making*. No longer carrying the burden of "authority," the fallacies can simply *be* one of many repertoires from which acts of interpretation arise.

The role of visitor studies in assisting the museum to name and tame these ghosts is, it seems to me, both unique and strategic. Unique because it is you and perhaps only you who have both the tools and the skills to make these invisible operators visible. You have the ability (the methodologies and the content knowledge) to face these ghosts, to pinpoint what fallacies lurk in the exhibitions and programs and to comprehend how they reappear in visitors' interpretations. You are in a strategic position in that you can—and many of you already do—gently nurture museum staff to become more aware of how their tacit repertoires of meaning-making operate and how these can be made more visible and more available to visitors *as repertoires*.

Let's take the art museum as an example. In that context you can ask

questions, gently and generously, such as: when we provide information about Picasso's or O'Keeffe's life, what does this tell us about *how* we make meaning as compared to *what* meaning is made? How does this embedded, almost surreptitious focus on biography—and its handmaiden, the nineteenth-century fallacies—act to close down interpretation or interrupt thoughts about *how* ideas of genius, greatness, fame, and talent are produced, circulated, and given meaning in culture? Further, what genre of biography is present here: a politicized one, a feminist one, a psychoanalytical one, or simply a narrative of surprising genius? Each of these is a repertoire. How the museum traces, tracks, and accounts for the ghosts is largely in your hands at this moment.

We can therefore ferry these ghosts, and the tools to make them visible, from the nineteenth century into our twenty-first-century shelter for endangered interpretation. By the early part of the twentieth century, though, debates about interpretation had left behind the fallacies and had coalesced into two positions: hermeneutics and structuralism. The hermeneutic position grew up around the premise that meaning is made in relation to the *individual subject*. Early hermeneutic thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher saw interpretation as an interaction between the text and the interpreter. Twentieth-century hermeneutics firmly rooted interpretation in the finite and situated character of all human knowing. As such, it dealt a significant blow to the enlightenment project that had championed universal unchanged truths that were accessible through reason and method.

However, the idea that meaning is made in relation to an individual subject does not imply that interpretive authority resides solely in the individual—as it is

often understood in the museum world. Rather, hermeneutics saw meaning-making as *relational*, and the key point here is *that that relation involved more than the two*; that is, more than the text and the reader, and more than the object and the viewer. In hermeneutics there is a "third" mediating force, one that silently but relentlessly structures interpretations, determining what is possible, what is valid, what is meaningful, what is useful, what counts as questions, and what counts as answers. This "third" force has gone by many names over time: God, history, reason, the nineteenth-century fallacies, ideology, the subconscious, class and gender relations, and the market—to name just a few. Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the great twentieth-century hermeneutic philosophers, took up this "third" force under the rubric of "method." He argued that scientific method, and what today we would call research methodologies, cannot get to a "truth" that exists independently of its methods. Method, according to Gadamer (1975), is not objective; rather it is always implicated, affecting and affected by the things it constitutes as evidence. The fact that current research practice demands the naming and defining of research methodologies does not absolve "method" of its power as a "third" force. Describing one's specific methodology does not make the mediating power of methodology as such visible; in fact, it may operate to disguise it further. The "third" forces operate partly by a skillful withdrawal in the very act of their interpretive work. Language is perhaps the best example of this, even if it is the most abstract. For one sentence to be communicated to one person requires the whole structure of language, yet the structure of language itself disappears in the act of communication, because we use it unconsciously. What we can take from hermeneutics, then, is

the forces that shape interpretation withdraw in the act of interpretation.

I invite these forces to come and stay awhile in our shelter for the endangered aspects of interpretation, so that we can coax them from their retreat. I invite them in so that we can attend to their power over us. Again, our collective job is to catch these forces in action. The work that John Falk is doing with Personal Meaning Mapping—if I've got this right—is heading in that direction. It seems to me that he is trying to bring attention to the kinds of repertoires or theoretical knowledge that underlie and produce certain interpretations. What is at issue in Falk's method, though, is a persistent paradox: we can only see and find what we already recognize and know. In order to meet this paradox head on, we, as researchers and museum and culture workers, must be familiar with many different kinds of meaning-making repertoires, from the intentional fallacies to Marxist materialism, to semiotics, to feminist theory and the myriad forms of post-structuralism. This, I suggest, is part of our collective task and it is a big one: part professional development, part lifelong learning, and part re-imagining the work of the museum. Visitor studies can play a generative role in this transformation by helping museum staff become aware of the "third" forces, by tracking them as they recede in displays and programs, and by attending to how they manifest in visitors' interpretations.

If hermeneutics began by positing interpretation as the interaction between text and reader and settled amidst these withdrawing forces, then structuralism, the counterpart to hermeneutics, took the opposite route. It began from the position that only in and through the structures of signifying systems—social, semiotic, linguistic—can any kind of meaning be created, and it ended by depositing meaning-making in the domain of the

individual. For the early structuralists, interpretation was a procedure, a matter of decoding—formally, socially, ideologically—a text, an image, or an account of history, nature, or society. But try as they might (and structuralism was a very influential cross-disciplinary movement in the early to mid-twentieth century), they could not stabilize or lock down meaning. They could not explain how you and I could have different interpretations of the same text if we share the same language and decoding tools. What they arrived at was that meaning was not a stable thing *in* the text or the object; rather, it was both the product and producer of the discourse and interpretive practices that circulate around these texts and images. In other words, meaning was indeterminate. It depended on the needs and circumstances of the individual reader (Eco, 1979; Bourdieu, 1993). By the 1960s and '70s, this destabilization of what Lyotard called the grand narratives of culture and Foucault called regimes of truth, was spreading across the western world in the form of the civil rights and women's movements, and of post-colonialist theory and identity politics. All of these eruptions affirmed that age, race, place, class, and gender have everything to do with interpretation. Together these movements shifted the authority of interpretation from the structure and codes of the text to the individual reader. This shift gave rise to the whole apparatus of attending to and quantifying reader response, and eventually to one trajectory of visitor studies.

One of the problems that arose when this productive and generative agency was granted to the interpreter was a loss of any definitive, authoritative, or even widely shared interpretation of a given text or work. Once the texts of the world were separated from their authors' intent and subsequently

separated from a stable decoding system, they could simply float, adrift on the endless sea of innumerable interpretations. How to cope with this unwieldy indeterminacy of meaning, this politics of pluralism, has to a large extent defined the post-structural project—a project that it is still unfolding. In the museum this indeterminacy of meaning, which is the culmination of the histories I have recited, provides the theoretical backdrop for the evil "whatever" to take up residence in the museum. It is to the "whatever" that I now turn.

THE "WHATEVER" INTERPRETATION

The "whatever" interpretation is an omnivorous force, a raging river, because it is fed by and gathers strength from a wide variety of sources. Having spent some time with the theoretical progenitors that posited interpretation in the huge void of indeterminacy, I will now look at trajectories in the museum that collude to produce the "whatever" interpretation.

What does this "whatever" sound like? Here is one example from Lisa Roberts' *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum* (1997):

At their most basic, museums communicate. In communicating they ignite memories, activate emotions and spark interchange. What visitors do with the possible responses is part of the narrative they craft. What they craft may or may not have anything to do with the messages institutions intend. (p. 137)

Now, in most circles, this would simply be called a failure! Museums certainly do not spend billions and billions of dollars collecting things (objects, stories, histories, ideas), conserving and cataloguing these things, carefully

researching, publishing, crafting messages, and writing the storylines for these things, only to have visitors make up “whatever” stories they please, stories that have nothing to do with the things and their stories. Yet the museum literature is saturated with statements such as Roberts’, in which the “whatever” interpretation is seen as positive (see Xanthoudaki’s 2005 edited volume for a recent example of how prevalent this notion is among practitioners and theoreticians). By placing interpretive authority in the hands of the individual, and further, by championing the “whatever” interpretation as the final and *desired* outcome of the museum visit, the museum not only justifies its failure to communicate, but also it absolves itself of any interpretive responsibility for the meanings it produces and circulates in culture.

This absolution of interpretive responsibility produces and is produced by the “whatever” and is evident in an array of practices in the museum. Over the past few decades, for example, there has been a significant shift in the *physical and perceptual* access that the museum offers to the public. This is evident in a dramatic rise in attendance and in the ever-increasing perceptual awareness of the museum in the public realm. Monumental building projects and more aggressive advertising have generated a high awareness of the museum in people’s minds. But at the same time, there has been no similar shift in the *intellectual and critical access* that the museum offers the public. In fact, there is a palatable reluctance on the part of the museum to engage with its interpretive mandate—which is in the end an intellectual project—except in the most problematic sense of the “whatever.” This reluctance raises some disturbing questions.

Why, for instance, if the museum is really interested in interpreting art for the public, does it spend more money protecting its objects from the public than it does actively interpreting them? Witness the number of security guards present in any museum, compared to the number of interpreters working with visitors. Why do museums pay janitorial, admissions, security, and gift-shop staff—those who attend to the physical and economic demands of the institution—but turn over much of the active interpretation, the intellectual access to its collections, to volunteer docents? Many docents do an excellent job, but we must question why fewer resources are devoted to the intellectual care of collections than to physical and economic care. Why, in those museums that do pay interpretive staff, is there an inverse relationship between the staff’s proximity to the public and their skill, knowledge of content, and rate of pay? Many of the most knowledgeable people are sequestered in offices, and their relationship with the public is highly mediated through the conventions of display; and many of those who work directly with the public are students and contract staff, who get the least support and very low pay.

The museum’s reluctance to take up its interpretive responsibility is nowhere more evident than in its tenacious reliance on a pedagogy of display: the arrangements of objects so that they both communicate messages and reinforce the importance of those messages. With the birth of the modern museum, displays were designed to deliver more specific bodies of knowledge—the grand narratives of Western culture—to ever larger and more diverse groups of people who did not necessarily share interpretive practices. During this process, two quite separate publics were formed. The first public was the princely crowd and their privileged descendants, those

who could both *see* and *see through* the objects on display. What is seen on display is understood, valuable, and meaningful, according to Pomian (1994), only because of the access it offers to a realm of significance that cannot itself be seen, because it affords a glimpse beyond the object itself. The second public was constituted as what Stallybrass and White (1986) called the “low other”: those who were both in need of the kind of “lessons” that the museum could provide (on science and nature, on civic virtue and the heroic might of the nation) but also needed to be schooled in the skills of *seeing* and *seeing through* what was on display. Schooling was, at that time, seen as a way to hold off the “whatever” interpretation.

But as it turned out, this perceived need for schooling was just another stream running into the dark river of the “whatever.” Once schooling became the rubric through which the museum enacted its interpretive mandate and supplemented the lack of a pedagogy of display, schooling set about colonizing the interpretive spaces of the museum. This process took place on two fronts. The first was financial. Schooling and school programs came to consume the lion’s share of resources devoted to interpretation, leaving the rest of the public adrift on the sea of indeterminable meaning, vulnerable prey for the “whatever.” The second front was methodological. Schooling began to infantilize the adult public by using the discursive frames and pedagogical strategies designed for children to configure interpretive programs for adults, again leaving the adult mind open to the omnivorous “whatever”.

The last and most insidious stream leading to the “whatever” was a highly selective uptake of constructivist learning principles that eventually prioritized personal meaning-making

as the end product of museum encounter rather than the beginning of interpretation. Here I will address three aspects of interpretation that were exiled and erased by this very selective uptake of constructivism; then I will call upon visitor studies to find shelter for those aspects of interpretation that have been banned from the constructivist museum.

Constructivism, like the word “interpretation,” is a collection of various histories and practices. Many of its greatest thinkers were mid-twentieth-century educational theorists concerned with how children learned. Constructivist ideas made their way into the museum by way of scholars such as James Clifford (1988), who forwarded the idea of the museum as a contact zone, and John Falk and Lynn Dierking (1992), whose descriptions of the museum experience were drawn directly from constructivism. These ideas were codified by George Hein’s (1998) work on the constructivist museum. At its most basic level, constructivism abandoned epistemological certainty and took up hermeneutic notions of understanding, asserting that there is no eternal truth outside the knower.

The first of the constructivist ideas that the “whatever” flattens out is the idea that individuals actively create meaning from their experiences. In and of itself, this idea is hardly contestable. We do indeed create meaning from all of our experiences—this is called experiential knowledge. It is developed by using the repertoires of meaning-making one already possesses—consciously or unconsciously—in order to ascribe meaning to an object or event. One thing that happens to this idea when it enters into the museum, though, is that the act of or active creation of meaning is pitted against what comes to be seen as the vile demon of passive consumption. Museum education literature is filled with the dichotomy of “bad is the stuffed duck or banking

model of knowledge” and “good is the creation of your own meaning.” This is reiterated again and again until it begins to exile any received or cultural knowledge, configuring it in terms of “factoids,” “authoritative,” or “academic”; this process makes room for the “whatever” to move in. What I want to point out here is that the exile of received knowledge was never part of the constructivist project; it is the work of that evil “whatever.” The constructivists saw knowledge as situated, yes, but they did not advocate dispensing with cultural knowledge in the name of personal meaning. In fact, they insisted that it is always *with* and *in the midst of* cultural knowledge that we produce any kind of interpretation—that is constructivism, as Vygotsky and Bakhtin articulated.

Again, visitor studies can be a strategic resource in loosening the hold that the “whatever” has on the museum by introducing much more robust models of constructivist interpretation. For example, the eminently readable philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) gives us vivid pictures of a rich “social imaginary” that is filled with and constituted by “received knowledge” and that shapes our dreams, thoughts, and actions. Castoriadis shows us how it is only *with* and *within* this social imaginary that each of us is offered the possibility of autonomous action. The question, then, becomes: Can visitor studies use its formidable knowledge, tools, and skills to make this kind of relationship between the robust social imaginary, this public encyclopedia, and make individual interpretations visible? Or again, can visitor studies use its power to foster educational models that *link* theoretical and disciplinary knowledge to personal interpretation, such as those developed by Lachapelle, Murray & Neim, (2003)? I believe we can. In this way we can retrieve the complex interplay between

the social world and personal meaning-making; we can make room in our shelter for these endangered aspects of interpretation, keeping them out of the clutches of the evil “whatever.”

The second and more dominant of the flattened notions of constructivism, and the one that is drowning out all others, is that the “whatever” of personal meaning-making is the *end product* of the museum episode. I suggest that if we look at what the theoreticians have said, we will find that the “whatever” of personal meaning-making is not the end product but rather the *beginning* of interpretation. It is a beginning of which you in visitor studies—Knutson, Anderson, Allen, Falk, and many others—have supplied ample evidence. Personal meaning-making is the beginning of interpretation that moves into the world, that acts in the world. It is the very substance of democratic society—it changes the world. Here again, visitor studies can bring new sources to bear upon the museum, sources such as the might of the critical pedagogues. From Freire (1972) to Giroux and McLaren (1994), these intellectual activists have shown again and again that in civil society, engaged democracy and freedom begin with interpretation. In order to engage and empower people, the pedagogue needs to *begin* by making issues meaningful (personal meaning-making) in order to make people critical (aware of the repertoires of meaning-making that allow certain interpretations to occur) so that it can be transformative (so that people can take action in the world). The museum often speaks about shaping individuals, communities and cultures, but stops short of enacting that by sacrificing the *with* of interpretation to the “whatever” of individual meaning.

Just to take that one step further, a whole critique of individualism has been exiled from the museum by the “whatever’s” occupation of

constructivism, and it goes like this. Foucault's (1977) biopower, Michael Apple's (1979) hidden curriculum, and more recently Giorgio Agamben's (1998) politicization of bare life—all of these forces produce us as individuals, and in fact produce the very notion of individuality. One of the ways we liberate ourselves from this—if only partially—is by being aware of these forces *as forces*, as the retreating “third” forces that play upon us and that shape our interpretations. As Searls Giroux and Nealon (2003) so aptly put it, yes, we all have opinions, but interpretation begins when we ask where these opinions come from. When, in the name of freedom and democracy, the museum retreats from its interpretive responsibility by vesting interpretive authority in the autonomous individual and that person's “whatever” of personal meaning, what it is doing is reinstating interpretive authority in the silent canons and busy ghosts of the past.

I foster hope that through our collective work, the museum can take on the burden of interpretive responsibility—which it will never fully be able to carry—by opening, unfolding and unraveling these reservoirs and repertoires, and by attending to the ways in which they silently and subtly close and shape opinion. Together we can make the invisible, withdrawing forces of the *with* visible. That kind of evidence shelters interpretation from the evil “whatever” and builds a future for the museum.

In closing, I will address one last flattening effect that the “whatever” has had on interpretation. If we remove definitive interpretive authority and take up postmodernity's indeterminacy of meaning, it does not necessarily follow that all interpretations are equal in weight and relevance. As Keith Moxey (1994) so eloquently put it, pluralism fails to acknowledge the role

of power in the process of selecting and promoting forms of interpretation that are considered legitimate by a particular culture at a particular time. So again, the “whatever” simply disguises and exiles the forces that withdraw in the act of interpretation, and in so doing ensures that the most dominant powers have their say over us. This subtle, insidious domination of thinking, of interpretation, and of action is not the stuff of a free and civil society, of a democracy. If the museum has a role in nurturing democratic ways of being in the world—and I think it most definitely does—then it is going to need your skills and experience in attending to, in making visible the interpretive repertoires that it creates and circulates in culture. In other words, it is going to need your help to take up its interpretive responsibilities, and how those responsibilities are shaped and understood will be the evidence of your making, and *that* is evidence.

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Apple, M. (1979, 2004). *Ideology and curriculum*. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bennett, T. (1995). *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production: essays on art and literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Castoriadis, C. (1987). *The imaginary institution of society*. Cambridge: MIT Press and Polity Press.
- Clifford, J. (1988). *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Eco, U. (1979). *The role of the reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Falk, J., & Dierking, L. (1992). *The museum experience*. Washington DC: Whalesback Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. London: A. Lane.
- Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Gadamer, H. G. (1975). *Truth and method*. (G. Barden and J. Cumming, Trans.) New York: Seabury Press.
- Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (Eds.) (1994). *Between borders: Pedagogy and the politics of cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Hein, G. E. (1998). *Learning in the museum*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lachapelle, R., Murray, D., & Neim, S. (2003). Aesthetic understanding as informed experience: The role of knowledge in our art viewing experiences. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37(3), 78–98.
- Moxey, K. (1994). *The practice of theory: Poststructuralism, cultural politics and art history*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Pomian, K. (1994). The collection: Between the visible and the invisible. In S. Pearce (Ed.), *Interpreting objects and collections* (pp. 160–174). London and New York: Routledge.
- Roberts, L. (1997). *From knowledge to narrative: Educators and the changing museum*. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Searls Giroux, S., & Nealon, J. T. (2003). *The theory toolbox: Critical concepts for the humanities, arts, and social sciences*. Oxford UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Stallybrass, P., & White, A. (1986). *The politics and poetics of transgression*. London: Methuen.
- Xanthoudaki, M. (Ed.) (2005). *Researching visual arts education in museums and galleries*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.