

# **The Sociocultural Impact of Portraying the Past: Old Tucson and Plimoth Plantation**

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## **Abstract**

Themed environments have profound potential to influence visitors and provide insight into human information processing, motivation, and culture. Examples for this discussion come from research at two themed environments that embody American cultural myths: Old Tucson, an old west theme park near Tucson, Arizona; and Plimoth Plantation, a re-created 1621 Pilgrim Village, Wampanoag homesite, and Mayflower replica, in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Both settings portray mythic pasts with current emotional consequence, function as pilgrimage sites for reaffirming the culture's spiritual and philosophical teachings, and are forced to compete aggressively for the tourist dollar. Examples from two Old Tucson studies and one Plimoth Plantation research project support hypotheses that themed environments influence visitors' conceptions of the past and attitudes toward the future, and that visitors perceive the past as a function of their own expectations and beliefs.

In one study, experimentally manipulated visitor expectations mediated Old Tucson's impact. In a second Old Tucson study, experimentally manipulated expectations and motivations to reaffirm cultural myths mediated beliefs about the old west and optimism about the future. A Plimoth Plantation study provided evidence that how virtuous visitors perceive the Pilgrims to have been is correlated with their own religiosity or political conservatism.

## **Introduction**

History museum personnel work hard to develop innovative exhibits and educational programs that instill visitors with appreciation for the past. Yet museum professionals and the agencies and foundations that fund them are wondering how history museums actually influence beliefs about the past and for how long? To begin to address these questions, we must understand what the culture has taught about the museum topic and what visitors bring to the equation in terms of experiences, memories, motivation for coming and expectations about what they will learn, and how they incorporate new

information that may conflict with lifelong mythic beliefs. The research discussed here begins to address such issues.

We believe that historical knowledge is critical to making informed decisions in the present and future. Yet even the well-educated among us remember history most easily and vividly as heroic, emotionally compelling, and morally unambiguous events presented in grammar school curricula, civic celebrations, parades, and pageants (e.g., Frisch, 1990; Schenkman, 1988). Historic legends and their mythic heroes help us maintain our sense of significance in the present, and confidence in the future (e.g., E. Becker, 1973; Susman, 1984). We seek useful aspects of the past, adjust popular historic beliefs as present needs and future agendas change, and pass them on to new members of the culture to foster shared symbols and values, as well as to distinguish ourselves from other cultures. Government and social leaders recognize cultural myth's power to instill values and customs, justify policy, bolster national pride (Susman, 1984), and promote role models (Morganstern and Greenberg, 1988).

Perception and cognition research indicates that everyone interprets the world in a unique way, depending on their motivations, beliefs, and expectations (Fiske and Taylor, 1984), regardless of what historians, museum curators, and educators intend to impart. We reshape the past to make it attractive today and conform it to our self-images, aspirations, and what is socially relevant or politically useful (C. Becker, 1935; FitzGerald, 1979; Frisch, 1990; Lifton, 1979; Lowenthal, 1985, 1990; Susman, 1984; Warner, 1959). "Rendered grand or homely, magnified or tarnished, history is continually altered in our private interests or on behalf of our community or country," (Lowenthal, 1990). John Urry (1990) discusses additional complexities that the *tourist gaze* introduces to how visitors comprehend museums and cultural landmarks.

A growing body of scholarly research on the relationship between history and memory (e.g. Lipsitz, 1990; Billig, 1990; Middleton and Edwards, 1990; Thelen, 1990) reveals that the public largely comprehends the collective past as a personal extension of the present, and judges its events and viewpoints from contemporary perspectives, reflecting popular modes of memory (Lowenthal, 1990). Frisch (1990) discusses how lifelong exposure to popular culture and mythic symbolism surface in the classroom, and argues that acknowledging collective cultural memory's powerful grip may help students understand the real people and processes of history.

The living history movement's political and cultural use of history and folklore creates dilemmas, as well as opportunities to study our own biases. The proliferation of living museums (Anderson, 1984; Lowenthal, 1985; Urry, 1990) over the past 20 years has kindled debates about living history's sociopolitical implications (e.g. Handler, 1987). We must recognize that

modern sentiment and motivation pervade living history and engender an awareness of particular periods as worth reliving that those whose lives we attempt to re-create would not have had in mind (Handler, 1987). Scholars are looking critically at the learning opportunities, as well as obstacles, created by innovative approaches to living history and first person interpretation (Leon and Piatt, 1989; Schlereth, 1989).

Because they only function fully with public participation (Glassberg, 1987), living museums recall civic celebrations and historical reenactments orchestrated to forge continuity among the past, present, and future. Thus, however scholarly their historic portrayals, they function as patriotic theme parks (Boorstin, 1987) with profound potential (Johnson, 1981) to shape visitors' perceptions of the past, as well as present and future (e.g. Morganstern, 1987; Morganstern and Greenberg, 1988).

Distinctions between history museums and other tourist attractions often blur. For example, Plymouth's myriad scholarly and commercial Pilgrim-related settings include the Plymouth National Wax Museum. It presents mythic Pilgrim Story tableaux such as signing the Mayflower Compact and celebrating the First Thanksgiving with the Indians, enhanced by light, sound, and motion effects. Although the Plymouth National Wax Museum is not a museum by professional standards, nor is it restricted to historic scholarship, it attracts about half a million visitors yearly (Leon and Rosenzweig, 1989). Its authoritative name, stately facade, and imposing location overlooking Plymouth Rock undoubtedly make it a museum in the eyes of most visitors.

Disney's Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow (EPCOT) exemplifies how difficult it is to distinguish museums from theme parks and how particular views of the future can be promoted effectively by combining special effects with carefully selected and purified images of the past. Few of the thousands who daily visit EPCOT's high technology pavilions and view multi-media presentations narrated by luminaries such as Walter Cronkite are aware that the sponsoring corporations have financial interests in promoting particular views or, at least, scenarios that people will find inspiring or reassuring. Disney's proposed historic park near Washington, D.C., which is generating heated opposition from historians, historic preservationists, and even members of Congress, has created another battlefield on which to argue age-old questions about who should control interpretation of the past, as well as more modern ones about what distinguishes the living museum from the theme park.

Theme parks, like living museums, promote cultural legends and heroes and have equal potential to influence visitors' beliefs, emotions and attitudes about the future. The proliferation of theme parks and living museums and the Disney parks' continued popularity among American and foreign tourists

urge us to take a closer look at themed environments. Examples for this discussion come from research at two themed environments that embody American cultural myths: Old Tucson, an old west theme park near Tucson, Arizona; and Plimoth Plantation, a re-created 1621 Pilgrim Village, Wampanoag homesite, and Mayflower replica, in Plymouth, Massachusetts. These studies provide strong evidence to support theories that: (1) what visitors believe/expect influences their perceptions of, and/or how they process information about, the environment; and (2) visitors seek an emotionally useful past to deal with the present and future.

Old Tucson's blatant commercialism and Plimoth Plantation's rigorous scholarship may seem unreconcilable, but these enterprises fall at different points along the same continuum. Both are complex, three-dimensional settings that portray mythic pasts with current emotional consequences. They function as latter day pilgrimage sites for reaffirming cultural inspiration and philosophical teachings (e.g. King, 1981), with potential to influence visitors' views of history and the world (Johnson, 1981).

America's most salient image of the past comes from the old west, which continues to foster values and role models. Will Rogers, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood, among others, realized status by portraying western heroes. Politicians invoke the old west spirit to justify policy or bolster national pride (Susman, 1984); Reagan successfully used Clint Eastwood's "Go ahead--make my day" line, and gun control opponents argue that "the west wasn't won with a registered gun."

Wright (1975) views westerns as narratives for social action, with the heroism and symbolism of traditional myths. Western heroes and their lessons always have reflected the American sociological, economic and political trends of their times (Calder, 1974; French, 1973; Wright, 1975). We use the western film, albeit different versions, to proscribe a valuable and righteous life in the present and inspire the future. Old west myths are basic variations of the hero myth, although the hero's qualities and actions change depending on his relationship to society. The myth could be fulfilled in the open country or the bustling town which, according to Calder (1974), always had certain distinctive features:

. . . a dusty main street, false-fronted buildings with the saloon and the general store in prominent position, hitching rails, a livery stable. In the southwest the buildings are of adobe, with low, dark openings and there is almost certainly a church. On the street there are a few decorative Mexicans, dozing with hats pulled over their eyes, women making tortillas or suckling babies . . .

Towns . . . appear to be no more than random communities with no obvious use other than to provide the drifting cowboy with a

drink, a woman and a fresh horse. The Hollywood-built main street appears repeatedly with no sense of the town's origin, its growth or its function. Sometimes there is a railroad coming through, or a stagecoach once a week, a bank to be robbed, but no solid reason for the existence of these (p. 63).

Calder could have been describing Old Tucson, constructed in 1939 for filming *Arizona*. It promotes the mythic old west with costumed employees performing Main Street shootouts, skits, saloon entertainment, and exhibits of old west artifacts and western movie memorabilia. Old Tucson provides a good setting in which to study Americans' beliefs about the old west because dual themes mediate its impact: it is both a re-created stereotypical old west town (e.g., Calder, 1974) and an operating studio for movies, TV shows, commercials, etc. Thus Old Tucson celebrates the old west myth as well as how it was created on film. Portraying the movie location theme invites visitors behind the scenes of the movie western to learn about stunts, special effects, and the art of facade, which exposes the old west town stereotype (cf. Goffman, 1959). Thus, Old Tucson represents the mythic old west and movie westerns. Despite that it is not as compelling as the Disney parks, the public derives its old west beliefs from those movies; and Old Tucson, located in the Sonora desert surrounded by Saguaro cactus and rugged landscape does, if nothing else, represent the western film.

Plymouth and the Pilgrims are cherished by most people assimilated into American culture. Plymouth functions as a modern pilgrimage site, a hallowed place for reaffirming cultural beliefs and values (e.g., King, 1981; Urry, 1990). As far back as 1921 brochures promised a visit to Plimoth Plantation would bring refreshment in body and spirit (Glassberg, 1990). The historically minded have journeyed to America's symbolic hometown since the 17th century, gravitating to Plymouth Rock, a shrine to the Mayflower Landing, the origin of Plymouth Colony, and by extension New England and the entire nation. Armed with the Rock's symbolism, the New England literary establishment's influence, and Yankee migration throughout the rest of the United States, the Pilgrims and Plymouth eventually overtook other regional stories of origin.

Every autumn schoolchildren busy themselves with Pilgrim cut-outs and illustrations, and steeple-hatted, dark-cloaked, and be-buckled figures appear on cards, table decorations, and seasonal advertising. We remember tales of courage in the face of adversity: the Mayflower's dramatic voyage, the terrible first winter and, finally, the glorious triumph of survival, celebrated by the Pilgrims with their supportive Indian allies at the First Thanksgiving (Baker, 1990). The Pilgrims symbolize family reunions, pilgrimages to

childhood homes, moral strength, patriotic unity, and national beginnings for most people assimilated into American culture (Baker, 1990), and the *Puritan Ethic* which underlies concepts such as America's unique mission (Zunz, 1985). The Pilgrim saga underlies some of our earliest national history (Baker, 1990; Pizer, 1988), and what has become our most important national holiday, Thanksgiving.

Plimoth Plantation includes a re-created 1627 Pilgrim Village, a Wampanoag household (Hobbamock's Homesite) of the same year, and a replica of the Mayflower, and is counted among the world's most comprehensive reconstruction and reenactment efforts. Colonists and Mayflower crew are portrayed through first-person interpretation; Wampanoags are portrayed through third-person interpretation and uniformed guides, since visitors would not understand their Massachusetts language. Plimoth Plantation focuses on the intellectual, social, and economic concepts and relationships that defined the European and Wampanoag cultures. Reenactors express the world views, hopes, and ideals, as well as prejudices and superstitions, of the 1627 villagers in regional Old English dialects.

Plimoth Plantation provides a high-quality immersion experience. It is very rare that interpreters who have been trained in the most minute details of their characters' lives err by stepping beyond 1627. Leon and Rosenzweig (1989) point out that understanding how a museum like Plimoth Plantation influences visitors is important, since its visitation probably exceeds colonial history readership in any given year. However, unlike the Disney approach, which sanitizes and idealizes the past, one of Henry Hornblower's aims in creating Plimoth Plantation was reforming the Pilgrim myth and its image of somber people in black clothes and buckles, created by 19th century historians searching for a model of morality and purity from the past (Roberts, 1974).

That themed environments can influence visitors' conceptions of the past and attitudes toward the future, at least in the short term, was demonstrated at Old Tucson. In one study (Morganstern and Greenberg, 1988), experimentally manipulated cues, intended to alter visitors' expectations, mediated Old Tucson's impact. Visitors who received no cue (e.g. no experimental intervention) adhered more strongly to stereotypical old west beliefs after exiting the park than they did before entering.

While common sense might argue that increased old west beliefs would follow inevitably from visiting Old Tucson, the same did not occur for visitors who were cued, before entering, that Old Tucson was a *famous movie location*. *Movie-cue* visitors expressed stronger belief in the popularized myth of the old west before entry, but very low belief after exit (see footnote 1). Most likely the *famous movie location* cue made action-

packed, heroic images of the old west highly salient (as manifested on pre-entry surveys), but forced visitors to interpret Old Tucson through images that focused more of their attention on the movie illusion aspects of the old west myth, diminishing their trust in the movie western's authenticity and, consequently, their belief in the myth.

A second Old Tucson study (Morganstern, 1987) tested theoretical issues concerning how psychological motivation to reaffirm cultural myths would mediate the Old Tucson experience. College students, half of whom were provided the *famous movie location* cue to inhibit their ability to reaffirm old west mythic beliefs, received either a culture *boost* or *threat* (see footnote 2). Thus, the experimenter manipulated participants' *ability* to reaffirm an important cultural myth as well as their *motivation*. The *threat* was designed to leave subjects feeling decreased cultural pride and, therefore, a strong need to seek affirmation that American culture was worthy by glorifying its old west past, since this was just prior to entering the park. Culture *boost* subjects were not expected to be motivated this way.

Analyses revealed that old west beliefs clustered around what percentage of people in the old west had been gunslingers, bounty hunters, cowboys and outlaws, saloon women, etc. Not surprisingly given the earlier findings, exiting *movie-cue* subjects estimated these proportions to be lower than did exiting *no-cue* subjects. Most interesting was that *no-cue culture threat* subjects (motivated and able to reaffirm old west beliefs) were significantly more optimistic about the future than their *movie-cue culture threat* counterparts (motivated but unable to reaffirm these beliefs). They agreed more strongly with questionnaire items suggesting that life was an exciting adventure most of the time, the world was a basically friendly place, etc.

Further evidence that visitors perceive the past as a function of their own beliefs and experiences came from a Plimoth Plantation study (see footnote 3) and concerned two specific mythic aspects of the Pilgrims: their virtue and religiosity. It is probably unavoidable, considering popular myth that the Pilgrims came to America in search of religious freedom, that entering and exiting visitors rated them highly, and equally, religious. However, whether someone had visited Plimoth Plantation previously mediated religiosity ratings. Among first-time visitors, Plimoth Plantation slightly enhanced estimates of how religious the Pilgrims had been. However, repeat visitors rated the Pilgrims as more religious when entering, and less religious upon exit. Apparently, something happens to Plimoth Plantation memories over time, or something occurs on a return trip that interferes with how the first, or prior, Plimoth Plantation visit was remembered.

In general, exiting visitors perceived the Pilgrims as more virtuous than did entering visitors. Visitors more active in their religious communities

did not rate the Pilgrims as more religious compared to less religiously active visitors, but they did rate them as more virtuous (see footnote 4). Similar analyses revealed that politically conservative visitors saw the Pilgrims as significantly more virtuous than did liberal visitors. Data collection methodology precluded these results having been due to any specific aspect of Plimoth Plantation, so these findings provide strong evidence that visitors differentially perceived that setting or sought information from it based on their individual characteristics. And this effect is not surprising considering that the Pilgrim Story historically has been identified with conservative political interests and Anglo-American values.

Today's sophisticated entertainment consumers demand compelling immersion experiences in other worlds or times, the maintenance expense which is reflected in rising admission costs for theme parks and living museums. As competition for limited tourist dollars heats up, visitors who "vote" with their admission fees may wield some influence even at the scholarship-based living museums. Plimoth Plantation is not alone in emphasizing social history and the processes of daily life. However, as a result, today's living museum visitors are likely to encounter a more humble and, for some, disappointing history than what they were taught in childhood. Conner Prairie Pioneer Settlement, an 1836 Indiana frontier replica community illustrates how such visitor disappointment and popular pressure can influence an historical portrayal (Lowenthal, 1985; originally discussed by Ronsheim in 1981). Visitors enjoyed traditional Christmas activities until 1978, when research revealed that Christmas had not been celebrated in 1836. For historic authenticity, staff decided to treat Christmas like any other winter day of that era. Visitors were outraged that Conner Prairie had dropped the "true" early-American Christmas for which they had come, and attendance dropped; so beginning in 1979, every December day became Christmas Eve 1836 and history was "adjusted" to permit Christmas talk and activity.

However scholarly they may be, living history museums and first person interpretation warrant critical study; and the political and cultural uses of the history and folklore they promote create dilemmas, as well as opportunities to study our own biases (Leon and Piatt, 1989; Schlereth, 1989). We should appreciate that they, like theme parks, reflect highly idealized elements of America's past and, in so doing, expose the shared symbols and values that inspire us and distinguish us from other cultures.

Themed environments, by virtue of what they portray and how we incorporate their information, afford us a window onto the sociocultural milieu that pervades our daily lives but about which we remain largely oblivious. Themed environments, considering their proliferation (whether obligated to historic scholarship or public pleasure), the emotional



importance of the past, and the continuing political debate over which version of that past should prevail, merit very serious study.

(1) Volunteers were assigned randomly to be surveyed before entry or after exit, and to one of three cue conditions: *no-cue* and *movie-cue* (discussed above) and an *authentic old west town-cue*, which had no impact and is omitted from this discussion for purposes of clarity. Although volunteerism may have introduced self-selection bias into the overall study, group assignment bias was eliminated. Visitors agreed to participate before entering the park.

(2) Boost: Although there is a lot of publicity about Americans raising money to repair the Statue of Liberty, it is not common knowledge that similar efforts are being made by people from throughout the world. It was recently reported in *Life Magazine* that people from other countries see the United States as the most democratic nation in the world, and feel the Statue of Liberty must be saved because it symbolizes to all that there is a place where oppressed people will always find freedom. Threat: Economists are concerned about the increasing amount of foreign investment in United States business and real estate. While foreign investment appears, on the surface, to boost our economy today, it will profoundly decrease the amount of control we have over our own country in the future. These were administered in the form of trivia quizzes, and subjects were asked to circle the country from which had come the largest amount of financial (a) contribution toward renovating the Statue of Liberty; or (b) investment in U.S. business and real estate.

(3) Surveys were distributed on four days: two entrance and two exit. Volunteers completed either entrance or exit surveys that requested demographic information and answers to questions concerning their interest in American history, the importance of Pilgrim history, what they expected from Plimoth Plantation in terms of education, entertainment, and authenticity, and the extent of Pilgrim virtue and religiosity.

(4) Analyses of Pilgrim virtue and religiosity were conducted on a subsample of Plimoth Plantation visitors who rated themselves as either less or more active in their own religious community (eliminating respondents that were moderately active).

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