Museology exploring the concept of MLA (Museums-Libraries-Archives) and probing its interdisciplinarity

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ICOFOM Study Series

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Introduction

In a world where social relations and knowledge are mediated more and more by data, institutions like museums, libraries, and archives – recognized for mediating and transforming information – have been grappling with enabling individuals' access to information and information literacy. Museums, libraries, and archives are institutions that create, maintain, and alter different kinds of information systems, each for their specific purposes. To explore the differences and similarities among these institutions, and the academic disciplines that study them, should prove to be a profitable exercise. All three institutions provide information resources for their visitors and users, but they do it in different ways. Information centers are generally supposed to be transparent, to guarantee easy access to all their resources. In this respect, libraries and archives have profited greatly from modern digital technology. Museums, too, develop more and more digital affordances.

For about twenty years, museology has been often related to Library and Archive Studies. How would museology examine the concept of MLA (Museums-Libraries-Archives) as a recently integrated field of study? How could museology contribute to the theoretical analysis of the entire MLA field? What is, then, the specificity of the museum in the MLA field? In comparison to archives and libraries, what is the individual identity of the museum institution and the museum as media? These and many related questions were pondered at the 38th Annual ICOFOM symposium in Tsukuba, Japan, in September 2015. Seven papers and one note were chosen for publication; those by Bruno Soares and Ann Davis are included as editorial views and were not part of the double-blind peer review system.

Contemporary museums are often more concerned with engaging their visitors, seeing to their needs and experiences, than with their collections and traditional documentation. Museums are not only research centers or centers of information, but they 'create' history and information in their representations by using the objects as the 'substratum' of their creation – an approach also made by libraries and archives. Consequently, museology too creates new theoretical, interdisciplinary approaches and ideas in analyzing the museum as a cultural institution. What are the similarities and differences among museums, archives, and libraries, as well as among Museology, Library Studies, and Archive Studies as academic disciplines? Why do cultural policies in many countries identify all three by the same paradigm?

One of the ways by which museums, archives, and libraries deal with information is through ICT (information and communication technology) and the integration of digital technology in exhibitions and programs, in order to broaden their abilities to establish communication and interpretation between people and things. Conveying knowledge has been a common theme in contemporary Museology, and communication has to an increasing degree moved into cyberspace. How would these new forms of mediation, communication, and technology change the way these institutions conceive themselves?

All three institutions today create exhibitions in order to attract audiences. On the other hand, museums – with their collections – differ from the other two institutions in one crucial way: they communicate a wide range of information based on differing interpretive levels. Museums are also the only media institutions where the visitor/user moves his/her physical body in the midst of the medium, relating in an immediate way to materiality, and sometimes changing the medium and message with their very presence and their entanglement with space and material. Museums are allowed to 'play' hide and seek with their objects, using lights, shadows, sounds and theater to engage their visitors in a meaningful performance. Archives and libraries appear to be transparent institutions charged with collecting documents, as if a one-to-one correspondence between the objects and more or less fixed meanings were possible. By contrast, museums are understood to be institutions that *interpret* and *represent*.

At universities, museology is often considered as a part of social sciences, heritage studies, anthropology, or information sciences – disregarding its specificity as an autonomous discipline. In which particular ways can a museological approach and museological theory (or theories) be useful for other disciplines and academic fields? And vice versa. From its start, museology has been defined as an interdisciplinary field of research. What is this interdisciplinarity all about, and how could we benefit from it?

Apart from interdisciplinarity, the very notion of museology is also being questioned and discussed, and its institutional specificity sometimes is being merged with others; e.g. in some countries, museology has been merged to heritology or critical heritage studies (e.g. Sweden, many East European countries). With museums so diverse and museology broadening its scope, can we understand clearly what museology is as a specific field of study? Do we still need museology and if so, why?

Interpreting the Museum as a social phenomenon, which connects humans and non-humans, or people and things, subjects and objects by the act of mediation, museology in the past few decades has gained new perspectives and a renewed field of studies for its theories and practices. After the movement of New Museology and its assimilation to the main discipline, the theorists of museology have been confronted with the *social functions* and *responsibilities* of the Museum. Going beyond the investigation of the museums' main functions (preservation, research, and communication) or its traditional role to produce and transmit information as knowledge, this theme has the purpose of interrogating how museums and museology have been dealing with the social impacts of their actions. Understanding knowledge transfer as a social process in itself, this

topic is mainly related to current research concerned with tracing the connections produced by museums or musealization, and its social implications.

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This journal presents a variety of theoretical approaches to the topic, *Museology exploring the concept of MLA*, from distinguished points of view marked by the authors' different professional backgrounds and socio-cultural contexts. It is a testimony to the real diversity of the International Committee for Museology.

As an editorial note, and in an effort to delineate the topic provocatively, Bruno Brulon Soares of Brazil presents a reflexive analysis on museology, discussing its status as a discipline and its subject of study in light of theoretical approaches developed by its main thinkers since the 1970s. This author distances himself from the information and objective perspectives, proposing instead museums as social agents that produce playful cultural performances, analogous to how *theme parks* represent social reality. By comparing museums with theme parks and highlighting the value of reflexive experience, this analysis aims to deconstruct the notion of museums as information institutions and proposes a new frame for museology's subject of study. As a result, museology appears to be oriented to the study of what is produced by museums or of what produces them (called *museality* or musealization in some literature), proving to be closer to a social science rather than the information sciences, as some past theorists of these disciplines have insisted.

In a second editorial note, Ann Davis, Canada, explores two humanistic theories that examine communication and interaction problems in museums, libraries, and archives, starting with Zygmunt Bauman's emphasis on physical space. Discussing the realities of living in an age of uncertainty, Bauman turns to a sense of place in the production of meaning and identity. Central to this idea is an emphasis on society, on people, rather than technology, a new humanism that defines progress in social terms, with technology and collections playing supporting roles. Second, following Martin Heidegger and John Dewey, separation of mind and body is rejected in favour of uniting thinking and action. The theory of *embodied cognition* posits that the workings of the mind and body are intertwined to a far greater degree than previously understood. Here the *generation effect*, learning by generating or doing – rather than simply observing, is important. These two theories help to clarify some of the very real contemporary challenges faced by museums, libraries, and archives and to suggest possible solutions.

Among the peer-reviewed articles, Zarka Vujic and Helena Stublic from Zagreb University in Croatia first examine how museology was seen as part of information science in Croatia in the mid-1960s. That period saw the establishment of the Postgraduate Program in Museology, which was run parallel with programsin librarianship and documentation science. The second part of the paper gives a critical overview of the unique conference, *Archives, Libraries and Museums: Possibilities of Collaboration in the Environment of Global Information Infrastructure* that has been held in Croatia annually since 1996. The conference influenced views on the convergence of the disciplines. Even though the institutions and their related disciplines have numerous activities, research phenomena, and

methodologies in common, there are evidently differences between them that need to be respected.

Norma Avila and Federico Gómez, Mexico, explore in their article how the museum reshapes our relations with the sensitive information submitted to us. They approach these relations from two aspects: first, the documentation of a community project to identify the specific consequences of a musealization process; and secondly, the concept of "community space" understood as a transition from a system of communication-diffusion to that of communication-interaction. The community space, according to the authors, is configured as a dialogue on identity and otherness, which allows reflexive overviews, creating a meta-reality. This reflexivity will permit us to understand how we signify that meta-reality.It reveals how we look to ourselves byobserving the museum sphere as an ethical exercise of memory and knowledge.

Alejandro Sabido, Mexico, presents an analysis of the ontological dimension of codices in museums, libraries, and archives. To analyze museums in relation to archives and libraries, codices are examined as entities that have been part of collections. The ancient Aztec word *Amoxotoca*, "follow the path of the book," gives way to a kind of ontological production that happens in museums. To develop this analysis, the author refers to the philosophy of science and how it answers the question of "what is?" He also examines the extent to which this question is determined by context.

Jennifer Harris, Australia, sees textual dangers in MLA convergence. Confusingly, all three types of institution have a rationalist epistemological background, and they all work now from an epistemology of unstable, politicized meaning. The similarities, however, mask significant differences. Although all three institutions collect and catalogue, the deliberate acts of representation undertaken by museums to construct narratives mark them as fundamentally different from the other two. Harris argues that museums have changed paradigms, moving away from their long-term institutional companions. Convergence is likely to endanger the textual advances achieved by museums.

Francisca Hernández Hernández, Spain, takes an epistemological theoretical approach, conceiving of museology as an intellectual exercise that helps us establish open dialogue with other systems of thought, such as the social sciences and information and communication sciences. At this point, the question arises as to whether or not museology shares the same objectives as these disciplines. The author suggests museology is a social science that encompasses the museum object as a document that transmits information and knowledge on reality, and which constitutes itself as a support for constructing collective memory. For this reason, museology cannot ignore those other subjects that deal with the documentation of memory. She ponders the role played by the archival and library sciences within the field of museology. The answer can only be that these social sciences must be regarded as true documentary sources of museology.

Tereza Scheiner and Luciana Menezes de Carvalho, Brazil, also explore the interdisciplinarity of museology. The question is: Why has museology established itself as an interdisciplinary field from its inception? In order to answer this question, Scheiner and Carvalho focus on the following topics: firstly, a reflection on the concept of

discipline and interdisciplinarity, using Bourdieu and Burke for a theoretical framework; secondly, a case study analysis of the Rio de Janeiro postgraduate program in Museology and Heritage and its interdisciplinary dialogues. The final consideration is the importance of professionals and academics in the museological field in setting its boundaries and building its interdisciplinary dialogues.

Daniel Schmitt, France, takes an enactive approach to museology. During their visit to a museum, visitors show a surprisingly creative ability to bind or connect to a reality that they largely construct themselves. Successfully analyzing the articulation of these links is an analytical interest that goes beyond the museum field because these links inform the construction modalities of knowledge in an ecological situation. The theory of enaction provides a fruitful conceptual framework to study museology as an operative relationship between visitors and reality.

Shuchen Wang from Aalto University, Finland, presents some brief but important notes on an "ecosystem" of museum communication and documentation in the digital age. Ubiquitous computing technology, Wang notes, may realize Malraux's 1947 proposal of a *museum without walls*. Previously grounded on materiality, museum communication andeducation embarks on new frontiers with digitization. Cloud, linked data, semantic web, online exhibition, mobile application, e-publication, augmented reality, interactive display, gamification, 3D scanning and printing – all these cutting-edge technologies contribute to a vision that the visitor/end-user can visit any cultural site at anytime and from anywhere. As ideal as it sounds, the journey is still paved with obstacles due to unsynchronized technical, financial, administrative, and legislative systems – all factors to be dealt with and solved before we reach this goal.

All the papers presented for this issue of *ICOFOM Study Series* were direct responses to ICOFOM's probing the links among museums, libraries, and archives. As a result, thinking of MLA as a field illuminates some of the insecurities we struggle with in museology, when we look from the inside to the outside and to other contemporary disciplines and areas of knowledge. The suggestion to discuss our boundaries is an invitation to reflect on the very status of museology today. The papers presented here tried to open new windows on the topic, as well as revisiting some others that were not fully explored in the past. We hope reading this publication will provoke continuing discussion and raise new questions.

We wish you a very good read!

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