

Accessing audiences: visiting visitor books

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Abstract

Museum visitor books, although held by almost all museums, are rarely used as a research source. This article explores their potential to provide insights and information about audience views, experiences and understandings. To do so, it focuses primarily on visitor books at the Documentation Centre of the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, Germany. The article highlights questions about using such books as a research source and to this end it contains discussion of forms of address, visitor conceptions of the nature and role of visitor books and of museums and exhibitions, styles of entries, and ways in which visitors talk about exhibition media and types of display, and make comparisons and links with their own experience. It also includes discussion of some themes more specific to history exhibitions, including different possible 'temporal orientations' exhibited by visitors; as well as some more specific to the exhibition of morally and politically difficult topics, and of Nazism in particular.

Key words: visitor books, audience research, interpretation, history exhibitions, Nazi heritage

One of the most pressing concerns in contemporary museum studies is that of accessing the audience. Theoretical developments in many areas of social and cultural studies have put new emphasis on consumption, and more specifically on consumption as a process of active meaning-making rather than primarily as a reflex of production (Miller 1995). This turn to the audience is also paralleled in shifts in public culture which have taken place over the past twenty years. In particular, there are those changes that are widely seen to accord consumers new levels of authority, and which mean that their views need to be gathered and taken into account (Macdonald 2002; Urry and MacNaughten 1998). Research on museum visitors – undertaken by museums and by independent researchers – has burgeoned and a wide range of methodologies has been employed to try to find ways to access visitor understandings of, and responses to, museums and exhibitions (see Hooper-Greenhill 2006 for a useful overview). One source that has been relatively little used, however, is the museum visitor book. In some ways this is surprising as almost all museums offer visitors the opportunity to record their comments in a visitor book. For information on visitors to past exhibitions in particular, visitor books may be the only source of information available. More generally, an exhibition's visitor book should, perhaps, be seen as an integral part of that exhibition – an interactive exhibit in which many visitors participate (either by writing or reading) – and, therefore, included in any exhibition analysis.

The aim of this article is to explore the potential advantages and drawbacks of using visitor books as a source of information on visitors' views, experiences and understandings of museums and exhibitions. In order to illustrate and develop this discussion, I draw especially on visitor books from the Documentation Centre of the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg on which I have been carrying out research. It was the fascination of reading these books, together with the perplexity over how to deal with them, that led me to consider the wider questions of using visitor books as a research source as well as what such books might contribute to understanding the visiting of Nazi sites.

Accessing audiences

Attempts to systematically gather information about museum audiences, and debates about methodologies and methods suited to doing so, have expanded enormously over the past twenty years – the period in which ‘museum visitor studies’ can be said to have become consolidated as a specific field of study. Approaches and techniques have been drawn from many different disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, literary and art historical criticism, and media studies (Bicknell and Farmelo 1993). Influenced by developments in other fields, especially media studies, various commentators, such as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2006), have argued for a shift from ‘a preoccupation with “effects” to an increasing recognition of the “active audience”’ (Brooker and Jermyn 2003: 1; see also Falk and Dierking 2000; Macdonald 2002, chapter 8). This entails questioning a previously dominant ‘transmission’ model in which visitors or viewers are conceptualized primarily as ‘receivers’ of ‘messages’, a task which they can then be evaluated as performing relatively well or poorly, and the effectiveness of museum (or other) communication judged accordingly. This model puts primary emphasis on cognition – the museum visit as an opportunity to learn. The ‘active audience’ perspective, by contrast, seeks to access visitors’ own active meaning-making, and the assumptions, motives, emotions and experiences that this may involve. Because this perspective seeks to ‘go beyond’ the prior assumptions or expectations of the researchers, it necessarily requires more open-ended methods than the closed-question surveys that are typically used to assess effects. Just what methods are suitable for the task of trying to access audience ‘activity’ – and especially that which exceeds researcher expectation – is, however, far from straight-forward and has generated considerable debate and methodological innovation.¹

Most audience research methods – e.g. interviews, focus-groups, questionnaires – involve the researched being aware that they are being researched, and indeed some argue that any other forms of research are unethical (for discussion see Mason 2002). While such methods have undoubtedly produced considerable amounts of interesting data, it is inevitably the case that this is shaped to varying extents by visitors’ understandings and expectations of this context itself, as well as by the way in which the researcher frames and conducts the research. More ‘naturalistic’ forms of research, relying on observation, potentially do not involve the researched being aware that research is being undertaken. Innovations here have included the use of odometers for measuring audience movement in galleries (Bechtel 1967), hidden microphones to record discussions at particular exhibits (McManus 1989) and video recording (Lehn and Heath n.d.). Again, these have produced interesting and significant insights. A disadvantage, however, is that such data may be able to tell us rather little about visitors’ views of their experience or the exhibition. We may know that they stood for a long time in a particular spot, or that they pointed out a certain feature to a fellow visitor, but not why or what it meant to them to do so. Naturalistic observation, as critiques from the *Verstehen* tradition have emphasized, easily runs the risk of cutting itself off from the means available to interpret what is being observed (Geertz 1985). A combination of observational and interview-based approaches offers significant advantages in this respect.² More generally, plural approaches – combining different methods and sources – potentially allow for fuller and more nuanced access to visitor understandings and experiences, as well as for more developed reflection on the ways in which the content of visitor expression may be shaped by the format in which it is made.

It is as a contribution to this wider attempt to access audiences and to reflect upon the value and constraints of particular sources and methods, with a particular focus on museum visitor books as a research source, that this article is intended. As noted above, for exhibitions that no longer exist, visitor books may be the only source of information on visitors available; and even for existing exhibitions, visitor books often include comments from greater numbers of visitors than are typically accessed in dedicated visitor research. Despite this, visitor books have not often been used by researchers, though, as part of the growing interest in visitor responses within museum studies (e.g. Fyfe and Ross 1996; McClellan 2003), this is beginning to change.

Below, I first provide a brief overview of existing research involving visitor books before looking further at questions of methodology. On the basis of this, I set out some general areas

that might be considered in evaluating the contribution of visitor books to museum research and draw especially upon my own work on visitor books of the Documentation Centre in Nuremberg to do so. These areas are (1) the context in which inscriptions in visitor books are made, a matter that also involves the second area of more detailed consideration: (2) the imagined receiver of the inscriptions; (3) the style of comments; and (4) visitors' comments on the nature of exhibition and the role of exhibiting, and, more specifically, the way in which they relate to the exhibition of history.

Visitor book research

There are a number of insightful examples of the use of visitor books in historical research on museums. Paula Findlen discusses the visitor books of Aldrovandi's museum in the late sixteenth century, showing that the practice of keeping visitor books is longstanding (1994: 136-46; see also Durling 1965, MacGregor 1983), if not always undertaken in identical ways or to identical ends. Visitor books in this period were essentially lists of names, though sometimes details such as place of residence and profession were also noted. They acted as a record and proclamation of the important, learned and famous people who came to visit, and, as Findlen's thoughtful discussion explains 'Such visitors' books immortalized the fame of a museum and its creator by recording their connection to the social, political, and intellectual centers of power' (1994: 137). The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century visitor books discussed by Franz Georg Kaltwasser in his history of the Bavarian State Library (1998) are, likewise, primarily lists of names rather than opportunities for visitors to make comment.

Without a full history of visitor books it is not possible to identify when and where the opportunity to make comments arose. What is clear from accounts that draw on visitor books in the twentieth century, however, is that the practice has become widespread but that there can be marked variations in what a culture of comment entails. Susan E.Reid provides a fascinating account of the comments books of Soviet art exhibitions in the Khrushchev era (2000 and 2005). What is remarkable here (and see also Sonia Schmid's work on Soviet science exhibitions (2006)) is that even in a context of surveillance – and one in which visitors were required to inscribe full names and addresses – there could be strikingly forthright, and sometimes politically surprising, opinions expressed. She suggests that this was in part informed by the cultural practice of the complaints book which was widespread at that time. By contrast, in Israeli settlement museums in the 1980s, Tamar Katriel found that the model of polite guests paying a visit shaped the inscriptions in the visitor books, making them, she argues, poor sources of insight. As she explains in a footnote:

Visitor Books give audience responses in the highly constraining frame of a tradition of self-selected, appreciative responses given out from guests to their hosts, thereby affirming that the museum has accomplished its rhetorical mission. In writing their words of thanks in the book, visitors can be said to inscribe themselves into the museum text as an audience-contributed gesture of closure, not really to provide well-balanced feedback on their museum experience. Indeed, most of the thousands of entries I have read in the visitor books in both museums (and others) during the time of the research include highly appreciative notes by both adults and children, who express their gratitude to the museum makers or to individual guides for a moving and edifying experience in semi-ritualized terms. Very few comments I have seen were critical or indifferent in their response, and the few that were pointed out the need to improve one aspect of the display or another but never questioned the value or relevance of the enterprise as a whole (Katriel 1997: 71 n.5)

Not surprisingly, other studies that make use of visitor books focus on cases where comments go beyond the kind found by Katriel. Museum curator Mary Alexander, for example, reading the visitor books of exhibition about the history of American sweatshops at the Smithsonian that she was to review, found her own assumption that museum visitors would have a rather superficial engagement with an exhibition challenged (2000). Visitor comments, she found, were often 'intelligent, articulate, sophisticated, and sometimes vehement', showing, for

example, extensive historical knowledge or sophisticated awareness of exhibitionary dilemmas faced by museums (2000: 86; see also Arnold 1998; Hughes 2003). In her suggestion that museums should, therefore, be sure to provide more than 'the prosaic visitor comment cards that elicit "thank you for this exhibit"' (2000: 90), Alexander implies that different formats and contexts for making responses may play a part in shaping the kinds of responses made. This is born out too by Douglas Worts's discussion of the attempt to elicit audience feedback in the Art Gallery of Ontario (1995) where the use of comment cards that visitors were told would be selectively displayed produced a high number of often accomplished drawings. It might be noted here that this attempt to make visitor comments more explicitly part of an exhibition is becoming more widespread as part of according the consumer increased authority, as noted at the beginning of this article (see, for example, Gammon and Mazda 2000). As some of the existing accounts of the use of conventional visitor books (e.g. Reid 2000, 2005) and my account below show, however, such books are already often used in a fairly interactive manner and can reasonably already be regarded as part of an exhibition.

Methodology

As a source of access to audiences, visitor books differ from most other sources in that they are produced independently of research being undertaken. As such, and as is usually the case for documentary sources used in other areas of social research (see Platt 1981; Plummer 2001; Scott 1990), responses inscribed are not shaped by the researcher agenda or the relationship between researcher and researched in the way that is the case for approaches such as interviews and surveys. Visitor books might, thus, be said to constitute a kind of 'visitor research against the grain' that may be more able to 'elicit unanticipated visitor responses' than some other approaches (Gordon Fyfe, personal communication).

Moreover, unlike the information gained from observational techniques, responses in visitor books are often explicitly formulated into views of the exhibition and subjective experiences of it. That is, they are inscriptions of visitor interpretations and thus provide access to aspects of visitor meaning-construction. This is not to say, however, that we should regard responses in visitor books as somehow more 'authentic', 'unmediated' or 'valid' than other sources. As with any source or form of data, we need to consider the context of production and how this may shape the information available. Whether visitor books are regarded as an opportunity to give opinions that visitors might be reluctant to give in other contexts, for example, is likely to vary not only among particular visitors but, as noted above, across different national and cultural contexts. As Susan Reid has written of using visitor books in the former Soviet Union:

Visitors' books are... a problematic source of evidence: the entries can hardly be considered a candid or representative reflection of opinion, least of all in a culture of surveillance such as the Soviet Union. To engage in assessing their degree of sincerity is a fruitless task. Rather, comment-writing should be treated as a form of role-performance or self-alignment (2000:117)

No doubt there are cultural differences in the extent to which those writing in visitor books feel that an individual opinion is legitimate, required or inadvisable, and likewise of the extent to which their acts should be seen as entirely a matter of self-alignment, but Reid's point that a concern with the honesty of comments is misguided, and that we should read comments as a kind of performance – be it of the compliant citizen, polite guest (as Katriel suggests) or opinionated individual – is important, for we have no independent access to, or guarantee of, sincerity. Instead, as Reid argues, a key analytical task is to try to identify the kinds of socially situated performances that are entailed in making a certain kind of entry in a visitor book. As John Scott writes of the use of documentary sources more generally, these demand 'deciphering' in order to approach 'interpretive understanding' (Scott 1990: 28-30) for, like any texts, they are 'socially situated products' (ibid.: 34). One important outcome of an expansion of research using visitor books is that comparison across different cases will enable researchers to better specify the kinds of socially situated performances that are involved in particular cases.

Visitor books differ from many other documentary sources in that they are composed

not by a single author but consist of numerous individual comments – individual comments that are sometimes, but not always, formulated in response to other comments already in the books. As Reid puts it, the books thus can be seen ‘as a kind of virtual public sphere, something like an Internet message board’ (2005: 8). The ‘deciphering’ task, outlined by Scott (above), is, then, more complex than for many other documentary sources in that it preferably entails at least some attempt to distinguish different kinds of ‘voices’ within the books as well as understanding the overall context of inscription and how this may also lead to certain kinds of voices not being inscribed.

Making the task harder is the fact that information about those who write in visitor books is usually extremely restricted or even non-existent. While this poses an interpretive challenge, however, it does not make visitor books worthless as research sources. One option is to identify different themes within the comments without speculating upon any possible socio-demographic correlations. Rachel Hughes, for example, does this in her discussion of visitor responses to an exhibition of photographs of the Cambodian genocide (2003), her aim being to understand what it was about the photographs that made the exhibition so compelling. While fully aware of the dangers of trying to make socio-demographic correlations, Reid’s analysis of the Soviet exhibitions usefully considers some of those that might be involved in the differences that she highlights between visitor comments – e.g. those showing understandings shaped by the conventions of socialist realism and those showing new more cosmopolitan perspectives.

Where visitor books are used in combination with other sources and methods, it may be possible to compare the responses made in visitor books with those produced in other contexts, and in this way to possibly gain more insight into socio-demographic or other features of those making certain kinds of entries. Comparing data from different sources and methods can also help to illuminate commonalities and differences in content. This is not just a matter of looking for those results that are substantiated by all methods employed – as is prescribed by the approach known as ‘triangulation’ – but also a matter of considering differences and disjunctions and the possible reasons for these. This would, for example, help to show whether visitors are more likely to be polite in a face-to-face interview than in a written entry in a visitor book. By using a combination of methods, researchers can also engage in processual approaches in which results from one source are further investigated through another method. In my own research, for example, I drew on insights into visitor responses derived from comments in visitor books to structure some of the questions that I used in interviews with visitors.

The analysis of visitor books themselves is in many respects similar to that of other kinds of texts and qualitative research data and is, therefore, in principle open to many of the analytical techniques that are employed for textual analysis in other contexts (see Denzin and Lincoln 1998). This might include relatively formalized techniques, such as some of those used in conversation analysis or the use of qualitative data analysis programmes and computer-assisted coding that runs through data to look for key-words and to assess frequency or correlations. There are also techniques that can be drawn from structuralist theory and semiotics, including the attempt to identify binary oppositions and units of meaning (*ibid.*). All of the examples of visitor research discussed above use nothing more formalized than intelligent critical reading.

My own strategy with the visitor books was likewise relatively informal and open, though informed by broadly semiotic and interpretive techniques. I began by simply reading through the books and making notes on matters that recurred and that I found of interest. From this I then generated a set of headings, such as ‘Forms of address’ (referring to who visitors seemed to be addressing in their comments) or ‘references to other exhibitions’ and as I worked through the books further I added more examples to my various headings, and in many cases broke them into sub-categories. Sometimes I would begin to find repeat instances of matters that I had not noted earlier as they seemed rather singular and so I would then create a new category and perhaps go back and add in earlier instances. Sometimes entries covered several categories and so I developed a set of shorthand notes to put into the margins of my notes to indicate this (as I was working by hand and so could not easily copy quotes into several sections). The further that I worked through the books the fewer new categories did I need to create, and the fewer examples did I come across that were not covered by categories that I

had already devised. One possibility for analysing visitor comments in visitor books would be to count instances of particular kinds of comments. For example, by doing this, the relative prevalence of, say, positive versus critical comments could be ascertained, or the numbers of visitors giving their names and addresses versus those who did not.³ I did not, however, attempt such a quantitative analysis.

A note on the ethics of using visitor books is perhaps necessary here. Making an entry to a visitor book is voluntary and visitor books are open to the public gaze. Visitors themselves typically leaf through the visitor comments and part of the motive for writing is surely that others will read the comments (as made explicit by some of the forms of address as I discuss below). To this extent, to read the comments and to comment on them in turn does not in itself raise ethical dilemmas. It is also part of the expectation of those who write in visitor books, as evident from many of the comments made there, that those who run the Documentation Centre (or other authority) will read the comments; and some commentators clearly expect their comments to be acted upon. In many respects research on the visitor books is an extension of this; and this is how it was seen by those running the Documentation Centre themselves. Nevertheless, I made a decision that in giving any quotations from the visitor books in publications I should not reproduce details such as visitor names and addresses that could identify those people directly (except in the few cases of public figures who made entries into the visitor books that were also reproduced in newspapers).

Documentation Centre of the Former Nazi Party Rally Grounds

In the rest of this article I draw examples from the visitor books of the Documentation Centre of the Former Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg which opened in November 2001. The Documentation Centre consists mainly of a large permanent exhibition called *Fascination and Violence (Faszination und Gewalt)* and is housed in an architecturally striking 'glass stake' through one of the buildings constructed by the Nazis for their week-long party rallies – the Congress Hall. This is located within the complex of remaining buildings and marching grounds that comprises the rally grounds area.

The exhibition covers the rise of Nazism, and the role of propaganda, and the rallies and rally site within this, as well as some aspects of World War II and the Holocaust; the Nuremberg trials and fate of the rally grounds post-1945. It contains many film clips – of film from the period (e.g. of the rallies) and of eye-witnesses talking about their experiences (e.g. of working in the labour camp quarrying stone for the site); photographs and plans (e.g. of the buildings); and text. The latter is in German but audio-guides are also available in English, French and Italian. Text panels are black and white with a red title box, and the lighting throughout the exhibition is fairly low, creating a slightly menacing effect, something enhanced by the music on some of the film sequences. There are neither reconstructions nor many artefacts but the original wall surfaces of the building are mostly left visible, and there are areas from which parts of the original building and the rally grounds area can be viewed.

Explanatory material provided at the Documentation Centre states that it takes about two hours to go round the exhibition and many spend about this long, though even this is not enough time to cover everything (especially to listen to the audio-guide) and some take considerably longer (one visitor that I interviewed had spent much of two days in the exhibition), while others manage to go round faster by skipping sections. By September 2003 (when I undertook my research), almost 400,000 visitors had visited the exhibition since its opening.

Almost one visitor book per month, each approximately 30 x 22 cm and containing approximately 300 pages – a total of twenty-two books – had been completed by then. The majority of entries in the books were in German but there were also entries from numerous other countries, including Spain, Poland, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, UK, USA, Australia, Japan, and Brazil. Below I present in the text only English translations of entries, but provide originals in endnotes.

My investigation of visitor books at the Documentation Centre was part of a broader research project which also involved participant-observation in the larger rally grounds site and interviewing visitors, Documentation Centre staff and tour guides at the Centre and elsewhere on the site. (In addition, members of staff at the Documentation Centre are conducting visitor research⁴).

In taking the visitor books of the Documentation Centre in Nuremberg as an extended example below, I am not assuming that all visitor books will be used in the same way. I am, however, using this example not so much to make a substantive argument about the Documentation Centre and its visitors as to explore visitor books as a research source more generally, and to try to bring out matters that might prove useful to those using visitor books in other contexts. My hope is that this will contribute to a broader comparative account of the uses of museum visitor books.

Contexts of inscription and self-positioning

I have suggested above that the visitor book should be seen as an integral part of an exhibition and, as such, writing in the visitor book – or leafing through it – can be seen as part of the ritual of exhibition visiting. In the Documentation Centre the visitor book stands, fairly inconspicuously, on a lectern-like stand in the foyer, to one side of the foot of the stairs which lead to and from the exhibition. The fact that the visitor book is visible before the exhibition might make it more likely that visitors to the exhibition will be prompted to prepare themselves to make comment later – suggesting that visitor books might also be regarded as having a constitutive role in visitors' engagement with the exhibition (cf. Reid 2005: 6) – though from my observations only a minority of visitors leaf through the book before going into the exhibition. At least half, however, engage in it as an exit ritual. Of these, only about 20% directly write in the book. Others either read some of the entries or look over the shoulder of a companion as he or she writes, it being fairly common for individuals to make entries on behalf of a group (e.g. a school teacher for a whole class, or one comment for a whole family or group of friends).⁵

That the book should be seen as part of the exhibition was an idea that some of those writing in it themselves observed. For example, one entry read:

I am impressed with this book which shows how controversially history can apparently be understood! Next to shockingly naive, crass and nasty comments one finds also signs for hope! This book belongs absolutely to this exhibition because here real unadorned comments are to be read.⁶

As this also hints, the ritual of reading and perhaps also writing in the visitor book helps visitors to formulate their own position in relation to those of others. Some of the visitors that I interviewed referred spontaneously to the fact that they had already written in the book, making comments like 'As I just wrote in the visitor book'. Beyond this opportunity – or what some might even see as a kind of duty – to formulate a view, some visitors may experience writing as a need, as seems to be the case at the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, where visitors queue up to write (Richard Sandell, personal communication).

Also relevant to consideration of contexts of inscription is how commentators position themselves in making their entries. This may also provide socio-demographic clues. In the Documentation Centre visitor books the majority of entries are accompanied by a name, date and place of residence. In some cases names may indicate nationality, origins and gender. Place of residence is generally given as a city or region, or, especially where a visitor is from outside Germany, a country. It is also fairly common for visitors to refer to where they were from, especially if they were from the local area (e.g. 'Als Nürnberger...', 'As a Nuremberger...'), or from abroad (e.g. 'As an American citizen visiting after Sept 11, 2001...'), or as somebody perceiving their place and origins to be significant (e.g. 'A Muslim in Germany'; 'As a former citizen of East Germany...').⁷ What people judge to be relevant is itself of cultural significance. That being from Nuremberg seemed to be judged especially significant was related, among other things, to the fact that many in Nuremberg have long felt that such an exhibition was overdue and that having it was important for the city in facing up to its past.

Also significant in relation to the particular subject matter of the exhibition was the fact that many visitors chose to indicate their age, either by stating their 'Jahrgang' (the year in which they were born) or commenting on the fact that they were, say, a child during the Nazi period (e.g. 'I was born in 55 – my parents in 21';⁸ 'As an eye-witness growing up then...'⁹). There were also other indicators of age: school groups are generally noted as such, usually including their year, as well as by graffiti. Styles of handwriting, although probably not a reliable

indication, may also give an impression of the age of the writer, as might the fact of whether they use new German spelling conventions or not. Some visitors also chose to indicate their occupation – again, where this was regarded by them as significant (e.g. architect, history teacher); or, perhaps, the role that they or their parents had played during the war. In a small number of cases, visitors chose to present information through some version of personal narrative. For example, the reference to age above continued:

I was born in 1955, my parents in 1921. I was taught how a good German housewife/a German girl should be. Here, I cried – I remember how my parents still sang songs from the Hitler Youth. Hopefully I have become an isolated case. I am ashamed for my parents.¹⁰

However, it was relatively unusual for visitors to present anything more than cursory personal notes, and there were few instances of the visitors making links to their personal biographies in order to construct 'narratives of self' in the way suggested by Gaynor Bagnall for British heritage sites (2003: 88). This may be because the books, unlike the interview format, did not prompt them to do so, or at least to record it. It may also be a function of the theme and the format of the exhibition itself. To inscribe a self-narrative after an exhibition of such a traumatic theme might seem inappropriately trivial or self-indulgent.

Imagined receivers

Visitors' own self-positioning may also be influenced by who they imagine that they are addressing. In the books considered here, the majority of comments do not contain an explicit form of address but instead make brief, generally positive, comments, such as 'an interesting exhibition!' or 'very impressive'. Of those that are explicit, there were two main kinds of addressee:

(a) *The makers of the exhibition/those running the Documentation Centre*

These were addressed directly to those who had made the exhibition (cf. Alexander 2000: 87). For example: 'Many congratulations to the "makers" of this successful documentation'¹¹ In some cases the museum staff, especially the Centre's Director, Herr Täubrich, were specifically named and congratulated. Occasionally front-of-house staff were addressed, as in a complaint about having to leave by six p.m. to 'Mr Cashier'. Comments on improvements that might be made to the exhibition, and especially the correction of details such as some numbers on key-pads of audio-guides not agreeing with panels, would also seem intended to reach museum staff.

Another 'addressee' – a kind of imagined 'maker' – was the City of Nuremberg, as in 'I congratulate the city of Nuremberg on this great building and its content'.¹² Whether it is more generally true that a 'place' is seen as the 'author' of an exhibition would be interesting to know from other cases. There are, however, as touched upon above, particular reasons why 'Nuremberg' is so often mentioned in relation to this exhibition, for having an exhibition on this subject is inevitably entangled with questions of Nuremberg's city image, and, as I found in many of my own visitor interviews, many visitors assume that the city of Nuremberg has long tried to avoid allowing an exhibition that would draw attention to its past.

(b) *Other visitors/ readers of the visitor books*

Other comments seemed to address other visitors or readers of the visitor book in general. There was a clear sense here of having an audience, though exactly who was not necessarily specified. Examples included entries beginning: 'Hi people!' or 'Dear reader!'¹³ Often these were greetings more typical for an oral conversation (e.g. 'Hallo!') or a letter to a newspaper, the latter also suggested by formats with a place and date at the top and a signature at the end of the entry. Some also occasionally included an ending, such as 'Best Wishes'.¹⁴ In the case of one 'Dear reader' entry what was also clearly involved was an attempt to inform other visitors

of the shortcomings of the exhibition as perceived by the writer. This particular entry continued as follows:

It is a disgrace, how German history is dragged through the mud. A dire picture of historical falsification is painted here; for example, the fighting of partisans.... this was NO crime by the Wehrmacht.¹⁵ Each army acts like that, even our American friends. So much for the 'neutrality' of an exhibition! This has been happening for years, that everything GERMAN is sullied! I don't look away and know the truth.¹⁶

There were other examples of entries in which the aim of the writer seemed to be to alert other readers/visitors to possible shortcomings of the exhibition. This was especially the case, as in the above example, where the author perceived the exhibition to be a slur on German history and wanted to suggest that the exhibition might be biased. A number of entries, for example, made comments such as: 'ONLY THE VICTORS WRITE THE HISTORY',¹⁷ pressing readers to see the exhibition as a positioned, 'victors' account', rather than as neutral. Not all of the comments alerting readers to shortcomings of the exhibition came from such perspectives, however. Others pointed out, for example, that there was relatively little about resistance and wanted to let other readers know that there had been such.

In some cases writers addressed the comments of others in the visitor books, and occasionally there would be a set of consecutive related comments, constituting a kind of serial conversation (see also Reid 2005). Take, for example, the following three comments on the same page (the third one looking as though it was tucked in later):

The exhibition is impressive. However, the whole building should be got rid of completely so that there should be no memorial left to the Nazi mania for gigantic buildings. J.... F..... [name]

I am of the same opinion as Mr J.... F..... This building promotes a glorification of the Nazi period and has no place or space here in Germany. All buildings [on this site] should be ripped down in order to avoid and prevent the glorification of it all.

Certainly not! For without the buildings this part of our history would fall into oblivion.¹⁸

In a few cases, such remarks addressed to other remarks were not set out consecutively but they occurred some pages later, giving evidence of visitors reading through the books and addressing the comments of others as part of the formulation of their own views.

Styles of comments

The mention of the ongoing conversation as a type of entry raises the more general question of the different kinds of styles that might be identified in the visitor books. One of the most striking stylistic differences in the Documentation Centre books was between the textual comments of the kinds already described and what might be called 'graffiti'. This latter is usually signed by school groups and is mostly characterized by several consecutive pages of very short comments, often written in large writing or at oblique angles, perhaps embellished with sketches. Many of these comments appear to have little to do with the exhibition, perhaps noting, for example, who loves whom, or a desire to visit Pizza Hut. Quite often they would list names and 'was here' ('war hier'), perhaps also including name, place and date as in more conventional entries; and also often including the most common type of entry in the books overall: the **short evaluative comment**. Most often this would be positive: for example, 'cool and interesting'; though there were plenty of negative comments from school groups, such as 'boring', or facile comments, such as preferring going for a beer. Although we might want to dismiss irreverent and facile comments, and perhaps those in graffiti-style altogether, it is nevertheless clearly a significant form of visitor-book entry.

The other style of comment set apart visually in the books was the **longer reflective comment**, which ranged from several sentences to, more rarely, a single side or even two sides of a page. Such comments would typically be evaluative, with longer comments being more likely to point out perceived shortcomings of the exhibition (e.g. areas deemed 'missing', such as discussion of the persecution of homosexuals by the Nazis), though in the longer comments there was generally more of a tendency to temper these with positive remarks and to present more of a rounded evaluation. The following is a short example of this kind and makes a criticism also made by others:

This is a problematic site to interpret. I found the topics on the cult and myth associated with Hitler an interesting approach to a baffling subject. I found the exhibition unbalanced however. Much attention on the rise of the Reich, anti-Semitism then an abrupt stop and the trial. What about the liberation of the camps, bombing of Nürnberg, and finally Hitler? More importantly what are the present repercussions of this episode in history?

Dividing comments into their styles – something that also maps at least partly on to kinds of content – is one way of distinguishing between them. There are, however, others and many of these will be more dependent on the particular type of institution or exhibition that is the subject of the visitor books. In the following section, I turn to some of the content of comments. In doing so, I am not so concerned to consider detailed points about this particular exhibition but to pick out some areas of comment that might also be covered in at least some other kinds of visitor commentaries and that might, therefore, prove useful for comparative research. The first two discussed are what might be called 'meta-commentaries' – on the nature and effects of the exhibition media, and on the nature and role of exhibition and museum themselves; and the third is concerned with the 'temporal orientations' that visitors seem to bring to the exhibition – a matter that might also be explored comparatively.

Exhibition media and style of display

The exhibition media, architecture and styles of display were frequently commented upon in the Documentation Centre visitor books, showing that visitors are highly aware of such matters and often articulate in discussing them. Many visitors made comments such as 'Good use of new media' or 'Very successful, above all in the combination of text and image (film)!!'¹⁹ Others were more specific. For example:

The exhibition is too harmless (harmless-making?), because it – above all through the smoochy film-music – presents the terror of the Nazi period far less impressively than the fascination, which comes out as dominant in the architecture and display.²⁰

As in this comment, other visitors also discussed the architecture of the Documentation Centre alongside the exhibition media. For example:

The exhibition informs well. The best is the computer simulation which shows how the whole area would have looked had it been completed. What I find particularly not ideal [?] is the "glass stake" celebrated by so many. It falsifies the whole size and overall impression of the Congress Hall. But it is typical of the current time, that the testimonies in stone of former power and size are destroyed, even in opposition to the laws and viewpoints of heritage protection.²¹

More commentators, however, praised the architecture; though some were critical of the preponderance of text and lack of original material in the exhibition:

I find the integration of the arrow, which cuts through the old regime, very successful. Unfortunately there is too little original material shown in the exhibition.²²

The remark about original material is particularly interesting in the context of this exhibition, for although it is housed in an original building, the exhibition consists almost exclusively of

pictures, film and text, with very little 'stuff', such as, say, flags used at rallies. Original things are, perhaps, expected by some visitors at what they perceive to be a 'museum'. Interesting in this context too, despite the lack of such stuff and the fact that the exhibition does not use reconstructions, are a number of comments, whose language and handwriting suggest that they have been composed by younger people, praising the exhibition for its 'realism': e.g. 'A real beautiful exhibition, very realistic & presents WWII very well'.²³ What is at issue here, perhaps, is the extent to which the exhibition persuades you of the truth of its position through its media – its rhetorical function as Silverstone has called it (1989; 1999: ch.4).²⁴ Implicit in some of these comments are also comparisons: perhaps with other exhibitions or other types of media or institutions dealing with such topics.

Comparisons with other exhibitions/media/institutions

While there were many comments which show visitors to be knowledgeable about styles of exhibitionary display, there were relatively few explicitly comparing the exhibition with others. The following were two of these, and illustrate the kinds of examples which my interview research also showed this kind of exhibition to be mostly likely to be compared with:

If only you had invested better in the restoration of the building, which gives far more impressive access to this period. What is the difference between a history book and this exhibition? Look at the Museum of WWI in Ypres, then you'll know how an exhibition can be museologically and educationally appealing.²⁵

Concentration camps are basically more interesting and shocking. Nevertheless – this exhibition's not bad!²⁶

Both of the comparators are, like the Documentation Centre in the Congress Hall, 'real' sites connected with war in Europe, suggesting that these might be perceived as a certain category of exhibition.

As we see in the comment above, the exhibition is also compared with other possible sources from which people gain information: in this case history books. Others also made such comparisons. For example: 'The exhibition was interesting and I learned more than from school stuff'.²⁷ What I did not find mentioned explicitly in the visitor books were any comparisons with film and television (cf. Reid 2005). On the one hand this is surprising given that exhibition-makers often imagine that it is with such media that they are primarily competing. It might be that this particular exhibition contained so much film footage that there was a sense in which this was encompassed by the exhibition. Alternatively, it might be that visitors do not regard these different media as particularly comparable. This leads to the question of visitors' perceptions of the Documentation Centre, its roles and the related matter of history exhibitions more generally.

Role of an exhibition

From the analogies made above, as well as some of the other comments that have already been noted, it is clear that the Documentation Centre and its exhibition is understood as having an educational role. Several visitors even suggested that it should be seen as a kind of civic education that everybody should go through.

Encounter history – hear history – see history – know what people can be capable of if they allow themselves to be blinded. Everybody should encounter this exhibition. In gratitude.²⁸

Related to this is the idea, fairly often voiced, that the exhibition should constitute a 'reminder', an exhortation to remember so that the same does not happen again: 'This should also be a reminder/exhortation to remember!' ('Dies soll auch Mahnung sein!'). In German, the idea of a memorial or monument is closely etymologically linked to the idea of an admonition or warning. A 'Mahnmal' is a memorial that serves as a reminder and a warning for the future. That the Documentation Centre is seen as such is evident in entries such as the following:

Shocking & alarming – hopefully with this exhibition a memorial [demand to remember] will be established! We hope that something so abnormal never happens again!²⁹

Relating to history

The comments about the Documentation Centre as a Mahnmal – a reminder of a period of history and a warning for the future – expresses a particular 'orientation' to the past (Rüsen 1994) and raises a more general question of how people relate to history exhibitions.³⁰ In the visitor comments two rather different temporal orientations seemed to be evident. One, namely the previous comment, related past to present: the concept of 'Mahnmal' acting as a link between the two. This might be called a **present orientation**. Comments orientated as such showed a reading of the exhibition as not just 'about the past' but for its contemporary meanings and messages.

There were many examples of this, ranging from very short comments such as 'Nie Wieder!' (never again) to specific analogies made with current events. The following are some examples:

The exhibition was impressive, but also depressing. Unfortunately humanity has learned nothing from history, see the Balkans, Palestine.³¹

It is a pity that the world has made so little progress in the last 50 years. Why did the world stand by as the U.S.A. committed crimes against humanity in Iraq. 6000+ innocent civilians have died because of American greed and power. bring the guilty before a world court. Show the world that "never again" truly means "Never Again"., USA, August 2003

In stark contrast to such comments were others which exhibited a **past orientation**, that is, which read the exhibition as about a past time and did not relate it to the present. Such comments tended to refer to 'damals'/'then', 'die Nazizeit'/'the Nazi period' and often mentioned Hitler in particular as part of an apparent encapsulating of the past in singularity. For example: 'A fascinating exhibition with wonderful glimpses into the former 'Reich-period' of Hitler.'³² One comment seemed to express particularly well the temporal orientation involved here: 'An impressive journey into an incomprehensible time'.³³

What the exhibition was allowing, according to this orientation, was a glimpse or journey into a different, 'foreign', time. As David Lowenthal has explored so well, this particular kind of understanding of history is itself historically specific and is one in which the growth of museums and heritage sites has played a significant role (1985). In the Documentation Centre visitor books the styles of handwriting and surrounding entries suggest that many of these kinds of comments came from younger people – just those who, in the eyes of some of the older visitors, should have been 'learning the messages for today'. This tendency to view Nazism as part of a distant past, rather than as a still lurking danger, has also been noted in other research on how young people talk about it.³⁴

What is clear is that this exhibition is capable of generating both of these kinds of orientations. Whether all history exhibitions are equally so is an interesting question which is deserving of more research. If younger people are likely to view a history exhibition as about a 'different' time, unrelated to the present, this also raises questions for exhibition-makers who wish to prompt visitors to draw out contemporary 'messages'. To do so may, perhaps, require particular calculated strategies. On the other hand, the fact that so many visitors spontaneously make such analogies, even though this is not an exhibition that specifically prompts them to do so, indicates that this may well happen even without this.

Final comments

As noted above, my initial use of visitor books was as a complement to other observational and interview-based research that I was conducting at the former Nazi Party Rally Grounds site.

While my other sources yielded a good deal of information that was not included in visitor book comments – for example, how long visitors had been inside the exhibition or how they were spending the rest of their day – I found a good deal of congruence in the commentaries on the exhibition itself from my different sources. Perhaps most importantly for my research, comments in visitor books sometimes prompted me to notice and take up points in my interviews with visitors, or to ask supplementary questions, that I might not have thought of otherwise. There were also single comments in my own interview material that I might have passed over as ‘one-off’ comments had I not also found many other instances among the thousands of entries in the visitor books. For example, I noticed various comments in the books asking, or requesting that information be provided on, what had happened to Hitler at the end of the war, a comment that I might initially have thought a singular request. However, reflecting on it further made me realize that what visitors were requesting was a satisfying narrative conclusion for the exhibition, one in which Hitler – whose power and mythos is explored by the exhibition – meets his end. Describing the end of the regime through the Nuremberg trials (as the exhibition does) omits Hitler (who had committed suicide before then) and the result of this was not simply that some visitors were left puzzling over what had become of him, but that they were left with a sense of narrative lacuna. Part of the reason for this too, as was also evident from reading through the visitor books, was that visitors sometimes seemed to read the exhibition as being predominantly ‘about Hitler’, even though this was not the way in which those creating the exhibition had envisaged it. This ‘reading’ made sense too given that this is so often the way that the Third Reich is represented (not without reason) and given that a section of the exhibition itself does deal with the ‘Führer Myth’, and that pictures of Hitler (e.g. at the rallies) occur throughout.

Within the Documentation Centre visitor books there are also other themes relating specifically to the content of this exhibition which I have not explored here. My aim in this article has been a broader and only preliminary one of opening up some more general possibilities for making use of visitor books as a research resource. This has involved looking at visitor books as a socially situated cultural product, the ways in which they are used by visitors, styles of comments, and some perceptions of museums and exhibitions – especially those concerned with history.

I have suggested here that writing in a visitor book should be regarded as part of the visiting process or ritual. Visitor books are also part of broader museological processes and following their ‘life-histories’ – including what happens to them later – could potentially highlight other aspects of museum workings. In some museums visitor books pile up and gather dust, in others all entries are diligently typed-up,³⁵ in some they are culled for positive comments to add to promotional material or are thoroughly scanned for suggestions to improve display, and, as noted above, increasingly they are turned into part of the museum’s explicit exhibition. Through some of these processes, visitors – or versions of some visitors – re-enter the museological process: they move from being the end-point or ‘receivers’ of the ‘museum messages’ to being part of the process through which museum exhibitions are created. But none of this is a straightforward or transparent matter and there is surely also some fascinating future work to be done subverting the usual lines of investigation by exploring curators’ reception, appropriation and uses of texts produced by visitors.

Acknowledgments

The research of which this is part was supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and hosted in the Institut für Soziologie at the Friedrich Alexander Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg where Professor Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim acted as my research sponsor. I also offer sincere thanks Eckart Dietzfelbinger and Martina Christmeier at the Dokumentationszentrum Reichsparteitagsgelände Nürnberg for considerable help with my research, and especially to its director, Hans-Christian Täubrich, for invaluable comments and corrections. I have also been fortunate to benefit from comments and suggestions from Gordon Fyfe, George Hein, Morgan Meyer, Susan Reid and Richard Sandell. All shortcomings are my own.

Notes

- ¹ For a lively account of some of the debate see Bicknell and Farmelo 1993. Falk and Dierking 2000 and Hooper-Greenhill 2006 also provide useful recent accounts of some of the various approaches in museum visitor studies. For accounts of audience research more generally see Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998; Ang 1991; Brooker and Jermyn 2003; Dickinson, Harindrath and Linne 1998.
- ² This approach was used, for example, in visitor research carried out at the Science Museum London, and showed well the interesting discrepancies between actual movements and accounts of them (see Macdonald 1999, 2002).
- ³ Such basic research has been carried out earlier on the exhibition *Faszination und Gewalt* in the Zeppelin Building by Dr Eckart Dietzfelbinger. This involves insightful classification of comments and interesting enumerations, such as of the number of 'Nie Wieder!' (Never Again!) or 'Rechtsextremistische/nationalistische' (Extreme right-wing/nationalistic) comments.
- ⁴ Martina Christmeier has conducted extensive research and provided me with some useful figures and discussion for which I thank her.
- ⁵ Visitors are also asked to evaluate the exhibition on their audio-guides, giving numerical answers to questions on how good they judged it to be. It may be that the fact that they have already 'commented' in this way means that fewer visitors comment in the visitor books.
- ⁶ Translations are my own. I have kept them as literal as possible even though this may entail a sacrifice of elegance. 'Ich bin beeindruckt von diesem Buch, zeigt es doch wie kontrovers die Geschichte anscheinend verstanden wurde! Neben erschreckend naiven, plumpen und häßlichen Kommentaren findet man aber auch Zeichen für Hoffnung! Dieses Buch gehört unbedingt zu dieser Ausstellung, weil hier wirkliche Kommentare unverblümt zu lesen sind'.
- ⁷ 'Ein Muslim in Deutschland'; 'Als ehemaliger DDR-Bürger...'
- ⁸ 'Ich bin Jahrgang 55 – meine Eltern waren Jahrgang 21'.
- ⁹ 'Als heranwachsender Zeitzeuge....'
- ¹⁰ 'Ich bin Jahrgang 55 – meine Eltern waren Jahrgang 21. Mir würde noch beigebracht, wie eine gute deutsche Hausfrau/ein deutsches Mädchen sein muss. Mir kamen hier die Tränen – ich erinnere mich, wie meine Eltern noch die Lieder aus der Hitlerjugend sangen. Hoffentlich bin ich mir ein Einzelfall gewesen. Ich schäme mich für meine Eltern'.
- ¹¹ 'Herzlichen Glückwunsch den 'Machern' zu dieser gelungenen Dokumentation'.
- ¹² 'Ich beglückwünsche die Stadt Nürnberg zu diesem tollen Gebäude und dessen Inhalt'.
- ¹³ 'Hi Leute!'; 'Liebe Leser!'.
- ¹⁴ 'Liebe Grüsse'.
- ¹⁵ This commentator is referring to the arguments about the role of the Wehrmacht, the German armed forces in WWII, especially on the Eastern front, and the controversy over whether they behaved with excessive brutality or within the 'normal' actions of war. There also may be an allusion in this entry to the notorious exhibition about the Wehrmacht which was accused of accentuating the crimes of the Wehrmacht and which had to close temporarily

due to inaccuracies and which created massive and ongoing controversy in Germany. See for example Reemtsma 2003.

- ¹⁶ 'Es ist eine Schande, wie die deutsche Geschichte in den Dreck gezogen wird. Ein fatales Bild von Geschichtsfälschung wird hier betrieben; ein Beispiel ist die Partisanenbekämpfung..... es waren KEINE Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Jede Armee ist so verfahren, auch unsere amerikanischen Freunde. Nur so viel für die "Neutralität" einer Ausstellung! So geht es schon seit Jahren, alles "DEUTSCHE" wird beschmutzt! Ich schaue nicht weg und kenne die Wahrheit.'
- ¹⁷ 'NUR DER SIEGER SCHREIBT DIE GESCHICHTE!'
- ¹⁸ 'Die Ausstellung ist beindruckend. Das ganze Gebäude sollte jedoch komplett beseitigt werden, um der Nazi-Gigantomanie kein Denkmal zu hinterlassen! J..... F..... [name]
- Ich bin derselben Meinung wie Herr J.... F..... Dieses Gebäude stellt eine Verherrlichung der Nazizeit vor, und hat keinen Platz oder Raum mehr hier in Deutschland. Alle Gebäude sollten niedergerissen werden, um die Verherrlichung des ganzen zu vermeiden und zu verhindern.
- Eben nicht! Denn ohne die Gebäude würde dieser Teil unserer Geschichte in Vergessenheit geraten'.
- ¹⁹ 'Sehr gut gelungen, vor allem in der Kombination von Text und Bild (Film)!'
- ²⁰ 'Die Ausstellung ist zu harmlos (verharmlosend?), da sie – u.a. durch die Schmuse-Filmmusik – den Schrecken d. NS-Zeit weit weniger eindrücklich präsentiert als die Faszination, die die in Architektur und Inszenierung zum Ausdruck kommende Herrschaft hatte.'
- ²¹ 'Die Ausstellung informiert gut, an besten ist die Computer-simulation, wie die ganze Auflage nach Fertigstellung einmal ausgesehen hätte. Was ich überhaupt nicht i.D. finde, ist der "gläserne Pfahl", von so vielen umjubelt. Er verfälscht die ganze Grösse und gesamt Eindruck der Kongresshalle. Aber es liegt wohl an der heutigen Zeit, dass man die steinernen Zeugen einstiger Macht + Grösse, entgegen denkmalpflegerischer Gesetze und Gesichtspunkte, so zerstört.'
- ²² 'Ich finde die Integration des Pfeiles, welcher das alte Regime durchtrennt sehr gelungen. Nur leider ist in der Ausstellung zu wenig Original-Material gezeigt worden.'
- ²³ 'Echt schöne Ausstellung, sehr realistisch u. darstellt 2 Weltkrieg sehr gut' [sic.].
- ²⁴ It might also be that these commentators are employing a notion of 'emotional realism' as Gaynor Bagnall, drawing on Len Ang's work on soap-opera (1985), argues is the case among visitors to heritage sites in Britain (2003: 88). However, the comments do not really support this and more generally the question of emotion in relation to this exhibition, and the topic of Nazism more widely, is complex, and it should be noted that concepts of 'authenticity' are not generally employed in quite the same way in Germany as in Britain (Macdonald 2005).
- ²⁵ 'Hätten sie besser in die Instandsetzung der Gebäude investiert, die einen weit beeindruckenderen Zugang zu dieser Zeit darstellen. Wo ist der Unterschied zwischen einem Geschichtsbuch und dieser Ausstellung? Sehen sie sich das Museum des 1.WK in Ypern an, dann wissen sie, wie eine museumspädagogisch ansprechende Ausstellung aussehen kann.'

- ²⁶ 'Da sind die Konzentrationslager wesentlich interessanter und schockiert mehr. Trotzdem –, nicht schlecht diese Ausstellung!'
- ²⁷ 'Die Ausstellung war interessant und ich hab mehr zum Schulstoff gelernt.'
- ²⁸ 'Geschichte begegnen – Geschichte hören – Geschichte sehen – wissen, wozu Menschen fähig sind, wenn sie sich blenden lassen. Jeder sollte dieser Ausstellung begegnen. In Dankbarkeit.'
- ²⁹ 'Erschreckend u. bedrohlich – hoffentlich wird mit dieser Ausstellung ein Mahnmal gesetzt! Wir hoffen, dass so etwas Abartiges nie wieder passiert!'
- ³⁰ Or, indeed, to historical aspects of other exhibitions. In my work on visitors to an exhibition in the Science Museum in London I noted how one kind of reading of the exhibition was what I called 'the history' – an interpretation of the content as a progressive history of technological development. See Macdonald 2002, chapter 8.
- ³¹ 'Die Ausstellung war beeindruckend, aber auch deprimierend. Leider hat die Menschheit u.d. Geschichte nichts gelernt, siehe Balkan, Palästina.'
- ³² 'Eine faszinierende Ausstellung mit wunderbaren Einblicken in die damalige "Reichszeit" Hitlers.'
- ³³ 'Eine beeindruckende Reise in eine unverständliche Zeit'.
- ³⁴ A recent and very thought-provoking book on family narratives about national socialism by Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall (2002) opens with the following quote from a twelve-year-old girl talking about her experience studying the Holocaust in school: 'Ja, das find' ich auch voll interessant, weil Steinzeit hatten wir auch und Mittelalter auch. Erst hatten wir Steinzeit, dann Mittelalter, dann geht das jetzt immer ein paar Generationen voran, muss auch irgendwie so'n System haben. Dann haben wir halt jetzt dieses Thema. Ja. Macht auch Spaß' (Yes, I find it really interesting, because we also did the stone age and the middle ages. First we did the stone age, then middle ages, then it went on a couple of generations, there must be some system there. Then we stopped now on this theme. Yes. It's fun too).
- ³⁵ e.g. St Mungo's, Glasgow, Richard Sandell (personal communication).

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