

style of a mock passport stamp. The curatorial intent is clear to anyone familiar with environmentalist discourses. The display is intended to show that these animals are not native to Australia and therefore have upset ecological processes. The text however has other meanings which are more insidious.

In the images described above dominant cultural phobias about migrants are transferred through the use of the passport stamps onto non-indigenous animals that were brought to Australia. The destructiveness of introduced species is given rhetorical force by deploying the threatening image of the invading migrant.

Semiotic techniques which look at relations between texts and within text (whether those texts be written, visual, spatial, etc.) can provide a way of making sense of the varying and sometimes seemingly idiosyncratic responses that visitors have to exhibitions. These techniques are based on systematically studying the modes and form of meaning.

Semiotics is a useful tool for evaluating not only what visitors understand in an exhibition, it provides a framework for understanding why they take away certain meanings. This is not to say that the concepts and methods of semiotics will provide the definitive analysis of the meanings an exhibition has made. Rather, it provides an account of the multiple meanings that any exhibition will invariably produce, thus providing clues not only to how to structure meaning more in concord with curatorial aims but it can also alert exhibition teams to some of the meanings they might be unintentionally producing.

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Empowerment, Evaluation and Narrative Structures

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Evaluation in museums has had a difficult history. Research has in the past been very much determined by museum perceptions and perspectives and it is only recently that the notion that audience and visitor responses should be canvassed has developed. Much earlier interpretation, evaluation and assessment was driven by the idea that audience attitudes should be changed by visits to museums — now evaluation is often concerned with the amount of learning that has taken place. This seems a limited approach.

During the last decades public life and mass culture have become the focus of research due in part to the growing economic importance of popular culture in western-style economies. The postmodern convergence between high

culture and popular culture driven by economic forces and new technology is a phenomenon which causes museums to find that they must appeal to popular, that is mass, audiences in order to justify their existence and cost. With the increasing emphasis on museum visitor evaluation, the field is more able to address questions about what visitors do and how they make meaning of their experiences. So measuring retention of information — a common view of “learning” — does not address the complexity of the visitor’s responses.

Insights from mass media theory to do with audience reception can be used by researchers in the museum sphere. In particular, those which have moved from the notion that the audience is passive, to a concentration on the way in which audiences use offerings in the mass media. Museums and popular culture both mediate reality — therefore theories which deal with audience reception in popular culture can be useful.

Much of the mass media and cultural studies research has grown out of social theory and owes a great deal to Marxism, however there are strands of such research that deal with rhetoric and which grow out of literary theory. One idea in particular which originated in medicine, psychology, and sociology, that of narrative discourse, has some potential to illuminate the museum experience. Theorists such as Mishler (1986) and Tambling (1991), argue that narrative constructions of selfhood which often depend on values clarification are common in everyday life.

Research Process

Letters were solicited through the *Australian Woman’s Weekly* asking people why they visited museums. The *Women’s Weekly* is a monthly magazine with a circulation of over one million and read predominantly by women over 35 years who aren’t in the paid work-force. Thirty-three readers, self-selected, chose to reply to this request and their letters were examined in detail. A substantial block of time was also spent doing participatory observation at various museums, in particular, Sovereign Hill in Ballarat, Victoria, a “living history” museum.

The letters contained many narratives and narrative fragments and strongly demonstrated that for these respondents a great deal of museum visiting was experienced through the mediating influences of personal and socially sanctioned narratives. They appeared to come to museums with personal narratives and look for wider socially sanctioned narratives into which they can fit their own story.

From the analysis, these visitors used narratives to explain their responses to the museum. They used museums, and the narratives on offer there, to consolidate family relations, to admonish children, to reinforce values for family members. There was also a great deal of pleasure generated by their experience of the museum and its stories. The family, both actual and idealized, seemed to be the focus much more than the learning of new ideas. There was a distinct emotional

response. This often dealt with elicitation of commonplace values such as the value of family or frugality or the comfort and security of having one's ideas about the past confirmed.

If, as an analysis of these letters suggests, narrative is strongly implicated in the way in which some visitors experience the museum, museum workers need to be aware of its power and to question the ways in which it works when viewers see displays. Evaluating the role of narrative in the visitor experience is a difficult challenge, but the results may well be far reaching in that a greater understanding of visitor responses will be possible.

Narrative structures are one way in which audiences try to make meaning of their experience of the museum. Narrative structures lend themselves to a wide range of uses from values clarification and values reinforcement to self empowerment — learning is not the only activity that museums encourage. What does go on in the museum often has little to do with what is on show, the museum can often be rather like a theatrical set where family plays occur. Evaluation that goes beyond analyzing visitor behavior to understand the reasons for that is an emerging trend and has much to offer our understanding of the visitor experience in museums.

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What's In a Name? Evaluation of Exhibition Titles

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Clever or catchy? Informative or insane? Brash or boring? Titles are one of the least loved yet important aspects of developing exhibitions in museums. Titles need to capture the "essence" of the exhibition subject area yet still be catchy enough to sell to a public that is constantly exposed to clever and, often inane, advertising and selling messages. Evaluators may be called in to help resolve arguments about this touchy subject, but how is this best done?

At the Australian Museum we have conducted evaluations for titles of five exhibitions so far, both temporary and permanent. We usually try to find out more information from visitors about why they like or dislike a suggested name as this always gives interesting insights into what they think about the topic overall, as well as the Museum generally.

We often think that visitors haven't heard of a concept or term, such as "biodiversity" or "indigenous Australians," and are always surprised at the knowledge that our visitors bring to the Museum.

We often go to our visitors with "sexy" or "cool" titles that they hate, or conservative titles which they like. Either way it seems we can't win!

So what to do? We have found that there are a number of issues or things to be aware of when choosing and testing titles:

- Visitors usually want titles that will tell them what the exhibition is about and what subject matter or content they're likely to see.
- They like titles that imply active experiences, fun and discovery (as long as this is followed through in the exhibition of course!).
- They don't want titles that are misleading or could be misinterpreted.
- Visitors usually dislike titles that are trying to be "too clever", but they want titles that are catchy and interesting, particularly younger visitors.
- There is a mixed view about titles being either too long or too short — some like them long with a sub-title, and some short.
- There is usually one title that they dislike the most — often the one that the museum marketing people like the most.
- There is a need to ensure that a sufficient variety of names are tested that allow some conclusions to be made about many different types of titles rather than just variations on a theme.
- It doesn't matter what great title is thought up — the exhibition will usually be referred to by a shortened name by both staff and visitors anyway.

Is there a way to solve this dilemma of naming an exhibition? Perhaps a set of guidelines similar to those mentioned above could be a starting point.

As to naming exhibitions, at the Australian Museum it's amazing what of a case of champagne as an incentive will do for the creative minds of Museum staff — they'll keep on dreaming them up and we'll keep on testing them!

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