9. Performing the aesthetics of science: visitors’ speech, movements and gestures in the Museum of Natural History in Venice

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Cultural Background

Since the 1990s art has become an important mediator between science and the public and science has become a cultural agent whose activities are characterised by aesthetic and perceptual concerns. The “visual turn” that interested the humanities in the 1990s, interested the hard sciences too. Images became increasingly important not only inside the scientific laboratory, but also as a means to reach the lay public(s) and engage them with STS. Responding via their role as institutions concerned with public communication and engagement with science, museums of science and science centres also devote attention to images and the design of exhibits. The cross-fertilization between science, the arts and design is promoted not only through artist-scientist collaboration, but also through curatorial practices that merge the history and practice of science with aesthetical concerns.

The discipline of contemporary aesthetics has no shared agenda or set of questions that should define its field of investigation. Nevertheless, the primacy of perception over cognition in aesthetic experience and the critical reflection on notions of representation and image are examples of issues that are at stake in scholarly reflection in aesthetics, especially from a continental perspective. The term aesthetics can be used in two ways: first, aesthetics is a discipline concerned with the senses and the perceptual apprehension of forms; second, aesthetics is a discipline concerned with the appreciation and nature of beauty, art and taste.

This paper focuses on one case study, the recently refurbished Museum of Natural History in Venice (MNH), where I am completing a research project on adult visitors supported by the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage at Ca’ Foscari University, Venice. Founded in 1923 and housed in the Fontego dei Turchi, MNH contains a wide range of naturalist collections of great importance from a historical and scientific point of view. The first section is dedicated to fossils and paleontology, the second describes the evolution of the practice of collecting from the Wunderkammer to the birth of scientific museology; the third offers a different interpretation of the complexity of living forms, analyzed through the survival strategies developed by plant and animal species during evolution.

The research project: objectives and methods

Through a close examination of visitors’ discourses and movements inside the museum space, my research seeks to show first, how the history and epistemology of science is mediated and enabled also by aesthetic concerns and, second, how visitors re-enact the aesthetics of science in their embodied sensory and cognitive experience of museum objects and spaces. My analysis is limited to adults visiting the museum without any mediation but of the exhibits. I use both quantative and qualitative tools (ex-post semi-structured interviews, ethnographic observation, video recordings). The transcription and treatment of data (interviews and video-recordings) is based on multi-modal and discourse analysis, an approach that looks at
meaning “as an integration of ways of saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity)” (Gee 2011: 8).

The video recordings exemplify – without being exhaustive – the range of movements and gestures enacted by museum visitors: we can think of the aesthetic body, as culturally shaped, entwined, and embedded in a complex network of relations, each of which has a distinctive character and dynamic. (Berleant 2004: 88). The bodily alignment to the exhibit, talks and gestures in front of it (pointing, discussing, showing, glancing, touching) reveal how visitors perceive and make sense of the exhibit influencing, simultaneously, their visit companions.

**The visit to MNH as an aesthetic experience**

Aesthetic appreciation originates in sensory perception and how this process is always entangled with associations, memories, feelings and meanings (Berleant 2004). An interview I made with a visitor exemplifies the relationship between aesthetics as sense perception, the power of imagination, and the knowledge possessed by the visitor:

*(The visitor is sitting on the sofa at the entrance hall, looking around and pointing at the external courtyard)* You need to imagine (he closes his eyes for a moment) they work the silk there and then make the fabric that was then traded off // I was hoping to find something on the history of the building but probably everything is lost (xx) 15, 16 pages I wrote about the Fontego, I’m glad that it is there and that I saw it = they built a temple here for the Muslims to pray = the interplay between the Jews, the Venetians, Muslims, Turkish (*always pointing*) rugs all around, you can smell the spices you can picture all this (xx) = all these were offices where they would negotiate (x) they would set up trades (xxx) // The exhibition is creative, dramatic, typically Venetian but I’m not into it (U, UK)

This fragment of discourse is significant for the way the visitor sketches another museum or the museum before the museum with the power of his knowledge and imagination. The aesthetics of the building façade and interiors (almost lost due to recent refurbishments) is put into relationship with the former function of the building. The temporal stratification of the building is actualized through the visitor’s words and gestures that bring the aesthetic values of the Fontego dei Turchi backs to life as a temple for praying (the religious function) and as a place where trades were made and goods exchanged (the secular and commercial function).

Sometimes the particular form of a specimen allows an exchange between co-visitors that demonstrate how visitors enter in the museum with a wealth of knowledge and expectations, not necessarily scientific but related to first-hand perception and the experience they have of nature. In this sense, the dogmatism of some anti-scientific positions cannot be contrasted by trying to bridging the knowledge gap in visitors (according to the deficit model), because dogmatism does not simply arise from the weakness of our knowledge or of our demonstrations. Dogmatism arises from the fact that we take for reality the image we have of it, that the images that we use to describe reality become reality themselves. From being a mere term of comparison, the image becomes a bias to which reality should match. In some cases MNH successfully breaks this spell by placing nature (as such) in front of visitors’ senses; they immediately become aware of the appearance of animals and fossils. Here the
principle of beauty comes into play. The effort is to maintain the correspondence between the way the specimen looks in nature (form, colours, dimensions) and the way it is exhibited in the museum.

The room devoted to movement in the air is often recalled by visitors for its aesthetic value and, simultaneously, its scientific precision. The specimen are here displayed to explain the concept and dynamics of flight in a straightforward, intuitive manner without the need of any written text.

So wonderful (x) (enacting the imaginary line of flight with the finger) it looks like they (the animals exhibited such as the birds and some mammals) come to you (F, Italy)

The birds are beautiful (x) they did not arrange the animals in order to show movement, rather they attempt to make them moving (F, Brasil)

At the same time, however, visitors can be in doubt whether the specimen is false or true to nature. This belief is caused by the aesthetic values of some specimens that appear to be too polished, varnished and shiny after being restored:

one does not understand whether animals are real or not (x) = I thought fishes were false and birds real because there were pens and feathers = fishes are (xx) too inflated they have not being dried up // fossils are too much polished varnished this is not the way fossils are found, it might deceive visitors (M, US)

The word ‘deception’ shows how museologists should be aware that aesthetic choices are a matter of being responsible toward visitors. Another fragment highlights how aesthetical values are connected to the appearance of a world and, ultimately, to ethics:

It was more interesting than the Visual Arts Biennale (x) the exhibits here the sounds the images make manifest a world (xx) many, millions of worlds that are mutually reinforcing because they are placed side by side, even as a contrast, from one room to another (xx) this gives importance to worlds alternative to human beings, and thus make sure that they are considered in their total unquestionable dignity (F, France).

It is the aesthetics of life that you take in through the exhibitions of MNH. Life captured by a tableaux or by a sound that evokes distant lands and unknown instruments, or by scents like the cedar wood. Thus, by taking care of the exhibits, by enhancing their aesthetics and appealing to multi-sensory forms of perception, museum professionals and conservators help visitors not only to observe and learn, but also to take care for the world.