VISUAL RHETORIC: HOW CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS COULD BENEFIT FROM A PARATEXTUAL COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGY IN A NEW AGE OF RHETORICAL DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted on three different museums and their respective designers. Each of these museums – Indianapolis Children's Museum, La Crosse Children's Museum, and Boston Children's Museum – has a different audience to serve, and create a diverse array of exhibits throughout the years with the goal of providing entertainment and creating a safe learning environment for kids to explore. However, to examine the inner workings of any exhibit, it becomes easier to view it as a text, still retaining the third dimension of it, but diminishing its potentially daunting complexity and allowing the exhibit to, without the intention of personifying it: speak. Combining the fields of visual rhetoric and museum studies, this research project takes a look at three different museums and four different designers to determine the role of visual rhetoric in a children's museum by employing a paratextual lens to further the idea of seeing the exhibit as a "text". After analyzing each interview with each of the respective designers, it becomes apparent that the designing process for an exhibit meant to provide entertainment has rapidly become something much grander in the past couple of decades. This project will take a look at multiple design strategies and what they effectively communicate with their audience; what the *text* of the exhibit is saying.

INTRODUCTION

In the study of rhetoric, there is a subfield titled *visual rhetoric*, a relatively new topic for rhetoricians, which is still being explored. Even more nuanced, is the combination of this field with museum studies, and then pushing even further into the subcategory of children's museums. The concept of entertainment and learning that so many children's museums promise within their exhibits is often delivered to the audience, and from a design perspective, it can be deduced why, but what I wish to explore is the concept of exploring these exhibits through a paratextual lens and entertain the idea that through this lens I can still effectively answer the question: Why are kids and their guardians able to enter these spaces and leave feeling exerted and enthused, and how is it different than a simple playground?

Employing this paratextual lens and borrowing the opinions and observations of several designers of these exhibits, I began turning these exhibits on their heads and conducting research on how the message of the exhibit transcends the plastic and rubber lining of the smiling cartoon characters, faux-houses, colorful blocks, etc., and effectively intrigues the minds of its participants, inviting them to interact and explore. I will be attempting to display a fashion in which to apply this paratextual lens and how it may benefit both the fields of rhetoric studies and museum studies and hopefully begin to intertwine the two fields significantly and effectively. However, also on the table are the limitations of this perspective, which are indubitably imperative to discuss in tandem with introducing a new perspective to any field of studies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The field of visual rhetoric studies is still relatively new, having been initially born from an interest in studying the effectiveness of images in advertising and political campaigns, and was first mentioned in a research paper by Roland Barthes in 1964 titled *Rhetoric of the Image*, where he discusses the semiology of an image, viewing it as a type of language. Now, Barthes has been joined in leading the field of visual rhetoric by numerous scholars. Sonja Foss, a visual rhetoric scholar, determined the sizeable and necessary gap between a *rhetorical* experience and *aesthetic* experience in her paper, *Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory*. She explained an aesthetic experience, "consists of a viewer's direct perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the artifact" (Foss, 306), while a rhetorical one allows the viewer to infer as to why an artifact and its various design components may exist. Charles A. Hill, one of these rhetoricians, built on this idea and spent numerous pages in his paper, *The Psychology of Rhetorical Images*, pondering and exploring the psychology of

these images, attempting to answer how exactly they persuade. Pushing away from the simple descriptor of "emotional" for rhetorical images, Hill explicated beyond the binary idea of aesthetic v. rhetorical, or as he preferred to state it: emotional v. rational. Hill argued that the concept of presence (something rhetoricians will subdue and emphasize to create more potent arguments) and how it transfers into photographs of human subjects, inciting a much stronger response to the photo as the human mind then sees that object as "real" and proving the adage *a picture is worth a thousand words* to be quite literal. (Hill, 25-38) Most, if not all, of these rhetorician's findings pushed for a nuanced analytical approach to visual method, an umbrella phrase meant to encapsulate many of the following terms (visual rhetoric, space syntax, semiotics, etc). This also begins to dip into the idea of visual composition being an alternate form of writing.

Next, concerning the move from these two-dimensional images to the three-dimensional one, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen have written a multitude of papers regarding multimodal communication, especially their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, in which they discuss social, historical, and cultural conditions which are used in the composition of visual language. They use the term "grammar" very carefully in this piece, as it is meant to not express rules, but rather the descriptions of patterns they have perceived in the generation of two-dimensional and three-dimensional images. Or, as they state, "the way in which depicted elements – people, places and things – combine in visual 'statements' of greater or lesser complexity and extension" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1). The two use many different terms when discussing composition — such as salience, information value, and framing — to describe the various elements of a piece's visual rhetoric; which assists in further illustrating what to look for when rhetorically analyzing an image.

Both Kress and Gunther also touch upon what should be referred to as the *transaction* which occurs between the viewer/audience the piece they are experiencing — or, as will be explored later: the interacter and the interactive. However, they also note that there is a strong difference between Hill's study on photography and the world of modern art when it comes to modality. The two wrote, "The issue of modality becomes particularly complex in modern art, because it has, to a large extent, been the project of modern art to redefine 'reality' and to do so in contradistinction to photographic naturalism" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 166).

Even more recent than visual rhetoric, and directly resulting from the development of the field of visual rhetoric, is the *combination* of museum studies and visual rhetoric. This is something implied rather than directly mentioned in museum studies, and the purpose of this study. Scholars such as Martin Tröndle (*Space, Movement and Attention: Affordances of the Museum Environment*) and John Pedro Schwartz (*Object Lessons: Teaching Multiliteracies through the Museum*) have each taken time to separately discuss the rhetorical meaning of composing a space in a museum. Tröndle focused on non-invasively studying the foot traffic in a museum space, and Schwartz leans into museum-based pedagogy and how, "museums constitute 'texts' whose meanings can be 'read' and held up to scrutiny" (Schwartz, 31).

However, while some of the basics are the same, it is imperative to observe the museum and the children's museum are entirely different beasts. While Schwartz has confirmed that museums are complex texts, a museum designed for children has slightly different goals and rhetorical strategies when designing these spaces for children *and* their parents.

Considering this specific category and applying a rhetorical theory requires knowing the distinctions defining children's museums. One of the most relevant articles explaining this is Gail Ringel's *Designing Exhibits for Kids: What Are We Thinking?*, which explores the often misconstrued notion that, "children are a shorter version of adults" (Ringel, 1). Ringel's comprehension of children's cognitive development is proven as she describes an exhibit she designed for the Boston Children's Museum (*Five Friends from Japan*) to teach children about Japan. The exhibit contained five Japanese children with vastly different interests, meant to introduce kids to Japanese cultural concepts while still finding some familiar ground (such as shared interests with one or multiple of the five children) (Ringel, 4-6). After seeing positive reactions from children interacting with the exhibit, Ringel concludes: "We need to create exhibit settings that make children the author of their own museum experience" (Ringel, 7).

Moving further into the design of children's museum exhibits; Uriel Cohen wrote in his paper, *Learning From Children's Museums: Implications for Design*, about curiosity and exploratory behavior being central to the ideas situated most closely to successful museum design. Natalia Filova, a Slovak scholar, highlights this concept further and relabels it as *human-centered* design in her paper, *Human Centered Design of a Children's Museum* and the introduction of learning goals and intended interaction with considered accessibility and the added importance of multisensory perception. In other words, it is experiential learning. In Filova's study concerning six different exhibits and a group of participating children, the layout and order of presentation became the top issue in the museum space, and text was recommended to be limited and instead have activities within exhibits be intuitive, leading to a more fluid and successful experience. (Filova, 67-78) However, it is important to note that Filova also states the obvious, but necessary, truth: "No single strategy for developing interactive spaces exists" (Filova, 78).

Even larger in scale, was an experiment conducted by Denise Coelho Stuart in her book, *The Perceptions and Behavior of Children and Their Families in Child-Oriented Museum Exhibitions*, where she observes, interviews, and collects samples from around four hundred and fifty different family groups visiting nine different children's museum exhibits and discovered the following nine attributes to be most successful: element of fun, challenging situation, element of surprise, child-sized exhibit design, imaginative design, opportunity for experiencing things, opportunity for role play, interactive machine/game, and teamwork. (Stuart, 2). Stuart's findings assist in determining what would be most effective to include in an exhibit, and then later even goes into the space in which these exhibits exist, finding larger rooms to typically be less attractive to visitors than smaller exhibits. (Stuart, 154) Also noteworthy is the mention of Bruner's spiral curriculum, an approach to learning that is meant to begin at surface level and then slowly build in complexity. Stuart stated this is often the goal of exploratory and discovery learning in a children's museum setting. (Stuart, 72-79).

Finally, I have to mention the inclusion of the paratextual lens through which I will be viewing visual rhetoric was invented by Gérard Genette, a French scholar who worked with the concept of paratexts. Genette's work mentioned that, "The literary work consists, exhaustively or essentially, of a text, that is to say in a more of less lengthy sequence of verbal utterances more or less containing meaning" (Genette, 261). Furthermore, he comments that paratexts are what surround these texts and bolster them with meaning. What I wish to argue, is that we can assume that the topic of an exhibit is the text, and the exhibit itself becomes the paratext, a vessel that surrounds and presents that topic.

Now, with each of these categories, I intend to explore the previously-mentioned concept of applying this paratextual lens to a children's museum exhibit and explore the effectiveness and limitations of this nuanced analytical strategy.

QUESTIONS/HYPOTHESIS

In this project, I plan to question the validity of viewing an exhibit solely as objects, and instead bring meaning to their existence through the verbal utterances their form, placement, and physical shape communicate with their pre-conceived audience. I am completing this project to merely suggest and persuade, not prove anything as there is not an appropriate way in which I can suddenly apply this newly developed theory. However, I will ask some of the following questions: How can a designer read an exhibit as a text? What could the inclusion of a paratextual lens do for an exhibit's visual rhetoric and design concept? What are the limitations of employing a paratextual lens regarding the visual rhetoric of a children's museum exhibit?

METHODS

The body of my research involved interviewing four different employees/designers of each of the following museums: Children's Museum of La Crosse, Indianapolis Children's Museum, and Boston Children's Museum. Each of the interviewees were asked a series of ten questions in an interview and prompted to give examples of exhibits which may remind them of certain design strategies or components which they deemed effective. I found this to be the most effective way to comfortably converse with designers about this new topic without fully delving into the ideas of paratextuality. Applying this lens is such a new idea, approaching the subject this way was the only thing that felt appropriate.

Each interview resulted in several key points, but the most prominently present and popular topic was the concept of immersion through environmental features included in each exhibit. It becomes important to also recognize the recognizable change of audience which takes place between each museum. Indianapolis's designers, Craig Wetli and Jessica Simmons, reported that their museum is designed to cater to ages zero to one hundred and ten. Meanwhile, both Boston Children's Museum's Joel Reider and the La Crosse Children's Museum's Anne Snow reported that they tend to cater their exhibits to kids of ages zero to ten.

Regardless, each employee stated that they have very specific things in each exhibit meant to communicate a certain messages to their visitors. All interviewees made mention of signage playing a very minimal role in their exhibitions, and spoke of how exhibitions are more so meant for exploration and intuitiveness should not be difficult within these spaces, pointing towards a concept which I have dubbed "zones of implication". In order to determine some easy examples of these zones, I indirectly asked each designer throughout their interviews of examples of exhibit features that could potentially fit this concept.

These ideas tended to have a rather large range in size, pushing from Jessica Simmons and Craig Wetli talking about the layout of an entire exhibition and how it communicates the *big idea* (a concept coined by Indianapolis Children's Museum) to a simple bench mentioned by Joel Reider. Anne Snow also tended to mention things down to the size of a small, plastic apple, while attempting to describe the destructive nature of children. In discussing this,

she incidentally revealed the concept of even a simple plastic apple communicating the idea “eat me”. It became obvious throughout these discussions that there was some sort of verbiage occurring between the interactive and interactors. Sometimes these conversations were being had in zones of implication, and sometimes outside of them, as shown by my conversation with Anne Snow.

Boston’s example of the bench proved to be particularly interesting, as a bench is not necessarily part of an exhibit but simply a method for which someone can sit and relax. However, Joel described the placement of the bench as being a couple feet away from one exhibit to foster play between guardian and child, and being around nine to ten feet from another exhibit to encourage the guardian to allow their child to explore on their own. And, finally, Jessica Simmons and Craig Wetli’s floorplan being meant to naturally push people towards the back of the exhibit and to put big things in the very back center of an exhibit spoke significantly towards the idea of an entire exhibit being classified as one zone of implication (within which many other smaller zones of implication exist).

RESULTS

Each of the previous interviews with each of those museums provided me with enough reasoning to further delve into the idea of viewing the museum space through a paratextual lens to design an exhibition. Components such as the implicative bench between exhibitions (as mentioned by Joel Reider) leaned heavily into the idea that each component of an exhibition, and the exhibition itself, can be read as a text. This process occurs naturally between a component’s audience and the component itself as the zone of implication does what it is supposed to do: implies that a certain action occurs, or should occur, within that space. Each designer I spoke to had mentioned some sort of implication being made in their exhibits, causing the audience to naturally play in a certain way, or behave a certain way.

These aforementioned “zones” compose what I believe to be an exhibit’s paratext, or something which highlights the topic of the exhibit, or what I prefer to refer to as the exhibit’s text. The theoretical verbiage occurring within these zones is meant to communicate what designers at Indianapolis Children’s Museum referred to as their *big idea*, a concept most likely included in every exhibit (just potentially referred to by an alternate term). Within this space, it becomes clear that each component is exerting some sort of message towards its audience that contributes to this large, overarching theme within an exhibition meant to teach children about a particular topic, thus behaving as a vessel for a designer’s vision. Anne Snow’s mention of attempting to find the right type of plastic to fortify an apple at the Children’s Museum of La Crosse more than speaks to this concept of communication. The texture and hardiness of the plastic apple speaks to its audience of children by saying, “this is not edible, but you may certainly play with it.”

Regardless, each of these interviews yielded plenty of space for which to insert an argument for the effectiveness of employing a paratextual lens within the process of analyzing an exhibit. The conversations that each designer appeared to be attempting to spark between their exhibits and the museum’s visitors give more than enough reason to suddenly begin exploring this new idea and its increasingly apparent literary approach.

DISCUSSION

After conducting each of these interviews and reviewing the results, I believe discussing approaching design theory from the lens of English studies, paratextuality, and visual rhetoric is worth considering. To explain why I feel this way, I believe it would be rather easy for a designer to transition to reading an exhibit as a paratext rather than an object with meaning, something I argue is relatively different, and also brings me to the idea that there are limitations in this practice. Texts themselves often require images to best explain themselves, and there are plenty of situations in which an image is more persuasive and effective than a block of text. However, I am not encouraging completely transitioning over from using images to solely texts, but I believe a designer who plans their exhibit as a paratext will benefit significantly from this lens as it will allow for them to directly as themselves just what each component of their exhibit is saying to their perceived audience.

Furthermore, the inclusion of this paratexual lens would nuance the exhibit-development process as it could provide an increasingly legible and more transparent outline of an exhibit. Adding this transparency to design-work could lead to better communication within design teams and overall better comprehension of the exhibit itself.

However, it is imperative to recognize the limitations of this lens within a museum space. Some sections of an exhibition could benefit heavily from this, such as the aforementioned bench which sits between exhibits at Boston Children’s Museum, but other sections of an exhibit, such as toys, may not need these explanations, because in children’s museums, the idea is simply trial, error, and exploration. There needn’t be paratexual explanations and guidelines attached to everything, and without the original schematics of a design and all other portions of an

exhibition plan, the process would not succeed. So, what I am recommending is including this paratextual lens for instances in which ideas in exhibitions may become complex, or even contested.

WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE

Finally, I would like to cover just what this could look like in a proposed schematic-plan for an exhibition. A paratexual lens would not simply be presented in block of text, but instead is something I would imagine to appear atop a schematic sketch or floorplan, explaining different sections of an exhibition and how each component is proposed to interact (or not interact) with visitors to a museum and allowing for there to be marked zones of implication. There is still *plenty* of exploration to do in this small sect I am attempting to carve out for myself in these two fields of English studies and museum studies. Again, the paratextual lens is a nuance to the design process, not a complete eclipse of tried-and-true methods of design.

CONCLUSION

After conducting this research and interviewing different exhibition designers across the U.S., I find myself pushing even more for including a paratextual lens within the design process at children's museums. I accept that this is an entirely new idea and there are plenty of limitations, but I believe the transparency a paratextual lens could provide designers with to be invaluable. There still certainly needs to be a case-study performed and further interviews to fully determine how open the world of children's museums may be to this idea, but I can determine after this project that I can see a space in which a paratextual lens could permeate this sub-section of museums. I intend to further explore this idea in later studies, but at this moment, it is easy to conclude this idea as being worthy of further investigation.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions:

1. What is your primary goal/focus when you organize an exhibit?
2. Are there learning objectives?
3. Who is/are your primary audience(s)?
4. When designing an exhibit, what do you focus on the most? What do you focus on the least?
5. What resources do you use in designing your exhibits and researching them? Where do you conduct your research?
6. How much does your research play a role in your exhibit's design?
7. Have you ever had to tackle heavier topics in an exhibit? If so, how did you tackle them? These could include anything revolving around political and historical subjects and events, anything that could be perceived as controversial.
8. How much does text play a role in your exhibits' designs? Who is the text for/audience? How do you incorporate text into your exhibit?
9. What design element/organization structures do you find that kids respond to the best?
10. Do you build your exhibits with fun in mind, or learning? If both, what percentage of the exhibit's design do you spend on each? Is there a golden ratio of fun to learning?