



## THE MUSEUM, THE GUIDED TOUR AND VISITORS SEEKING A LEISURE ACTIVITY

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For about twenty years, the guided tour has no longer been seen only as an educational discourse but as a particular form of mediation or more significantly, of interpersonal communication. Thus, certain research has been interested more particularly in the role of the guided tour in the communication operations of the exhibition (Gellereau, 2005 and 2006). Other studies have been more influenced by the approach of learning theories and more particularly by cognitivist theories. They postulate that the guided tour must act on the cognitive and emotional registers in order to develop the skills of the visitors to understand and learn. They show how to apply these theories to the particular form which is the guided tour, without however truly checking the relevance of the suggested models with the visitors (Gringer & McCoy, 1989; Banna, 1991; Lefebvre & Lefebvre, 1991; SMQ, 2000).

The majority of the authors of these various research studies consider that the guided tour must evolve in terms of mediation and no longer be a boring, incomprehensible monologue, with an overabundance of information. Nadia Banna (1991) pleads, for example, for an "alternative visit", by proposing a new model of communication between the guide, the object and the visitor. The guide must no longer, as in the traditional visit, present and comment the object to a passive visitor: during the visit, the object must be in the center of the interaction between the docent and the visitor. From now on, the guide has to take on new responsibilities: we are moving away from the idea of a *guide* who takes complete charge of the group, or of a *leader* of educational or creative activities, to the idea of *mediator* who develops the museum medium as a center of resources (Jacobi & Meunier, 1999). New qualities are also required of the guide: he must not only control and love his subject; but also make an effort to popularize information according to the previously acquired knowledge of the different audiences; to select and treat, on a hierarchical basis, the information and the objects; to build a coherent discourse with clear objectives; to move alternatively between the cognitive level, the emotional level and the development of thinking skills of reflexion; to let the public reflect on and see the objects before commenting on them and above all, to allow for interaction, which supports comprehension (Banna, 1991; Gringer & McCoy, 1989; Lefebvre & Lefebvre, 1991; SMQ, 2000).

In parallel, the majority of these studies suppose, more than they demonstrate, that the public has new expectations. The studies interested in the public tend to generalize

their results based on an often reduced and specific sample. Thus using the study of expectations of fifteen students with regard to the guided tour, Bernard and Helene Lefebvre extend their findings to other populations, by affirming that all audiences could have the same expectations (Lefebvre & Lefebvre, 1991). The empirical approaches around the guided tour also seem to be very few, centered on one of the aspects of the visit (guide/discourse/visitor) and tend, then, to neglect the importance of the context and the characteristics of the visiting public.

The present study tries to look at what is truly at play in the particular process of communication which is the guided tour itself: the intentions of the guide, the expectations of a public, the discourse and the reception of the visit. It tries to examine the impact of the context and the type of public (with its particular practices, expectations, and representations of this form of mediation), on the experience of the visit. We studied the guided tour of the *musée de la Boissellerie de Bois d'Amont* (Haut-Jura, north-east of France), which presents the traditional techniques of exploitation of the spruce-tree. The visits function only on the guided mode because machines and animations have to be set in motion during the visit. The hour-long visit functions mainly on the aesthetics of a show and the scenography (exhibition design) is entirely thought out for the guided tour.

Each of the three docents took part in an interview, which questioned, among other things, his intentions and perception of the visit, the visitors and the museum. They were also followed and recorded during three visits each. Lastly, a series of 58 interviews and a survey of 275 visitors using a questionnaire, was carried out on their expectations of the guided tour in general and on their reception of this visit in particular. The principal characteristics of this public are as follows: they are visitors of museums (and more particularly of art museums, but very few visit science and technology museums), with a certain museum culture. They belong to a "public of leisure": coming from the upper middle class, they are on holiday, with the family, and come to the museum to relax more than to discover or understand something new.

We approached and confronted the three analyses. The interviews with the public, those with the three guides on their intentions in regard to the visit as well as the discourse of the visit, were the subject of both a thematic and a lexical study using the software program *Tropes* (Ghiglione, Landré, Bromberg & Molette, 1998). Finally, the questionnaires were treated using the software *Modalisa* for statistics processing.

## Principal results

### a) The guides' intentions

During their interviews, the guides were invited to describe what they try to pass on during their visit. They all insisted on the concept of experience: they wish to transmit their love of wood, of traditions and of the region Haut-Jura. Then, according to them, a good guide must try to pass on sufficient information by selecting it and making it accessible. He must also be warm, have a sense of humour and be impassioned by his work. But above all, he must take into account the expectations of different kinds of public. The lexical analysis (with *Tropes*) shows that the public is truly at the center of their discourse and their concerns: the guide must involve the public and allow it a true exchange. Thus, we can find in the docents' views, the qualities described in the majority of quoted research studies. Each of the three guides was convinced that these qualities were those which he sought to develop during his visit, that his visit was interactive and adapted to the demands of the public.

### b) The guided tour itself

The thematic and lexical analysis using *Tropes* of the visit's discourse makes it possible to observe that, in fact, whoever the guide, the visits remain very centered on the objects. In the same way, the text vary very little from one group to the next. There is very

little interaction: the guides themselves or to ask any question. Often the same ones (from 0 to 5 minutes on average are asked).

How can we explain this? Perhaps it is due to the nature of this museum is more of a tour centered on the objects, in which the museum is rich in various objects. To show all these objects, especially in a short time, between them, as our analysis shows, guides tend to want to keep control of the visit and to avoid any deviation from the routine, repeating the same things over and over again. Lastly, when the "show" mode: whenever the objects become the actors, the guides tend to act and enjoy their anecdotes. This role and gives a good stage performance is reinforced by

### c) Public expectations

Generally, 82.5% of the guided tours "very much" say they appreciate them "very much" principally perceived as a tour behind, as an activity leader or heir or a witness of the past. A maximum of technical information by his subject (48.7%) and few expect to understand (10.5%). They also do not believe that they must let them discover the exchange, experience, value they wish to receive, but not receive. Interviews with the public: with their family or the group attending the same performance should be noted that, while visitors' expectations are identified. In fact, their demands (with the speech of the guide. So, they implicitly make their speech satisfy them, even if, in doing so, the relative passivity of the museum practices. It would be interesting to study other audiences, in other contexts.

### d) Qualities of the visit

Finally, the public expectations: the questionnaires show that the public is "satisfied" with their visit

little interaction: the guides leave little time for the public to discover the objects by themselves or to ask any questions. It is, in fact, the guides who raise the questions and often the same ones (from one guide to another and from one visit to another). Less than five minutes on average are granted to any interactive dialogue.

How can we explain the difference between the intentions and the real practices? Perhaps it is due to the nature of the museum itself or to the vision that the guides have: this museum is more of a techniques museum than a society museum. The visit remains centered on the objects, in a desire to demonstrate rather than to spread ideas. The museum is rich in various objects, and the guides have little time to waste if they want to show all these objects, especially as they do not seem to place any particular hierarchy between them, as our analysis shows. Perhaps the limited time of the visit encourages the guides to want to keep control of its unfolding: for them, filling the speaking time is to control it and to avoid any questions which could be difficult to manage. Beyond the routine, repeating the same speech from one group to another is also a way of managing the time. Lastly, when the guides are observed, one can note that they function on a "show" mode: whenever they "stage" objects, they take part in this performance. They and the objects become the actors, and the visitors are the spectators who laugh at their puns and enjoy their anecdotes. The guide undoubtedly enters, more or less consciously, into a role and gives a good stage performance rather than allowing any true interaction. This performance is reinforced by the impressiv aspect of all the machines set into motion.

#### **c) Public expectations towards the guided tour in general**

Generally, 82.5% of the visitors who answer the questionnaire say they appreciate the guided tours "very much", 15.3% say they appreciate them "moderately" and only 2.2% say they appreciate them "very little" or "not at all". For the interviewed public, the guide is principally perceived as a transmitter of knowledge (for 57.6% of the visitors), then far behind, as an activity leader (17%) and thirdly, as an expert (12.4%). He is not seen as an heir or a witness of the past. For the public concerned, a guide must above all give a maximum of technical information and knowledge (60.4% of the visitors), be impassioned by his subject (48.7%) and know anecdotes on life in the past (48%). On the other hand, few expect to understand (25.1%), or to interact with the guides or to think (28.4%). They also do not believe that the guide should take into account public demands (7.6%), and must let them discover the objects before commenting on them (6.2%). Whatever concerns exchange, experience, values and emotions was not emphasized at all by the visitors: they wish to receive, but not necessarily to exchange or take part. This is confirmed by the interviews with the public: the most important aspect for them is the experience they live with their family or the group. Everything happens as if the group members were all attending the same performance, on which they can then exchange, a little like a show. It should be noted that, whatever their social membership and the level of expertise, the visitors' expectations are identical.

In fact, their demands (weak in terms of mediation), correspond rather well with the actual speech of the guide. So, one can wonder from this result, to what extent the guides do not implicitly make their speech correspond to the expectations of the visitors, in order to satisfy them, even if, in doing so, they move away from their own intentions. In addition, the relative passivity of the public is astonishing, especially if we take into account their museum practices. It would be interesting here to check if one finds this tendency with other audiences, in other contexts.

#### **d) Qualities of the guide and the visit**

Finally, the public was questioned on the visit they had just followed. The results of the questionnaires show that the qualities they detected in the three guides differ from their expectations, without this diminishing their satisfaction, since 77.3% were "completely satisfied" with their visit and 32.7% "rather satisfied". If this satisfaction is linked to what

they perceived of the guided tour, it is observed that they consider that the guides played their part of transmitter of knowledge (53.4% of the visitors), by giving them many anecdotes and information, while providing explanations and allowing the public to understand (53%), as well as giving access to past knowhow (58.8%).

However, things are a little more complex, because the visitors also perceived a certain conciseness in the guides' remarks. They also think that they could discover the objects themselves before the guides comment on them. In the same way, they are persuaded that they could "very easily" raise questions (for more than 50% of the interviewees), which the analysis of the guided tours refutes. They are thus convinced that the visit was rather interactive. Even if this aspect was not in their initial expectations, it seems that it contributed to their satisfaction. However, 70% of the questioned public consider, in fact, that they did not have any questions to ask and among the 30% of those who did, only half actually asked their question. Lastly, if this satisfaction is related to expectations and representations of the visit, it is no doubt due to a "guide effect". Because the visit is very centered on the show (thanks to the machines), the stage setting of the guided tour and the gestures of the guide and the public take part, as by Michele Gellereau said, in the construction of a "*rencontre*" and an "*aesthetic mediation*" founded especially on the reconstitution of patrimonial gestures (Gellereau, 2006). The interviews show that this satisfaction is in fact rather superficial, the interviewees having great difficulty in finding justification for their satisfaction.

### Conclusion and opening

To summarize the principal contributions of this study, one can observe initially that a myth of the "good guide" is emerging from museum literature, and within the institutions themselves - it is, in fact, the title of the book by Gringer and McCoy (1989)-. However, it does not necessarily have an effect on the form of the guided visit. The form of this particular mediation seems to depend as much on the context as on the different representations one can have. The guides, very often caught up in the action, do not seem to have time to question their practices. Certain audiences, such as the public engaged in a leisure activity, seem to be satisfied with a more traditional form less founded on the current theories. In this case, it is the aesthetic aspect, the performance of the guide in the context of the visit and thus a certain "guide effect" which seems to create satisfaction. In other words, it is not only the guides' speech which counts, but also the very particular context of the museum and the visit as well as the expectations and characteristics of the public concerned. The spectacular side of the museum and a visit which is more a stage performance, can also reinforce the passivity of the visitors.

The complexity of the shifts observed between the different phases of museum communication must be taken into account. These phenomena might deserve to be examined by more thorough, qualitative studies in different contexts. It is thus desirable not to regard the text of the guided tour as a pure discourse, but to study it within its context. Without that, the myth of the "good guide" will remain a myth shared by museum professionals, which will not "guide" the form of the guided tour and which, in fact will not offer a great deal to the *differing* audiences.

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