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SCIENCE CENTRES AROUND THE WORLD SEE UNREST FOR ART AND SCIENCE IN SOCIETY

The theatre, (art) and science: between amazement and applause!

Salvatore Fruguglietti

ABSTRACT: There have been countless innovations in the realm of science museology after the foundation of the Exploratorium of San Francisco and of the Ontario Science Center of Toronto with, among other things, the introduction of the exhibits hands-on, the use of new technologies and the arrival of virtuality.

But most of all a new dialogue was launched, also as a form of transformation of reality. And what is drama but fiction and transformation of reality?

This statement is the basis for the belief that museums and the theatre should continue, if not even start, a path to move closer, so as to make their languages work at the service of each other.

A dialogical interaction which is difficult (as both languages and their interpreters crave for superiority), strong (the place for communication becomes multi-channel), but necessary (in view of a systemic approach of science communication).

It is necessary especially to build an all-encompassing museum to fully play a sociological role of study, interpretation and determination of human society.

The theatre is a branch of art, in the materiality of stage and costumes and in the immateriality of ideas and words. Starting from this assumption, we should not limit our speculation to the role of the theatre in the new generation of scientific museology (which I would take for granted), but extend it to the methods for integration between drama and the places of science, between drama languages and techniques and scientific languages.

Forty years have passed since the inauguration of the first science centre in the world, the Exploratorium of San Francisco, which was ideally and practically the breakpoint with the traditional concept of the science museum.

Since then, many things have happened in the realm of scientific museology, and some have substantially contributed to the definition of a new museum conception.

The introduction of the exhibits hands-on, the ever more invasive use of new technologies, the arrival of the virtual world have changed the foundations of the way to conceive and build a museum.

In the past few years, in a systemic conception of a museum as a container of knowledge and science communication techniques, a fundamental role – although not equal to science – has been acquired by art and, most of all, dialogue has been restored.

Words have become protagonists in a scientific locus which no longer wants to adopt the obsolete model of a ‘deficit’ (scientists giving knowledge away to those who ignore it), but willing to dialogue with visitors in the attempt – not to be failed! – of building the citizenship of knowledge through a multi-subject communication in which the different players establish a two-way dialogue.

Words and dialogue are to be conceived as a form of transformation of reality; and what is drama but fiction and transformation of reality?

Both actors and the audience of a theatrical performance see a (hopefully, at least) good make-believe, but everyone perfectly knows that it is a make-believe, so there is no deceit, but only truth; precisely the truth which is pursued by science (and by those who work in scientific museology) as an objective category of the world.

But most of the times visitors of science museums do not simply desire truth, but a truth to be pretty and interesting, preferably made of facts that are impossible if seen through the eyes of men, but possibly containing a deeper truth. In the attempt to meet this legitimate desire, then we discover science possesses infinite poetry.

The most gratifying situation you can have in a science centre is the presence of a considerable number of people willing to hear interesting things and wishfully waiting to see the fulfillment of the promise they will see and hear something they have always dreamt of. But this implies you must keep the promise before they leave the museum.

Having an ability “to lie”, drama is functional to this purpose because playwrights, directors, actors and technicians are quite like poets who, contrary to philosophers (and the first philosophers were also scientists...), make less promises but keep more promises!

The theatre, but also art in its various forms, helps – if not to understand a phenomenon – at least to take it closer to the understanding abilities of the average public visiting science museums.

It is the need of addressing a public which simply asks for truth on a daily basis that leads us to choose directors and actors who cannot be only “fashionable”.

Renowned artists, in the case of drama, generate an event (and a temporary media coverage) relegating science in the background and reversing, against any communication logic, the relation, in any case unfairly unequal, which sees the scientific culture prevailing in science centres on the creative conception of the world.

On the contrary, it is necessary to guarantee the everyday uniqueness of the theatrical science communication. This is why artists are selected among those who have a scientific interest and are willing to go beyond the scientific arguments and to explore the scientific method. Consequently, performances (or the generic forms of theatrical science communication) should use an artistic language to explain the scientific one, so as to become an interpretative meta-language of science centres. This is not so common and, most of all, not so widespread among renowned artists who often “very courageously” want to play it safe.

Is this choice the right one? The answer lies in the public’s evaluation!

And how should we evaluate the public’s reaction to the spurs coming from a theatre performance about science? Ears, mouth, eyes!

The short moments of silence at the end of a performance before applause bursts, the amazement of those who understood a concept though they believed it was too difficult for them, eyes shining with what Wagensberg called intellectual happiness!

The intellectual happiness of the Science Centre of the *Città della Scienza* of Naples has a paradigmatic role and has always been seen as a primary variable in the planning of the exhibition spaces and paths.

What is the next planning and programmatic step for the eyes of the theatre? Making theatrical communication permeate the museum. This can only be achieved conceiving scientific places as theatrical places and scientific issues as words of theatrical science communication. This process is to be imagined as a walk (not even a very long one!) to get mutually closer. The first step was done: drama put itself to the service of the museum. The museum, hesitantly, has not fully taken the path to be at the service of the theatre. And to make it viable it is necessary to spur a cultural revolution that should translate into a revolution in planning exhibition spaces, rather than contents. Making the theatre and the museum fully interact means that the places of the museum should be places of the theatre, the paths should be conceived to be enjoyed by the visitors following a travelling exhibition, the staging must have a set design. All of this is complex, yet not complicated, if conceived in the planning phase of the exhibitions; it becomes an improper addition when the theatre has to adapt to the spaces, if done a posteriori and with huge efforts not to make it passively.

Le Nuvole and the *Fondazione Idis – Città della Scienza* already successfully experimented an exhibition-drama interaction model in the performance *Le Nuvole “Le Nanometamorfosi”*, held for the Nanodialogue exhibition promoted by *Fondazione Idis – Città della scienza*. The staging included a scenery (the central exhibition table) and the cavea for the audience (four panels arranged in an arc of a circle, delimiting the perimeter of the exhibition), and some evocative references in the actor’s tales.

What are the difficulties of this interaction? The difficulty is to establish an interaction, a dialogue between the players (the theatre and the science centre) in this process. In fact, each of them feels, sometimes pretentiously, their vision should always prevail.

What is the strength of this interaction? There is no longer a place for science and a place for drama; now there is a single place, a place for a multi-channel dialogue, in which words (either spoken, written or acted) become protagonists in the scientific dialogue, and made understandable in a clear, playful and fascinating way.

What is the need of this interaction? If the difficulty is to establish a dialogue and the strong point is again the dialogue that can be established between museum and drama – which is functional to the visitors' enjoyment of the knowledge created by science centres and kept there – the need is precisely to activate that dialogue for an effective systemic approach (between science centres, theatre and visitors) to the science communication issues.

Introducing the theatre component in the science centre/visitor communication system means, on the one hand, to increase the complexity level in the system (adding a third component on top of the two existing ones) and, on the other hand, to increase also the relations existing among the single components within the system and consequently also the levels and the methods of interaction-interpretation of science centres.

This systemic vision, integrated by the dramatic component (artistic in general terms, if the word 'drama' is similarly replaced by 'art'), is the element able to make visitors see a science centre (as well as a museum, a festival or an art exhibition) as a real and practical all-encompassing museum which, beside being actually touched, involves the body and the spirit. It turns into a pervading and persuasive museum with a variety of dimensions, a museum able to play an ever more frequent sociological role for the study and the interpretation of human society processes, with a view to guiding operational planning.

The theatre is in (and for) the museum to answer the countless, complex, manifold and contradictory questions that society asks science and which need a self-aware, clear and renewed communication system.

The theatre as a form of art is like (and with) museums for society!

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

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