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museum as “world picture” vs museum as “lifeworld”

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This article deals with the issues of museum communication and interpretation of museum exhibits in a philosophical and cultural context. As an example, it considers two different ways of presenting palaeontological material – specifically, the skeleton of a southern mammoth – revealing differences in how the semantic content is interpreted. The first method – the traditional approach of assembling the skeleton – gives a “world picture” of a certain era, as it appears to a palaeontologist. The second approach presents the skeleton in a “sandbox”, representing how it was found during excavations, such that viewers deal not with the interpreted “ready-made” material, but with the contemporary experienced reality – the “life-world”, the “raw” source material. This allows visitors to realize their own creative potential and to recreate the nature of the Pleistocene epoch in their imagination. Thus, through the mutual correlation of the roles exhibition’s author and of the visitor as an interpreter, the semantic field of museum communication expands. In Heidegger’s conception, a “picture of the world” hides the world rather than explains it, while the “life world” represents it as it is.

Keywords: southern mammoth skeleton, palaeontology, museum exhibit presentation, interpretation, Heidegger, world picture.

“Bones in the sandbox! Bones in the sandbox!” a five-year-old boy shouted, jumping in delight around an unusual exhibit in the Stavropol Museum of Natural History. Imagine the boy’s amazement when his parents told him that those were the bones of a huge elephant that lived nearby in times immemorial. “Aren’t elephants only able to live in hot Africa?” asked the

child. “And why are these bones so scattered around that they don’t look like a skeleton at all? Who put them here in such a mess and why?”

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the Italian palaeontologist Filippo Nesti produced a description of a fossil elephant, the southern mammoth (*Archidiskodon meridionalis*), endemic to the vast territory of Eurasia in the Early Pleistocene. Relatively full skeletons of this species are very rare and well-known. The first to be found (1825) is on display in the Paris National Museum of Palaeontology (part of the French National Museum of Natural History in Paris). The second (found in 1940 near Nogaysk in Ukraine and moved to the Zoological Institute in Leningrad in 1949) is in the Zoological Museum of the Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. The third is housed in the Tbilisi Institute of Paleobiology, and two more, found in 1960 and 2007 are in the Stavropol Museum of Natural History respectively¹. The academic significance of all the finds of remains belonging to this species lies in their value in clarifying and specifying the picture of the evolution of mammoth species and subspecies, while illustrating their diversity in the Late Pliocene and Early Pleistocene (2.6 to 0.7 million years ago).

Since 1962, when a skeleton of *Archidiskodon meridionalis* found in a sandpit near the town of Georghievsk was examined, restored and put on display in the exhibition space of the Nature Department of Stavropol Museum of Natural History, it has become the most prominent item not only of the palaeontological collection, but of the entire museum fund. With the museum’s guides invariably pointing out the uniqueness of the find and describing the life of this specimen in detail, the mammoth’s skeleton has acquired a symbolic meaning: the territory of the Stavropol region has become the birthplace of elephants and mammoths in visitors’ minds. The myth that “Stavropol region is the birthplace of elephants” was born.² The skeleton, more than four meters high, had an inevitable impact on the visual structure of the palaeontological exhibition. Although the exhibition displays palaeontological objects which are no less rare – such as skeletons of extinct species such as a cetotherium whale (*Cetotherium cf. maicopicum*), a dolphin (*Anacharsis orbus*) and a rhinoceros (*Elasmotherium sibiricum*) – the southern mammoth skeleton, due to its huge size and expressively curved tusks, makes the strongest impression.

In 2007, the uniqueness of the skeleton from the sandpit in Georghievsk was challenged by yet another startling discovery: a second skeleton of the southern mammoth *Archidiskodon meridionalis* was found in Novoaleksandrovsky Administrative Okrug (Stavropol Krai). In the opinion of palaeontologists, multiple finds of almost full skeletons in one region of the territory of Russia represent extremely rare events in the history of science.³

The museum staff was overwhelmed with joy: the new acquisition significantly increased not only the size but also the value of the palaeontological collection. The ubiquitous media attention allowed all residents of the region – who were eagerly looking forward to seeing the second mammoth skeleton next to the first one – to share in this joy. However, the restoration

¹ GARUIT, Wadim E. A skeleton of the Southern Elephant, *Archidiskodon meridionalis* (Nesti, 1825), from a sand-pit near Georghievsk, Northern Caucasus, Russia. In: *Cranium, jrg.* 15(1), July 1998, p. 33–38.

² The expression “birthplace of elephants” in the Russian language has a sarcastic connotation: it generally refers to a place praised by local patriots (as a rule, exaggerating the merits of their small homeland). In this instance, the connotation is even deeper: the sarcasm consists in the refutation of sarcasm – the elephant (mammoth) remains were indeed found here.

³ MASCHENKO, E.N., SCHVYREVA, A.K., KALMYKOV, N.P. The second complete skeleton of *Archidiskodon meridionalis* (Elephantidae, Proboscidea) from the Stavropol Region, Russia. In: *Quaternary Science Reviews* 30, 2011, p. 2273–88.



Figure 1: The bones of the southern mammoth skeleton, after conservation and restoration, are displayed in the museum as a representation of excavations. (Photo courtesy of the Nature Department of the Stavropol Museum of Natural History)

work required time and incurred significant costs, which prompted the museum staff to take an unexpected decision: after the most indispensable conservation and restoration work, the skeleton was displayed the way it was found: the excavation picture was reproduced (Figure 1).

Certainly, in the era of interactive museums and the fashion for performance, this decision seems neither revolutionary nor even extraordinary, but in this situation it turned out to be very creative.

The impression stirred by the “life-sized” representation of the excavation turned out to be unprecedentedly strong, and the resulting excitement found its reflection in the public mind through the aforementioned meme: “Stavropol is the birthplace of elephants”. Despite its sarcastic tone, this motto gave its name to one of the projects presented within the framework of a competition for a grant from the Vladimir Potanin Foundation (*A Changing Museum in a Changing World*). As a result of the activities of the museum staff and the media, the theme of mammoths and elephants became popular in schools, and all kinds of festivals, contests and quizzes – with an appropriately offbeat titles such as *Elephant Protection Day* – took place. An exhibition named *Elephants in My Life* was organised using materials provided by Stavropol residents, such as arts-and-craft items, essays and other literary works. Writing and art competitions, contests and festivals were held, and various types of memorabilia and other merchandise were made.

However, the sandbox exhibition was only temporary. After the conservation works were completed, the long and laborious process of reconstructing the skeleton lay ahead. As a rule, during preparation of an exhibition, its space is closed to visitors. However, the museum team decided otherwise: the visitors were allowed – indeed, encouraged – to witness the skeleton’s

installation. As a result, the idea of an “expo-action” attraction, entitled *Putting the Elephant Back on Its Feet*, was born (Figure 2).



Figure 2: *The poster invites visitors to witness and participate in a rare event: the installation of the second southern mammoth skeleton in the exhibition space.*



Figure 3: *Young visitors watch the southern mammoth skeleton installation process in the exhibition space (photo courtesy of the Nature Department of the Stavropol Museum of Natural History)*



Figure 4: *The exhibit after the installation of the second southern mammoth skeleton* (photo courtesy of the Nature Department of the Stavropol Museum of Natural History)

The visitors witnessed the hard work of the museum staff; they could hear the conversations of experts and watch the action, ask questions, express their opinions about what was going on, offer help and even entice the museum staff to deliver impromptu lectures⁴ (Figure 3).

When the reconstruction works were completed and the second skeleton finally took its place next to the first one (Figure 4), some of the visitors could hardly conceal their disappointment. The former exhibit representing the excavation turned out to be something more meaningful than just a momentary snapshot of the recently obtained valuable results. It provided visual images and information that were significant for the visitors and were telling

them something important. Two almost identical skeletons next to each other look less informative than one restored (complete) skeleton and one skeleton in the natural environment (soil). The “bones in the sandbox” exhibit gave the visitors the opportunity to mentally assemble the skeleton into the shape of the nearby sample and then mentally reproduce an image of a living mammoth, thus finding confirmation of the authenticity of the images and the truthness of palaeontology.

The communicative peculiarity of a museum is the “authenticity” of the items which make up its collection. A museum holds “physical evidence” of existence (of life, of being). The verification process requires proof “here and now”. Belief in objects and documents has, in the modern era, grown stronger than belief in God. A stamped document, a test-tube full of liquid – these are things made by man; they are symbols of authenticity and of reality (truth) in a way that is comparable to natural objects. What does a museum represent to its visitors? An image of the world? The truth about the world? A model of the world? Or the world itself?

⁴ SHVYREVA, A.K. (2016) Find, save and pass on to descendants (the story of the acquisition of a single exhibit). In: *Ninth Prokritelev's readings. Materials of the Interregional Scientific-Practical Conference of November 24–25, 2016. To the 110th anniversary of the Stavropol Scientific Archival Commission*, p. 252–257. [In Russian].

A thing is real (true) because of the fact of its existence. But, if it is a museum object, there is something that it signifies. Napoleon’s bicorne hat asserts the reality of the Great French Revolution and the European culture of the nineteenth century; archaeological ceramic finds assert the historicity of ancient cultures; palaeontological bones assert the historicity of extinct animal species. And what kind of truth do the bones of the southern mammoth that became extinct a million years ago tell a present-day person?

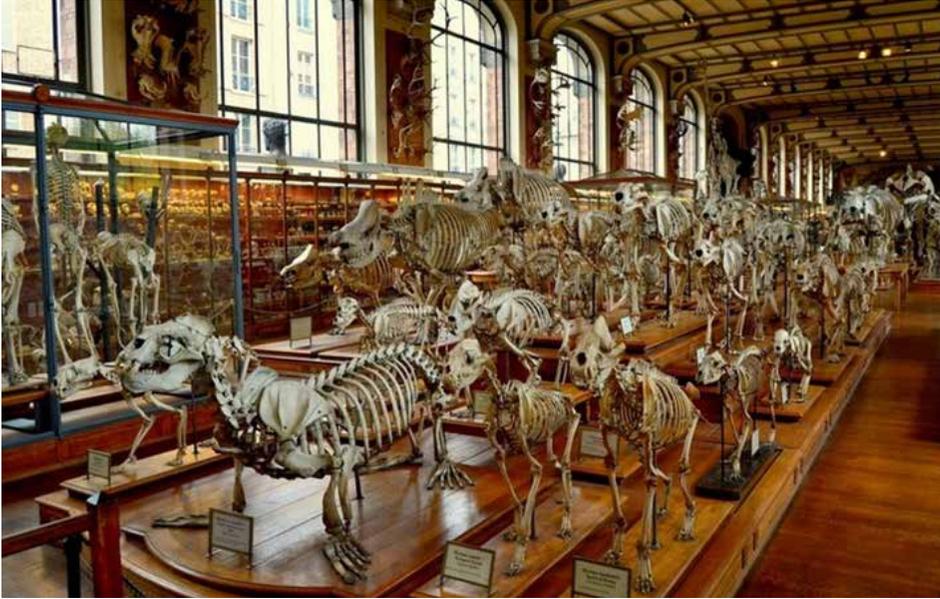


Figure 5: A “skeleton parade” in the Gallery of Palaeontology and Comparative Anatomy of the French National Museum of Natural History in Paris (photo from <http://www.stena.ee/blog/muzej-skeletov>).

In palaeontological museums, visitors see skeletons of extinct animals accompanied by sculptures or pictures showing what they looked like. Undoubtedly, the images accurately depict the specimen which once existed and do not contradict scientific method and understanding. But what do we see? Do we see a bygone world, or an image of a bygone world born in the mind of a palaeontologist? What world picture appears in front of a visitor of such an exhibition? (Figure 5).

In our case it is important that the creative process of imagination begins not from the resulting image of the assembled skeleton, but from the image of the “resting bones”, i.e., from what one could see if one were “lucky”. Such a meeting with the past is a hundred times more valuable, since it happens directly, without intermediaries. Such a meeting has all the attributes of a real discovery, an insight, an exit from the Platonic Cave. A find in this instance remains a find, rather than a story about a find (even if not in a verbal, but in a visual form). A visitor intuitively feels that there is too much of the narrator in the story, and not so much of whatever the narrator is talking about. Why has a world picture become necessary? In order to hide the world. This is exactly what Martin Heidegger wrote about when he argued that the world in modern times had turned into a picture.⁵

⁵ HEIDEGGER M. *The question concerning technology, and other essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 129.

The history of the modern museum's evolution is inextricably linked with the dynamics of worldview frameworks: religion, philosophy, myth, poetic perception and so on.

The museum, by origin, inherited the features of its "ancestors": the temple (Mouseion/Musaeum – Temple of the Muses), the depository and the educational institution. The initiation of temple construction in human history testifies to the emerging need to realise (materialise) the invisible sacral, to make it apprehensible, to make its sensory perception possible. It is quite likely that the birth of fine art was due to the same need for objectifying mental images. The division of the world into the sacred and the profane necessitated new behavioural customs: what may be done in the everyday (profane) space is unacceptable in the sacred space. Moreover, whatever is done in the sacred space should not be done in the profane space. Divine power and will are manifested in sacred times and sacred spaces. The secularisation of common perception (public consciousness) has not destroyed the sacred, but transformed it into a "law of nature", as independent from personal will (that is, as far beyond the control of people) as the sacred. A secular person also has a sphere of the daily (the routine), the changeable, the temporary, the controllable as well as a sphere of the eternal, the natural, the unshakable. A spectator in the theatre cannot influence the events taking place on stage, but can make visiting the theatre one of the events of his personal life. Overcoming naive visions of the cosmos through the method of philosophizing has allowed discovery of the sources of the endless birth of the myth. If the myth cannot be mastered (destroyed), it should be rendered an ally in mastering the world.

The first museums, which combined the functions of a temple and an educational institution, were the Temple of Lyceum, dedicated to Apollo Lyceum, and the Academy of Plato on the site of the sanctuary. Certainly, one should not overlook the fact that the temple staff were trained to perform sacerdotal functions even before then, but Plato and Aristotle philosophised not only on religious subjects in their Mouseions.

While the temple was born as a result of the need for realization of the sacred, the museum in the modern (or rather "modernist") understanding, starting from the 1830s, represents a reified "world picture". This reification occurs through removing things from the real (pragmatic) world and transferring them to the symbolic world.

The museification of a thing, be it unique or commonplace, is the process of changing the semiotic status of that object from pragmatic (signified) to symbolic (signifying). In other words, an object which is talked about and used becomes a thing through which something is communicated; it transforms from the subject of communication into a means of communication.

The museum "model of the world" is a secondary structure in relation to the "world picture" or the "model of the world" as phenomena of common perception (public consciousness). Just as facts are registered (recorded) as being initially loaded with theory, the selection of material (items) for a museum collection takes place based on the "world picture" of the museum specialist, on the museum's development concept, and so on.

Virtually any exhibition offers a "world picture" or, at least, a fragment of the "world picture". Hence the paradoxical conclusion: in order for the museum to represent the "lifeworld", the "lifeworld" should become the next "world picture".

At first glance, the world picture appears to be a comprehensive and systemised view of the world, a consistent depiction of its parts. And the fuller it is, the less distortedly it reflects the world in its entirety. However, as Heidegger convincingly pointed out, when creating a

world picture, something is brought into it by the creator and something is brought into it as a consequence of the act of its creation.⁶ And here a semantic shift takes place: we perceive the world picture as the most comprehensive and, importantly, the most natural representation of the things which exist. But is it really so? “With the word ‘picture’”, Heidegger observes,

we think first of all of a copy of something. Accordingly, the world picture would be a painting, so to speak, of what is as a whole. But “world picture” means more than this. We mean by it the world itself, the world as such, what is, in its entirety, just as it is normative and binding for us. “Picture” here does not mean some imitation, but rather what sounds forth in the colloquial expression, “We get the picture” [literally, we are in the picture] concerning something. This means the matter stands before us exactly as it stands with it for us.⁷

But what is meant by “the matter stands before us exactly as it stands with it for us”? And what would “the matter stands differently” mean in that instance? This means that a representation (an image) of something, including the whole world, in the form of a picture, is not the only, and certainly not the best option for representation (depiction). To put the matter exactly “as it stands” means to choose some kind of representation. This choice may be accidental (the first option that comes to mind), or selected intentionally (for any reasons the author of the exhibit believes to be necessary).

The influence of the “world picture” on the interpretation of things, on the ways of compiling things in a collection, is described in detail by Jan Dolák in his article entitled *Thing in Museum. Museum Collection as Structure*. The author cites the arguments of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century and the contemporary age confirming the systemic nature of interpretation of a thing as such, and opposes Michel Foucault’s concept of the museum as “a space of government [state power]”.⁸ A museum does not strive to collect everything. A museum as a “world picture” – or, more precisely, a “world portrait” or a “text about the world” – cannot reproduce all the attributes and characteristics of the world itself, just as there cannot be a text describing everything. At the same time, the critical nature of modern-age thinking certainly manifests itself in the museum sphere as well.

For the sake of consistency in using the metaphor of a picture, we can say that different artists, obviously, paint very different pictures, and even photographers are able to show their individuality in or bring their subjective viewpoint into their photographs. And although there are no special signs of subjectivity in the reconstructed skeleton, the intuitive craving for authenticity and primary-ness still exists as an implicit interest for a museum visitor. No matter how precise the copy is, the original remains an absolute value. Although the reconstructed skeleton is not a copy, it is unconsciously perceived by our contemporaries as something artificial and purely presentational. Meanwhile, the exact reconstruction of the place where the bones were discovered and the bones themselves look like – and essentially are – traces.

All this creates a fairly strong sensation of touching prehistoric reality for the visitor. There is even the feeling of involvement in the discovery, the illusion of being an eyewitness, or at least a person examining the “scene of the event” in order to form their own opinion. However, a skeleton might be assembled flawlessly in terms of technique – there is no subjectivity here, as each bone is either in its place or not, that is, the skeleton is either “right” or “wrong”. Subjectivity begins with a contextual interpretation of the skeleton. The context is that the

⁶ HEIDEGGER, *The question concerning technology...* p. 129.

⁷ HEIDEGGER M. *The question concerning technology, and other essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977, p. 129.

⁸ DOLÁK, Jan. (2018) Thing in museum. Museum collection as structure. In: *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana* 2, 2018, p. 25–35.

“background knowledge” of a palaeontologist might be subjective (otherwise there would be no academic discussions). As Heidegger continues:

“To get into the picture” [literally, to put oneself into the picture] with respect to something means to set whatever it is, itself, in place before oneself just in the way that it stands with it, and to have it fixedly before oneself as set up in this way. But a decisive determinant in the essence of the picture is still missing. “We get the picture” concerning something does not mean only that what is, is set before us, is represented to us, in general, but that what is stands before us – in all that belongs to it and all that stands together in it – as a system. “To get the picture” throbs with being acquainted with something, with being equipped and prepared for it. Where the world becomes picture, what is, in its entirety, is juxtaposed as that for which man is prepared and which, correspondingly, he therefore intends to bring before himself and have before himself, and consequently intends in a decisive sense to set in place before himself”.⁹

So, what can be the aim of the authors of a museum exhibition? What exactly do they want to show the visitors, what ideas do they want to impart, and what analogies do they want to avoid? The most common wish of museum workers is rooted in the Age of Enlightenment, which gave birth to the idea of a public good related to the popularization of scientific discoveries and technical inventions. In this case, the “picture of the exhibition” is aimed at illustrating the picture of natural evolution or the picture of social development. Specialised exhibitions on the history of painting or the history of costume only confirm the general trend: a museum should confirm the knowledge acquired at school and strengthen interest towards the popularization of scientific knowledge. Heidegger continues:

Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture. What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth. Wherever we have the world picture, an essential decision takes place regarding what is, in its entirety. The Being of whatever is, is sought and found in the representedness of the latter.¹⁰

We dare to put forward a hypothesis: a museum visitor intuitively searches for things which are not included in any paintings – as if they want to be alone (face-to-face) with things and have the right to draw the necessary pictures themselves or not to draw them at all. Traces turn out to be more valuable for direct contemplation than a reconstruction of whoever left these traces (no matter how realistic the reconstruction is). Visitors want to look at the traces and to finish drawing a picture of a phenomenon or an event of the distant past in their own imagination. And the point here is not even the fact that modern people suspect that someone else skilfully controls their impressions – although such a danger exists and it is realised. The main thing, perhaps, is that “touching” things from a bygone era is valuable in itself, it provides a direct and almost physical link to the past, which no stories and no recently made drawings can replace. No wonder that Heidegger wrote that as a result of the arrival of the new age, not only did the world turn into a picture, but also that the person inside reality (“*that which is*”) turned into *Subiectum*. “That the world becomes picture is one and the same event with the event of man’s becoming *subiectum* in the midst of that which is”.¹¹

⁹ Heidegger, *The question concerning technology*... p. 129.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *The question concerning technology*... p. 129.

¹¹ Heidegger, *The question concerning technology*... p. 132.

Without going too much into detail regarding Heidegger’s philosophical concept aimed at overcoming subjectivity, we will point out only those negative consequences of the transformation of “just a person” into a “person as a subject” which are related to the issue of a museum exhibition. We are talking about the phenomena identified by Heidegger which determined the spirit of modernism: the art of modernism and the culture of modernism. “A third equally essential phenomenon of the modern period lies in the event of art’s moving into the purview of aesthetics. That means that the art work becomes the object of mere subjective experience, and that consequently art is considered to be an expression of human life”.¹²

The entirety of an exhibition, be it of historical or palaeontological material, or a work of art placed in the museum space, embedded into the “body” of the exhibition, turns the author of the exhibition into an experience organiser and a participant in a joint experience. An externally controlled experience might represent some kind of propaganda, an element of the system of education and upbringing, a means of socialization, and so on. The incomprehensible effect of this means of socialisation lies in the fact that it remains imperceptible for a very long time and only gradually gives rise to an unconscious desire to remove all kinds of intermediaries who are also subjects. And even if those intermediary subjects have no specific goal or bad intentions, why mix one’s own subjectivity with someone else’s (which, by the way, turns out to be in a priority position)? That is why the desire not to add someone else’s experience (prepared in advance and, therefore, highly sophisticated) to your own experience should have sooner-or-later arisen in the minds of museum visitors.

Another essential phenomenon of modernism, identified by Heidegger, links the understanding of activity with the notion of culture in a new way.

A fourth modern phenomenon manifests itself in the fact that human activity is conceived and consummated as culture. Thus culture is the realization of the highest values, through the nurture and cultivation of the highest goods of man. It lies in the essence of culture, as such nurturing, to nurture itself in its turn and thus to become the politics of culture.¹³

Thus, culture becomes self-sufficient and turns from a means into a goal: culture for the sake of culture itself. Now culture is no longer a way of improving one’s own soul (Cicero) and not a mechanism of transition from the world of nature into the realm of freedom (Kant), but something completely different. As follows from the quote above, culture becomes a kind of politics. This implies that the participant in an experience and the organiser of a joint experience has some kind of preset goal unknown to the visitor, which is inherent in any policy, including the cultural one. And this preset goal, this “someone else’s subjectivity”, becomes increasingly felt as typical museum visitors become more knowing.

Research in the sphere of the philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge has allowed us to speak of the socio-cultural contexts of creation and the interpretation of scientific theories, including those pertaining to natural science. Therefore, not only art, not only the world of politics and history, but even pictures of natural reality appear to be increasingly dependent on culture, on society, on someone’s prejudices and someone’s interests. For instance, a display of fossils can assert the principles and paradigms of the evolutionary theory in the sphere of biology, thereby participating in its popularization. However, a visitor who has heard at least a bit about the disputes between the representatives of this school of biology and their opponents (Neo-Lamarckists or supporters of the gene drift concept)

¹² Heidegger, *The question concerning technology*... p. 116

¹³ Heidegger, *The question concerning technology*... p. 116.

might feel a certain mistrust towards the exhibition, followed by suspicion and a desire to rid themselves of the world picture imposed on them.

The foregoing should not be understood as a demand for maximum non-participation of the exhibition creators in arranging the material or forming a certain picture with it. This is hardly possible and would be tantamount to the removal of the research staff from the museum. Equally meaningless would be a demand for creating exhibitions in the genre of the scene examination records. However, the relationship between the visitors and the organisers of a museum exhibition should acquire the quality of communication, that is, become as transparent as possible and even grow into the relation of partnership.

Worth recalling, in this regard, is the essay by Roland Barthes entitled *Shock Photos*, where the author describes a photo exhibition in the Galerie d'Orsay. Many photos that are intended to shock the viewer, in the opinion of the author, fail to do so, because it was the author of the photo who experienced a shock. The viewer may only agree with the author at the level of rational perception.

This is because, as we look at them, we are in each case dispossessed of our judgment: someone has shuddered for us, reflected for us, judged for us; the photographer has left us nothing – except a simple right of intellectual acquiescence: we are linked to these images only by a technical interest; overindicated by the artist himself, for us they have no history, we can no longer invent our own reception of this synthetic nourishment, already perfectly assimilated by its creator.¹⁴

The value of any museum exhibition consists in the fact that it should not (and cannot) offer a product already “chewed and digested” by someone. Even in the case of a strict conceptualization or an ideological message, there is still some kind of “gap”, a space for the co-creation by the viewer.

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¹⁴ BARTHES, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, p. 116–117.

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