

Presentation & Representation.

The Diorama at the Natural History Museum.

KEY CONCEPTS

WHAT KIND OF TOPOS IS THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM?

The Natural History Museum is a place where nature, i.e. reality is reconfigured and realigned according to prevailing cultural and social constructs. It is thus a mediating process which continuously produces and reproduces; presents and represents reality as it is constantly culturally redefined.

WHAT IS THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OBJECT / SPECIMEN?

A sign, a sparkle of nature that can be, and is in fact, perceived as the whole of the natural science contents it represents.

“PARS PRO TOTO”

This specific process of comprehension of a system of simulacra is a complex linguistic process that overcomes the materiality of each specimen; even as this understanding happens we never take representation for reality; there is an analogical process between actual presence of a specimen and its simultaneous substitution of a whole.

WHAT IS THE DIORAMA?

The diorama is a very specific cultural construct; a cultural reproduction set on the modern visual paradigm of understanding and analyzing the world visually; these were display structures that produced and reproduced meanings and agendas both cultural and social.

The diorama as a visual structure transcends the boundaries of representation itself, consolidating a three-dimensional arrangement with its pictorial setting, which extends the viewer's point of view stressing the *mise en scène* of the Real.

THE DIORAMA TIME MACHINE

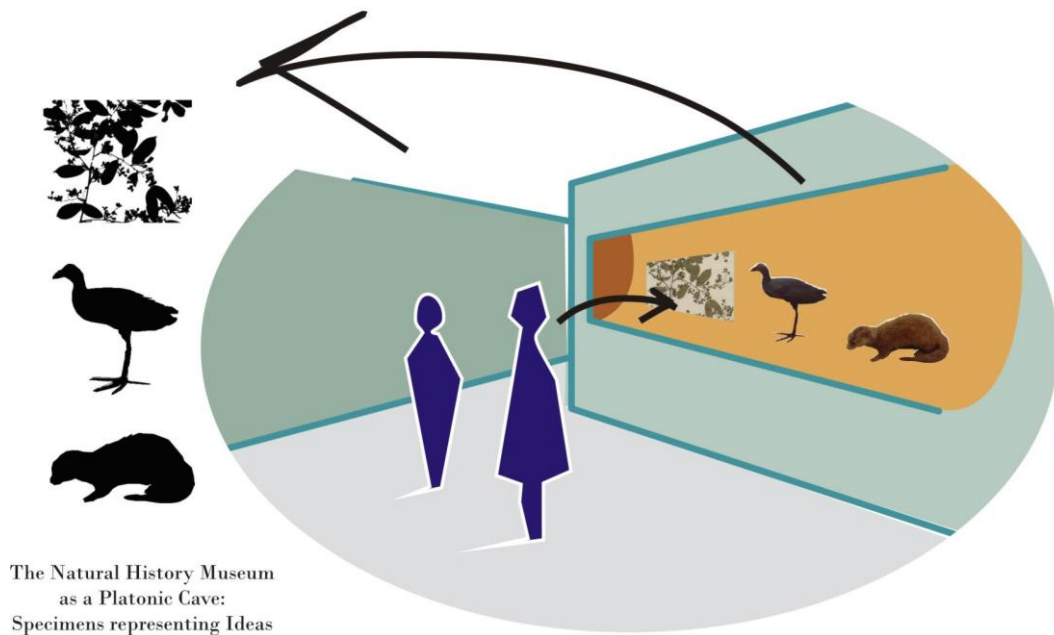
The Natural History Museum and nineteenth century's Science epistemological history is withhold in such displays as the diorama. These are mediating structures designed to organize knowledge, scientific knowledge, inside the walls of the Museum; signifying a specific composition of realistic and naturalistic values.

METAMUSEUM

Dioramas used to be display structures, but may nowadays be more clearly perceived as historical evidences of the developments on the history of science and of scientific literacy in the last century. As well as other dated museographical features, it may be used today as a device to revise the meanings of the Natural History Museum.



the Diorama stands for a specific frame of knowledge through means of visual display.



Diorama describes the act of seeing through. It is a device that simultaneously displays nature and its representations according to symbolic values. The diorama is examined here as a prevailing visual display and a specific museological device of a classical Natural History Museum. It is both a presentation and a representation of scientific contents. It is part of the history of the natural history museum as well as it is part of the history of knowledge in natural sciences.

Each field of knowledge builds a specific vocabulary for producing and presenting its finds and concepts. The modern museum, along with the modern paradigm, was above all a visual construct. As such, what are the ways through which the natural history museum presents itself nowadays? As the diorama loses its power and influence in the modes of display available, how should the museums relate to it and to classic taxidermy techniques?

THE MODERN EPISTÉME

As the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries foundation of knowledge unfolds, the modern concept of the Museum develops as a visual display of cultural enlightenment. The Natural History Museum is thus the expected result of a reorganization of the Curiosities Cabinet displaying the new ideas about the natural world, and the new classificatory science.

Reconfiguring scientific knowledge, this new place of literacy the natural history museum presents a very specific view on realistic representation of nature. The illusionist appeal allowed by the late eighteenth century devices and technology produces a development of such structures as those of the Panorama and the Diorama,

as a means of presenting and representing environments and sensory experiences to the bourgeois masses.

Louis-Jacques Mande Daguerre, inventor of the Daguerreotype, physicist and landscape painter; and Charles-Marie Bouton, open to the Parisian public in 1822 an exhibition entitled “Diorama”, where both wish to present «un monument d'exposition d'effets de peinture» [Wood, 1993]. Through the following twenty years they presented more than twenty different vistas and scenarios of monuments and landscapes in this fashion. It is supposed to have drawn ca. 80.000 visitors, only between 1822 and 1830 [Wood, 1997]. Later on some of these monumental paintings were to be sold and exhibited also in London's Regent's Park, this becoming then a tale of two cities. In both cases the diorama presentations included paintings of massive scale opaque and translucent, where the scenic effects are played through an ingenious light design, whilst the spectators are kept in the darkness.

This being the origin of this specific illusionist display, the diorama may be defined as a three-dimensional representation, or scale model of a landscape designed to visually present an historic event, an urban scenario or the natural world settings for educational and entertainment purposes we find in the Natural History Museum.

The presentation and re-presentation of nature and the real inside the museum has had different designs related with the epistemological history of scientific knowledge. A museum, or an exhibition, incorporates in itself the paradigm of a prevailing visual knowledge of the world in the western society. The visible, the view and the viewed are of utmost importance in the display devices in the museum.

Museological structures such as the diorama show an impressive knowledge about design, physics and the visual and light phenomena. Nevertheless, underlying is also an illusionist driving force possibly rooted in the baroque fantasy paintings and 'trompe l'oeil' theatre settings whose canvases were also made curvy in order to achieve a pictorial perspective apparition; and the extraordinary development of taxidermy techniques derived from a concept of realistic depiction of nature.

NATURALISM AND TAXIDERMY

The natural history museum is dedicated to scientific research and the consequent popularization of scientific knowledge through exhibits which may cause curiosity and awe in the visitorspectator. In the twentieth century, unlike the previous displays of «unicorn horns» or such objects, it is intended an empathy and understanding on the natural world which is presumably objective and more scientifically informed. Which is

to say that the scope of analysis of these museum structures and displays should be aware of all the proposals for a new educated and culturally improved society that the mediating structure that is the Museum as an institution represents. Or, as Haraway [Haraway, 1984] reads the work of Carl Akeley in the American Museum of Natural History of New York, this specific representation of the diorama as 'pure' nature as being a prophylactic dosage of Nature for the twentieth century citizen museum visitor. So, the visual scenic effect of the diorama is a symbolic shrine to nature inside the museum walls achieved through the improved taxidermy techniques. Carl Akeley's dioramas are a privileged glance, a revelation, a vision of the knowledgeable world. Much as the renaissance notion of pictorial space as an "opening of a window to the world". To the visitor of the Akeley's African Hall, a diorama gallery, the experience is of a travel in space and time. The diorama transcends the boundaries of representation allying the three-dimensional scene along with its pictorial *mise en scène*, prolonging the visual illusion of being there without being there. The ability of re-presenting of these displays is clearly reinforced via the use of the taxidermy specimens. For the taxidermist, the choice of each specific specimen and each specific pose is of paramount importance. It implies a selective process of denominating characteristics that may function as synecdoche, as a representation of a taxon.

PARS PRO TOTO

What we find in the natural history museum are always simulacra, always representations of a given idea about natural classification and organization. Although the museum table never refers to the idiosyncrasies of a specimen and always to a generalization of a species, we as visitors perceived this complicated linguistic process as a part of the underlying structure and performance the natural history museum implies and demands, i. e. if we are observing a *Ginkgo biloba* L. specimen in the museum and we state that it was around even when dinosaurs ruled the earth; we are not really referring to the specificities of the specimen before us but to a whole species. This, we believe, is a complex sign-signifier relationship that is part of our producing and reading natural history museums.

ANALOGICAL IDEAS

Two francophone authors Schiele and Montpetit also read the diorama as a culturally specific and relative construct, a reproduction of a preconceived cultural order rooted in the western society visual dependency for obtaining and perpetuating

knowledge. Schiele [1996] supports a definition of the diorama as semiotic system that allows all these linguistic processes of simultaneously presenting and representing; of coincident presence and substitution of scientific ideas.

Montpetit [in Schiele, 1996: 55-100] reads the diorama as part of a structure of an analogical take on museum displays and museography. A device that presents the viewer with original objects or its reproductions disposed in a specific context in a design in which the whole produces an image, i.e. refers by means of analogy, to a specific place and state of the Real outside the museum; this situation is identified by the viewer which situates him or herself in the origin of what he or she sees. This author analyses in detail all the cognitive and perceptive details of this analogical reading of visual displays. The force of this analogical relation comes from the synchronized presence of the artefact and its substitution; the production of a representation of an idea with aide from certain material presences.

META MUSEUM

As a mediating process of reproducing social and cultural relations, museology and exhibition production is a transversal field of knowledge. To manage museum contents or to design museographical structures are both revealing of a certain predominant paradigm. The diorama as a museum display was once representation of a certain presentation of scientific knowledge. What may it mean today?

In the most recent state of the art science exhibitions the stress is again on the authenticity of each specimen presented, and the more real is the presentation, more effective results it produces in the visiting crowds of the museum. The hands-on model of scientific exhibits and the use of real muscle tissue in anatomic presentations only appears to be a shift in the representation / presentation model addressed here. In fact, the appeal of the naturalistic representation though not only visual, but increasingly more and more sensorial is a success factor for a scientific or natural history exhibition

The taxidermy based diorama is a dated display, being substituted by its 3d animations and videographical equivalent. Nonetheless, what it represents for the history of epistemological scientific knowledge is valid even in today's natural history museum.