

THE IMAGINARY MUSEUM.
INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE “MATERIAL WORLD” AND THE
“VIRTUAL WORLD” IN ANDRE MALRAUX’S *MUSEUM WITHOUT
WALLS*

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Abstract. Since Classical Antiquity, the role of Museums went through a process of metamorphosis. This article begins by scrutinizing the Imaginary Museum - a theme in the work of Andre Malraux, and lead us to embark on an imaginary journey without borders, founded on the interaction between the material world and the virtual world of a *Museum Without Walls* that influences also the *Imaginary Documentary*. It concludes with a sociological reflection on what the Museum can offer today.

Keywords: Andre Malraux, Imaginary Museum, visual arts, art theory, virtual spaces, sociology of art, social politics

INTRODUCTION

Between Classical Antiquity and the 19th century, the museum “Temple of Muses” operated as a leading knowledge centre. In the meantime, museums became *research centres* or *centres of science and arts*. In the 18th century, a new era began with the opening of public museums, highlighting the British Museum (1753) in London, England; the Musée du Louvre¹ (1793) in Paris, France; and the *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga*² (1884) in Lisbon, Portugal. At the end of that century, the museum became an important element of the enlightened imagination in Europe, expanding the field of meanings and functions. (Brefe 1998, 85).

During the late 20th century, museums lose their strength as main institutions of research to universities, as centres for research and

innovation. However, these institutions continue their important role. In the 1980s and 1990s, museums worked towards giving rise to a new perception of the Western world, offering nowadays researching and teaching activities and contributing to a structured future of the individual.

George Brown Good (1888) observed that what counts is not what a museum owns, but what it can do with what it owns (Mendes 1999 *apud*. Zeiterberg, 64). Man's necessity to collect and preserve different objects for the future gives rise to an institution that completes the general historical process of humanity. Throughout the 19th century, through public museological institutions, the States, particularly the Europeans States, exhibited their power and, simultaneously, ensured the education and well-being of their citizens, based on the theoretical basis of educational philosophy, whose goal was the democratization of education (enlightenment legacy) in a time of renewed nationalism (Mendes 1999). Regardless of the modalities offered to the general public, studies were not carried out based on the experiences of its visitors (Mendes 1999, 674; Hein, 4-5). We will observe soon the care to overcome some of the detected limitations through experience, accompanied by studies and various reflections, the result of the re-alignment of the dynamic part in the functional, technical and financial structure of the museological institution. For example, the MNAA has been given a key role in staff training. This exercised a kind of tutelage over regional museums where, during the 1930s, the "Educational Extension Service" was a pioneering project in Portugal. It aimed to create a link and promote the collaboration between museums and schools (Mendes 1999). The Contemporary Museum is thus understood by a complex system, not limited in what regards collections, exhibitions and conservation of works, nor is it directed to experts but the general public.

As concerns the ideas of massification and reproduction of works of art, and for prophetic ideas that remained until today, I call Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). He argues that works of art could be reproduced with greater or lesser intensity and quality and,

concomitantly, the emergence of photography and cinema enabled to man the reproduction of instant images, reaching, thus, the status of a category as a work of art. Through the democratization of culture, there were positive aspects (advanced civilizations) and negative aspects (mindless, little selective and little interested). The good has ceased to be good to become trivialized indiscriminately, rising, amongst others, problematics such as the fact that the value of works of art is measured today by their ability to generate spectacle, that is, easily predispose mass entertainment (Tota 2010).

Llosa (2010) presents us these problematics and considers that the media influences in the almost complete absence of values from the hierarchy of the importance of cultural facts, a fact caused by the intellectual (avant-garde) movement. The author observes that it is probably in the field of plastic arts that one feels a greater devaluation of the old system of classifying works of art as important, less important and unimportant works (Llosa 2010).

THE NOTION OF “IMAGINARY MUSEUM” IN THE WORK OF ANDRE MALRAUX AND ITS INFLUENCES ON THE MALRUCIAN UNIVERSE

The reflection on the recent dialogical forms of museums has produced deep debates, namely from the *Museums Without Walls* of Malraux³ (1954) to Hetherington (1996), who uses Malraux’s metaphor to analyze the Stonehenge case. The museum works as an instrument in transmitting the conservation of power in the culture, as well as a dominant hegemony in arts (Tota 2000, 147).

According to Malraux (1978), the notion of *beauty* is in constant transformation in man, considering as beautiful what surpasses him or that he finds enigmatic, considering the representation of the aesthetic diversity and the different expressions of the artistic creations around the art and the beautiful. For the author, individuals have the possibility of mentally assembling their own *Imaginary Museum* without limitations of borders or time/spaces, unlike the traditional one. In this project – the *Imaginary Museum*,

which began in 1947, Malraux leads us to question the historical past, and artistic legacy, the processes of decontextualization and recontextualization in contemporary culture.

The author assembles a montage of photographs of works of art from all corners of the world and different eras. He analyzes and questions the importance and function of the museum to societies and its interaction with culture, making, thus, the following observation: "The museum is a statement, the Imaginary Museum is a question". A "museum without walls" in the format of an art book which designates as reproductions of works of Arts in an epoch in which printing and photography techniques were improving in the 50s⁴ and 60, thus enabling the perception of art at the level of image quality and printing/publication: "the museum is a confrontation of metamorphoses" (*Ibid.*, 12). "Titian did not reproduce imagined scenes; it was from the night bound forest of Cadore he got his Venus" (Lombardi 2008; Malraux 1978, 56). Many artists claim to have found references in the works of someone else for their own artistic creations. Sometimes we find a connection between painting and photography, in which one is used by the other and vice versa (it is in this meeting of exchange of experiences that the Imaginary Museum is used and where it is enhanced).

The Imaginary Museum is undoubtedly a strong influence on the Imaginary Documentary, as observed the photographer Antoine D'Agata (1961) in one of his publications, namely *Stigma* (2004). He was inspired by the artistic creations of Francis Bacon (1909-1992), in turn "drank" from Muybridge's literature and the idea of the movement of photographic representations, transporting them to his artistic creations, namely to serial painting (Lombardi 2008; Sylvester 1995, 30).

We shall observe, here, the metamorphosis that Malraux talks about when an artistic creation metamorphosis what it was before (Sylvester 1995).

SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON THE MODALITIES THAT A MUSEUM CAN OFFER

As an institution, the museum gives shape to social practices, paving the way for a succession of approaches on how different societies remember or forget the past, as well as the importance of research work on intervention in the reconstruction of the memory-related to specific historical events. Recalling the past is not limited in remembering historical facts but also depends on the perception of small movements or actions of the human, such as body postures, what kind of materials they used in certain purposes or how certain stimuli make us feel. The museum can offer fragments of everyday life, retracing the culture of a community (Totta 2000; Connerton 1989, p.135).

The role explicitly assigned to museums promotes common values to citizens, raising their cultural and civic levels. This is about the role of museum democratization that leads Zolberg (1992) to compare cultural policies of art museums in France, and the United States of America, in the theme of museums as identity technology. The author questions the modalities in which museums communicate with their public and underlines that although there is an increase in the number of visitors, this is not an indicator of democratization. DiMaggio, Useem and Brown (1978), in a study on this matter, document that although museological institutions can attract a larger number of visitors than theatres, the public mostly under-represents the less favoured classes.

Tota (2000) refers us to Bourdieu and Darbel (1966), who carried out an investigation in which we find out later that there seem to be no changes since then, especially in the Italian Museum. In the 60s and 70s, the authors compared French museums with Greek, Spanish and Dutch ones. In the three ways of enjoying the museums, strictly related to social classes, as a result, the most numerous groups of visitors, to those who knew the names of the artists and their works of art, came from the upper classes, this group sought to avoid guided tours and crowds. They preferred

individual visits or accompanied by someone knowledgeable and thus relying predominantly on their personal culture. In turn, visitors from the middle classes made their group visits, accompanied by a guide, making use of the available catalogue, thus taking the opportunity to absorb all the available information. As the authors emphasize, the middle classes recognize in the erudite culture a value that they aspire to become cultured, they recognize a greater dominance of the upper classes that legitimized themselves as “superior” when compared to other social classes. The working classes did not visit museological institutions for several reasons, namely due to the economic shortage and the inability to decode museum codes, and excluded guided tours for fear of exposing their ignorance.

Tota (2000) affirms that, in Italy, it is still connoted as a classist and that for most, museums are mainly directed to tourists, such thinking about the Italian museum seems to lose its social role as an agent of democratization, of a legitimate arena for recomposing social conflicts. However, based on several analyzes we observe that new experiences have opened up about dialogical museums, that is, about the museological planning policies that will transform the relationship with their visitors in an interactive way. The forms are changing institutionally and the poetics of conservatives (Visitor-Model) are documented in dialogical museums. The cognitive and emotional experience the new dialogic forms can offer corresponds to the profile of the contemporary visitor, familiar with different media and resources for navigation among the numerous museums available online (Tota 2000, 135-148).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Museum is undoubtedly an irreplaceable place for the perpetuation not solely of Ars Magna exhibited but also to persevere the memories of a nation, its identity, history, myths, cultural influences, artists, trends and the development of techniques in

different fields; teaching; research and conservation of cultural heritage. Culturally rich as history, socio-cultural promotion, source of dissemination and acquisition of new knowledge by the public in general.

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, designed by Frank Gehry⁵, reflects upon its deconstructivist style compared to most contemporary museums with influences from the prototypes of the Modern Movement and the 50s, which recover old typological values. However, following the technological developments and the new requirements of an increasingly demanding consumer/visitor, viewing the Museum has an educational role. The Guggenheim Museum, a building in itself a work of art that you feel and breathe whenever you observe it, pays homage to the city of Bilbao and its people. All its structure is majestic, essentially in its complex shapes and curves, due to the shades reflected on its external surface that are different every day, inspiring photographers, painters and causing the metamorphosis that Malraux explained to us.

It is important to highlight the Museum of the History of the Holocaust - Yad Vashem⁶ in Jerusalem, by various memorials, and centre of studies contributes to the enriching of the visitor as an individual. Another similar Museum is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum⁷, as a centre of studies, does not restricts in providing massive statistical data to its visitors, but handing to each visitor, upon entering the Museum's Permanent Exhibition, an identification card of one of those people who lived during the Holocaust, and where its history appears, showing to visitors that they hold in their hands details of real people of different ages and with existence at different levels of familiarity or friendship. It results in the importance to educate, as well as the responsibility that the museological has for the collective memory. Thanks to the technological evolution and "the plastic arts that invented its press", it is thus possible for us to revisit it online or in book format.

Addressing also the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (MNAA), due to the campaign carried out in 2015 as a result of continuous work in directing the attention to the only receiver of the Museum:

man, for doing something unprecedented in Portugal, although this type of initiative is already practised abroad, having started in the United Kingdom in 1906. The MNAA launched a fundraising campaign⁸ to buy the painting “Adoration of the Magi” by the illustrious artist, the Portuguese painter, Domingos António Sequeira⁹ (1768-1837). The fundraising campaign counted with the participation of numerous anonymous contributions from various private entities, such as the EDP Foundation, *Sociedade Portuguesa de Autores*, awards, including the Pritzker Prize (1989), the Prince of Asturias Prize (2014) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2016), by Barack Obama. Ana Aeroporto among all, noteworthy, the Aga Khan Foundation, whose donation was the most significant, contributing one-third of the value of the work to the National Museum of Ancient Art.

It should also be noted that traditional visits registered a growth trend in Portugal concerning the number of visitors to museums of 5.2 per cent in 2017¹⁰. However, the trend of the increase in the number of visitors to the museum space and of attendance to cultural attractions events, as well as the offer of the virtual museums as a supplementary modality to visit it, it is not a reliable indicator of democratization, and further studies should be carried out in this field, as well as regarding the transition from real to virtual, where the task would be to bring more concrete results in the countless debates on analytical reflection, some addressed here regarding this thematic and largely documented in many countries. They bring together technologists and sociologists from museological institutions in an offline and online museological experimentation, as referred by Tota in her work (2000, 210 -216). We must, therefore, carefully analyse the situation nowadays, since the visitor loses something, although he acquires many potentialities. He loses his corporeality, restricted only to auditive and visual senses of perception. The individual cannot feel himself in the space, that is, the virtual visit cannot transmit the real environment of the exhibition room(s), although thanks to multimedia technologies and consumption practices, the artistic

productions, contemporary art and visitors benefit from this encounter resulting in an immeasurable diversity concerning both the past and the present. Virtual museums are more receptive and more diffusion to what Benjamin (1955) emphasizes, how the work of art would be structurally transformed when referred to technical reproducibility.

Virtual museums offer a supplementary modality compared to the face-to-face visit. Mnemonic functions tend towards a path to numerous experiences such as freedom. They multiply the potentiality of knowledge and, although this is of great importance, it produces an imperfect approach compared to a face-to-face visit. In short, museological institutions are known as geared institutions service providers, which must provide an experience, based on a singular or differentiated narrative. It is, therefore, crucial to improve the quality of museums' relationship with their audiences and users, and quality assessment tools should be applied for an observational and proper understanding of the studies and to determine their effectiveness, as they are key spaces of education, innovation, inspiration and dialogue.

At a time when governments and the world population face COVID-19, with this unprecedented situation, most museums have made their social media pages more active since they closed their doors to the public by following the recommendations of governmental and health institutions. Others made virtual tours and mobile applications available to continue the support they are providing to society. The pandemic situation, and the current social distancing rule, moving out of lockdown might put the public at further risk of infection. Cultural institutions in general must find creative ways to serve billions of people around the world. Museums, when closed to the public are vulnerable, don't generate revenue and face more challenges with staff and security, as the preservation of collections must continue. UNESCO, the International Council of Museums (IOM), trade unions and supporters are doing all efforts to support the museological institutions with all types of reopening plans as they are experiencing

a new metamorphose, needing to be reimagined with new tools to continue to inspire, educate and produce a dialogue between societies, whether locally or globally, whether virtually or face-to-face. Experts, museums supporters, staff must all engage in a deep constructive reflection in bringing such creative solutions.

NOTES

1. The British Museum had 5000 visitors during the 18th Century. Nowadays, it has 6 million visitors.
2. *Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga* (National Museum of Ancient Art - MNAA), has registered 212.669 visitors, occupies the 2nd place in the national ranking in Portugal, behind the Museu Nacional do Coche (National Coach Museum) registered 350.254 visitors. Although the MNAA has 21.1% more than the previous year, while the MNC registered 8.5% less than in the previous year (Público, 2018); see more information on the Cultural Heritage portal.
3. André Malraux (11.3.1901 – 11.23.1976), entrepreneurial and visionary spirit, French novelist, art historian, for 10 years he served as Minister of Cultural Relations in France. Author of *Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* (1952-54; *Museum Without Walls*).
4. The period post-World War II, when documentary photography acquired new values.
5. Frank Gehry (1929), a Canadian architect, author of postmodern designs, deconstructivist, who used materials such as corrugated metal and recycled materials. His works can be found at the *Guggenheim Museum*, Bilbao, Spain; *Vita Design Museum*, Germany; *Opus*; *Walt Disney Concert Hall*, Los Angeles, USA.
6. Further information available in the portal Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre, Israel.
7. Further information available in the portal United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, United States of America.
8. Fundraising campaign started on October 27, 2015, and finished on April 30, 2016. Total raised: €745.623,40. Further information available on the portal of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga – *Let's put the Sequeira in its rightful place*.
9. Further information on the portal *Arqnet*.

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