Reality, the museum, and the catalogue: A semiotic interpretation of early German texts of museology

WERNER HÜLLEN

Introductory remarks

We all take it for granted that there are museums, that everybody can enter them as public institutions, that occasionally they exchange their sometimes apparently limitless resources for exhibitions (which means that the number of people visiting them may increase), and that there are catalogues. However, it needs only a slight mental provocation to see that all this is not to be taken for granted at all. Admittedly, as will be shown later, there is no human society where people do not collect certain items, but this need not result in museums and their activities as we know them. They are the contemporary end of a historical development which has given the museum a specific place in our societal system — 'societal system' meaning what Luhmann (1980) understands the term 'semantics' to mean; i.e., a sense-generating reflection of man on his/her surroundings and himself/herself. This development can aptly be described with the conceptions and terms of semiotics. The following is an attempt to do this for conditions in Germany between, roughly speaking, 1550 and 1700. What will be said is, in fact, not confined to Germany, but is an all-European phenomenon.

We will use the semantic differences between 'reality', 'museum', and 'catalogue' as a starting point for our thoughts. 'Reality' is the universe of natural and artificial objects as they meet the eye; 'museum' is a container (chest of drawers, room, institution) in which such objects are arranged according to a certain order and are made showpieces; 'catalogue' is the type of book in which such showpieces are listed and (frequently, but not always) described.

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threshold of material wealth, also put into practice. On closer historical inspection, this idea proves to be a culturally highly developed and sublime form of stockpiling, which is one of the bases for a settled life of human beings (Rigbey and Rigbey 1944). The collection of valuable objects answers human needs which range from the necessities of physical life (i.e., provision against hunger and cold) to culturally imprinted forms of a complex, unfolded lifestyle as it is generated by the many historical shapes of *Zeitgeist*.

Such a collection of valuable objects offers *physical* security in a somewhat primitive sense when food or clothes are concerned, and in a much more sublime sense when, for example, pieces of art are stored as capital investment. It also offers *mental* and *emotional* security as a sign for important achievements of an individual — for instance, when headhunters carry their trophies with them or when the great conquerors of history employ art experts who, in the wake of their armies, strip the conquered countries of their cultural riches. As a special area of mental and emotional security, the objects in museums also indicate their collectors' expertise and show their generosity, from which they expect to enhance their reputation and to be remembered even after their death. This is why loaning, presenting, and bequeathing such riches are very often as important as the collecting.

The collection of valuable objects, moreover, offers *religious* security in the sense in which this is done with tomb furnishings, items of ancestor worship, fetish objects, and relics. It offers security out of *aesthetic* needs when artificially formed objects are piled up as examples of what is thought to be beautiful. Finally, it offers security out of *cognitive* needs when natural objects are piled up as a visible and touchable example of what is supposed to be true and real.

Thus, satisfaction of wants and assuredness of life with the help of a new world, organized according to human plans, is the genuine idea behind the museum. In the course of Western history, it has materialized in various ways, and is the groundwork of today's museums, with all their special branches. This new world is superior to the real one, and can be called a second creation. Early reflections on the museology state (e.g. Olearius 1666: 'Vorrede'; see also Berliner 1928) that the search for our paradise lost is the real reason for collections of all kinds, in particular for the so-called *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* which became popular in Germany during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Balsinger 1971). In its origin the museum is utopian.

The value of museum pieces is determined by the service which they render men in this utopian world. It is *material* value, *aesthetic* value, the value of *remembering the past*, *magic* value, *cognitive* value, and possibly

value in a very *personal* sense. Today's highly diversified system of public museums hardly ever gives away its origin in stockpiling as a special (i.e., settled) way of life. Moreover, what we nowadays regard to be culturally valuable has become determined to such an extent by tradition and by public commercialization that it is difficult to see the connection between it and needs on a personal scale. However, the sometimes bizarre fervor of individuals who collect cigar bands, chamber pots, or shrapnel betrays that collecting for individual needs time and again gets the upper hand as compared to collecting as a highly perfected and academic cultural activity, largely supported or even undertaken by the state.

Vis-à-vis the central importance and general presence of the idea of the museum for human culture, it is astonishing how little general attention has been paid to their history compared, for instance, with the history of settlements, costumes, or weapons.[1] One of the earliest monographs starts with the general complaint that the great encyclopedias have no entry under 'museum' and that museums, which have been in existence for a long time, do not keep files about their beginnings and their history, or about their catalogues (Murray 1904: I–XII).

Quiccheberg's *Theatrum Amplissimum*

The first reflections on museology (i.e., a theory on museums, with the aim of transposing naïve collecting into a planned activity) were made in Germany. It is generally thought that their beginnings — in which attention is immediately focused on the importance of catalogues — are found in the plan of an imaginary museum which the Belgian Samuel von Quiccheberg published in Munich in 1565. He was the personal doctor of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria and, like his master, was an enthusiastic collector. Today, his little book is supposed to be one of the most valuable and, at the same time, rarest documents of historical museology.[2]

As can be seen from general descriptions and complaints, museum collections had up to Quiccheberg — and have indeed even much later — been kept in an order determined by external accidents. Lists of such collections, which served, for instance, as inventories of an estate, show that objects were placed somewhere according to the size of rooms and cases, mixed up with furniture and other household items. Quiccheberg must be praised for being the first to draw up a philosophically based plan for arranging and displaying objects. He thought of it as the basis of future museums, and in doing this he created the idea of a systematic catalogue.

Quiccheberg planned the ideal order of a comprehensive museum by writing down and illustrating with examples the rooms and showcases for potential pieces.[3] His museum is utopian; it never existed. His *Theatrum Amplissimum* is of course imprinted with the features of his time and the place where he lived, because it was meant as a plan for a feudal museum privately owned. This is why the first class of showpieces is totally devoted to the person of the ruler as founder and owner of the museum. He is seen to be in the center of geographic, historical, social, corporate, and artistic circles of reality — with 'artistic' meaning everything man-made (i.e., art in our own understanding, but also tools and all sorts of machines). Of the following classes of objects, only the third is devoted to natural history; all the others comprise art (i.e., sculpture, music, and painting). This preoccupation with the personality of the museum founder and with art and artefacts goes together with a disregard of nature and shows a worldview which was typical for a Renaissance court. This is in itself a proof of the semantic effect (in the sense mentioned above) exercised on the assembly of objects by a strict museum order.

Quiccheberg adds a commentary to his plan which goes into many practical details. He wants to link his museum with a library, a printing shop, various workshops, and a pharmacy. He also admits that it is impossible for a single person to collect all the kinds of objects that make up a museum. Having the whole in a well thought out plan, however, allows specializations which are not just accidental, but make sense. Finally, Quiccheberg states that looking at the manifold and well-ordered exhibits creates more wisdom for carrying out civil and military, clerical and scholarly affairs within the administration of a commonwealth than a speaker could effect even if he was as perfect as Cicero.

Besides the plentiful details and the practical commentary, the historical importance of Quiccheberg's *Theatrum Amplissimum* must be seen in the fact that a systematic arrangement of exhibits is called for instead of an accidental accumulation, and that this arrangement copies the encyclopedic order of reality. This is why Quiccheberg expects that looking at museum pieces leads to knowledge and experience 'fast, easily, and with certainty' (*cito, facile, acuto*) which otherwise could obviously be gained only slowly, painfully, and as guess-work. In a museum, man (and most of all the courtier) encounters the world in an artificial overview. Thus, the museum is itself the sign for a better world. With this idea, Quiccheberg embeds his plan in a general concept of world knowledge and gives it a central function in Renaissance pedagogy, with its primary aim the unfolding of an all-around personality.

Olearius, Major, Valentini

This pedagogic program also surfaces in the catalogue of the famous *Gottorff'sche Kunstkammer* (Olearius 1666), roughly a hundred years later. Adam Olearius, its author, compares 'nature, the book of miracles' with a schoolbook for young people in which they discover the greatness of God. From this *topos*, Olearius constructs a comprehensive didactic system which gives museum catalogues their proper position: the world is a schoolbook in which you discover the greatness of God; sciences and travels are the means with which to discover the world (i.e., with which 'to read the book'); museums step in for scientific work and the concomitant dangerous travels; catalogues with descriptions and etchings of the exhibits are descriptive and illustrative aids with which to enrich our visits to museums, but which may also replace them altogether. This means that for each part of the system, it is the signs which for men can replace direct experience of reality and which, nevertheless, can make them become fully aware of it. Museums, by the semiotic effect which the arrangement of their collections produces, provide people with insights which otherwise are only the outcome of direct experience. In the same way, catalogues as signs provide people with insights which otherwise are only the outcome of visits to museums.

The idea of a museum arranged according to scientific principles was again put forth in a particularly convincing way by Christian Daniel Major, who in 1674 published his book *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken von Kunst-und Naturalienkammern insgemein*. In the human curiosity for the discovery of nature, Major finds men's wish to turn back to paradise, where the knowledge of nature was perfect. This wish is not a prerogative of princes who own museums, but belongs to the members of all societal estates.

According to Major, the knowledge of nature comes from either the word of God or from experience — which, however, must be filtered by intelligence (*Vernunft*). As for Olearius, experience for Major is a result of travel. As not everybody can afford this, comprehensive collections of objects must guarantee that the world at large become visible for everybody. Major does not call them *Natur-und Wunderkammern*, but *Vernunft-kammern*. In them, objects must be arranged according to an ideal order which allows everybody *benefico methodi* to find every object in the dark. Of course, he says, this ideal order of a museum is indeed only an idea, just as Plato's State was one.

Like Quiccheberg, Major in many details proves to be a real practitioner in running museums. The historical import of his book is, among other things, that he follows the thought of an ideal museum catalogue to the extreme. He demands a great book of rarities in which all exhibits

of all museums (*Kammern*) are visualized, described, and commented on so that, in the end, a total copy of objective reality is given. Major admits that this great book of rarities is only a piece of sweet imagination (*süße Einbildung*).

It is exactly this plan that is picked up by Michael Bernhard Valentini in his monumental *Museum Museorum* (Valentini 1714). Following his personal experience as well as catalogues, pictures, reports of visits to museums, and travels, he sought to put together a catalogue of all collections which people know of, and thus to produce the great book of rarities Major had envisaged. The first volume of this museum of all museums represents objects of the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal kingdoms, exploiting 418 sources. The second volume complements the first one in its order and adds *Kunst-Stück* (i.e., artistic as well as artificial objects), exploiting another 240 authors, some of whom had published several books. Valentini prints extracts of 23 catalogues, in sometimes rather long passages, among them the catalogue of the Royal Society in London. The third volume adds the enumeration and description of machines and scientific instruments which were part of the collections mentioned in the first and second volumes. Other artificial objects go unmentioned because Valentini thinks that the reader of the *Museum Museorum* will know descriptions of them anyway.

Knowledge as spatial arrangement of objects

Our comments on real and ideal museum catalogues do not, of course, suffice for a description of the history of collections in existence during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, the monumental work by Valentini will give an idea of the pure quantity of such books and of their function in scientific progress as it was understood in those centuries. We are entitled to speak of museum catalogues in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as an independent and efficient text genre (Murray 1904; Impey and Macgregor 1985; Hüllen 1989). It betrays the existence of a general paradigm of thinking which surfaces for the first time in Quiccheberg's book. Towards the end of the seventeenth century this paradigm obviously had gained general acknowledgment. It had also initiated the idea that museums, because of their semiotic character in documenting true reality, have a general pedagogic function and should not remain in private ownership. However, we are still far away from those who opened the riches of museums to everybody (McClellan 1988).

The collections of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as mirrored in their catalogues, share the general methodological principle which

underlies the beginnings of sciences at that time: namely, ordering by observation (see Shapiro 1979, Slaughter 1982, Hüllen 1989). Recognition of the order of the world, which is supposed to underlie sensible phenomena, was the first aim of natural history as founded by Aristotle and acknowledged by European tradition. It includes the presupposition that this order becomes translucent if one isolates an item of nature — a piece of mineral, a plant, an animal — from the ecological context of its natural existence and defines it *per se*. On a large scale, recognizing the order of the world means arranging in mind objects side by side, comparing them, and breaking them down into classes. In doing so, one moves such items, after isolating them out of their natural context, into a new and ideal one. Such was the famous Great Chain of Being, as it was the Aristotelian system of genus, species, classes, etc.

In their basic aims, the new sciences of the seventeenth century were quite traditional. However, the measure of order was no longer the theory of essence and accidence, as shaped during the medieval centuries and still vivid in seventeenth-century contemporary school philosophy, but the newer scientific observation — i.e., the exact description of an object according to the impression it makes on the senses. This led to a taxonomy of objects — a total system, as for instance worked out by the botanists of that time.

It is important to see that the gradual development of the taxonomic paradigm in the course of European sciences was much facilitated by printing, by the graphical possibility of making visual far-reaching and complicated complexes of thought which thus became memorable; spatial arrangement became a pedagogic principle which spared the memory the work of internalizing long lists of terms and names and replaced them with graphical schemata which one could look at. Before printing, scientific discourse relied to a great extent on this work of the memory. The new principle furthered the increase of detailed knowledge, which started in the sixteenth century and, with ever wider travel throughout the world, grew to dimensions that no one had thought possible. Spatial arrangement as a principle of scholarly discourse must be seen against the background of the fact that, within the Biblical concept of time, understanding the world had always consisted of ordering and classifying objects, because there was no understanding of evolution in time (Lepennies 1976: 9–130). Nature was supposed to have been perfect from the moment of creation on, and human knowledge only consisted of its spatial arrangement, facilitating its overview and storage in the mind.

In this context, the museum proves to be an institution in which the principle of the spatial arrangement of facts (i.e., their arrangement in rooms) was realized in a model way.

The arrangement of objects according to scientific principles in a house has an effect similar to looking at lists and schemata in a book. It allows the visitor of a collection, in going through the rooms and looking at the pieces, to become aware of taxonomic systems which could otherwise only be explained by discourse. As the objects themselves are present, they can be looked at and observed *ad libitum*. Thus, the foundation of the young sciences — that knowledge of nature depends on the senses — is realized.

In fact, the museum put into practice what, since the seventeenth century and since Francis Bacon, had been postulated to be the new method of sciences. Historically speaking, it even anticipated this method. The museum became an opportunity to enact bodily what scientists described to be the method of their work. By going to and through rooms with systematically arranged exhibits, people became aware of the physical features of objects and could realize the order of the world.

It is interesting to see the way in which graphical techniques of visualization again led to a more radical shape of the taxonomic paradigm on a higher semiotic level. By being presented with the plan of a museum, including its surrounding gardens, on a copperplate print, people could take in at a glance what was otherwise disclosed to them piece by piece (i.e., room by room) when walking through the building (Anonymous [= Sturm] 1704: 26–27). Furthermore, by drawing the objects on display in as natural a way as possible, there arose an opportunity for intense observation without having the object to hand. In the same way that printing facilitated the representation of complex and abstract relationships, the copperplate facilitated observation of natural objects.

Concluding remarks

After this chain of thought, it is not difficult to give the museum catalogue its proper place as a special genre of text. It repeats the spatial arrangement of exhibits in the sequence of entries. In many cases, the one-dimensionality of a printed text, contrasted with the three-dimensionality of a museum room, is supplemented by additional explanations or copperplates. Moreover, in the catalogues of the time, a systematic variation of letters — their shape, size, and ornaments — indicated further classification. Thus, the careful reader could at least imagine the taxonomic order when reading the text. Furthermore, the object, which in the museum the spectator could see, touch, and sometimes even smell, was replaced in a catalogue in a style of objective, matter-of-fact description (Hüllen 1989: 114–147).

It is obvious, and indeed a pity, that the dependencies described here are almost totally forgotten nowadays. As a rule, we do not understand the collecting of valuable objects to be a means of making our human existence more pertinent for us in many respects, nor do we look at museums as places where the order of the world becomes visible. One reason is that, from the eighteenth century on, museums have been categorized as picture galleries, sculpture galleries, numismatic cabinets, museums of natural history, of crafts, etc., and have lost all affinities to each other. Again, catalogues nowadays are not supposed to give some plan of an ideal world, but in many cases are the very opposite — i.e., demonstrations of expert knowledge on a tiny field. It is only the parallelism between pictures and descriptive texts that makes us still remember the relationship between such knowledge and its material objects. Thoughts such as the ones given in this paper may perhaps stimulate a few museum administrators to mount an exhibition dealing with the idea of the museum and its catalogues.

Notes

1. There are only six comprehensive monographs on the subject: Bazin n.d. [1967], Murray 1904, Rigbey and Rigbey 1944, von Schlosser 1908 [1978], Klemm 1838, and Scherer 1913.
2. The only copies known to me are in Breslau, Vienna, and Munich; see Vollbehr 1909.
3. The most important passages of Quiccheberg's text have been reprinted in Hüllen 1989: 121–130.

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Werner Hüllen (b. 1927) is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Essen, Germany. His principal research interests include semiotics and theory of communication, text linguistics, language acquisition theory, and teaching methodology. Among his publications are *Linguistik und Englischunterricht* vol. 1 (1971) and vol. 2 (1976), *Sprachstruktur und Spracherwerb* (1979, with L. Jung), *Englische Grammatik für Erwachsene* (1983), *Handbuch Fremdsprachenunterricht* (1989, with K. R. Bansch, H. Christ, and H. J. Krumm), and *'Their Manner of Discourse': Nachdenken über Sprache im Umkreis der Royal Society* (1989).