



37th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology - Frontiers of Sociology, Stockholm July 5-9, 2005

Session: Visual Culture

Convener: Helena Wulff

Title: From concepts to images: visual representations of science in museums

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Abstract:

This paper aims to discuss how visual elements (still and moving images) are used in exhibitions in scientific museums. Considering that science has a strong abstract component (the construction of theories, concepts, hypothesis) and is expressed mainly in mathematical formulae and written words (reports, articles in journals, books), the visual dimension hardly ever comes into play. However, it can be an essential aid in translating scientific knowledge to a lay public in the museum medium.

Unlike most art museums (in particular those specialising in painting, photography and video art), scientific museums tend to rely heavily on three-dimensional objects: scientific instruments, interactive devices, taxidermised animals, archaeological artefacts. This kind of museum also tends to be text-intensive: labels, written panels, instructions for operating interactive devices. However, images are increasingly being used in scientific museums, both to make their message clearer and to appeal to contemporary media saturated audiences.

Thus, what kinds of images are used in scientific museums? What purpose do they serve? What information do they communicate? Are they used to translate concepts and theory into perceptible notions to the lay public or merely to entertain and instil visual pleasure? Do they tend to represent science in the making or just the archetypal images of test tubes and lab coats?

The different roles played by diverse kinds of images will be analysed: photography, scientific illustration, video recording, computer-generated images, diagrams, graphics and drawings. The denomination scientific museum intends to encompass a wide range of museums where different scientific disciplines are on display (science museums, science centres, natural history museums, archaeological museums, anthropological museums).

This paper is based on current research for a PhD thesis in sociology. The supporting information was gathered predominantly through content analysis of exhibitions in Portuguese museums.