

Please Increase Your Browser's Memory Partition: Individual Action and Collective Blame in the Hall of Biodiversity

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The American Museum of Natural History in New York city aims to awe visitors with its sheer, incomprehensible magnitude. As massive as the displays of "preserved" animals, fossils, and cultural exhibits are, museum workers proudly boast that the museum can only display 1% of its holdings at any given time. The museum's numerous exhibits, combined with its enormous halls and labyrinthian rooms, impress upon visitors a feeling of ancient timelessness and irrefutable truths. Significantly, teachers and parents usher children here to expose them to the secrets of nature, past and present. What messages does this museum deliver to these, and other, formative minds? In relating my experiences at this museum, and particularly in the museum's Hall of Biodiversity, I hope to decode some of the many tacit messages conveyed through this museum's exhibits.

In an initial, rapid perambulation of the main hallways and staircases, I pause to observe the convening of school children on the museum's lowest level. They sit in orderly groups within this catacomb-like structure and await the special event ahead of them. I catch the tone of anxious nervousness in their chattering, high-pitched voices. Their usual educational routine has been radically altered so that they can learn something majestic. Truths about nature? Their places within the world? How to maneuver with passive conformity from one surrealistic display to the next? I leave them, noting the warm glow falling upon their faces from a strategically placed gift shop, and reflect upon how the museum's serious ambience rekindles

in me feelings of respectful reverence and anxiety from my childhood museum trips. Even if my mind forgets the details of those experiences, my body remembers the emotions. I wonder what other truths of worldly comport I physically embody from past and present experiences like museum field trips? For now, I let the cycle of learning continue with this next generation of children and make my way to the African Mammals room.

Upon entering the African Mammals room, I find myself staring head on with a "family" of African elephants. While all the other animals in this room are behind glass enclosures in simulated natural habitats, the elephants stand alone, on a raised platform, without any separating glass. The intent, noted by Haraway (1989), is to give visitors the impression of encountering elephants in the wild, but the effect, for me, is much different. I am unable to reconcile myself to the fact that these exhibit props were once living creatures. A coating of plastic over one of the elephants only adds to my suspended belief: he (?) was obviously just delivered from the factory.

I blame this mis-reading, in part, on the Disneyfication of my cultural sensibility. As Eco (1986) and Baudrillard (1994) have observed, the unreal and the ersatz strike observers as being much more plausible than the "real" thing. For example, where a crocodile in the wild would probably steer clear of a boat, at Disneyland, one comes to expect an overt display of ferociousness. The simulation becomes more real than the simulated – this is the condition of "hyperreality."

Anachronism is another reason for my disbelief. My historically specific reverence for living mam-

mals prevents me from accepting the reality of their murder. That said, the elaborate use of virtual and artificial animals and plants in the Hall of Biodiversity better reflects the values of late-twentieth century Western culture, but this value-match does not mean that the Hall of Biodiversity is devoid of any encoded messages; it just means that they are more difficult to discern and decipher.

Hyperreality in the Hall of Biodiversity

Stepping into the Hall of Biodiversity feels like stepping into another realm. It is not, as with the elephants in the African Mammals room, that I am encountering something out of its natural habitat. Instead, my senses are assaulted with lush green visuals in a darkened room, with cool air whispering across my skin, and with songs of insects and birds emanating from somewhere beyond sight. For a split-second, the impression of being in a tropical environment remains with me. I quickly comprehend the surface message of this exhibit's layout: visitors are made part of the exhibit in order to instill in them an awareness of *their* places within biodiversity. I soon discover that this hall also imparts many other, more problematic, messages to visitors.

Another dominant theme of this exhibit is the need for humans to harmonize their endeavors and actions with the natural flows of life on this planet. As a guide instructs me, this is the first time the American Museum of Natural History has taken a non-neutral stance on an issue. What the guide most likely means is that this is the first time the museum has acknowledged the potential of exhibits to deliver political messages and consciously constructed an exhibit to take a stand on an issue. The presentation materials in this hall reinforce the need for and possibility of harmonizing human practices with ecosystems. Many computer terminals, television screens, and films complement the natural rainforest environment, as if illustrating how we could benevolently integrate our high-tech world with the natural world.

The soundness of this message resonates with me, but it also conspicuously serves the interests of big business. Industries don't need to cease polluting the environment or exploiting natural resources, only to "harmonize" those practices within "acceptable" limits. As I continue to probe this harmonization theme in the exhibit, it does not surprise me to find that the hall's "founders" and

"friends" include business giants such as IBM Corporation, Mobil Corporation, Monsanto Company, and others.

As I walk within the hall and try to synthesize the glut of biodiversity-related information thrust upon me, the museum guide's words return to me. He related that our planet is now rapidly approaching its sixth major extinction; for the first time in "the history of the universe," this extinction will be caused by human activity. So, the exhibit is designed to spread awareness of this impending doom and to chart an alternate path that may help us avoid this catastrophe.

Textual Analysis: Discourse of Collective Blame

The hall is physically bifurcated into two main sections by an artificial African rainforest. The textual information on the right side of the rainforest (when entering from the main museum hallway) enumerates many reasons for valuing biodiversity and then relates the many ways that biodiversity is being threatened. The textual information on the opposite side of the rainforest deals primarily with strategies for ameliorating environmental woes through individual actions. I turn a critical eye first toward the textual information on the right side, which I call a discourse of collective blame.

In all the discourse of biodiversity destruction found within this exhibit, whether presented on wall plaques, television screens, or floor panels, I would like to draw special attention to the lack of agency. That is, the text does not explicitly mention any people or companies responsible for this pending environmental doom. On one hand, this rhetoric honestly sums-up the situation: everyone must work together to prevent the sixth major extinction. On the other hand, such generalities foster a sense of apathy that is usually associated with this register of environmental discourse – i.e., we're all doomed no matter what we do. The use of passive voice also allows culpable parties to remain hidden so that museum visitors cannot target them for redress.

Consider a few textual examples taken from wall plaques on this right (collective blame) side of the hall. The hall's designers situated these plaques on two sides of adjacent pillars (four plaques total) facing the Ocean Life / Ocean Life Café room. The plaques rest at three to six feet in height. The text is vibrant red and white on a black background. The

plaque entitled “MAJOR THREATS TO BIODIVERSITY” reads:

Human population has exploded since the invention of agriculture some 10,000 years ago. People have already transformed vast amounts of land for farming, and the Industrial Revolution has increased the rate of expansion of cities, roads, and manufacturing facilities – all at the expense of natural ecosystems.

I find it difficult to criticize the passive tone of this opening section because of the historical nature of the information. One could still, however, pose a macro-level question of what countries account for the most transformation of land and expansion of manufacturing. The answers to these questions would begin to hone in on issues of responsibility. As the passage continues to describe present events, one can easily spot the lacunae. Note my bracketed interactions with the statements given on the rest of this plaque:

Conversion of land for farming and timber production is accelerating, especially in tropical regions where most of the world’s species live.

[Why is it accelerating? What forces are pushing this escalation? Globalization? What companies are responsible for most of this farming and timber production? How does international law work in favor of such exploitation?]

Our fisheries and numerous wildlife species have become severely depleted through over-exploitation, . . .

[A certain amount of exploitation is alright?]

. . . and pollution is poisoning many species outright. Invading species, arriving from distant lands through human contact, are driving large numbers of local species extinct.

[Again, who is doing most of the polluting? Who are the biggest culprits? How do political and economic systems allow for (or encourage) such polluting? What is meant by “human contact”? Does the reliance on deterministic metaphors such as “driving” contribute to our collective inability to get off the extinction highway?]

Some 30,000 species a year are being lost forever – and it is all our fault.

[Will guilt motivate change? Will it encourage visitors to alter their behavior? No matter how accu-

rate or inaccurate collective blame is, does the purpose it serves outweigh the agency it elides?]

The exhibit designers obviously had a teenage to adult audience in mind when scripting the text found on these plaques. The sentences are too lengthy and grammatically dense for younger audiences to decipher. It is unclear, however, what messages other than awareness and guilt these plaques were designed to communicate. Take one more example from the plaque entitled “BIODIVERSITY”:

Biodiversity is presently in crisis as humans are degrading ecosystems and driving thousands of species a year extinct. We have the power to stem these losses, but we must first understand the importance of biodiversity and the forces that threaten it.

Like most of the textual information found on this collective blame side of the hall, this passage exemplifies a type of conservative environmental rhetoric that forestalls action and encourages apathy. One finds similar rhetoric of the need for more scientific information and expert knowledge in debates over global warming and ozone depletion. The message is clear: do not act until we know definitively that we absolutely need to, even if it is too late by then.

Standing in between the plaques, with my back to the Ocean Life / Ocean Life Café room, my senses are staggered by the challenge of assimilating the sight before me. Eighteen television screens, lined up side-by-side, span the base of the rainforest enclosure. These three-feet by three-feet screens display images of beautiful natural environments in motion – from oceans to deserts to forests. Soft, new-age sounds accompany this display. These moving images, devoid of human presence, test the limits of my periphery vision and give me the impression that I am walking (or swimming) within these scenes.

Upon further observation, these eighteen screens cycle through a three-stage presentation every minute and thirty seconds. [Is this the estimated attention span of museum visitors?] The first stage synchronizes all the screens to display one scene of a slowly moving, lush habitat; the second stage divides the images appearing on the screens so that every few portray a similar moving image of one serene habitat; the final stage transforms these many habitats into blackened images of destruction

– bulldozed wetlands, clear-cut forests, sea-life caught in nets, etc.

Notably, no human actors are visible in these images of destruction. The theme of collective responsibility and disguised agency continues even with this exhibit's non-textual presentations. For dramatic effect, the exhibit designers complemented this final visual stage with deep, rumbling timpani hits and ominous organ tones. Over the top of these dark scenes, vibrant red and white textual "information" about current ecosystem destruction assaults viewers. I have just enough time to read one of these blurbs before it recedes and another textual selection of bad news appears, in time with somber instrumentation. After about twenty seconds of these depressing messages, the screens return to stage one – unified and idyllic nature, unblemished by human activities. Thus, the form of this technological presentation symbolizes natural life-cycles of destruction and regeneration.

As with the textual information found on the plaques, the blurbs of bad news emanating from these television screens also elide agency in lieu of a message of collective responsibility. Note these samples:

"In Canada, an acre of ancient forest is clearcut every 12 seconds"

"More than 30,000 new dams have been built since 1950"

"Humans erode 71 tons of topsoil on a typical day"

Granted, if the museum chose to target certain actors for blame, that might lead visitors to the conclusion that it is not their fault, so they need not do anything about it. If the museum chose to delve into the complex political, economic, and social reasons for such destructive behavior, an already overwhelming exhibit would quickly become impossible for visitors to make any sense of, especially if visitors are only devoting a minute-and-a-half to each display in the exhibit.

Normative stances may be at odds with the very museum design. The topic of biodiversity demands attention to agency, complexity, and complicity in ecosystem destruction. We (in the collective sense used by the museum) may need to increase our attention spans so that we can cultivate patience for working through the complexities of environmental problems. Keeping that in mind, please follow me past the beautiful (and real) hardwood floors and in-

clined benches of the simulated rainforest to take a brief look at the discourse of individual action on the *other* side of this hall.

Textual Analysis: Discourse of Individual Action

A video called "Life in the Balance," narrated by Tom Brokaw, outlines the four main steps we must take to prevent the sixth extinction: stabilize population, reduce construction and waste, develop clean technologies, and set limits on fishing, tree harvesting, and the like. In doing these things, we will not only maintain necessary resources for survival and prevent extinction, we will simultaneously protect opportunities for spiritual rejuvenation through communion with nature. A nearby plaque highlights some of the benefits humans derive from biodiversity: food, fuel, fiber, medicine, and countless natural products.

The discourse of these benefits and Brokaw's important steps may do more to motivate action than the discourse found on the other side of the exhibit, but this action discourse also assumes that anthropocentric value systems are the only credible ones. Biodiversity is valued, but diverse value systems are not. It may be that anthropocentrism works against biodiversity by encouraging ecosystem exploitation.

Moving away from the video screen and plaques about known extinct species and benefits of biodiversity, I encounter a series of partitioned displays, each with two computers, several posters on the issues outlined by Brokaw, and charts delineating steps for individual action on these issues. Amidst these displays, the exhibit designers have interspersed progressive quotes from well-known intellectuals. Margaret Mead's quote captures the activist flavor of this section: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The "What you can do" charts extend these quotes by encouraging individual action through learning, getting involved, leading the way, participating in local government, and consuming wisely.

While the shock value of this section of the hall does not compare with the dazzling technological demonstrations (massive, coordinated television screens) of the other side, it is more pragmatic in that it presents information that could lead to action. This section also offers visitors a chance to in-

teract with the exhibit through graphic computer databases, thereby harnessing information technology to attract children and encourage (inter)action. Visitors are invited, for instance, to E-mail themselves activist-oriented documents for later perusal.

Unfortunately, on this day all but one computer terminal is out of commission. The non-functioning terminals display the following dialog box: "Shock-wave flash can not get enough memory. Please increase your browser's memory partition." So much for the rhetoric of high technology's promise for helping humans overcome obstacles to action. Upon seeing this message and failing in my attempt to correct the computer's memory problem, I reflect upon my guide's initial hesitancy to show my tour group around the Hall of Biodiversity. He explained that this exhibit requires individual attention and that the computers could provide that better than a human guide could.

Conclusion

The discourse of individual action, contrasted with that of collective blame, strikes me as being reasonable and useful. Rather than overwhelm visitors, it invites and encourages action. Still, something is lost between the polarized discursive realms of collective blame and individual action. A

level of accountability is overlooked (companies and governments responsible for ecosystem destruction remain unnamed and unchallenged) and non-anthropocentric value systems are ignored (because humans need biodiversity for material goods and spiritual well being). These two (intentional?) oversights support global economic rationalities in ways that may actually preclude meaningful corrective action to stem off the sixth major extinction. In order to adequately deal with the complexities of ecosystem maintenance in relation to value systems, we will need to increase the memory partitions of our collective browsers (our attention spans for working through difficulties) to greater than a minute-and-a-half.

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