

Communicating the Museum: Literature, Cinema, Art Expression - an inexpensive way to do PR

Presented at ICOM MPR conference in Tampere Finland
29 August 2005

By Romina Mancuso Melisenda: Sociologist, Literature Faculty, Cultural Heritage Department, Palermo University, Italy.

Museum's promotion budgets are not often rich, most of the time they are extremely small. This is the "scenery" where P.R. and communication manager's astuteness and creativity talents are strongly request to set up low-cost high-visibility actions, where anyone and anything can become a communication tool.

This presentation will provide examples of art works as television shows, movie and storybooks placed in museums or inspired by their collections in order to support the Museum Communication Staff's image-and-visibility -building efforts. An interesting review of several Cases study from all over the world will help to investigate the variety of communication potential offered by those media; looking at them from a different perspective will reveal unexpected results and creativity applications.

(...two flash just to open) Sandokan, the pirate of Malaysia.....

...even if he doesn't exist in the reality, the character is so well defined by the description of the Italian writer Emilio Salgari (that has never been in Malaysia!) to seem true. So much true, to firmly be rooted in the fantasy of any Italian, grown in the last 60 years. And, the TV series running in the Italian television in the seventies with the interpretation of Kabir Bedi (the fascinating Indian actor) as Sandokan has marked an indelible picture in the spectators mind. Even if rationally is understood that he derives from the imagination of the author, at emotional level is impossible not to think about Malaysia without inserting the idea of the pirate Sandokan and his young tiger (tigrotti) heroic saga! Also me, when have been in Malaysia, have keeping looking for the traces, the places beaten by the pirate, during all my stay. I had the secret hope to meet him! Let's say: DESIRE OF SANDOKAN, DESIRE OF MALAYSIA. PASSION FOR SANDOKAN, PASSION FOR MALAYSIA.

King Kong.....

I guess you all know King Kong. Beside the story, I consider, the 1933 film, King Kong as a good example of how a skyscraper it has become a worldwide known icon. From that movie on, the Empire State Building got an incredible notoriety. The property company, owner of the building (built in eighteen months only and inaugurated in 1931), asked to its PR office a great effort of inventiveness to find ideas that could promote the sales and the rents of the elegant, but extremely expensive flats in that building. The film King Kong, distributed in the cinema two years after the inauguration of the skyscraper, with the scene of the gorilla tightening in its hand the beautiful Ann Darrow (interpreted by Fay Wray), on the top of the Empire State Building, gave a big help to the sales. The PR office enumerated the film among the promotional actions of greater success.

(...some considerations)

What are museum Pr & communication managers constantly looking for?

Any communication tool able to form, maintain, or change public attitudes towards the museum, its collections and facilities, that in turn will influence behavior...

What are writers of fantasy books, movie authors, and artistes constantly looking for?

Inspirations. They are looking for good, new smart, engaging, sweeping ideas to be loved by the publics.

Museums are full of interesting, mysterious, fascinating, stories. Stories of men, of objects, of discoveries, of long trips, of forever loves, of secular hatreds, of foolishness....

Any atom inside a museum is ready to become a subject for a romance or an engaging movie plot. Just by reading beyond the simple appearance. And, in this way, a creative artist mind, as well as the children's one (following a child during his/her museum visit it could help us to notice many unimaginable details), it could be of

great help to capture the many things hidden inside mute objects "sleeping" on a museum shelf and to "decode" all the story they still have to reveal!

Benefits of PR:

"first, they may have higher credibility than advertising because it appears as news and not as sponsored (paid-for) information. Some experts say that consumers are five times more likely to be influenced by news and editorial copy than by advertising. PR can catch the attention of people who avoid paid messages. Pr also extends the reach of advertising, breaks through commercial clutter, and makes news before advertising. PR can complement advertising by reinforcing messages and legitimizing claims and by telling the story in greater depth. It has high potential for dramatization in that it can reveal a noteworthy event and thus arouse attention. The museum pays only for the staff who develop and circulate the stories and manage the publicity for events. The museum does not pay for the media space or time. If the museum develops an interesting story, it may be picked up by all the news media, and this could be worth a great deal of money in equivalent advertising. The smaller the museum's promotion budget, the stronger the case for using PR for larger portion of the promotion activity." (Kotler & Kotler p. 236)

INTRODUCTION

Movie, TV-shows, storybooks could they be a worldwide, non-expensive, P.R and communication tools for museums image-and-visibility - building?

Searching for Alternative Media, in many Marketing and PR communication manuals, I found a lot about Television, Radio, Magazines and Newspapers strengths and weaknesses, but I could not find any mention of fantasy books, or movies (action-pictures) as alternative communication tools. Why? I'm asking to myself. Could it be due to difficulty to channel inside the museum market needs the wild stream of a creative artist mind? Or it is just because the museum and the "wild creative mind" simply never have met? Can the museum PR & Communication person help in this situation?

A well done plot, planned, written and crafted from a collaboration between a PR& communication person entrusted by a museum and a well known best seller writer, or movies director, it has to be considered more like a "product placement" action than a simple art expression.

Many Films, which have been running in the big screen in those last years, are more like a museum editorial, well packaged, to shape the public opinion. They looks like have been planned by a pr-communication office, in order to let people feel what a museum feels, to believe what the museum mission believes, to tune in to museum reality and needs (money, community support and so on).

Lots are the examples, but today, considering that we don't have the time (it would needs to see the films, to read the books, etc.), I will just launch small "spot" that can help us to start a brainstorming to think on this matter.

I'm going to recall your attention only on some cases, but I am sure, that each of you will individualize as many, if not even more, just by "looking through" your own experience.

An "exercise of creative imagination", I hope...where each one of you will draw your own conclusions.

CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH LITERATURE

A special consideration I would now like to share with you talking about children's and youth literature. I never really stopped to be a child and always been attracted from children stuff. From December 2003 I have discovered the joy of been a children's book writer and since that day I have been invited in many book-fairs and bookstores all over Italy to talk about my book. It is really fantastic to "swim" through a crowd of exited young playmates. So as you can imagine this subject is really in the middle of my heart.

Several are the examples of well done children's books, set inside museums or, specifically made by a Museum in order to fit its own young visitors educational needs.

The Vasa saga", is one of that. It is a well-illustrated book telling the story of the ship to whom is now dedicated the Stockholm Vasa Museum. Written by Bertil Almqvist in the 1965, it is still a good example of how using simple, but hooking words, it could explain very well a true (but easy to become boring) museum story. I had the chance to enjoy the read last year when visiting the museum. It is just perfect. I don't need to add more.

"The Amazing Museum Adventure of Thomas Maxim Moore", written by Jane Bishop, public relations/publications coordinator at the Kansas City's Toy and Miniature Museum. She was looking for something able to made the collections interesting to young visitors and so after three years of work she came out (in 2000) with a fantasy story where, just as his class begins its tour of the Toy and Miniature Museum, Thomas, a read head boy named after Bishop's grandson, falls asleep.... and, like often happened in those kind of story, he start to have fantastic adventure with the company of many museum's collection characters.

Some thing similar is written in the 1967 novel *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* written by E.L. Konigsburg. That story, which was awarded the Newbery Medal, follows a brother and sister who run away from home, take up residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and solve a mystery about a sculpture suspected to be a Michelangelo.

In both books readers learn about the museum's layout, outstanding items in its collection, and the potential of children who are eager to learn.

In *Neue briefe von Felix*, a world known Annette Langen and Constanza Droop book, the beginning "climax" fact happened inside a, not named, museum.

There must be a nice Dodo's story in a book made by the State Darwin Museum in Moscow. I heard about it from Alexandra Agafonova from the Darwin Museum (ICOM-Nathist member), she was working at this Dodo project when I first met her in Slovenia at the 3ICOM-conference. It sounded very interesting but I haven't see the book yet.

I do too have my own experience on this matter: by the Caltagirone Regional Ceramic Museum I was asked to produce a booklet to be read by the young (8 to 14 years old) museum visitors. I wrote a fantasy story, "Capitan Coral and the ceramic course". I set down a plot where readers learn about the museum's layout, outstanding items in its collection and the instructive potentiality of the place. And, the most important, they will become familiar with people that are working inside the museum. The main character of the story is Mr Luigi, the ceramic restorer technician (he is really working in the museum) and, of course, even the Director, Enza Cilia Platamone, has her "cameo" appearance! I set the story, both, in the museum and in a parallel world (from where the items originally come from) so that children by reading it, become familiar with the characters,...and when they got to the museum they'd recognize the items and they'd know what they are looking at.

In the next future the Caltagirone Museum staff could incorporate the story into a sort of Capitan Coral Tour, a new program that traces Capitan Corallo's path from gallery to gallery. At press time, the museum had a book signing, at which young readers were able to meet the characters (actually, the director, the guardian and others). It really makes me happy to see groups of children recognize characters and see their eyes light up when they recognize the objects that they're looking at!

In the "crafting" of the all project it was very important for me to work side by side with the director of the museum: she has been giving me all the scientific support with fact-checking and proofreading. I drew some pictures myself. I have provided the booklet with practical ideas to develop enrichment activities and to stimulate the readers' creativity.

My new book: "Incontriamo la Cina in cucina" (Let us meet the China in the kitchen) will be in the bookstores in October. It is a sort of fantasy - anthropological essay for children. A simple, "baby-way", to get in touch with a culture, to make children curious about China and than live them free to investigate by themselves. A main story, set in Beijing, gives the inspiration to cooking recipes, manual activities, and games that are the most part of the book. An object from the National Cinema Museum in Turin inspires one of the manual activities, and I tell to the lectors to look at it when they'll go visit the museum.

LITERATURE

The discourse about literature is ampler and articulated. I would like to start excluding from this analysis all the home-made texts produced by museums, as permanent collections' guides or catalogues, or any printed materials related to temporary exhibitions. Considering the enormous papery production constantly published by the museums, this kind of analysis it would turn into an extremely capillary and time-wasting research.

I would like to recall your attention on some novels set in a museum or, in which the Museum, and obviously all its "fauna", of administrators, curators, visitors, guardians, etc., are protagonists.

My first think goes to the Thomas Bernhard's novel: "Alte Meister Komodie" (Ancient Masters), entirely set in the Bourdon hall of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

In the book, the author, besides his personal reflections about the Art, about the Viennese citizens, about meaning of life, or about the value of beauty, traces a wonderful, sharp, caricature of the Kunsthistorisches Museum world. He describes weakness and obsessions of: Visitors (he hate schools visit group!), Custodians, Guides, Curators and Director. The Bernhard's telling fit, like a glove, to many art museums in the world and, most of the consideration are a perfect abstract of what many museum study survey are showing out in those late years.

Although the nasty and controversial image of the Vienna Art Gallery traced by Thomas Bernhard, his novel is still a great attraction point for that museum. It is, at least, a source of curiosity and, an incentive for the readers to go to visit the places, to admire the paintings, to sit on the velvet bench where the protagonist of the book first meets is future wife, where he writes his articles and where he goes to find inspiration, peace and serenity.

Of all different sort, but entirely set in a museum as well, is the thriller "Relic" written by Douglas Preston and Lincon Child. The story is set inside the Natural History Museum in New York. Preston himself has worked for long time in that museum. The book it has become a movie. But in the cinema version, the Field Museum in Chicago was chosen as a set. I'll give you more informations of it later on, when we'll talk about Cinema.

Talking about "laky setting choice", the worldwide best seller: Da Vinci Code, written by Dan Brawn, has a lot of its plot set in the Louvre halls. As probably most of you already know the story begins with the death of a curator (Leonardo's expert) of the museum. By a sort of treasure hunting, he conducts the reader to the search of the truth on the facts through the works of Leonardo, from the Gioconda to the virgin of the rocks and searching for all the secrets of the Italian artist life and work. And, needless to say that, after the success of the book, a lot of Louvre visitors, women in particular, ones inside the museum are immediately asking to see the works described in the novel. The museum guides have already predisposed a particular tour that goes along the book's plot. In the Dan Brown novel there are also some "brush-spot" describing the pleasant environment of the Louvre, the parquet of the great hall, or about why the glass Pyramid is standing in front of it. The Da Vinci Code will soon be a movie, some scenes are going to be shot inside Louvre and the communication about its launch has already started.

In some novels one museum appears just for a short time, in few pages, or it hardly comes only mentioned....but...still this is enough to "inflare curiosity" in the readers imagination.

Just to mention one of this case, let's remember "Elämä Lyhyt Rytönen pytkä" (translated in Italian under the title The scatterbrain of Tapiola). In this book, written by the Finnish author Arto Paalinn, the protagonist spent a hilarious, crazy, day visiting the Tank Museum in Parola. Having read the book, I have now great curiosity to visit it too!

CINEMA

The cinema is a medium that well it is lent to the amplification of the expressive potentialities of the museums. It represents for the museum an interesting, and inexpensive tool of communication for the promotion and diffusion of the image of the institution to a vast public.

The dark of the room, the images magnified in comparison to the human dimensions on the illuminated screen, produce in the spectator a suggestive state as dreamlike type that facilitates the message iter, at least at emotional level. A media as this offers great communication potentialities to Museum Public Relations.

It is very trendy, right now, in last generation films, to find a museum curator among the professions of the protagonists. As well, in many films we see at least one scene shot inside a museum. If we look behind the set, there surely must be a museum pr & communication office planning the dialogues, and supervising the emotional message to out-put. As for example many films taken place in New York City are often shooting some scene in the Metropolitan Museum. If a museum will become a city symbol as the Colosseo is for Rome, the Pyramids for Egypt, and so on, then it will be a beautiful conquest of position.

Seen the favourable moment, it would be a pity not to take advantage of this communication tool and leave be only the literary author to define the profile of the museum image.

It would be disagreeable, considering that the museums, their staff, their visitors and so on exist in the reality, to disappoint the spectators arousing in them false information about all of this. It would give a wrong image of the institution that later on would become a stereotype hard to break. It would be better to combine the narrative dowries of the authors with basic museum information data.

Still greater it is the call if one or more objects from the museum collection have a role in the carrying out of the plot of the film. Costing zero, when not even remunerated, the museum or a piece of its collection can become protagonist of a film, conquering so a privileged place in the imaginary of the public. May be, side by side to that of a movie star or of a famous character.

As an example from Italy: the Museo Nazionale del cinema in Torino is the protagonist of the Italian director, Davide Ferrario, movie. Titled: After midnight, the movie is entirely shot inside the National Museum of Cinema in the Turin Mole Antonelliana. It tells the story of Martino, the young museum night guard, which lives inside the museum and is fascinating by its magic atmosphere. And it gives at the same time an extraordinary picture of this new Museum.

And again, Films as 1964's TopKapi, or "Belfagor, the ghost of the Louvre" have conducted, with the imagination, whole generations of spectators in the rooms of two great museums, contributing to spread their notoriety in the world. The cinema is furnishing to the museum excellent suggestions and inspirations to choose new exhibitions and special events themes.

Exploiting the actuality of the themes treated in a film, easily the museum sees amplified what it does about the same themes. Let think film as "The Mummy" (of 1932) and to its several remake (the last one in the 2001), whose scenes (some set in the Cairo archaeological museum) and characters have contributed, and still contribute, to give charm to all the Egyptian collections preserved in the museums around the world.

Similar thing has happened about the success of "Jurassic Park" and the raising of exhibitions on dinosaurs in all the big museums of natural history. Two facts pretty correlated among each other. As the films "Titanic", " Pearl Harbour", " Bugs Life", and the several exhibitions that were born of it. In many cinema productions, that consider by now normal to use the rooms of a museum to amplify the emotional effect of their colossal, it is difficult to understand if it is the museum that takes advantage of the success of the film to publicize a show, or it is the cinema that is submitted to the popular didactic vocation of the museums to create an interest around the theme of the next film. Probably the both aspects are true, however it seems to be a unitary dimension.

Nevertheless, for how much a beautiful film could contribute to create a positive emotion towards a determined museum, it is always the experience that the single visitor lives inside it to mostly influence the idea that he/her will feel of that museum.

FIELD Museum and Cinema

If there were an Academy Award category for "Best Performance by a Museum", the Field Museum in Chicago would be a shoe-in. From the comic to the dramatic to the horrific, more than a dozen feature films and television series have used the Field's majestic halls and neoclassical facades as recognizable movie shorthand for "museum". The most familiar example may be The Relic, a 1996 entry (directed by the "Alien" director Peter Hyams) about a brain-sucking monster on the loose in a Chicago natural history museum, but the Field on film stretches back to the days before movies "talked". The creation of the Illinois Film Office in 1975, and the arrival of Mayor Jane Byrne's film-friendly administration the following year, led to the rapid entrenchment of Chicago as a vibrant film location. Today, stars' trailers and movie catering trucks have become common sights on Chicago streets- and at The Field Museum. The Field played a small part in the 1986 pilot to the series Crime Story. There were larger supporting roles in two 1988 films. In Vice Versa and in She's having a baby. The Field is central in the plot of The Relic (1996), a movie about a monster that gets loose after being shipped back to Chicago with a load of archeological artifacts. Only a few scenes were shot at the Field, including the north entrance, Stanley Field Hall and the west balcony, but the producers' efforts at re-creating "back-of-the-house" labs and a two -tired zoology exhibit convinced many viewers that the whole movie was shot there.

Ron Ver Kuilen, managing director of the Illinois Film Office, reports:- After the EI, the intersection of Milwaukee, North and Damen and Wrigley Field, The Field Museum has been our most popular filming location -

"The Relic" presentato come fanta thriller, è in realtà un redazionale cinematografico del museo ben progettato. The parallel history or the struggle among an unprejudiced entomologist and the biologist that try to be awarded the economic contribution of two rich "friends of the museum" to continue their searches, is more as a museum positioning action, transforming so the film in a great editorial on the museum, of which the mission is communicated to the spectator, the characteristics of the staff, the comfortable and pleasant aspect of the galleries and, to attract the spectator attention on the importance to undersign donations for that institution. It doesn't care if of modest amount, since as the protagonist says:<>. Since the beginning of the movie, in fact, small messages are inserted that allow to intend how much important is for a museum as this the economic support of the public.

TELEVISION

Also the television has contributed and it contributes particularly to build the image of museum in general or a museum in particular.

As the TV serial, set inside the Louvre Museum, with the usual Belfagor that sows fear. More recent some episodes of the lucky American tv serial: Roswell, set inside the UFO museum in the Roswell town and whose plot, goes around the discoveries made by the museum curators.

Also the note TV serial E.R., set in a Chicago hospital, has chosen as location for some episodes the halls of the Field museum in the same city.

All small apparition, they certain cannot build a solid image but, enough to turn on, even if for brief term, a spotlight on the reality of a museum.

CONCLUSIONS

All of these creative media have contributed and still brightly contribute to build, to consolidate and to position the image of a specific museum or, the general idea of museum in the collective imaginary. With the globalisation of the artistic, literary and cinema market this phenomenon takes effectiveness and greater power. Today I was able to talk with you about many titles and characters that we all know, probably, this is already the proof of how large it can be the diffusion of art works. I would be happy if any of you could enrich my research by giving me some new information about this item.

References

Ron Chew, Collected Stories, Museum News november/december 2002, pp.31-37

Thomas Bernhard, Antichi Maestri, Adelphi -Milano 1992. (titolo originale) Alte Meister Komödie, Suhrkamp verlag Frankfurt am main 1985

Mark Alvey, The Field on Film, In the Field march-april 2001, pp. 18-19

Fiona McLean, Marketing the Museum, Routledge, London, 1997

Neil Kotler & Philip Kotler, Museum Strategy and Marketing, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1998

Gaby Gollub, Once upon a Museum, Museum News november-december 2000, pp.12-13

Arto Paasilinna, Lo smemorato di Tapiola, Iperborea - Milano 2001. (titolo originale) Elämä lyhyt, Rytkönen pytkä, WSOY, Helsinki, 1991.

Annette Langen & Constanza Droop, Neue briefe von Felix, Copenath Verlag, Münster, 1995.

Romina Mancuso, - Incontriamo la Cina in Cucina, Effatà Editrice, Torino 2005 - Lasciatemi cucinare!, Effatà Editrice, Torino 2003. - Capitan Corallo sulla rotta della ceramica, Museo Regionale della Ceramica di Caltagirone, Caltagirone 2003. - Un Museo da Oscar. in Quaderni del Museo Archeologico Regionale A. Salinas, n.7- Palermo 2001. Alexandra Agafonova, darwin@museum.ru

Paolo Mereghetti (a cura di), Dizionario dei Film 2004, Baldini & Castoldi, Milano 2003.

Bertil Almqvist, The Vasa saga - the story of a ship, Bonnier Carlsen

Douglas Preston e Lincoln Child, the relic, 1995

www.medusa.it/dopomezzanotte/