From the Walls to the Web: Media Aesthetics, Technological Innovation, and Audience Attention to Artwork Representations

Nicole Smith Dahmen, University of Oregon, School of Journalism and Communication, Eugene, OR, USA

ABSTRACT

Aesthetic theory considers the reciprocal relationship between the creator, the object, and the viewer of an artwork. When viewing artworks on a museum website, a new element is added to the aesthetic model: the mass-mediated representation of the art object. This research brings together art and media theory, as well as technological understanding, to study mass-mediated presentations of artworks and to gauge audiences’ visual attention to artworks based on differences in media presentations. Study findings indicate that art museums are generally showing rigor for visual displays of their artworks on their websites, thereby providing a legitimate visiting experience for their virtual patrons. However, regarding technology, art museum websites are not fully embracing web capabilities. Eyetracking data provide empirical evidence of the effects of certain changed aesthetic variables in the viewing experience. From a theoretical perspective, the research showed how aesthetic theory can be placed within a media aesthetic theory model to study the mass mediated viewing experience.

KEYWORDS
Art Museums, Eyetracking, Media Aesthetic Theory, Web Technology
INTRODUCTION

As the Western appreciation of art forms matured during the Renaissance, humankind began to accumulate and display such objects. Historically, collections of rare and beautiful objects were accessible only to the elite members of society. It was not until 1753 that a Parliamentary Act, institutionalizing the will of Sir Hans Sloane who had left his collection of books and rarities to the nation of England, established the British Museum in London as the first modern, public museum.

Museums, now commonplace, are often one of the first destinations of tourists who are able to see systematically organized, labeled, and preserved collections. Today, with the rise and popularity of the modern museum, humankind, perhaps, finds it challenging to fully understand the influence that museums have had on our approach to seeing works of art. Staniszewski (2000) reminds us that when works of art are displayed in museum collections—either as a part of the permanent collection or a temporary installation—the display itself is a “representation in its own right” (p. 11). As such, “the meaning of a work of art is modified and transformed by its installation” (Staniszewski, 2000, p. 11). Andre Malraux (1953) was one of the first scholars to examine this concept. In his seminal work, The Voices of Silence, Malraux (1953) devotes great attention to museums as subjects and the misrepresentation of museum artworks. Museum collections provide an educational opportunity to those who may otherwise never see the items enclosed within their walls. There is, however, one unavoidable consequence—the items have been removed from their natural context, and in effect, are now being misrepresented (Malraux, 1953). Based on this consideration, Daniel Boorstin (1961) asks, what effect does removing a piece of art from its natural context and placing it in a public museum have on the viewing experience itself?

Using museums as one of his examples, Boorstin (1961) argues that reality, as we know it, no longer exists. He describes the American experience as a series of “pseudo-events”: human-created events designed solely to generate news in support of an agenda. He argues that these pseudo-events facilitate the acceptance of illusions in the place of reality (Boorstin, 1961). To support his argument, Boorstin (1961) dissects aspects of the American experience, including museums, in which the onslaught of pseudo-events overshadows reality. Boorstin (1961) credits the rise of pseudo-events to the “Graphic Revolution,” which began with the advent of photography in the late 1800s. By definition, the Graphic Revolution accounts for the “ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images” (p. 13). According to Boorstin, the Graphic Revolution is the key advancement that gave humankind the ability to capture and disseminate “reality.” A photograph is a prime example. Malraux referred to photographic reproduction as creating a “museum without walls” (as quoted in Madoff, 1996). Bringing us forward to 2016, the web is our current and dominating media
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