



# GETTING THE BIG PICTURE: VISITORS BETWEEN FILM AND ARTEFACTS AT IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM NORTH

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## **Abstract**

Museums have developed from places of mere collections of authentic artefacts to places where history is experienced. One means to bring experiences to the visitors is to include modern, dynamic media in the exhibitions. Prior studies have been concerned with the many new ways museums take to inspire, entertain, and motivate visitors, and the current study contributes to this research with a visitor perspective on history museums' use of audio-visual media in exhibitions. Through a qualitative interview study of The Big Picture Show at Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, UK, this article investigates how conventional audio-visual media such as the film medium places the museum visitor in an experience of an authentic past in museum exhibitions. Thus, focus lies on the interrelation between media, visitor and past. It is argued that use of audio-visual media impacts on the overall narrative, and that the immersive cinematic show among objects has a higher level of interactivity than a regular cinema show. Interviewees explained what role the medium played in their pursue of connecting to the past and the surrounding objects. Furthermore, they reflected upon whether this emotion-evoking communication could be perceived authentic or trustworthy, and it is found that an experience of an authentic past is stimulated through the interaction between intellect and emotions offered by the combination of film and artefacts in the exhibition.

## **Keywords:**

Audio-visual media, authenticity, emotion, history, interactivity, museum objects.

*'I think it is a bit of a cliché, but I think it is a very big reminder (...) what war can do. How destructive war is. Even when you see these things, I think, yes there is the wow-factor when you see a tank, or you see a plane in the actual scale. But then you see the visuals, you see the videos, you see all the artefacts; the diaries, the bits of writing of people, and the actual artefacts all put together. I just couldn't help but feel that there were so many stories there, on a personal level, on a national level and on a historical level. (...) Strong emotions build up in you.'*

(Male, 30 years. Interview 17)

## Introduction

Through an increased use of modern media technology, museums have changed from institutions merely showcasing authentic historical artefacts to places of experiences. Visitors still seek authentic encounters by going to museums, but how do they relate to the stories told there and how do they perceive the mediation used? Through a qualitative interview study of *The Big Picture Show* at Imperial War Museum North, this article investigates how conventional audio-visual media such as the film medium places the museum visitor in an experience of an authentic past. Thereby, it contributes with visitor perspectives on the relation between authenticity and the use of audio-visual media in exhibition to the increasing studies of museums. The selected museum for this study, Imperial War Museum North in Manchester, is a branch of Imperial War Museum and offers a spectacular exhibition about the human aspects of armed conflicts in the world inside a building especially designed for this purpose by architect Daniel Libeskind. Every hour lights are dimmed in the main exhibition hall to give space to *The Big Picture Show*, which is a range of immersive, all-surrounding, multimodal cinematic shows on every surface in this room.

## The Imperial War Museum North and *The Big Picture Show*

In its opening year, contemporary historian Matthew Hughes criticised IWMN for selling the attraction as a spectacular, architectural space, focusing on the periodic *Big Picture Shows*, limiting the amounts of objects on display in the attempts of addressing wider audiences (Hughes, 2002). Since then, scholars have turned to less antagonistic perspectives, including spatial and architectural aspects (Bendsen, 2012), the museum's visitor engagement (Powell & Kokkranikal, 2014), the museum as a new interpretation of the movie theatre (Mandelli, 2019) and MacLeod et al. (2015), who apply a museum design research approach to increase the visitor experience of the entire museum. Hoskins & Holdworth (2015, p. 35) asks how the immersion of *The Big Picture Show* leads to reflection. The focus of the present study instead lies on the presentation of the past through the film medium, and this article thereby contributes to the understanding of the relation between the application of media in the museum and visitor experience of an authentic past.

The Imperial War Museum North (IWMN) in Manchester opened in 2002 as the fifth branch of the Imperial War Museums in a spectacular building designed by architect Daniel Libeskind. It is con-

cerned with war, with a strong focus on the human aspects of conflicts in the world. IWMN has a vast archive of various assets including collections of more than 23,000 hours of moving images (Imperial War Museums, n.d.a), close to 11 million photographs (Imperial War Museums, n.d.b) and more than 33.000 sound recordings (Imperial War Museums, n.d.c), of which a fraction - together with text and music - is presented in thematic and immersive narratives in *The Big Picture Show*. In the main exhibition room, other kinds of installation also offer audio-visual media to visitors via for example short film clips on small screens. Due to its cinematic nature, *The Big Picture Show* is the subject of interest in this article.



**Figure 1. The Big Picture Show. Photo: Mikkel Kirkedahl Nielsen.**

*The Big Picture Show* is the concept description for immersive, all-surrounding, multimodal, cinematic shows performed inside the museum's main exhibition space at hourly intervals. During the first years of this museum's life, the visual part of these shows was performed by 60 slide projectors, showing up to 1,500 slides pr. show (Martin, 2002, p. 28), but digitalization has since increased flexibility and added the possibility of using dynamic audio-visual media such as film and animation. The films use diegetic and non-diegetic sound, so explosions or engine noises and even music blend with auditory (and audio-visual) eyewitness quotations.

*The Big Picture Show* takes place inside the main exhibition hall. Here are also six enterable silos containing topical exhibitions unaffected by the show, although the outer walls of these silos are used as part of the projection screens used for *The Big Picture Show*. A show begins at least once every whole hour (Figure 2), and is announced prior to the beginning, as lights in the main exhibition hall are dimmed, and all walls become screens for projected film and images. Most visitors stop to listen and watch. A majority sits down on the benches (up against one of the walls screening projections), some stand up, while only a few people stroll around. Fewer continue to look at the artefacts on

display, that are still visible in the dark room, although the museum's original intention was that visitors walked around during the show (MacLeod et al., 2015, p. 320). The fragmented layout of Daniel Liebeskind's architectural vision functions as an all-surrounding cinematic experience quite different to the infinite virtual space offered in spherical 360-degree cinemas or IMAX cinemas (Figure 1). Furthermore, the sudden darkness may force one to seek the nearest available seat, thereby limiting the sense of freedom to choose. This may place one right next to an armed military vehicle while experiencing films of conflicts and wars, making the vehicle feel even more present than simply a museum object on display. Many tempo-spatial issues related to *The Big Picture Show* affect the visitor experience of IWMN. Patterns of movement are interrupted by the dimming of lights and beginning of *The Big Picture Show*, and space is transformed from a recognizable exhibition room to an immersive media experience where even moving persons may act as projection screens. The show's duration is another temporal aspect: Visitors either watch the entire show or enter or leave the show with the 'same temporal uncertainty of beginning, end, and duration, of looped and other video/filmic screenings in museum spaces' (Hoskins & Holdsworth, 2015, p. 34-35). Thus, space, media, and objects come into play in the communication process of conveying historical aspects of conflict to the ever-mobile visitors in the main exhibition hall. Characteristics of this process seen from the visitors' perspectives will be laid out in this article, after a short literature review.

<p><b>11am: The War at Home</b> Looks at the experience of people on the home front during the Second World War</p> <p><b>Noon: Remembrance</b> Focuses on the different elements of remembrance, from the First World War to Iraq</p> <p><b>1pm: Children at War</b> Explores children's perspectives of conflict from the Second World War through to today</p> <p><b>2pm: Build the Truce</b> Inspired by the Olympic Truce, and looks at the concepts of truce, conflict and resolution</p> <p><b>3pm: The War at Home</b> Looks at the experience of people on the home front during the Second World War</p> <p><b>4pm: Al Mutanabbi Street</b> A creative response to a bomb attack on Baghdad's Al-Mutanabbi Street</p>
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Figure 2. Timetable for The Big Picture Show.

Each show is of varying length, and programs may also vary. [http://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/public-document/Big\\_Picture\\_Show\\_Timetable\\_2015.pdf](http://www.iwm.org.uk/sites/default/files/public-document/Big_Picture_Show_Timetable_2015.pdf) accessed 3 July 2023.

## Literature review: Film, authentic objects, and the museum space

Most people are used to experience the past through historic novels, radio, TV, and film (Beck, 2015, p. 437; Landsberg, 2015, p. 7), and these media often engages on an emotional level. Although it has been stated that some of the museums' expository functions are challenged by new visual media types like TV, film, and computer interfaces (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 150), it seems that many museums have now overcome these challenges and increasingly embrace the new technology, naturally

implementing audio-visual media in exhibitions. Proponents of this development point out, that certain media can extend the limited range of our individual memories as an important social function. Such capabilities are 'attributed to documentary films, writings, and museums such as the Imperial War Museum' (Arnold-de Simine, 2006, p. 296). The aim is not only information storage, as the media also form and create memories and evoke emotions through their performative and communicative characteristics. Many museums offer visitors a stronger relationship to the past through identification, empathy, and experience. The traditionally imaginary arts and the fact-oriented museum media may be moving towards each other's realm (Arnold-de Simine, 2006, p. 299-300), as 'It might be an obvious strategy to attract visitors who are more and more used to learning about history through Hollywood films and who relate to historical events through imaginative investment, identification and emotionalization' (Arnold-de Simine, 2013, p. 120).

In many ways, 'film changes the way people use the museum' (Henning, 2007, p. 25). Therefore, the need for reflexion on the use of audio-visual media in museums is ongoing. Instead of seeing the audio-visual media displayed in *The Big Picture Show* as a competitor to the exhibition media, the following examines the amalgamation of the two.

Museums have used moving images alongside artefacts on display since at least the 1920's (Hoskins & Holdsworth, 2015, p. 33). These institutions' use of modern technology and media is thus not a novelty. A coherent line can be drawn from the dioramas of the nineteenth century to current day's implementation of screen technology (Griffiths, 2008, p. 6) in museums' attempt to immerse visitors into their constructed visions of the past. But the use of audio-visual media such as film and video in a museum context differ from e.g., the TV or cinema experience, as the media may be used as either interpretation of the past or as source materials from this past in conjunction with other materials of that past. But film in museums may evoke emotions not necessarily intended by the original creators. This emphasises that as well as places of knowledge, museums are spaces for emotions (Watson, 2015, p. 285). Thus, at least two distinct groups of information (factual and emotional) are communicated. The first relying on social structures and intellect, the second different from social structures and relying on (bodily) experience (Hemmings, 2005, p. 550). Presenting audio-visual media as source material in museum exhibitions blurs the division between fact and fiction and may support the fictional elements of museums - depending on the use of the exact media and context. Museums function in such crossfield as it often deploys scientific and research-based elements such as narrative, text and objects as well as address visitors' (who both think and feel) emotions (Watson, 2015, pp. 287-291).

Film and exhibitions may be defined as two remarkably diverse and distinct types of media. Where the first - among others - is guided by principles of space and continuously progressing time, the latter is guided by principles of space and - in principle - unrestricted time, when it comes to the consumers' absorption of information.

The effects of spatio-temporal mixture of media in *The Big Picture Show* opens new areas of discussions in this article. Where the act of navigating through the information in a physical exhibition

is obviously interactive, the act of film viewing in the traditional, linear sense represents a different kind of interaction. Existing models for interactive storytelling are therefore brought into a discussion of the relationship between interactivity and linearity in the context of the nature of the specific case.

This article shares Stephen Crofts' constructive perspective on how history is understood through the media-aided representation of the past. Focusing on (fiction) film and television, Crofts argues, that audio-visual media construct historical material through textual processes such as the visual image itself, the form of the narrative, characters, the narration or commentaries, and personas (Crofts, 1987, p. 90). Whenever a museum chooses to present the past through the forms of audio-visual media, these choices impact the visitors' perception of that narrated past.

The key area of interest in this article is how audio-visual media impacts on history museum visitors in terms of establishing convincing and authentic connections to the past and the surrounding objects of the past. This happens in a particular spatial setting, and the relation between museum visitor, museum space, audio-visual media and the past is examined. This approach sees audio-visual media driven museum environments as offering experiences of authenticity through the integration of objects, space, a degree of interactivity and certain narrative strategies (Nielsen, 2014, p. 131), since '(...) the experience sits between the visitor and the physical material presented, rather than in the physical material itself (...)' (MacLeod et al., 2015, p. 329). In the following, we will see how the integration of dynamic, audio-visual media in museums impacts on visitor behaviour, what they experience, and how they interact with *The Big Picture Show*. In what way does the combination of artefacts, physical surroundings, and audio-visual media create meaningful experiences for museum visitors? Is space, artefacts and audio-visual media perceived as connected to each other, and how are they distributing information signalling authenticity and engaging visitors emotionally?

Nielsen (2017) presents a conceptual framework for audio-visual museum media which consists of a set of characteristics or attention points in form of seven continua demonstrating contextual variations connected to the use of audio-visual media in museums. In short, the first characteristics are concerned with the narrative and navigational aspects of the audio-visual media and, in relation to this, the related interactivity offered. Other points of attention in the framework are the audio-visual media's integration with the museum objects (for instance physical, stylistic, or thematic) and the spatial interrelation between the media and the surroundings. In the framework, the mimetic-abstract level of the audio-visual media is also a characteristic of consideration, and another characteristic concerns the virtuality of the audio-visual content. This points to the question about how audio-visual media affects the visitors' experience of authenticity. Traditionally, European curatorial practice has defined authenticity through a dichotomy of opposing pairs like 'authentic vs non-authentic' and 'real vs fake' (Pearce, 2006, p. 18). Such tradition includes an intellectual approach to museum objects. But as the interview excerpts demonstrate, interviewees often related to emotional aspects of the displayed past.

Perceptions of authenticity can be placed on a continuum ranging from essentialist to constructi-

vist standpoints. The essentialist standpoint comprises the intellectual approach to the past, where museums traditionally belonged (Chhabra, 2008). The constructivist end of the continuum acknowledges that the notion of authenticity is based on emotions, experience, context and emotions. Such constructivist experience of authenticity is therefore an individual matter. Our prior experiences impact how we react emotionally to new ones, so the response depend on a circular interrelation between personal experience and affect (Hemmings, 2005, p. 552). Sheila Watson elaborates that ‘places where we encounter the past, have effect which is both cognitive and physical and these affects impact upon the brain to encourage an emotional response as well as a mood.’ (Watson, 2019, p. 443). No matter how much factual information the museum links to an object, it can be easily argued that its authenticity has been challenged when it was removed from its original context and put on display (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 17), which opens for a potential dissonance (Ashworth and Graham, 2005, p. 4) between an object’s original and current meaning. Museum professionals and museologists have advocated that the experience of authenticity builds on more than mere factual information. Authenticity is not a constant: Ritual and tradition around an object may give it aura and authenticity (Rickly-Boyd, 2012, p. 276). Mark Jones reminds us that the relevance and sense of authenticity or the non-authentic in the encounter with an object very much relies on situation and context: ‘... not simply, because knowledge and experience can never be complete, but because perception itself is determined by the structure of expectations that underpins it’ (Jones, 1990, p. 11). Thereby the experience of an authentic past concerns heavily with meaning (Asworth and Graham, 2005, p. 4). How the visitors at IWMN experienced authentic history in the cacophonous environment of The Big Picture Show’s exhibition of films and artefacts was examined through a range of interviews, and in the following, this method will briefly be described.

## Methodology

The data of this survey is based on twenty semi-structured, open-questioned interviews with a total of twenty-eight museum visitors with ages ranging from five to seventy-nine years (Figure 3) and observations of the visitors during *The Big Picture Shows*. Everyone was approached at the entrance/exit of the main exhibition space<sup>1</sup>. Visitors exiting the main exhibition hall were asked if they had experienced *The Big Picture Show*, and a positive answer to this led to an invitation to participate in an audio recorded interview<sup>2</sup>. The interview was then immediately conducted in the concrete hall just outside the entrance to the main exhibition space, and concerned the following topics, inspired by the elements from the conceptual framework for audio-visual museum media (Nielsen, 2017): How did the visitors define a museum? Did this view on museum institutions correlate with a positive attitude towards the use of media in exhibitions? What was the impact of the specific media use, and what role did it play? Did visitors find a connection between media and the surrounding objects? And, at the end, what status do media have: are visitors finding such communication authentic or trustworthy, and does it evoke

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1 A method Anderson (2010: 4) refers to as convenience or random sampling.

2 Especially people with small children and people who felt they have not paid enough attention to the exhibition - or were busy - declined the participation.



certain feelings or thoughts? Interview transcriptions were categorised in accordance with Nielsen's (2017) conceptual framework for audio-visual museum media and during the iterative process of coding sentences of the interviews, overarching themes were identified and defined among the visitors' answers. Five themes important to the research questions were identified as "museums and media from a visitor perspective", "the Big Picture Show as a key to understanding the past", "integrating film and artefacts", "narration, navigation, and interactivity", and "media, objects, and authenticity", and will be discussed in individual sections in this order in the following. Representative quotes from the interviews are discussed in the relevant sections throughout this article.

Interview 1: Male, 25 years.
Interview 2: Female, 32 years.
Interview 3: Male, 67 years.
Interview 4: Male, 45 years.
Interview 5: Male, 46 years.
Interview 6: Male, 67 years.
Interview 7: Male, 32 years.
Interview 8: Male, 52 years.
Interview 9: Female, 53 years. Male, 50 years.
Interview 10: Female, 24 years. Female, 25 years.
Interview 11: Male, 25 years. Female, 23 years.
Interview 12: Female, 32 years. Male 30 years. Female, 8 years. Female, 5 years.
Interview 13: Male, 38 years.
Interview 14: Female, 62 years. Male, 63 years.
Interview 15: Female, 22 years.
Interview 16: Female, 30 years.
Interview 17: Male, 30 years. Male, 22 years.
Interview 18: Male, 48 years.
Interview 19: Female, 36 years. Female, 10 years.
Interview 20: Male, 79 years.

Figure 3. List of interviews. During 20 interviews, 28 (15 male persons with an average age of 43 years and 13 female persons with an average age of 28 years) were interviewed. All visitor interviews were conducted at Imperial War Museum North, 6 & 7 September 2015.

The following sections thereby reflect both the characteristics from Nielsen's (2017) audio-visual museum media framework and the themes identified through the coding process with a continuous outlook to the recurring theme of the emotional aspects in the interviewees' responds about their experience of authenticity in *The Big Picture Show*. Initially, interviewees' understanding of - and attitude towards - museums is established.

## Museums and media from a visitor perspective

'Museums used to be pretty stuffy and boring and displayful.' Male, 63 years.

'They just used a glass cabin.' Female, 62 years.

'Yes, and they are drifting away from that nowadays, the museums.' Male, 63 years (Interview 14).

The introductory part of the interview concerned the interviewees' experience with museums in general, to understand the individual interviewee's definition of museums. This served as a background to further understand opinions and expectations to the use of audio-visual media in museums. The excerpt introducing this section reflects views on traditional museums as disciplinary frameworks with textual interpretation, that often surpassed or distracted emotional interpretation and sensorial experience (Watson, 2019, p. 448; Dudley, 2012, p. 6). Traditionally, museums are 'the locus for exhibiting the authentic' (Bendix, 1997, p. 3), and, in overall, interviewees subscribe to this view. Authenticity, factuality, learning, and entertainment are among the words often used by interviewees defining museums. One visitor describes it as, '*An insight into whatever it is about. To tell you things. Inform you. And entertain, as well*' (Female, 62 years. Interview 14). Furthermore, another visitor adds, '*It is a place where you can learn about events that happened in the past, you can experience what they suffered, what they went through and things like that*' (Female, 30 years. Interview 16). Objects are considered to be resources establishing this experiential connection to the past: '*It is a building designed to house artefacts that connects us to history and the past. It is a visual record of the past*' (Male, 30 years. Interview 17). In general, the respondents considered the increased inclusion of audio-visual media as more accessible and engaging for people than traditional text-based information.

*The general implementation of audio-visual media in a museum context was not only accepted, but even regarded as necessary: 'I think it is more relevant today than ever. Static displays are not conveying the message to young people, like a film or a cd, dvd's do'* (Male, 67 years. Interview 3). By using audio-visual media, *The Big Picture Show* seeks to communicate to feelings and emotions rather than merely convey intellectual information. The following sections show how this effort is received.

## ***The Big Picture Show as a key to understanding the past***

*'... it puts them into context. You can see an object and it can be beautiful, it can be unique. Because it is something different. But once you see the visuals and you hear the audio and you see pictures of them in context, the objects, and you see the people with the objects, and things like that, then you start to... it is another sort of tool that can connect you to the reality that was ... something that you can't really.. you can't really get a full sense of it by just having an object in hand.'* (Male, 30 years. Interview 17)

The purpose of film in exhibitions may vary, but a traditionalist view would be that 'film can be used alongside artefacts in a display to help relate those artefacts to their original use in their original setting' (Oliver, 1992, p. 61-62). Same author expressly notes 'that film should be used to complement a static display, not replace it' (Oliver, 1992, p. 62). Such approach will not fully exploit the dynamic me-

dia's potential, as film tends to address emotions rather than functioning intellectually like for instance static texts. The interview was therefore designed to explore whether the visitor experienced the use of film in exhibitions as a way of furthering their understanding of the displayed objects as well as the past world represented. However, interviewees stressed an enhanced meaning rather than increased understanding.

Many interviewees answered that *The Big Picture Show* and the film media contextualized, and to a certain extent helped them identify and understand more of the past, but it did not necessarily transform their perception of the presented past. Instead of directly understand, many interviewees express the emotions, the show triggers: *'Not understand, but get a good feeling of the thing. To feel, how it was'* (Male, 32 years. Interview 7). The extended filmic narrative of the past presented by *The Big Picture Show* particularly addresses the viewers' emotions, due to the nature of the medium. Images have emotional qualities, whether they originate from archival material or are produced deliberately for exhibition purpose (Thomas, 2000, p. 14). *The Big Picture Show* offers an easy way of being involved and engaged, whereas exhibition texts are addressing the more intellectual side of visitors. These are able to separate and identify the different means of information and their different roles in the communicative process: *'I think it (The Big Picture Show) gave the objects more relevance and more emotion and more meaning. And that the text kind of gave you what the objects were and things like that'* (Female, 22 years. Interview 15). Different media types are thus conveying emotional and factual information, and the conjunction of these may thereby support visitors' meaning making. The directness and large-scale, cinematic nature of the media delivers an instant connection and immersive experience. One visitor explains, how *'... you are in that experience, and I think it is - you are surrounded with it, and it is more in your face, so, it makes you connect with it'* (Female, 32 years. Interview 2).

Somehow, the traditionalist approach to the relationship between objects and media in museum exhibition turns upside-down here - the film is not merely used as a complement to a static display. While *The Big Picture Show* is on, light is dimmed, and almost every visitor is focused on the projections on every surface. Thereby the objects on display become material extensions, or as Andrea Witcomb has explained in relation to an Australian museum multimedia installation:

... the museum object - the gun on the wall - becomes the extra layer of interpretation, extending to the multimedia presentation an irrefutable materiality to the evidence presented. The gun is used as an aid to materialize the documentary evidence into a clear message ... (Witcomb, 2007, p. 43).

This allegedly 'upside-down' approach to the relation between artefact and media is not limited to *The Big Picture Show* but is rather a tendency in the museum. Beth Lord uses Imperial War Museum North to exemplify how many museums are relying 'less on objects than they do on narrative and the experience of an architectural space' (Lord, 2006, p. 4). Similar concerns about the objects' role have been expressed by others (For instance Dudley, 2012). As shown earlier, the interviewees generally

consider both artefacts and media a requirement for experiencing the past. Maybe the question is not whether the objects still have centre stage, but how objects and media interpret each other in a reflexive interplay. Sometimes, one is the main character, sometimes the other, but both are needed by the visitor to have a meaningful experience of the past.

## Integrating film and artefacts

*'... you move slowly from one display to another. And you read, and suddenly it (The Big Picture Show) comes up. It has its own impact. Otherwise, you'll be seeing the National Geographic (...) but it does not have the same impact. Here you slowly build up on the first display and then you live through it'. (Male, 48 years. Interview 18)*

The above section shows how media and artefacts enhance each other in the museum. However, we must consider whether the positive effects stem from the amalgamation of the two, or if they are a property of film media? Does the film experience benefit from exhibition? It is assumed, that 'Someone watching a television report of a car bombing in Iraq may respond very differently to the event when they encounter the mangled remains of a blown-up car in the Imperial War Museum North' (Watson, 2015, p. 285).

In order to explore this, the interviewees were asked to imagine the experience of the same audio-visual information in another setting. Many interviewees concluded that the museum settings represented something extra, stronger, and powerful, '*Because of the screens, the objects and the environment it's in. You know, you are surrounded by artefacts and things like that*' (Male, 45 years. Interview 4). Several interviewees express positive views towards the integration of film screening in the exhibition hall, as this for instance '*... forced you to sit down and look in it. And it was really good because otherwise we wouldn't have entered another room just to see the video*' (Female, 24 years. Interview 10). Does this mean that the days of the isolated, special room for film screening in the museum seems numbered in favour of cacophonous total installations? The change of the environment in the exhibition hall, when lights are dimmed, and the show begins, functions as the cinema room. The cacophonous nature of this exhibition media is in strange ways to a certain extent counteracted by the film medium, which visitors describe as a means of focus:

*It teaches you more of what you can actually see. As you walk around you tend to miss things. So, with the films you can sit down for five or ten minutes, have a bit of a break, but carry on taking in more information. I think it teaches you more about what they try to tell you. (Male, 50 years. Interview 9)*

The immediate presence of the objects enhances the film experience. Visitors found a connection between *The Big Picture Show* and the objects around them in different ways. Some visitors find that the surroundings and objects support the ability to '*imagine everything that has been told*' (Female, 24 years. Interview 10). Especially when the show relates to immediate recognizable objects, the

show makes sense to the visitors:

*But when they were talking about the air raid shelters, they got the actual physical ones that you can go in and look up and you can walk around them as well. So, what they were talking about is becoming relevant to what you've seen while walking around. (Female, 23 years. Interview 11)*

During *The Big Picture Show*, objects and exhibition space is momentarily embedded into the narrative driven by the film. While the simultaneously presence of film and artefacts contributes one another, the two can obviously also be experienced individually. When asked directly, if they could not just watch the media show at home on a TV screen and get the same experience, the answers are clear. The exhibition environment, the authentic objects, and the presence of other visitors creates a special atmosphere, and *'It seems to me, it would be just as interesting to watch in a TV programme, but it wouldn't be the same experience'* (Female, 23 years. Interview 11). Even though audio-visual media in museums may affect the role of artefacts, museums are in no danger of becoming obsolete.

## Narration, navigation, and interactivity

'The architecture is great. But the thing that makes it is the way the film moves around. And there's different images on different walls. So, you can sit and listen, maybe look up on one image, but then there is a different image still relating to what the film is saying on another wall. And part of films from all different countries.'

(Female, 53 years. Int. 9)

Another pertinent aspect of film in museums is the impact upon user interactivity. The agent of the meaning making process as described above is the visitor - the visitor chooses her own path in the museum, and thus creates her own story. A conventional film viewing contrasts starkly to this - although the film viewer exercise cognitive activity (Bordwell, 1985), watching film is not usually considered as engaging with a highly interactive media. Media in linear form may conflict with non-linear experiences of a public space, such as a museum (Semper, 2000, pp. 120-121). Such conflict certainly relates to the special kind of interactivity that takes place in the museum context: Opposed to traditional film or narrative storytelling, information is not as controlled in the museum's free-choice environment. The information layout is spatially designed, and visitors browse through information by positioning themselves physically in the museum space (Semper, 2000, p. 122).

In broad terms, interactivity is the active relationship between two or more entities (objects or people) (Mechant & Van Looy, 2014, pp. 302-304). From a technical perspective, it is not enough to rely on the specific media to achieve the interactive experience: Media affording interactivity can be consumed passively by passive users, whereas active users may act interactive with static media such as broadcast media etc. (Retzinger, 2009, pp. 247-248). Andrea Witcomb also criticizes the me-

chanistic or technical view on interactivity that is common in the museum world. Instead of simply being the outcome of interactives, Witcomb suggests a view on museum interactivity as a form of dialogue between museum and visitor. (Witcomb, 2006). Thereby the interactive can be seen either as a product or as a process (Roppola, 2012, p. 47). As an example of such approach to the concept, one visitor defined the total experience as very interactive by means of *The Big Picture Show*: 'It is great! It is very interactive. All the pictures on the walls (...) because you use all your senses' (Female, 30 years. Interview 16). Such understanding of interaction is linked to visitors' individual actions and meaning making processes. Considering the object in this situation, it can be defined as 'the interaction between the thing being observed and the human subject doing the perceiving', because in this view, 'the object in its fullest sense exists not in the artefact nor in our mind, but somewhere in the middle' (Dudley, 2012, p. 5). The experience of the past thereby exists due to this interaction. Generally, though, the interviewees expressed a more mechanical view on interactivity, and did not consider *The Big Picture Show* an interactive part of the exhibition:

*No, not really in terms of that you can't get involved. But I suppose it is thought-provoking. So, it is interactive in that sense. It kind of leaves you with challenging questions and makes you think about things.* (Female, 22 years. Interview 15).

Mieke Bal outlines how integration of visual media in exhibition has impacted on museum exhibitions. Spectators' movement through exhibition space and the temporal sequentiality forces a narrative to a certain degree in each museum visitor, who walks their own, individual storyboards. Combined with photos (or other visual media), these movements create a cinematic effect (Bal, 2007, p. 72), and this is further enhanced in the design of *The Big Picture Show*, where most surfaces in the main exhibition hall act as screens during the experience. In the following, I will therefore argue, why - although not interactive cinema in the traditional understanding of the subject - *The Big Picture Show* is nonetheless a much more interactive experience compared to regular cinema viewing.

The (semi-)interactive process connects to the narration of the stories presented in the non-responsive films and can be compared to the interactivity during the process of walking through an exhibition. In the main exhibition hall at IWMN, interaction occurs on many levels. Each *Big Picture Show* is part of the exhibition's overall narrative but do also represent individual enclosed stories. Marie-Laure Ryan has presented a range of designs for interactive narrative structures with different architectures of systems of links (Ryan, 2001, pp. 246-258). Visitors' total freedom of navigation (a characteristic of free choice learning environments) unfolds in the main exhibition at IWMN, which as an overall phenomenon very much follows what Ryan calls the complete graph where every element of a narrative link to every other. On the other hand, the filmic *Big Picture Show*, as one individual component, has a more linear, restricted, and non-responsive form. The separation of sound and image - with the soundtrack as an all-surrounding element, and the visual elements torn into atomic, individual imagery on endless amounts of screens - of *The Big Picture Show* offers its viewers partial interactivity, as the audible and visual plot to a certain degree are disconnected through the spatial order of the exhibition room. Audible story information constantly progresses through the actual time

and is heard throughout the main exhibitions space. Visible imagery also progresses through time but takes place on nearly every surface (walls and floor) in the room via the vast number of projectors. Not all projections show the same image or film - making the experience a 360-degree experience. The visual is thus a unique experience in the sense that what visual information an individual visitor receives depend on his/her position in the room and viewing angle. What is behind a visitor, or around the corner, cannot be seen without a certain activity from the viewer. This means that the visitor by moving around in the exhibition area or simply moving his/her head at any time can select a new perspective on the story told, thereby managing the visual part of the plot him/herself. The free-choice paradigm of the museum is thus incorporated in the film-viewing experience of the main exhibition of IWMN. This is represented visually in Figure 4. Here, the x-axis represents the audio information and time, whereas the y-axis represents the visual plot, in which visitors may navigate by positioning themselves and view in certain directions.

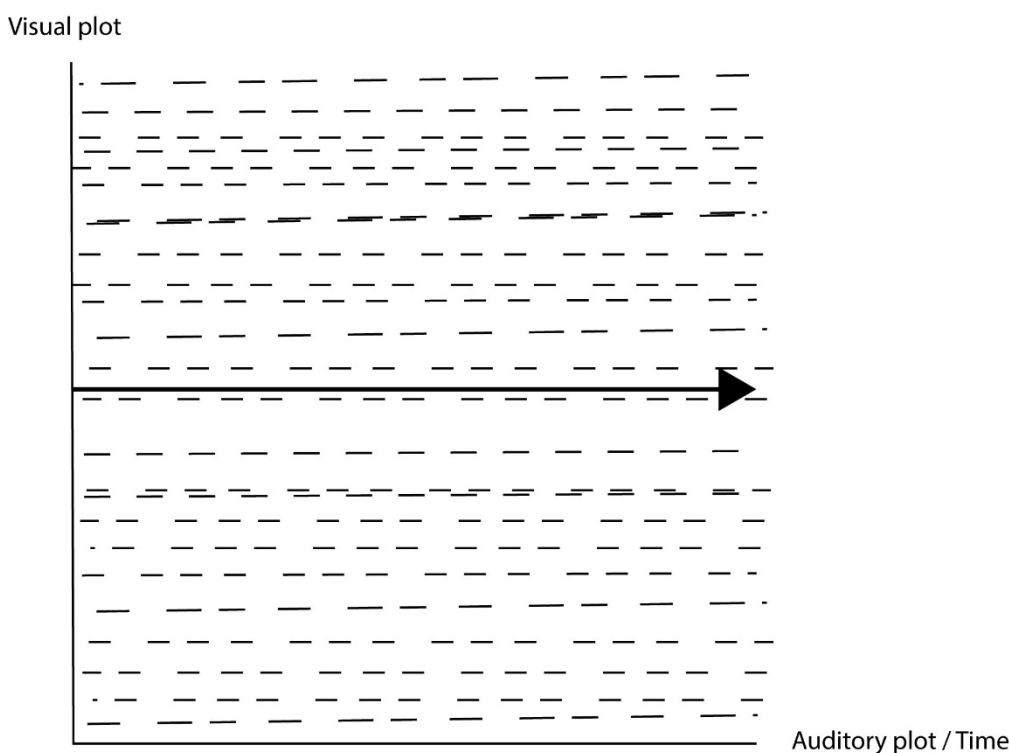


Figure 4. The semi-interactive model of The Big Picture Show.

When auditory and visual plots are separated, *The Big Picture Show* comes close to what is known as the braided plot (Figure 5), where several unique perspectives and stories are entwined or parallel to each other. The progression is driven forward (and in Ryan’s model sometimes even backwards) by the dimension of time, and the spectator has the possibility of moving to another perspective at that exact moment in time, where he/she moves from one story to another (Ryan, 2001, p. 254). While the audio part of *The Big Picture Show*’s functions as both a time-fixed guiding principle and part of the plot, commonly shared with the other attending visitors, the visual experience may differ individually, according to the above description. Although, as Sandra Dudley reminds us, “our experience

of the material world is dependent upon our location, our movement and our interpretations of the data we receive from our senses” (Dudley, 2012, p. 1), these particular position-dependent changes in the story may seem so subtle, that visitors do not see them as options for action or recognise them as a means of interactivity.

Space

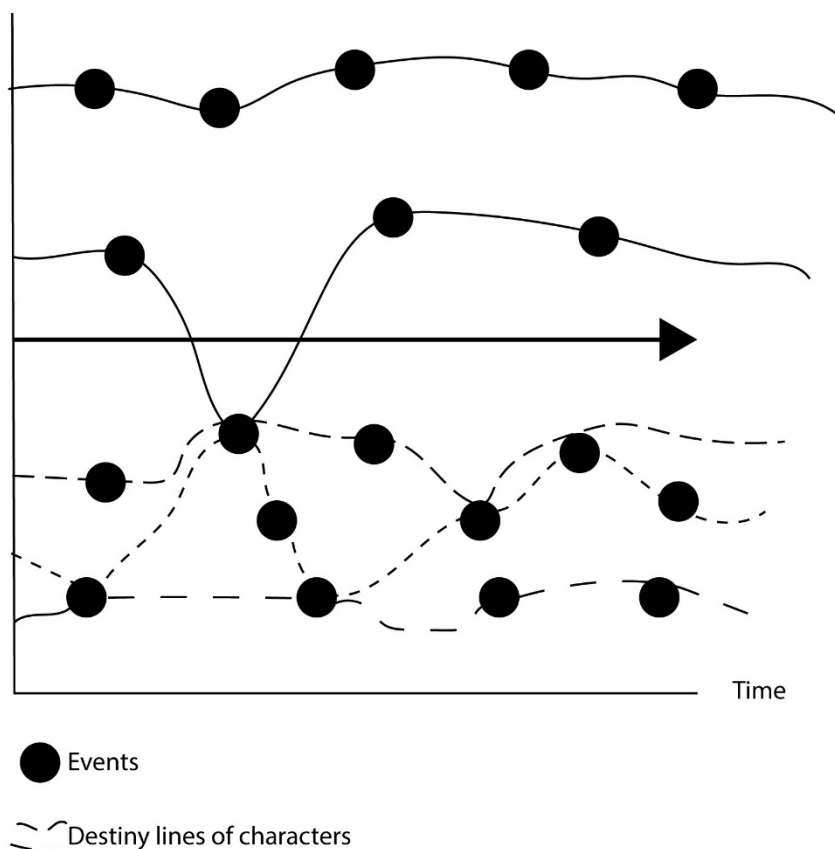


Figure 5. The Braided Plot. Based on Ryan (2001, p. 254).

## Media, objects, and authenticity

*‘It just brings it to life. It just makes you go back to what it was like when it was going on. And it pushes you back into that situation’ (Male, 22 years. Interview 17).*

A concern when implementing audio-visual media is that media technology may interfere with the authentic experience of the past, or that the media tend to reduce the experiential value of the museum objects (Dudley, 2012, p. 4). On the other hand, some studies show, that media may enhance the authenticity of the museum experience. Shaw, Scholes & Thurgood (2008) link *The Big Picture Show* to Jean Baudrillard’s notion of hyper-reality, by claiming it to be ‘more real than real’ - i.e., more real than the past that is being mimicked on the screens (p. 228). Furthermore, Michelle Henning claims that the process of remediation may support the authenticity of artefacts via the addition of video footage (Henning, 2007, p. 27). One question arising is therefore, how the audio-visual media of *The Big Picture Show* affects visitors’ experience of authenticity.



The Imperial War Museum North stages authenticity in different ways. The experience of authenticity is emphasized by an announcement prior to *The Big Picture Show*, declaring, that ‘Every image, every document, every voice is part of someone’s story.’ (Arnold-de Simine, 2013, p. 114). The visitors perceive this personal and emotional perspective as authentic:

*Because of the amount of first-person testimony and first-person narrative included in the show. And that is like you don’t sometimes see in a museum. You would frequently see historical artefacts and context from historians as opposed to people who were involved the events at play (Male, 38 years. Interview 13).*

The personal aspects in particular reinforce the credibility of the show with the audience and supports its claim for authenticity: ‘It’s that kind of “I experienced this, this is what happened to me” and it makes it much more personal to you, and you can relate to it a lot more’ (Male, 25 years. Interview 11). Visiting the museum to experience authenticity has been seen as an ‘emotional and moral quest’ (Bendix, 1997, p. 7), but also an experience which emotional - and thereby immersive and engaging - dimensions has been challenged by the traditionalist eager to augment and contextualize with correct, academic information (Watson, 2019, p. 444). In addition to being personal, relatable, and authentic, first-person testimonies seemed to correspond to the museum as a place of objectivity:

*It is not from a critical point of view, is it? It is a factual thing. It doesn’t lean one way for or against. It is just based on facts. And that is what you want when you go in through here. You don’t want somebody else’s opinion, do you, like you get in newspapers, or certain newspapers leaning one way or the other. This wasn’t like that. This was just factual things being filmed. (Female, 53 years. Interview 9)*

Even though historians may cringe a little, hearing first-person testimonies described as factual and neutral, the above quotation shows the great impact of original material presented in the museum context.

In addition, other kinds of content material in the show plays a large, but not unproblematic, role in supporting the experience of authenticity. The visual part of *The Big Picture Show* originates from the museum’s vast collection of war-related footage, but missing references and the cacophonous and overwhelming character of the presentation obscure the relation between the juxtaposed footage and impede critical evaluation by the visitors. In her analysis of *The Big Picture Show*, Arnold-de Simine draws attention to the fact, that it is not always even clear exactly which war the visual and auditory information comes from (Arnold-de Simine, 2013, p. 115). Visitors express trust in the communicated knowledge linked to the visual information: ‘Well, I suppose it is just the facts, you know the photographs were real, don’t you?’ (Female, 62 years. Interview 14). The status of being archival or found

material from the past adds to this audio-visual media a strong sense of authenticity (Baron, 2014, p. 17).

It has been questioned, if visitors still see museums as windows onto the past, conveying a general 'truth' (Arnold-de Simine, 2006, p. 301). Interviewees in the current case generally believe that the museum institution itself invests much authenticity in what it presents. They regard the museum as a trustworthy institution, safeguarding the authentic stories, making the cinematic show authentic, *'Primarily because it is shown in here'* (Male, 45 years. Interview 4). But at the same time visitors also know that what they experience is to a certain degree a construct, and presentation style has an impact too: *'Obviously it was heavy edited, and Hollywoodified, if you like, to be entertaining. But I think that it is based on truth. It just needs to look good. It is polished'* (Female, 22 years. Interview 15). In 1997, Regina Bendix pointed out characteristics of the longing for authenticity: 'Coming to terms with the constructed and contingent, if not deceptive, nature of authenticity is the result of cognitive reflexivity; living in a capitalistically driven, mass-mediated world means to be surrounded by the mimetic products and enactments of aesthetic reflexivity' (Bendix, 1997, p. 8). As the interview excerpt demonstrates, museum visitors seem to accept the necessity of construction when presenting the authentic. Though both historians and documentary filmmakers yield authenticity to their work through the presentation of primary sources, the latter group tend to give preference to narrative and dramatic flow at the expense of complex argumentation. Therefore, the end products of film production rely on coherence and verisimilitude (Calvert, 1995, p. 31). *The Big Picture Show* merges these two disciplines (history and filmmaking), as the institutional authenticity represented by the museum spills over to this form of communication. Rather than diminishing the experience of authenticity, the use of film media in exhibitions lends authenticity from the sphere of authority to the world of immersive user experience.

## Conclusion

Audio-visual media enters a complex relation with exhibited artefacts when employed in the museum. *The Big Picture Show* encourages visitors to make meaning of the displayed artefacts, but at the same time, the presence of artefacts enhances the film experience. Visitors may not always be aware of the actual interaction, but film in museums can be much more interactive than in traditional cinemas, as the audio-visual elements are entwined with the non-linear environment of a museum exhibition and provoke thoughts, insights, and emotional responses. The amalgamation of film and museum furthermore stimulates an experience of an authentic past through an interaction between intellect and emotions. The former is connected to text, information, and facts, while body, affect and the physical world attaches to the latter. In this environment Logos and Pathos are juxtaposed without privileging one over the other.

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