

Chapter 7

A Place for Imagery in Composing Histories: Available Means of Memory at the Gettysburg Museum

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the affordances and constraints for the visual modes of meaning making at the Gettysburg Museum of the American Civil War. The past is remembered in terms of available memory tools, which effectively shape an understanding of history when carefully presented with context to an audience. Visual imagery at the museum presents material in ways that other modes cannot; however, it is dependent on other modes to set proper context during the audience's meaning making process. The museum at Gettysburg relies heavily upon visual modes to compose Civil War histories. The multi-modalities (visuals, objects, texts) work synchronously as fragmented pieces of history to create a more whole understanding for the audience.

INTRODUCTION

The Battle of Gettysburg spanned three days in the sweltering July of 1863, and is remembered as a turning point in the American Civil War as well as one of the bloodiest battles that the war produced. Here, Abraham Lincoln delivered his eponymous address to dedicate the Soldiers' National Cemetery. Thereby, a quaint, rural town in south central Pennsylvania became a household name, one quintessentially linked to the Civil War. Gettysburg became a hallowed place, quickly progressing from rural township, to battle site, to graveyard. Although over 150 years have passed since the Battle, contemporary visitors are able to see, touch, and embody a facet of Civil War history at this site. Anniversary festivals commemorate the Battle with reenactments, tour guides take often hundreds of tourists around the grounds daily, and the Gettysburg National Military Park Museum and Visitor Center is open to provide historical context

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for the site. The researcher asks: How is history composed through the visual modes of meaning making at this site? How does this site construct a Civil War *ethos* through these available means? What, then, are potentialities for visual modes of meaning making in the composition process?

This chapter focuses on the use of visual imagery within the Gettysburg Museum of the American Civil War at the Gettysburg National Military Park and Visitor Center and suggests implications for this museum's reliance on visuals within the audience's (museumgoer's) meaning making process. The museum provides context for and a justification of the Battle of Gettysburg, as well as an overall summary of the Civil War: its causes, other battles nationwide, and consequences for the outcome. The researcher demonstrates that the visual imagery at the museum fulfills a unique role in framing information for the audiences, although the multimodalities (primarily imagery, text, and object) are all interdependent. Visual imagery is brought to its full potential as a meaning making tool through interaction with the other modes on display. The use of visual imagery in pedagogical situations such as museums can provide an understanding of history and memory and can generate an audience interest that words alone cannot; however, a consideration of the context for these visual artifacts should be part of the meaning making process as well.

This chapter offers a discussion, from the perspective of researcher-as-museumgoer, of one museum's visual artifacts (mainly photographs) and their role within the larger communicative framework of the museum. The researcher-as-museumgoer examined the museum with the belief that the curators have constructed particular histories through the modes presented, and offers an exploration of how museumgoers might read and interpret these modes to compose their own Civil War narratives. The researcher first explores some of the possibilities, namely the available means, for visual imagery within the process of remembering and memorializing the Civil War. The researcher then examines the visual imagery, visual modes of meaning making, that the Gettysburg Museum of the American Civil War has made available to the public, or the specific public audience of museumgoers. Through self-guided reading and interpreting of museums and their content, museumgoers compose their own understanding of Battle of Gettysburg and Civil War histories. Lastly, the researcher interprets the potentiality of the available visual means at the museum for composing a Civil War *ethos*, which allows the audience to frame the information and takeaways they receive. Visual imagery stands at the forefront of the museum's composition of *ethos*, yet the aforementioned interdependence of the multimodalities is especially critical for audience interpretation of *ethos*.

READING THE MUSEUM

Museums are interactive sites for learning that transcend the teacher-student hierarchical model of learning and allow for a sense of self-guidance not found in the traditional classroom. Schwartz (2008) argues that museums are “one of the foremost sites for teaching and learning by visual means” (p. 27). Museumgoers can interact with museum content and discover as much or as little as they feel. Students learn how to “read” museums, how to compose through the available, multimodal means. Museum-based approaches to visual literacy education, as discussed by Schwartz, “examines how objects interact with their physical setting to form persuasive arguments that are primarily visual” (p. 34). Through the consideration of *how* the museum transfers these messages to audience rather than *what* these messages are, students may begin to understand how multiple modes (visual, textual, spatial, object) work together to create meaning.

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