



Moral discourse and argumentation in the public sphere: Museums and their visitors



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ABSTRACT

Recent studies of moral discourse and argumentation highlight the pervasiveness of morality in everyday life, and how the public sphere is shaped by moral 'stuff': speech acts, narratives, accounts and the like. By taking a discourse analytic orientation, this article joins this line of research, and delineates the situated and interactional nature of moral argumentations and rhetoric. The article focuses on the role moral discourse plays in the formation of the public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, and specifically on moral discourse (co-)produced by museums and by their visitors. As cultural public institutions, museums play an important role in shaping the public sphere both thematically (topically) and materially (communication technologies and materialities of display and participation). In recent years, museums have shifted to more interactive modes of operation, where visitors are invited to participate in the public sphere by producing discourse in situ. This study explores museum questions and visitors responses in a large Jewish cultural/heritage museum in the United States. The study first looks at the museum apparatuses, through which discourse is publicly invited, produced and presented, to then study visitors' responses as moral discourse. The analysis critically highlights the dramatic quality inherent to moral scenes, and depicts and discusses how visitors' texts selectively address the moral Actor, Action and Motive as parts of the social moral drama they evaluate.

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1. Morality, museums, and the public sphere

Recent studies of moral rhetoric and argumentation confirm how ubiquitous morality is in everyday life, and how the public sphere is both shaped by and saturated with discursive moral 'stuff': speech acts, narratives, accounts, claims, and more. Most of the recent work on moral discourse has its roots in the linguistic turn of the 1980s, which advanced the study of moral rhetoric from its Greek origins, nesting in abstract logics and centering on the concept of virtue, to be viewed as part of everyday social interaction (Antaki and Condor, 2014; Billig, 1991, 1996; Hymes, 1975). Some of the work, such as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969/2000, rests on earlier foundations, namely post-WWII/Holocaust intellectual attempts to come into terms with Europe's moral collapse. See Frank, 2011). Everyday moral discourse is produced in different spheres: from visible public figures on occasions of explicit moral framing, such as politicians' and celebrities' mediated moral scandals (Eronen, 2014; Thompson, 2000), to laypeople's mundane interactions, such as sharing secrets (Gunthner and Luckmann, 1998). In these partly overlapping spheres, Tileagă

(2012) argues, morality "is a matter grounded in our 'grammar' of using ordinary language concepts," and in "common sense ... assumptions about persons, activities, social relations" (p. 209).

Addressing moral discourse as *situated dialogic accomplishment*, presents a constructionist line of inquiry that is attuned to the social, cultural and of recent also intensely mediated nature of moral arguments and the contexts wherein they transpire (Eronen, 2014; Tileagă, 2012). As an analytical perspective, addressing everyday moral 'grammar' is informative also because it highlights moral claims as situated and interactive accomplishments, often not explicitly coded as possessing moral content. Morality, Bergmann (1998) writes, "is so deeply intertwined with everyday discourse that the interlocutors hardly ever recognize their doings as moral business" (p. 280). In other words, when our research focus shifts from logical claims to everyday moral discourse, the abounding breadth and wealth of morality—its ubiquitousness in various life spheres—becomes powerfully apparent.

What also becomes powerfully apparent when studying the everydayness of current moral discourse, is how thoroughly mediated public spheres are nowadays: moral events are mediated in and into the public sphere, where they are then discussed and negotiated by 'the public'. The public sphere, as Habermas (1962/1989) initially proposed, is "a realm of our social life in

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which such a thing as public opinion can be formed” (p. 105). It is a discursive space of and for deliberation that serves in mediating between the public and various authorities (from the Court and the Church to the State). The public sphere impacts on governmental agencies and on public life, and contributes to shape public discourse, norms and behavior. Habermas’ (1997) view of the public sphere rests on Enlightenment sensibilities, stressing that “access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens,” and that “citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion” (p. 105). His theorizing has been immensely prolific, not least because it has set into motion an array of critical reformulations (“Habermas bashing.” Schafer, 2014, p. 1134). These reformulations address Habermas’ rationalistic and optimistic view of individuals, and of the public as a whole, and his overlooking of the coercive role that power (politics) play in shaping the public sphere (excluding marginalized publics on basis of class, gender, ethnicity, race and more. Mouffe, 2002; Calhoun, 1992). Yet, for Habermas and for his critics alike, the focus on morality is abiding, as it is seen as vital for all forms of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1986, 1990). The public sphere is essentially conditioned on morality, which precisely concerns “the prohibitions, positive obligations, and permissions that regulate interaction among persons” (Bohman and Rehg, 2014, npn., my emphasis).

Habermas’ early studies examined Britain’s coffee houses and France’s salons of the 19th century, conceived as institutions of the burgeoning public sphere, where discourse and exchange helped constitute publics and shape their moral norms. Yet an additional critic of his theory is that it conceptualizes the public sphere as an “abstract space” (Oliver & Myers, 1999, p. 38, cited in Adut, 2012, p. 239). In order to reply to this lacuna, in this study I turn to cultural and heritage museums as public institutions, where moral discourse is performed by both the institution and its visitors. This occurs through the use of specific practices of representation and mediation (on behalf of the former) and participation (on behalf of the latter).

From at least the onset of the modern (national) museum around the 18th century, museums have supplied physical spaces and semiotic resources for the education of the public, and more fundamentally, for the constitution of their visitors as public (Barrett, 2011). Museums have played an important role in shaping the public sphere both thematically (topically) and materially (technologies of mediation and display). In *The Birth of the Museum*, Bennett (1995) adds on Habermas that the “reorganization of the social space of the museum occurred alongside the emerging role of the museums in the formation of the bourgeoisie public sphere” (p. 25. Also Dickinson et al., 2010). Together with the rise of print and mass media, museums continued to flourish as semiotically dense spaces of and for public learning and opinion-formation, which rest on the shared knowledge and the moral presuppositions that they mediated. With the advent of new media we witness the advent of the new museum, with its stress on interactivity and participatory media. The new museum embodies a shift from a modern environment, characterized by top-down narratives anchored in collections of authentic artifacts, to immersive, experiential, and ‘visitor-friendly’ post-modern media environments (Gans, 2002, p. 372; Runnel and Prulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2014).

This study looks at visitors’ public expressions in museums, which is to say how visitors respond to and interact with museums (Marselis, 2016; McLean and Pollock, 2007; Noy, 2015a,b, 2016a, in press; Sandell, 2007). I view visitors’ discourse in museums in light of studies looking at audience participation in mass media (‘broadcast talk’. Montgomery, 2001; Thornborrow, 2001). Indeed, Thumim (2009) observes the resonances between mass media and museums, arguing that like public broadcasting, public muse-

ums too currently “invite the public to represent themselves” via on-site communication apparatuses (p. 618, emphasis in the original). Notwithstanding historical and contemporary similarities between museums and broadcast media, the former are essentially spatial institutions and visiting them is an encompassing corporal experience. If media, from books and newspapers to mobile phones, are characterized by portability, museums are spacious and immobile (like theaters and cinemas). In museums these are the visitors who are on the move (‘circulating’), and doubly so: to/from the museum and inside it. In fact, the politics of the control museums exercise over those visiting them—their “cultural governance of the populace” (Bennett, 1995, p. 21)—is a cornerstone in the critical study of these institutions (Barrett, 2011; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

Museums’ spatial nature touches on public sphere and moral debate in yet another way, namely that consuming the museum is a social event. “Visiting is almost always co-visiting,” Macdonald (2008, p. 170) reminds us, and museum visitors are commonly co-present in the museum and co-engaged in interacting with it. “Judging how others behave” in the museum, Macdonald (2008, p. 170) continues, is a matter of “moral witnessing: a witnessing of others and opening oneself up to be viewed in public” (p. 170).

2. Sticky notes and moral arguments: The apparatuses of the public sphere

All public exchange of opinion requires apparatuses—materialities and technologies—through which participation is afforded and made publicly accessible, and through which it assumes its public character (its public-ness). See Noy, 2016b). Recent semiotic approaches to rhetoric and discourse in the public sphere look more closely into actual settings and communication features, including spatiality and materiality, visibility, and technological affordances (Blair, 1999; Selzer and Crowley, 1999), which are viewed as the “core of the public sphere” (Adut, 2012, p. 238). With this in mind, I turn to examine the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, focusing on the interactive platform that the museum offers its visitors for discussing current political affairs.

The National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia (NMAJH) is a large, state-of-the-art cultural heritage institution. It was founded in 1976, and relocated and comprehensively restructured in 2010. The museum’s glass-clad, five-story building is centrally located in the historic and touristic district of Philadelphia, and hosts 80,000 visitors per year. The museum narrates the history of Jewish immigration to, and livelihood in, the US from a clearly liberal-democratic perspective: it portrays the high levels of integration and accomplishments of Jewish communities and individuals in American culture, society, and politics, and reserves little space for more ‘traditional’ topics, such as the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Regarding the latter, for instance, the main text on display is a quote by Jacob Blaustein, then president of the American Jewish Committee, stating that, “To American Jews, America is home.”

The museum’s display revolves around the theme of “freedom,” which appears in the title of each of the exhibition’s three floors: “FOUNDATIONS OF FREEDOM: 1654–1880,” “DREAMS OF FREEDOM: 1880–1945” and “CHOICES AND CHALLENGES OF FREEDOM: 1945–Today.” In the latter period, freedom, civil right activism, and women’s movements are interweaved and reiterated (“EXPANDING FREEDOM,” “FREEDOM NOW”). The museum’s stress on individual, collective and minority freedoms embodies US liberal political philosophy, as Jewish integration and success build on liberal affordances for mobility across multiple spheres. The NMAJH thus joins contemporary, global democratic museums, which

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