

## Heritage Talking - A Semiotic Analysis of a Major Railway Museum

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**SUMMARY:** Sites recording engineering heritage are commonly presented as museums. Many museums act as physical attractions, resourcing the tourist industry. Messages are constructed by the museum, passed to, and read by their visitors. The paper uses semiotics to analyse the communication event between museum and visitor. It is suggested that the messages passed, have much broader meaning than the mere presentation and recording of engineering heritage. The message is elevated from the level of language to that of myth, by the place that what the museum signifies has in modern popular culture. The Zig Zag Railway in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney is used as a case study.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Sites of engineering heritage, provide physical resources, and activities that are likely to attract visitors. Tourism is often proposed as a method to generate economic interest in, and public understanding of, places of engineering heritage eg Butcher (1985).

Railway museums figure prominently in the most popular types of engineering museums. McKillop (1989) lists ninety operating tourist railways and museums in Australia. Major ones include Puffing Billy in Victoria, Pichi Richi in South Australia, and the Zig Zag Railway in NSW.

Museum visitors may come for educational purposes, though a substantial body of critical literature suggests that visitors are primarily recreating. Visitors may well be unaware of, or even uninterested in the authenticity (or significance) of the site's engineering heritage (Pearce 1982). Visitors may "read" the museum's offering in a very different way to its managers. A dichotomy of purpose may well exist between the two groups, both using the same resource.

### 2.0 MUSEUM MANAGEMENT

Some railway museums have recently employed professional staff to carry out technical or managerial functions. However, all rely heavily on volunteer labour to operate successfully. People sufficiently motivated to be involved with managing a site of engineering heritage, may be motivated by one or more interest. Motivation for railway museums, might include;

- \* treating the museum as their own full-scale toy train set, for personal amusement;
- \* nostalgia;
- \* enjoyable recreation;

- \* running the railway as a commercial operation;
- \* preserving rail transport for its educational or cultural value;
- \* using the railway as a loss-leader to generate economic activity;
- \* as a means of furthering their own political interests;
- \* for social contact, or sense of self worth.

Volunteer workers, are likely to have positive images of and an interest in railways. People with negative life experiences, are not so likely to volunteer to assist. Lack of experienced, expert, volunteer workers, is a common complaint of museum management.

### 3.0 THE ZIG ZAG RAILWAY

The Zig Zag Railway is an operating tourist/museum railway, situated on the western edge of the Blue Mountains, about two hours drive west of Sydney.

Constructed between 1866 and 1869 the great Zig Zag lowered the standard gauge (4' 8 1/2" gauge) main western line, down the western face of the Blue Mountains into the Lithgow valley. The route was abandoned in 1910. During 1967 a group of railway enthusiasts established a 3'6" gauge line on the Middle Road of the former great Zig Zag. The line has since been extended twice along the Top Road, with a return journey now taking about one and a half hours. Locomotives and rolling stock have been imported from Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, and Western Australia. The operating pattern, fare structure, train consist, and ancillary structures are all based on modern touristic practices, not on the original patterns.

The Zig Zag Railway operates reliably throughout the year, with rides offered on public holidays, weekends and on week days during school holidays. It has been rated as among the top five tourist attractions in Australia. During the 1990-1991 financial year, the railway carried 67,995 passengers (ZZR 1991).

#### 4.0 CONSTRUCTION OF THE MUSEUM'S MESSAGE

As with other museums the Zig Zag Railway produces a range of interpretive material and commentaries for distribution to visitors. These contain the overt messages issued by management, and focus on the acquired relics and museum organisation. However, museum site attractions themselves, are structural developments that provide physical settings for visitors to experience. An experience usually gained through some form of personal participation. Visitors and non-visitors may also experience the museum vicariously and at other times, through photography, sound tracks, literature, and story telling. In the process of managing museums, social spaces are created for occupation by visitors. Management creates spaces by;

- \* site planning;
- \* collection, organisation, arrangement, and interpretation of exhibits;
- \* provision of visitor facilities;
- \* provision for visitor activities;
- \* staging of performances.

Museum structures are experienced by the visitor and "read" in the communication event. MESSAGES are passed between them. A discourse is established between museum and visitor, Figure 1. (De Vito 1976).

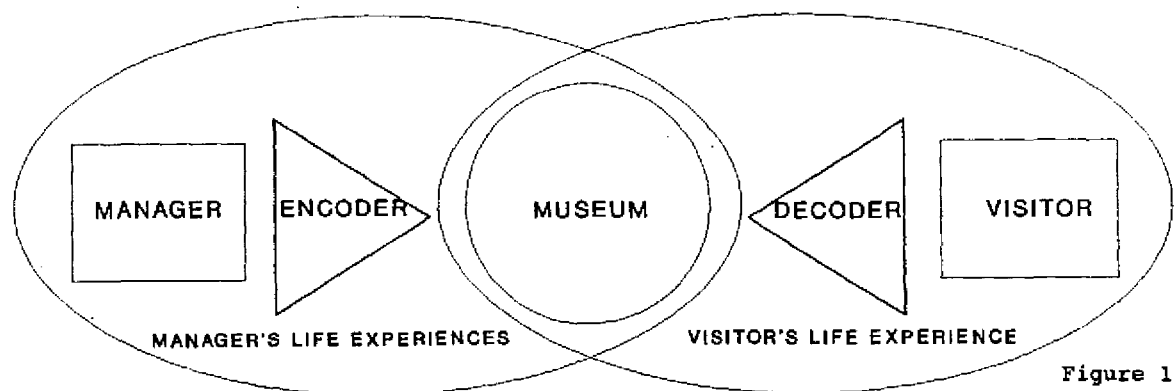


Figure 1.

Additional to the messages of interpretive material and commentaries, an on-site discourse is created by six elements that structure the railway visiting experience;

- \* site setting in the Blue Mountains;
- \* original great Zig Zag site works;
- \* collected and displayed museum relics;
- \* performances by railway staff (and their visitors);
- \* developed station facilities and structures;
- \* riding on the train.

These messages coalesce with and tend to subsume those of the interpretive material.

Not all the meaning of the discourse is contained within formal messages themselves. Much of what is communicated derives from the message's CONTEXT, CODE and means of CONTACT (Jakobson as cited in Hawkes 1977). Context includes the physical, spatial, temporal, social, cultural, economic, or political setting in which the message passes. Code refers to the system of signals in use, such as words, numbers, shapes, colours, letters, sounds, textures, or smells. Contact is established at the points at which museum and visitor touch, such as sight, sound, touch, smell, and to a lesser extent taste.

Sense is given to the message by reference to both the physical and other contexts in which it passes. Visiting the Zig Zag Railway takes place (almost universally) within the enveloping social context of the visitor being at leisure. All constructs of the total museum message, need to be understood by the museum manager and visitor, if the message is to pass unambiguously.

Messages are also passed from visitors back to the museum, as part of a larger dialogue.

#### 5.0 MUSEUM MESSAGES AS LANGUAGE

Messages passed between museum and visitor take place either within the physical context of the museum site, or via the information packages issued by management or commentators. On-site messages are encoded (the process whereby meaning structures are imparted to the museum constructs that program as meaningful

discourse) from the museum's six producer structures. At the Zig Zag Railway codes are encoded by both authentic and inauthentic structures. Some are authentic in themselves but are inauthentic for their current site. Some are totally authentic both in themselves and for their site, others are totally inauthentic, originating from standard tourist producers.

On receiving the message, the visitor applies their own meaning structures to it, and decodes (the process whereby an

incoming message is issued into the receiver's social practices) the message within their own personal framework of knowledge. Most visitors, carry very distorted schemata, against which the message is compared (Longworth 1990, a).

The message passed between museum and visitor, can also be considered as a sign in terms of associations, at the level of language. The six major structures that have been identified as structuring the museum's message, act as signifiers (an image that expresses an underlying concept) which combine with their signifieds (the underlying concept) to compose the total sign that is passed between the two parties in the communication event (Barthes 1988), Figure 2. The relationship is one of equivalence, not equality.

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
Blue Mountains Setting	"old world" charm
Original Great Zig Zag Site-works	human engineering conquest over nature
Zig Zag Railway Relics	premodern technology
Staff Performances	personal service, "honest" work
Station	social centre of the community
Ride	romanticised travel
SIGN AT THE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE "The Past"	

Figure 2.

Relationships are established by forces of modern popular culture, including the popular press, product advertising, tourist promotional literature, interpretive material, film, video, children's literature and toys, and the railway museum industry.

Operating railway museums are particularly well suited to signify the past. Industrial archaeological sites and relics of past technology, are combined with the experience of riding through a landscape. Railways themselves symbolise "travel", as romanced by Prato & Trivero (1985). Steam train travel offers the very journey itself, not mere transport between two points.

Visitors can readily identify with the railway's use of primal heat energy and the simple visual transfer of power. Steam locomotives are an almost cliché symbol of action, power, and exciting drama (Witte 1984), and symbolise a way of life that no longer exists as San Francisco's cable cars. The past is an iconic, semi-motivated sign, as there is some existential

extension of the object. The signifier fits the signified in some quality, though bears no resemblance to the object. However, the relationship is not established by mere convention either.

#### 6.0 MUSEUM MESSAGES AS MYTH

The signifier and signified at the level of language, are united to become an associative total, a signifier in a second-order semiological system (Barthes 1988), that of myth. The established sign that is passed from museum to visitor at the level of language, is elevated to the linguistic level of myth, by the place that "the past" has in modern western popular culture, Figure 3.

SIGNIFIER	SIGNIFIED
the past	smaller communities; greater family unity; closer ties to the land; closer social relationships; simpler life styles; no pollution; fewer social tensions; less materialism; optimism about the future; etc.
SIGN AT THE LEVEL OF MYTH; "the good old days"	

Figure 3.

Authenticity or truth are irrelevant to the myth, and play no part in establishing the relationship between signified and signifier. The old setting has great significance to engineering heritage, the new little. During 1989 an Interim Conservation Order (under Section 26 of the NSW Heritage Act 1977) was placed on the Great Zig Zag, not including the current Zig Zag Railway operations, much to the surprise of media people present (Gill 1989).

The past is defined by the present, for present needs. The past we perceive, is the past we want to, a largely fictitious construction. The past is seen in reaction to, and contrast with modern times, characterised by alienation, disillusionment, pessimism, and an increasing rate of change. Not just "the good old days" as days that were good in themselves, but days that were in some qualitative aspect better than now.

#### 7.0 VISITOR SCHEMATA

The experience of visiting the museum, does not exist in historical, social or cultural isolation for the visitor. Steam trains are a popular subject for reproduction in many forms of popular culture. Visitors bring with them well established preconceived attitudes, ideas, and images, ie schemata (Howard 1987), about steam trains and rail travel in the bygone era.

Visitor schemata are constructed by the various socio-cultural forces of popular culture. Most forces present very distorted images of rail transport in the steam era, so visitor schemata are likely to be distorted also (Longworth 1990, a).

Messages received during the museum visit, are compared to and contrasted with established schema. On visiting the site, the incoming message is decoded against these established schemata. Nearly two thirds of visitors to the Zig Zag Railway express no interest in railways what-so-ever (Longworth 1990, b). Personal experience is a lessening base line against which visitors can judge technical authenticity. Steam trains have not operated in routine revenue service in NSW, since the early 1970's. Rail travel plays a lesser role in personal transportation now than it did in the steam era. Therefore it can be assumed, that most visitors will have little technical expertise on the subject. Younger people and future generations will have had no first hand experience to compare museum messages with.

#### 8.0 VISITOR MOTIVATION

Visiting sites of engineering heritage is an example of a persons self initiated expressive behaviour. Sites are often seen as a resource for the dual purposes of education and tourism eg Milner (1988). Griffin (1976) found 25% of visitors to the Australian Museum in Sydney, expressed "learning" as their reason for visiting, while 20% gave "enjoyment". Most visitors will be visiting the Zig Zag Railway during their leisure time. Kirby (1988) notes the trend to see museums as part of the leisure and tourism industries, rather than the educational. Of respondents to a recent visitor survey at the Zig Zag Railway, 61% expressed no interest in railways. They were visiting for reasons other than personal devotion to the iron horse (Longworth 1990, b), Table I.

Results of this survey (and other like it) suggest that visitors are attracted by the presence of steam locomotives, engineering heritage, and scenery. However many are attracted to the resource for its potential recreational and leisure values. Visitors are ordinary members of the public seeking entertainment in attractive scenery as a family day out. They visit the site to enjoy themselves in pleasant surroundings, not necessarily to enjoy the place itself.

#### 9.0 CONCLUSION

Museums acquire, conserve, research, communicate, and exhibit material evidence of people and our environment (Piggott et. al. 1975). However they take evidence and place it outside its authentic social, cultural, geographic or historic settings. Museumification as a cultural phenomena, separates sites and relics from daily use and symbolises their rarity or specialness. Museums depicting engineering heritage, pay homage to the symbols of human achievement, marvel at the technological prowess of past

TABLE I  
 EXPRESSED ATTRACTIONS

Visitor attractions	% of total responses
Steam locomotives	17%
Engineering/historicity	13%
Scenery/views	12%
For childrens benefit	9%
Unique/novelty/different/fun	8%
Out of children's interest	7%
General interest/time filler	7%
Its on the tourist route	5%
Family entertainment/outing	4%
Nostalgia	3%
Old trains	3%
The ride	2%
Intrigue/charm/mystique/ quaintness/old worldiness/ vintage essence/peacefulness/ interest in preservation/on recommendation/to see improvements/show visitors/ good wet weather activity/etc	10%

generations, and provide a contrast with present day work practices.

Through collected relics and the experience of the ride, railway museums present both premodern technology and romanticised travel. Preserved and recorded engineering heritage, constructs a sign which is read as "the past". The past is defined in terms of recoverable and displayable bits and pieces. An emphasis on tangible remains, not social relationships. Concentration on icons is a particular problem for presenting and recording sites of engineering heritage, which rely on the assumption that the past is there to be visited anyway.

At the Zig Zag Railway, history as it was in the 1869-1910 period is stripped away. A new history based on the picturesque aesthetic, has been injected into an old setting through importing relics from off site, and constructing new structures. Authentic relics and inauthentic new structures, are combined to form a series of landscape precincts, strung out as beads along a thread of track.

The past is no longer a finite entity but a resource, shaped and moulded where history is re-historicized speech.

The museum's message as language, is elevated to the level of myth, and yet again given a much broader meaning than mere preserving and recording of its engineering heritage. At the Zig Zag Railway visitors play at travelling in a bygone era, "the good (better) old days". The experience in no way reflects the educational experience suggested by the museum's interpretive material. This is recreation not education, and helps construct our present culture. The Zig Zag Railway is in the entertainment business of the type suggested by Budd & Ruben (1987), and Silverstone (1989).

At the Zig Zag Railway visitors imagine the past, an imaginary past. A second poetic world is created on-site, with the aid of the presented relics. Relics are used as props as in a play where visitors step out of real life and for an interlude pretend (Huizinga 1950). By painting a picture of the past, museum structures provide clues that unlock the visitor's imagination. The visitor explores the site in terms of their own imagined historical reality, creating their own sense of historic place (Craig 1989). What visitors imagine, is not an accurate representation of how the great Zig Zag was when it provided a functional link between Sydney and the Western Plains of NSW.

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