

SOME RADICAL COMMENTS ON INTERPRETATION
A LITTLE HERESY IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL

By Kenneth Nyberg, Ph.D
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Do not say, "Draw the curtain that I may see the painting." The curtain is the painting. --Nikos Kazantzakis

In one of the more pretentious descriptions of environmental interpretation, Carr (1976) is reputed to have said that:

not having an interpreter in a park is
like inviting an guest to your house,
opening the door, and then disappearing.

Unlike Carr, I rather suspect that not having an interpreter in a park is more like returning to your own home and not having a salesman there waiting for you. Indeed, it is the essential thrust of my thesis that not only is environmental interpretation is largely unnecessary, but significantly more likely to produce harm than benefit, as well.

Introduction

There is a considerable body of literature addressed to modes and means of "improving" environmental interpretation. Prior to this address, three distant colleagues have already added to this literature and others are sure to follow. What is not considered is the fundamental character of the phenomena itself, i.e. the more radical questions of "what is it. why is it, and what has accrued because of it?"

As a beginning, I offer three short answers to these three short questions. The remainder of this presentation will elaborate these considerations.

Regarding the first of these questions, i.e. what is environmental interpretation, it appears that the interpreter does three things: (1) the interpreter tells the audience what it already knows, or (2) the interpreter tells the audience what it does not want to know, or (3) the interpreter tells the audience more/less than it should know. The important thing to remember here is what will be elaborated upon later, i.e. that the interpreter is forever "telling" the environment to others.

The second question, i.e. why environmental interpretation, is even simpler to answer. Having considered the question of why we have interpreters at all, I have come to the only conclusion possible: that the interpreter exists as a service to the good Bishop Berkeley, so that if a tree should fall in the forest we can be sure that it does make a sound, because someone is in fact there to hear it.

The third question, i.e. what hath environmental interpretation wrought, is considerably more complicated but can generally be answered by noting the plagues upon every conceivable house. The interpreter, much like Job, continues to glance over his shoulder just in time to catch everything turning to salt. Before him lies plague, pestilence and immeasurable debauchery in the cathedral.

The Curtain is the Painting

There is something wholly audacious about the environmental interpreters' work. Much like the doorman treating the landlord as the tenant--and an undesirable one at that--the interpreter is involved in the business of convincing the public that their land is in fact his, and if they are good they may visit it for a short period of time. The term for this in Yiddish is "chutzpah", and basically means "unmitigated gall".

Not only is such gall unmitigated, but it is also undiminished. Having convinced the owner that he is not the owner, and having provided him with a new title, e.g., "visitor", the interpreter then proceeds to convince the newly constituted audience that it is ignorant, as well. The "visitor" does not see, taste, hear, feel or smell what he sees, tastes, hears, feels or smells. Rather, he mis-sees, tastes, hears, feels and smells what is really there. Hence, the visitor does not see a pretty, leafy tree sprouting nutlike growth, not does it even see the "Ohio Buckeye". Rather, the visitor mis-perceives what is, in fact, an Aesculus glabra.

In short, the environmental interpreter is in the business of "telling" reality, thus denying to all others present the inspiration of speculation. To remove, hinder, or displace this speculation is to destroy reality; borrowing from T.S. Eliot (1952: 117), reality is:

an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation

and by "telling" it, no longer is the possibility possible. "Telling" reality negates reality, and ultimately negates man himself. As the philosopher Heidegger (1961) notes, the fundament of man is brought forth in a threefold act of founding a world (Grunden), discovering the things-that-are (Shiften), and endowing them with a sense of meaning (ontologische, Begründen des Seienden). The interpreter, by "telling" a meaning, diminishes discovery and ultimately precludes man's founding of a world.

Realities are nothing more than ways of knowing, things to be known. When the interpreter "tells" his reality, he does not share it on equal footing. Rather, he "tells" it so that it now is to be someone else's reality. It is an act of epistemological violence, not simply saying "my reality is better than your reality", but that "my reality IS reality". All else is illusion or delusion.

Much like the priest who observed that it is almost impossible to have a regular religious experience during a church service, I am compelled to argue that an environmental experience is far more often precluded by interpretive programs than it ever is facilitated. Indeed, it has always struck me much like programmed love-making, complete with a coach. Whatever technical knowledge the coach can provide will hardly compensate for the loss of passion and intimacy. It is damnably difficult to enjoy what you are doing, when some third person keeps shouting instructions

Aside from meeting the quizzical demands of Berkeley's dilemma, the very real question remains: why environmental interpretive programs in the first place?

Here it is important to remember, that unlike the proverbial chicken and egg, the interpreter clearly did not precede either the environment nor the actor in it. And improbable as it may seem, far more people have benefitted from an "un-interpreted" river than from an "interpreted" one. Here, the general rule is, if God had wished for there to be interpretive programs He (She) would have properly labeled trees and rock formations in the first place.

Essentially, interpretation--the "telling" activity--was largely instituted to provide a need, not to meet one. Prior to interpretive programming, such responsibility was entrusted to a various assemblage of incompetents typically termed "fathers", "mothers" and "friends", or worst of all, ones own imagination and scholarship. This occasionally led to such crises of consciousness and faith as confusing a "douglas-fir" with a "slash pine"; "sandstone for limestone"; and the "yellow-bellied-sapsucker with the loon". Such angst was relieved by the presence of the interpreter. Now one did not have to make up something when one didn't know, or figure it out for oneself; someone was now present to assume this responsibility. Not only could we now be sure that the tree is, in fact, a "douglas fir" but we were immeasurably enhanced--interpretive programs invariably "enhance"--by the knowledge that the average twelve year old "douglas fir" regenerates 11,156 needles every year, while the loon hardly any.

I do not mean to deny the fact that a great many people like interpretive programs; they prefer having their world told to them. Generally, however, people who like interpretive programs also believe the Northwest Passage was opened by "Coleman and Winnebago". Their idea of a "primitive campsite" is one where the television reception is bad, and the ice machine is at least 30 years away.

The argument goes that we need interpretive programming to meet the increasing demand of larger visitor populations. One of the reasons for this increasing visitor population is greater numbers of interpretive programs. My suggestion is to cut off the snake's head and let the body die. Simply abandon every interpretive program; tear up every access road; dismantle every prepared campsite and refreshment stand; and remove every plaque, sign, poster, arrow and restroom.

What will occur? Basically, a great deal fewer people will attend parks, wilderness areas and forests. Only those people truly interested will go, not as "visitors" but rather as indigents. After all, where is it really written that everyone needs a "wilderness experience", properly interpreted or not?

If you can imagine the consequences of my suggestion, then you now know the "what", "why" and "benefit" of interpretive programming: pure Keynesian economics. Indeed the only unquestioned benefit of interpretive programming is that it:

may assist in the successful promotion
of parks where tourism is essential to
an area's...economy (Sharpe, 1976:9)

In this regard, the interpreter becomes a lackey for the exploitative interests of the proletariat class, and--unless pay scales have improved immeasurably--like all lackeys, does not participate in the proletariats' profits.

Now you may well ask do I really believe all this to be true? Do I truly view interpretive programming as encouraging Bad Faith (Sartre, 1965), playing reductio absurdum with the natural environment, and unwittingly participating in capitalist exploitation? The answer is yes.

The question is, however, is not what I believe about interpretation but rather what you believe about it. Do you really believe that interpretive programs "enrich experience", "enhance understanding", "broaden horizons" and "protect the environment" (Sharpe, 1976)? Once again, I believe the answer is yes. Clearly, not a meeting of the minds.

A student and--until now at least--a good friend, has argued that the interpreter should "...assume a role that supports public mental health services" (Philipp, 1976:12). I take this suggestion as a final measure of evidence as to why I am right and you are wrong. The interpreter perceives his/her role far too ambitiously. It is not simply outrageous, it is dangerous as well. You are tampering with the lives--mental, physical and spiritual--of people. You are taking from people not only their definitions, but their defining capabilities and processes too. You have moved from prophecy to priesthood; your proclamations no longer are prayer, but are revelation. And the fundamental question is: do you know what you are doing?

Conclusion

By now, I suspect I appear like Madalyn Murray O'Hare at the Southern Baptist Convention. In truth, my remarks are not intended to feed complacency, both rather to challenge complacency. I believe it useful to question the very basis of that which we do; to go to the roots; to be radical. This is true of science, life, and interpretational programming, as well.

Quite often the journey itself is more important than the ultimate destination. Quoting one of James Agee's (1960:458) wonderful aphorisms, "the tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction", Saner (1970:178) goes on to observe that:

One learns little or nothing if he avoids the central tigers of his discipline or craft, even though remaining with the gentle, domesticated horses may seem safer. It is necessary, then, to enter the fray; not for me to pretend to instruct, which is for horses, but rather to take up the issues directly, inviting you to think through with me the sense of criticism and its demands on thinking.

It is my hope that these few remarks serve as a catalyst for this demand on thinking, and that the remainder of our time together be devoted to the critical consideration of environmental interpretation; What it is, why it is, and what has accrued because of it? That we confront tigers, if only to grab them by the tail--and consider seriously the topic which I have only poorly delineated. Finally, and returning once more to T.S. Eliot,

we shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.

Dr. Nyberg is the Director of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the California State University, Bakersfield.