Popular, Unpopular

When First World War Museums Meet Facebook

Catherine Bouko

Let us start this paper with a simple question, which many cultural education managers are asking themselves as we commemorate the centenary of the First World War: how does one generate interest in this conflict among the younger generations when they feel so distant from it? For example, the British government plans to recreate the Christmas Day 1914 football match between the British and German troops. Here, popular culture meets historical reconstruction, as football star and pop-cultural icon David Beckham will be one of the players. Although widely accepted, the paradigm of ‘popular culture’ is nevertheless not always clear. In the opinion of Eric Maigret and Eric Macé, the expression ‘popular culture’ is one of those concepts that emerged after the concept of ‘mass culture’ and which clumsily glorify the cultural practices they purport to bring together without really emphasizing the new forms of relationship that these practices entail (cf. 10). As far as the media are concerned, the cultural practices are currently becoming more autonomous; their legitimacy no longer primarily depends on the domination of one social class over another. While the relationship between ‘popular’ and ‘unpopular’ media practices is less frequently subjected to these vertical social breakdowns, this does not necessarily mean that domination has disappeared; rather, it is apportioned in a different manner and also takes into account other important variables (such as age). Nowadays, what differences do we find between the popular and the unpopular? How do cultural media practices express these differences? This chapter aims at enhancing our understanding of the manner in which historical museums, as traditionally ‘sacred spaces’ of high culture, integrate the codes of popular culture to make the younger generations sensitive to themes they are likely to consider unattractive. In other words, I wish to examine how an institution nowadays often considered unpopular, associated with the values of the traditional, unfashionable, and old, invites the popular in its treatment of history.

In an attempt to answer these general questions, I have chosen to analyze the story of the fictional First World War infantryman Léon Vivien that was disseminated on Facebook. This unique experiment involved presenting a fictional approach to the Great War while also incorporating the
communicative codes specific to this social network. Over several months in spring 2013, on an almost daily basis, the DDB communication agency published online messages posted by the character Léon Vivien, devised on behalf of the Meaux Museum of the Great War (north-east of Paris). The story, illustrated by a large number of (audio-)visual documents, is based on the museum’s substantial collection. Just as on any friend's Facebook page, Internet users reacted to Vivien’s messages by commenting day after day. In total, nearly 7,000 messages were posted by followers and 60,000 people became ‘fans’ of Léon’s page. We thus find ourselves faced with a media object that, in an original manner, hinges on a topic taken from high culture—History as presented in museums—with a media support, namely Facebook, that constitutes the jewel in the crown of popular contemporary media culture. Two paradigms intersect here: on the one hand, we observe the paradigm of an emotional bond and intimacy in the way in which History is dealt with. Initially apparent at the very heart of museums and in televised works of fiction, it is now translated on Facebook with Léon Vivien’s personal page. On the other hand, we see the development of practices within the paradigm of ‘connectivity’ (cf. Van Dijck), of sociability specific to online social networks. Here, I will try to investigate how these two paradigms fit into the Léon Vivien project in order to give new readability and new visibility to the First World War, rendering it a unique cultural practice at the crossroads of popularity and unpopularity.

This chapter consists of four parts. The first section evokes the changing paradigm of historical culture in museums and in the media that we can observe today. Then, the chapter explores how Léon Vivien’s Facebook page shows analogies with Hollywoodian codes (second section) and how its way of visualizing the war with photographs mixes fact and fiction (third section). In the fourth section, I will briefly mention my linguistic analysis of Léon’s fans’ comments to show how these online exchanges meet the specific characteristics of popular sociality on Facebook.

1. **How History is Treated in Museums and the Media: Ever-Increasing Emotion and Intimacy**

Two concurrent phenomena appeared in France in the 1980s: the mass integration of television into homes and a new means of relating to History. The latter, supported by recourse to the emotional and an experience of war on a personal level, also characterizes the new approach to historical fact adopted by many museums.
In a number of seminal papers, Valerie Casey describes the evolution of museum practices. She distinguishes three categories in her typology: the legislating, the interpreting (on which we will focus), and the performing museum (cf. Casey, ‘Museum Effect’; ‘Staging Meaning’). These three types imply different approaches to the relation between the exhibited object and the museum, as well as to the authority of the institution regarding the production of knowledge. The legislating type bases its authority on the selection and presentation of objects (cf. Casey, ‘Museum Effect’ 4-5). In that case, the collections’ displays tend to propose a transparent, unmediated relation between the object and the museum: Trofánenko quotes Bennett to highlight that ‘when placed under the authority of the museum, artefacts become “facsimiles of themselves” (that function to represent their own past [...] ) [...] This provided the illusion of certainty’ (Trofánenko 52). In recent years, this transparent relation between the object and the museum’s visitor underwent profound questioning; the ‘new museology’ (cf. Vergo) shifts the debate to the question of the consequences of the chosen displays and has, for example, contributed to unearthing selection processes for displays and exhibitions thereby complicating the very concepts of neutrality and objectivity. As Sherman and Rogoff have it: ‘a broad range of critical analyses have converged on the museum, unmasking the structures, rituals and procedures by which the relations between objectives, bodies of knowledge and processes of ideological persuasion are enacted’ (ix–x, qtd. in Trofánenko 52). For Casey, the second museum type particularly challenges the institution’s natural authority by highlighting the processes of mediation. The interpreting museum no longer bases its authority on the intrinsic value of the object, but rather on its integration into interpretative displays. Historical reconstructions are the ultimate examples of this approach, and the Léon Vivien project shows that par excellence. Here, the object’s status is modified: it is no longer significant by itself, but rather becomes illustrative, in the service of the museum performance. The interpretative performance becomes analogous with the object. The mediation by the museum is apparent; the visitor no longer comes in contact with the object but with the performance of that object. The evolution of the relation to fiction is important: we move from an object, which is put into a story, to a story illustrated by this object. To those who consider this a devaluation of the museum function, Casey replies that this insistence on mediation stimulates the visitor’s critical mind, as s/he masters the codes of mass mediation and is thus able to decipher the fictionalization of the object. For Casey, we here find a marvelous opportunity to question cultural authority (cf. ‘Museum Effect’ 19). The third museum type—performing, as
in ‘living museums’—immerse the visitor into a pre-aestheticized universe, reconstructed in a human-size in which actors are performing. Here, the visitor is invited to take part in the fictional world, even if his interventions are framed and limited. At such moments of encounter, ‘the performance replaces the museum object’ (Casey, ‘Staging Meaning’ 10) in its entirety. Casey’s typology highlights the evolution towards a disembodiment of the object: it moves from the auratic to the illustrative, and even fictional, and ends up being substituted by the visitor in the museum-performance.

The fictionalization of History reaches its zenith in docudramas. In the eyes of Isabelle Veyrat-Masson (cf. 113), the Franco-British docudrama _D-Day, leur jour le plus long_ (2004) signals a clean break in the way in which History is dealt with on television. Fiction now outweighs fact. History production in docudramas is accompanied by the controlled treatment of facts, leaving little room for controversy or the complexity of events. Notably, docudramas can exploit the assertiveness of fiction, in which it is not necessary to substantiate a story, in order to present true facts. In addition to the questions this raises regarding the relationship with the truth, these docudramas are designed to arouse the viewer’s emotions. Anne Wierviorka highlights the way in which the broadcasting of a witness account on television is presented as an intimate moment with the viewer, who enters into a sort of ‘compassionate pact’ (179) with the witness. Docudramas exploit subjectivity and emotion as much as possible, to the extent of superseding factual accuracy. To accomplish this, docudramas can call upon the world of popular Hollywood cinema. The _Holocaust_ series illustrates this, whereas the _Léon Vivien_ project shifts this mechanism to social networks.

2. **The Great War as Media Object: The _Léon Vivien_ Experience and the Hollywoodian Codes**

Before analyzing the _Léon Vivien_ Facebook page as such, let us study its ‘promise’. In François Jost’s terms (cf. 48): to what media genre (real, fictional or playful) do the producers relate it? In other words, is knowledge or entertainment through fiction and/or game promised? If the promise is a bit ambiguous, it has also evolved over time. The press release of 10 April 2013, which launched the experience, includes formulations that refer both to the categories of reality and fiction. The release insists on the ‘patronage by a historian’ and defines this experience as a ‘formidable instrument of knowledge and collective memory’. Beyond the formulation, which
refers to the two registers of the real and the fictional, the ambiguity of the press release also lies in the expression ‘genuine human story’, which functions almost like an oxymoron as it refers to seemingly contradictory ideas, ‘genuine’ referring to the historical truth, and ‘story’ to the fictional conventions.

The last message written on the Facebook page (on 24 May 2013), which is written by the Museum (and no longer by Vivien), mentions more modest objectives, which focus on its emotional charge: ‘This page had no other goal than making you feel and share, as closely as possible to the human, what the soldiers of 14 could have lived, as well as the relatives remained in the back. Your thousands of comments, coming straight from the heart, showed us that we succeeded’ (Musée de la Grande Guerre de Meaux on Léon Vivien’s Facebook page, my translation). Here, the issue is not about its function as learning device but more about a touching, immediate, and lived experience. As we can see, the promise made to the Internet user is plural, meandering between knowledge device, emotional experience, and fictional entertainment. The studies on docudramas and other hybrid forms often invalidate their historical significance, as Brian McConnell’s opinion illustrates: ‘Docudrama does not represent historic fact, or history, or journalism, but crusading entertainment with facts carefully tailored to sustain a neat storyline and to suit a particular social, political or religious point of view’ (54). The Léon Vivien Facebook page is not concerned with these questions inasmuch as it proposes to follow the daily experience of a called-up primary teacher and does not offer any political treatment of the conflict. Its point of view is only human size, which makes for its uniqueness and pedagogical interest. The proceedings of the war are not mentioned, neither are the specifics of space and geographic locale: we do not know the name of his training camp, of the trenches where he fights, of the name of the villages the soldiers cross, etc. The action evolves in a space-time that is indeterminate, totally fictionalized. The web surfer does not get any temporal indications either. Vivien’s posts are dated but these dates do not refer to dates of real events that happened during the war.

We can draw a parallel between the fictionalization of this infantryman and some scriptwriting techniques of popular movies, and it is noteworthy that the museum deploys most of the successful strategies identified by the famous consultant in scenarios Linda Seger in her book The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film (cf. 52-55), which I will discuss in the following.
2.1 A Rising Dramatic Line, Leading to a Strong Climax

It is interesting to notice that the building of the story, which indeed aims at a dramatic climax, can be divided according to Aristotle’s three acts theory, which Seger recognizes. Here, the division sticks with the necessary balance between the acts: the first one lasts three months and a half; it serves to introduce the context and then the beginnings of the conflicts from an external point of view, as Vivien has not been called up yet. The second act is the longest (five months and a half) as it primarily serves to recall the everyday life in the training camps and in the reserves, while the third act is the shortest one (one month and a half) and the most dramatically intense: Vivien bears witness to the horror of the battlefront by evoking many particularly violent events in great detail.

In his book *Aristotle in Hollywood*, Ari Hiltunen shows how most stories, whatever their geographical origin and the period when they appear, are structured around the mythic journey of a hero. Most stages of this journey are also visible in Léon Vivien’s story. John Truby insists on the importance of the quality of the plot, which is different from the story. Its quality greatly depends on the ways information is hidden and revealed to the reader. Léon Vivien’s plot obeys that principle and spreads some touches of mystery. Mystery is produced when some posts conceal some of the information they evoke, while at the same time making our mouth water. For example, Vivien evokes the ‘frightening rumors in the streets’ (20/08/1914) but does not tell us which ones. Suspense is constructed when some central and dangerous events are announced step by step, which leads the reader to anticipate future developments and to be scared for his hero. For example, Vivien notes that he is ‘called up by the military doctor’; it is only the day after that he announces his mobilization, while he often posts several messages a day and could have stopped the suspense earlier. Suspense reaches a climax with his last message, ‘they (The Germans) are comi...’ which he cannot finish. His death will be announced the day after.

2.2 Sympathetic and Univocal Main Characters

Nine characters make up the network of relationships. They all fulfill one of the four character’s functions identified by Seger. Léon Vivien, Jules Derème and Eugène Lignan mainly fulfill the ‘storytelling function’: these characters provide most information. Besides, their personalities are very much alike: all three adopt a dignified behavior, nuanced words, without any sputters.
On the contrary, the other male characters fulfill the ‘talking about, revealing or embodying the theme’ (Seger 124): less used as conveyors of information, their posts mainly consist of spontaneous, vivacious and not necessarily nuanced points of view. Most of their comments show their feeling of unfairness or anger with the monstrosity of the war, which is a much-developed topic in this Facebook experience. They also fulfill the ‘adding color and texture function’ (Seger 124): these spontaneous characters, which contrast with the other first three and are never at a loss of words, provide a certain emphasis to the discussions. The name Lulu L’Andouille, which could be roughly translated as Lulu the numbskull is a first sign of it. His wife Madeleine Vivien fulfills two functions: the ‘helping to reveal the main character function’ (Seger 125): as a confidante who, through their signs of love, reveals a more intimate side of Léon. As she comments the war from an external point of view, she also participates in developing the theme of the horrors of the war and thus also fulfills the second function. The fictionalization is furthermore created via a process of simplification and lack of development of the characters as they seem deprived of any ambiguity and do not change their point of view in the course of the story. Only Léon Vivien is subjected to transformation: while the beginnings of the story highlight his patriotism, his posts in the third act demonstrate a more bitter point of view. The Léon Vivien experience is centered on the human before the soldier.

2.3 The Human before the Soldier

This humanization of the war comes true through three major strategies. Firstly, many posts evoke the details of the soldiers’ daily experience, outside of military operations, or pick up personal anecdotes or precious and moving moments: he shows the picture of a human pyramid (14/12/14), the toilets (11/04/15), a picture of his baby (2/05/15), etc. Secondly, many posts mention the physical sensations felt by the soldiers, whose body is put through the mill. Descriptions in details of the sensations felt by the five senses offer a particularly precise sight of the ordeal endured by the soldiers: the bag which wrecks the back after a walking day (13/04/15), the corpses everywhere and the ‘mud, even colder than the inert bodies’ (22/04/15), etc. Thirdly, a tension between the common and the dreadful is developed. About twenty messages alternate between telling of the horror of the war and the daily life of the civilians or of the soldiers. For example, on 22 October 1914, Vivien announces that Madeleine is pregnant. His subsequent message indicates he is called up by the military doctor. Two crucial posts succeed each other,
and, by doing so, associate the private and military registers. This highlights even more its intensity; indeed, joy quickly gives way to fear.

We have already seen how some messages include a sensational dimension or a strong emotional charge, furthered by the tension between the common and the dreadful. The Facebook user is really invited to thrill with the character. Significantly, the post that was the most 'liked' (nearly 3,000 likes) is the one of their newborn's picture. The family also received many messages of congratulations. Other posts make use of the sensation strategy, mixed with emotion, by providing in details crude information: the story of a sergeant who tries to hold his entrails (19/14/15), of a foot snatched by a shrapnel (20/04/15), of a meal made of cat (11/05/15), of a soldier stabbed from end to end (15/05/15). The reader sensitivity is then severely tested.

The structure and the elements of the story as well as the strategies implemented to evoke the soldier’s humanity as closely as possible obey the fundamentals of fiction, according to which the story must invite the reader to live a genuine experience. For Truby, ‘good storytelling doesn’t just tell audiences what happened in life. It gives them the experience of that life. It is the essential life, just the crucial thoughts and events, but it is conveyed with such freshness and newness that it feels part of the audience’s essential life too’ (6). Facebook is a great device for creating such freshness and liveliness.

3 Visualizing Leon Vivien’s War

According to Seger (cf. 54), a story needs to be told visually. A real work on images has been produced for this Facebook operation. Generally, the docudrama’s hybridity lies in its articulation between real events and their audiovisual re-creation. Steven Lipkin highlights how the docudrama implies a specific suspension of disbelief from the spectators: ‘We are asked to accept that in this case, re-creation, is a necessary mode of presentation’ (68).

In Léon Vivien’s case, the aim of authenticity is not mainly produced by that re-creation of events. The impression of truth is above all based on the plentiful use of the Museum’s rich collection of visual documents. Around a hundred images have been integrated into the story. These are authentic documents that have been fictionalized. The story is thus not based on real facts, but on documents that were integrated and adapted
to the story. At least five methods were used to that purpose. Firstly, the creators of Léon’s Facebook page have customized blank documents. This method has been deployed twice by integrating the names of the characters and the dates in the blank spaces in these documents. For example, we can see Léon Vivien’s personal call under the flag (4/11/14) and Eugène Lignan’s ‘war godmother’ certificate (11/05/15). If the first document is easily understandable for the reader, the second one, less known, might remain unclear and ambiguous as it is not explained that war godmothers were soldiers’ pen pals. We see to what extent the integration of documents does not primarily aim at providing explanations about the war but rather serve as a support for the fiction. Indeed, the comment that goes along with this document only refers to the fictional elements. Secondly, some objects have been contextualized through the use of photographs. A dozen pictures show a modification of the relation to the object: the original picture, which comprises a neutral frame and show the object as element of the Museum’s collection, has been modified in order to include the narrative context. Vivien’s comments emphasize this fictionalization. The object’s value is no longer intrinsic but depends on its possible integration to the fiction. For example, the infantryman’s backpack has been personalized for Vivien. It is now photographed in his bedroom. Some objects are photographed in the soldier’s hands (an amulet on 27/04/15, a knife on 21/05/15). From a ‘neutral’ point of view, the audience moves to a subject-centered one, impregnated with the soldier-photographer’s sight, who lives with these objects. Thirdly, some pictures’ caption and context have been removed. Nearly ten pictures initially include a caption or a context that have been erased for their use in posts. These original frames are replaced by Vivien’s comments, which situate them in the fictional space-time, as for the wake up in the bedroom (10/11/14), etc. These comments sometimes mention instants of life that happened before the picture, or will happen after it: the bedroom’s picture would have been taken after a training session, etc. The image’s production of a snapshot is integrated into a longer temporality. Fourthly, the portraits used for the profile pictures on Facebook have been drawn on purpose, in order to avoid any regrettable confusion between the character and a person that really existed. The characters’ faces have been added to some authentic documents, like on the picture of Léon with Eugène (9/12/14), etc. And finally, some documents have been modified in order to ‘stick’ more with the story. One picture that is quite known has been modified so that it is no longer identifiable and not awkwardly positioned within the story. A half a dozen pictures have been deeply modified: the faces
and/or the frame have been changed; some elements have been added or suppressed. Some establishing shots have been altered (13 and 14 April 1915, 12/05/15). Apart from an adaptation to the story, these manipulations could also aim to create some visual effect by highlighting some elements of the document. These five techniques show how the goal consists in making the images talk in the fiction, making their content alive and human. Far from a political treatment of the war, this use invites us to follow day-by-day ‘slices of life’ which are more likely than true. They are more like ‘symbolizations’ than representations, according to Trouche (200, my translation).

This important use of images raises several questions. In his analysis of the documentary series *Apocalypse*, broadcast on a French channel in 2009, Robert Belot denounces the omission of the sources, which tends to de-realize the event by transforming it into fiction (cf. 172). Such a reproach cannot be made against the Leon Vivien experience, as it is presented as fiction, and thus precisely de-realizes the documents in use. But, as we have seen, the promise refers both to the authentic and the fictional categories. The producers do not mention the methods of construction of the fiction at any time. Without any interpretative frame, the power of truth inherent to images tends to give a status of authenticity to the Facebook page – authenticity that it does not claim but does not refute either. Niney reminds us of André Bazin’s famous warning: ‘The spectator has the illusion he observes a visual demonstration while in reality it is a succession of equivocal facts which hold together only thanks to the cement that goes along with them’ (112, my translation).

The absence of information about the treatment of the documents provokes a real risk of interpretative misunderstandings concerning the value of images as traces of real events. Some comments written by followers give the impression that they sometimes forget the fictional treatment of the documents and approach them as a proof of reality. Here, the mediation typical of the ‘interpretative museum type’ (Casey) is not really visible. Consequently, in order to become a real pedagogical device, the Léon Vivien experience should go along with a reflection on the production and on the modes of diffusion of historical knowledge, and in particular on the complexity of images and their use as trace; it is necessary to show how it is a question of a deliberately constructed reality. In those years when education curriculums focus on critical analysis of historical sources, this Facebook experience as well as its analysis in class will become unique and exciting pedagogical activities.
4. **The Connectivity Paradigm, or how Facebook is Building Contemporary Online Sociability**

In the analysis of the Léon Vivien story, we have observed the way in which the mobilization of Hollywood cinematographic codes contributes to familiarizing internet users with the Great War, by avoiding contradictory or less politically correct opinions and instead focusing on an emotional approach to an infantryman’s life. Now we shall also see how Facebook, as the media support for this tale, contributes to rendering the historical treatment of the 1914–18 War more popular. We know that all testimonies constitute an undeniably social construct, consistently subjective and conditioned, in particular by the ideologies of the era to which they belong as well as the chosen distribution channel. Let us therefore briefly consider the way in which Facebook operates, as the foremost support for sociability and content sharing at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

According to Van Dijck, the initial ‘participatory culture’ of Facebook has been transformed into a ‘culture of connectivity’ (4–5); the initial utopian social design has been overtaken by automated technologies that strongly influence social practices on Facebook, which raises questions regarding the molding of cultural practices: with a ‘shift from user-centered connectedness to owner-centered connectivity [...] do social media platforms stimulate active participation and civic engagement, or has collectivity become a synonym for automated collectivity?’ (54)

What remains of the utopian ambition of the first few years? In Fabien Benoît’s opinion, Facebook still conforms to an online ‘Bisouland’ (47), which we can translate as ‘Kissland’, populated with ‘Care Bear’ users. Sharing, friending and liking are not innocuous powerful ideological concepts: relativism rules while conflict and contradiction have no place on Facebook. Above and beyond the endogamy this creates—we become friends with people who are like us—and the social fragmentation this maintains—the most privileged social classes are the ones who most benefit from the network, particularly from a professional standpoint—the way in which Facebook functions prioritizes the sharing of emotions rather than a rational approach to the world with its complexities and differences. The simple fact of being able to *like* nearly everything, while a *dislike* function does not exist, stands as witness to this.

It is worth noting that the forms of sociability Facebook prioritizes can also be found in followers’ comments. After each message from Léon or another character, many messages (and sometimes hundreds) were posted. However, the characters never replied to followers’ messages. In
our examination of the 6,669 written messages, we identified the following practices, drawn from the ‘affinity space’ (Gee) surrounding Léon Vivien and the Great War, which confirm the hypothesis of a ‘Kissland’ conducive to emotion. First, it is observed that 58.2% of the comments show their author’s adhesion to the fiction: the majority of the fans followed Vivien’s story respecting his timeline, as any other Facebook friend’s page. In 36.7% of the comments, the fans approach his story from a past stance. Very few comments explicitly indicate doubts about Vivien’s truthfulness (only 0.1%). 40.9% of the messages are ‘narrative’ (based on experiences, beliefs, doubts and emotions), while 54.2% are non-narrative (based on natural (physical) reality, truth, observation, analysis, proof and rationality). Noticeably, the page did not primarily stimulate exchanges of information: only 9.3% of the comments can be classified in this category. Facebook’s social mechanisms also characterize Vivien’s affinity space (see fig. 1 below): like other
Facebook pages, it mainly appears as a conveyor for social interactions: his fans first used it to express an empathetic relationship with the characters (25.3% of the comments), by encouraging, supporting or advising them. Léon Vivien’s fans also wrote comments to give their opinion about Léon’s posts (19.8%), about the war in general (10.2%) or, more rarely, about our present time (2.4%). The sharing of emotions was also a common reason for writing a comment (10.4%).

As we have seen through the analysis of the Léon Vivien story as well as of the comments left by his fans, this unique way of presenting the Great War jostles the relations between the paradigms of high culture and popular culture in particular. Via a knowing blend of historical fact and fiction, the Vivien tale prioritized emotion and united fans in an empathic experience of the war. In doing so, the creators of this experience on Facebook somewhat pay homage to the soldiers’ subjectivity. To some extent, they transpose the principles of the New History to this docufiction: ‘creating an empathy with the past is surely at least as, if not more important, than any flawed attempt to resurrect the past under the belief that it comes back to us as it really was’ (Munslow 147).

Note

1. Léon Vivien’s messages were only written in French. In this chapter, his messages in English are my personal translations.

Works Cited