

Unpacking the book collection:

Following a book collection in an author museum

One of the most extensive collections at the museum dedicated to Sigrid Undset, both in volume and value, is the Norwegian Laureate's book collection. Approximately nine thousand books are on display at Bjerkebak, the former house of Sigrid Undset (1882-1949). Her private book collection is present in nearly every room, and bookshelves cover the walls from floor to ceiling. Being guided through the rooms by the skilled museum staff, visitors experience the books from a distance, behind barriers, in bookshelves, protected by glass. However, while the books presented during the guided tour have the role of framing the domesticity of a writers' home, they are also a possible source to the author's reading practices and interests. All books at Bjerkebak are registered in a public database and it is possible to loan them. This gives researchers direct access to Undset's original belongings and, transforms the museum into a library. I will present how books from the collection are made accessible to the public, following a museum guide and those actors whom the visitor usually does not meet in the museum: the conservator and the librarian. This method is inspired by actor-network theory and Bruno Latour's slogan to "follow the actors themselves" (Latour, 2005) and see where it takes you. Drawing on ethnographical observations and fieldwork at the museum, I will present three versions of the collection where the potential of exhibiting and impart an authors' private book collection is under debate.

As a museologist I am interested in how the book collection is mediated, and how different mediations of the collection makes it more or less accessible to the audience, and what kind of knowledge the different mediations communicate through the different displays. At Bjerkebak there are two mediations of Undset's former book collection that highlight different kinds of knowledge, and together makes a third version of the book collection possible for people outside the museum. This presentation explores Undset's book collection from three different ways of positioning and, reflects upon what kind of knowledge that is possible to obtain through these. I will start with a presentation of the book collection through a guided tour at Bjerkebak, where the entire book collection is put on display. Then I will explore the book collection as seen from my personal computer, through the digital database Oria where all the books are registered. The third move will be to follow the path of a book from the collection when it leaves the museum.

First move, following a guided tour through the museum

The museum dedicated to Sigrid Undset is placed in her former home, Bjerkebak, where she lived from 1919 until she died in 1949. After the house opened to the public in 2007, visitors were introduced to a reconstruction of the Laureate's home from the 1930s, displayed as lived-in interiors with over five thousand original belongings in addition to her book collection comprising approximately nine thousand books.

As a visitor at Bjerkebak you are obliged to follow a guided tour to get access to the house, where you follow the guide's pace and the educational program during the one hour walk through the house. Although being presented as a lived-in interior where bookshelves are part of every room, showing Undset's book collection in total, I would argue that the way they are presented reduces them to illustrations and back-drops within the exhibition space. Visitors are not able to get close to the shelves. The shelves present the books as they were placed when people lived in the house, but since they are protected by glass it is no longer possible to take books from the shelves and obtain more information about their content. Ropes are used as barriers and glass protects the shelves so they remain at a distance. Furniture, and chairs at the visitor's disposal are placed in front of the shelves creating a physical distance that also makes it difficult for visitors to approach the exhibited books. Therefore, I argue, the book collection at display in the exhibition becomes an illustration and is reduced to being a part of a domesticized lived-in interior.

But, walking through the many rooms, all filled with books, except from the kitchen and bathroom, also creates a physical experience that is only accessible within the actual rooms. One thing is to read the figure nine thousand books, but its visualization and the amount of space it demands provide another form of knowledge about the magnitude. In addition, the collection is also placed according to Undset's own order. The museum staff have used pictures and informants to reconstruct Undset's own library system, which makes it a possible source to both Undset's systematization and what kind of books she placed in which rooms. What kind of books is in her study, in the hall way or in her bedroom? Some book historians have argued that the furnishing of a room of books can reflect the "furnishing" of a writers mind, and bridge the gap between writers' readings and their creative work ((Oram & Nicholson, 2014, p. 3).

Second move, the book collection mediated through a digital database

Bjerkebæk's book collection is also part of the digital database Oria, where all book titles and authors from Undset's book collection are made searchable. This database does not only work as a tool for archiving practice, it also represents a democratization of the collection by making information about it public and accessible for everyone who has a computer. You can now browse through Bjerkebæk's book titles and author names from your personal computer, in your own living room. Oria is also a search engine that allows you to search academic library resources, and when you are registered as a patron of the Library System you are able to request a loan. This means that every user is allowed to search Oria's database, but loans are restricted to students and researchers.

The cultural and media scholar, Michelle Henning, argues "new media is best thought of as a means to organize and structure knowledge (...) in the museum" (Henning, 2011, p. 303): Both in regard to the hierarchies of 'front and back regions' at the museum and, how a digitized way of structuring and organizing the book collection extracts different information from it. The search tools in Oria enable other interfaces from the collection than what is possible to gain through the exhibited books. For example, it is possible to do a search that shows that Undset owned 59 books by the author Gilbert Keith Chesterton, that 319 of her books has underlining and 47 of them contain marginalia. This information is of importance if the museum ever wants to produce another exhibition from the same material at a later date, or just to extract more information about the collection as a whole or about a single specimen. It also puts the visitor in the position of the curator, since it becomes possible for every user to curate their own search topics and information from the collection. In that way "new media offers the museum a means to undo the separation of public display and research collection in the museum" (Henning, 2011, p. 309). It captures new practices of information management which breaks down disciplinary boundaries of cataloguing, opening up the resources of museums to a wider audience (Witcomb, 2003, p. 121). However, although it is possible to extract information about how many books has underlining and marks, the only way to find out what the marginalia say is to contact the museum and request a book.

By making Undset's book collection part of a larger database it becomes accessible from your home computer, where you can obtain an overview of the collection as a whole, as well as every specimen from the collection. The interface makes it possible to establish all these

connections through its search topics, but Oria also makes the book collection part of a larger database connecting several libraries in the Norwegian university system, preventing meanings produced within the museum from remaining enclosed within it. As part of a larger database the connection between the books and Undset can also be lost, and it was not before I gained specialized knowledge of the search tools with help from Bjerkebak's librarian and curator that I managed to navigate through the many options of the databases.

Third move, following a book out of the museum

The last move is to follow a book from the collection that leaves the premises of the museum. It thus becomes possible to study a third version of the collection, by receiving access to the books content.

During fieldwork at Bjerkebak in March I met the curator outside the museum. She carried a plastic envelope that contained a book and a printed request from a loan taker. Outside of the museum, in her hands, one of Undset's former belongings was being returned to the exhibition at Bjerkebak, and I wondered; who have access to this collection, what kind of knowledge can be found in these books, and, how do people obtain information about requesting books from the museum?

When I asked about the practice of taking museum objects out of the museum I understood that the books within the exhibition carry a double meaning. They are both understood as former belongings, but also as research objects. Therefore, the books are not fixed within the exhibition space, they also move between the exhibition space and the museum's office three kilometres from the museum building. Whenever a researcher makes a reservation of a book from the collection, the curator opens up the museum, removes the glass from the bookshelves and carries the specimen to her office. If the researcher can not come to Bjerkebak, the librarian will scan the material before the book is returned to its right place in the bookshelves.

319 of the books have underlining, which connect them to Undset in another way than the other ones. Undset was a bibliophile, that means that she collected more books than she read, and many books were also given to her as gifts or by publishing houses. It is impossible to know exactly how Undset read her books, but the underlining gives a hint of what she reacted to, found interesting, or did not agree with. At least that is how I can relate to this practice.

Here is an example from Undset's book *A preface to Morals* (1929) by Walter Lippmann, that has been scanned and sent as a PDF-file to my email address by their librarian (see picture)

An analysis of Undset's marginalia is beyond the scope of my research and the format of this paper, but I want to wrap up the presentation by sharing with you some reflections about how to understand Bjerkebæk's three versions of Undset's book collection and how it affects my perception of what a museum does.

Conclusion

I have argued that the museum makes it possible to extract different kinds of knowledge by having several approaches to presenting Undset's book collection. In the exhibition we are confronted by the large volume of the collection. It is presented as a whole, only separated by rooms. But by being displayed at a distance from the audience behind bars and glass it is made part of an interior, and its content remains inaccessible. In the digital database the whole collection can be viewed from your computer screen. This makes it easy to get an overview of the authors and the literary genres Undset collected. But her own cataloguing system is replaced by the digital database's own internal systematization that also breaks the connection between the books and their previous owner.

I also want to highlight that the analysis of the versions of the book collection as part of an exhibition, within the digital database, and as a specimen, changed my role as a researcher from a guest following a guided tour through an exhibition, to a data user browsing a database with instructions from Bjerkebæk's librarian and finally, as a researcher ordering a book through Oria and receiving the book's content as a PDF-file to my email address.

I would argue that in the last version, where Undset's books become accessible to request by the loaner, the museum also becomes a specific kind of library: A research library or a private archive, since the loan system is not accessible to everyone. The origin of the word museum is often traced back to the *museion*, erected at ancient Alexandria situated in today's Egypt which was a study collection with library attached, a "repository of knowledge" (Vergo, 1989, p. 1). And in some ways Bjerkebæk echoes this provenance.

Thank you.

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