



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Museology and Its Others: Analyzing Exhibition Storytelling through Narratology, Space analysis, Discourse analysis, and Ethnographic Research

Sitzia, E.

DOI

[10.1007/978-3-031-11108-2_9?pdf=chapter%20toc](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11108-2_9?pdf=chapter%20toc)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Interdisciplinarity in the Scholarly Life Cycle

License

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sitzia, E. (2023). Museology and Its Others: Analyzing Exhibition Storytelling through Narratology, Space analysis, Discourse analysis, and Ethnographic Research. In K. Bijsterveld, & A. Swinnen (Eds.), *Interdisciplinarity in the Scholarly Life Cycle: Learning by Example in Humanities and Social Science Research* (pp. 153-171). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11108-2_9?pdf=chapter%20toc

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)



Museology and Its Others: Analyzing Exhibition Storytelling Through Narratology, Space Analysis, Discourse Analysis, and Ethnographic Research

Emilie Sitzia

Introduction

Two visitors push the heavy doors and enter the dark space of the exhibition. They stop, they hesitate, they look for an introduction panel but miss it as they are distracted by the mosaic of screens blaring at the entrance. On each screen a specialist is talking, but the sound is on for only one of them. It involves a commentary on Fernand Braudel's work by a distinguished urbanist. The visitors stand there a few seconds, look at each other quizzically and start moving again. There is an opening on each side of the screen, each one giving access to a different part of the exhibition. One visitor goes left, the other goes right. But then they stop, turn around, go back to each other, and try to determine which of the two paths is the correct path. Next, they notice a discrete map of the exhibition on a stand. After carefully

The research was undertaken during an Iméra/Mucem fellowship from February to December 2020. I want to thank both institutions for their support during this research period.

E. Sitzia (✉)

Department of History, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences,
Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands
e-mail: emilie.sitzia@maastrichtuniversity.nl

looking at it, they look back at each other, shrug their shoulders, and take the opening on the left. As it turns out, they entered the historical section, by chance rather than by choice. (Vignette drawing on fieldnotes Sitzia)

Museums are key players in constructing meaning, asserting individual and collective identities, and institutionalizing heritage. They also act as catalyzers in civil society and contribute to envisioning possible futures. As such, the narratives they put forward have a significant impact on how a particular society presents itself, perceives itself, and projects itself into the future. If museums aim to be inclusive and to act as agonistic spaces with layered multivocal and complex stories, sometimes they fail to communicate their narratives to their visitors.

Traditionally, to examine such communication of narratives, practitioners of museum studies have relied solely on visitor research, which is most often based on closed-question surveys and tends to give a very superficial, and sometimes biased, impression of the reception of the narratives. I propose here a mixed methods approach not only to analyze the nature of storytelling within the museum but also to assess whether those narratives translate into meaningful visitor experiences.

In recent decades, various studies and emerging practices have challenged the traditional, unidirectional educational and social role of the museum (Vergo, 1989; Sandell, 1998; Davallon, 1999; Mairesse & Desvallees, 2007; Dewey, 1916/2008; Marstine, 2006; Simon, 2010; McSweeney & Kavanagh, 2016; Antos et al., 2017; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Chynoweth et al., 2020). Using strategies popularized by “new museology” and “participative practices” (Vergo, 1989; Marstine, 2006; Simon, 2010), some museums have explored new pedagogical frameworks, alternative modes of building and exhibiting narratives, as well as audience-activating tools. These frameworks are meant to allow museums to engage publics of all ages, to be socially relevant to and inclusive of visitors from diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and to be representative of the multiple community voices in contemporary society.

Furthermore, in expanding the possible meanings of learning and knowledge (Sitzia, 2017, 2018), museums have become multimodal spaces of communication. In order to engage a variety of audiences and stimulate a wide range of knowledge production and skills, museums

have developed a broad gamut of communication strategies. From traditional wall-texts and labels to video and audio-installations, interactive maps, smell vials, touch boxes, and dress-up chests, museums have become places of exploration, communicating elaborate and layered narratives in multisensory ways.

This implies that museums now have to take complicated decisions regarding the stories they choose to tell and the ways in which they tell them. Thus, according to Borg and Mayo, museums can be “conceived of as sites of struggle, of cultural contestation and renewal” (2010, p. 37). Indeed, museums attempting to challenge and question the monolithic national narrative are gradually becoming “agonistic museums,” a term coined by Chantal Mouffe (2016). Similarly, others have addressed how museums may turn into institutions that “trouble identity, decolonize, mock, revitalize, tell alternative stories, reorient authoritative practice, interrogate intolerance and privilege and stimulate critical literacies” (Clover, 2015, p. 301). Now that many museums are willing to critically engage with the public and actively commit themselves to particular social issues, the narratives they present have become both more sophisticated and more layered.

In turn, this situation requires from us that we adapt the ways we study exhibitions, in particular in terms of the reception of narratives by visitors. That is, we need to move beyond the dependence on the visitor surveys mentioned above and instead adopt an interdisciplinary approach using mixed methods. By doing so, we can, so I shall argue, not only acquire the tools to study how such exhibition narratives are received, but also how they are created and mediated. With this in mind, I proposed a research project to explore how Mucem, a museum in Marseille (France) that focuses on the Mediterranean world and its dialogue with Europe, presents narratives in its current exhibition *Connectivities*. As a socially committed museum (*musée de société*), Mucem propagates a multidisciplinary vision, and it is thus a perfect site for studying how complicated narratives are communicated by museums today, and how such narratives—both fed and analyzable by research in anthropology, history, archaeology, art history, and contemporary art—impact on visitors.

Because the content and form of the exhibition and the multimodal nature of the museum’s communication is part of the move toward the new types of narratives I identified above, I chose to employ a range of

interdisciplinary methods to analyze the exhibition. This enabled me to distinguish my approach from previous practices in museum studies, which, because of the more general tendency toward “evidenced-based” policy and funding in the cultural field, have frequently adopted a positivist approach to their research. Instead, I aimed to analyze not only the intent of the institution when it comes to narrative production but also its legitimacy to and its impact on audiences.

In what follows I will first introduce the Mucem exhibition itself, before outlining the set of methods employed, which encompasses approaches to storytelling in various fields, critical content analysis, and reception through ethnographic research. Next, I will bring these methodological tools together, using them to highlight the study’s key findings regarding the disjunction of roles and disciplines in the Mucem exhibition. In so doing, I not only offer a detailed case study of a leading European museum, but I also show that, with a mixed methods approach, we can both analyze the nature of storytelling within the museum and assess whether those narratives translate into meaningful visitor experiences.

Mucem and the *Connectivities* Exhibition

Mucem, which opened in 2013, has an extensive program of permanent and temporary exhibitions and accompanying public offerings. Because of its prior history, the collection is seen as playing an important role in France’s dialogue with North Africa.¹ Recently, Mucem has made an aspirational shift toward wanting to be a global museum, aiming to embed its Mediterranean and European narratives in the histories of the rest of the world.

Within Mucem, I focused my research project on the semi-permanent exhibition *Connectivities*, which opened on June 29, 2020, and runs until March 13, 2023. The exhibition is held in the “Gallerie méditerranée,”

¹ The current collection of Mucem is a combination of the collections from Musée des arts et traditions populaires, the European collection of Musée de l’homme, and the collections from the now-abandoned project Musée de l’histoire de France et d’Algérie.

the museum's primary spaces. The exhibition is introduced on the website as follows:

Connectivities tells the story of the great Mediterranean port cities of the 16th and 17th centuries: Istanbul, Algiers, Venice, Genoa, Seville and Lisbon were the strategic sites of power and trade in a Mediterranean that saw the birth of the modern era, between great empires and globalization.

Taking the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II as its foundation, the exhibition follows in the footsteps of historian Fernand Braudel and approaches this 16th- and 17th-century Mediterranean region not as an object of study with strict chronological limits, but rather as a character with a lengthy story to tell, even extending into the contemporary period.

Inviting visitors to leap backward in time, this urban history continues today, through changes to contemporary port territories like the megalopolises of Istanbul and Cairo and the metropolises of Marseille and Casablanca. This exhibition shows expanding cities as places where influxes, connections trade [sic] and therefore power converge and intensify. (Mucem website, <https://www.mucem.org/en/connectivities>)

This quote shows the complexity of the narrative proposed and the multiple leaps through time and geography that make this exhibition potentially very difficult for visitors to apprehend.

This narrative complexity is further compounded by the organization of the exhibition, on view in two connected yet distinct spaces. Precisely because of these challenges, the exhibition makes for an excellent case study of the complementary methods for unpacking the exhibition's multimodal narratives, including their impact on visitors. Which narratives are told by the museum, and how does it tell them? How does its audiences perceive and (re)construct those narratives? And how do the narratives presented affect visitors' perceptions of themselves and/or of the museum as a (social) narrative maker?

Combining Methods: Museology and Its Others

In what follows, I will outline the interdisciplinary methods employed. First, I discuss the use of multimodal storytelling analysis, drawing on the fields of exhibition design, literary studies, and education. Second, I apply critical content analysis, relying on sociology and a subset of discourse analysis. Finally, I develop an approach to visitor reception that builds on ethnography. More than simply mixing methods, however, my aim was to address the exhibition from a perspective that would genuinely integrate those different forms of analysis. Below, I will explain the various methods and the reasons behind their use.

Multimodal Storytelling

First, I drew on what we might call “multimodal storytelling analysis,” employing different strategies to unravel how a narrative is told in the exhibition space. I did so by building on Tina Roppola’s exhibition design analysis framework, Mieke Bal’s literary analysis tool, Bruce W. Ferguson and Tony Bennett’s application of such literary analysis of narratives to museum contexts, and George Hein’s model of museum educational theories. The approaches to storytelling outlined in these three fields complement each other and enable me to analyze what objects are shown, how they are shown, who is speaking, what story is being told, how this story is conveyed, and how it impacts the visitor.

In her 2012 book *Designing for the Museum Visitor Experience*, Roppola proposes a framework for analyzing exhibitions design in terms of visitor impact. Roppola distinguishes between four key interconnected design processes: framing, resonating, channeling, and broadening. These processes allow us to account for various types of visitor impact. She acknowledges that these are “interrelated systems,” which explains why some elements play out at more than one level (p. 75).

The first of the four processes identified by Roppola, framing, can be considered a “macrolayer.” It allows for studying a museum’s spatial layout, room(s), and concept organization. The second process, resonating,

applies to exhibition displays that “mesh” with the visitor and “achieve some level of kinship” (Roppola, 2012, p. 124), thereby igniting a relationship with the visitor in a short-term interaction. Traditionally, to analyze resonance, the focus is on the visitors’ bodily, emotional, and social engagement. The third process, channeling, refers to directedness and cohesion. In Roppola’s words, channels are “conduits by which visitors are assisted through the museum, or pathways visitors construct using their own agency” (p. 174). She further distinguishes between spatial, perceptual, and narrative channeling. Finally, the fourth process, broadening, applies to the “content-related meanings” visitors derive from their visit (p. 216). Such broadening may be experiential, affective, conceptual, or discursive in character.

To apply Roppola’s framework to the Mucem case study, I collected data by undertaking multiple site observations between February and December 2020. With a particular focus on the abovementioned aspects of Roppola’s framework, I used, for making my fieldnotes, forms with sections that encouraged me to consider each of the four relational processes. I also took more free form notes detailing the actual functioning of the exhibition design.

In a second approach, I drew on the seminal work of Bal (1997), who identifies three components of a narrative: text, fabula, and story. She notes that a text can take many forms (book, image, exhibition, etc.), but that, regardless of the form, it always has a narrative structure. Bal defines fabula as “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (p. 5). This is the relational, and usually diachronic, aspect of the narrative. Key elements of fabula are events, actors, and time. The final component is the story, which pertains to the manner in which the fabula is communicated, including its ordering, rhythm, use of space, movement, and focalization. These features concerning the story were of particular importance for analyzing the exhibition’s wall-texts.

The ways narratives are constructed in museum spaces have also been explored by scholars like Ferguson (1996) and Bennett (1996). Core questions regarding a literary narratological approach to exhibitions are: Who is talking? With which authority? To whom? About what? Once again, I applied these questions to the Mucem exhibition by giving

particular attention to wall-texts and labeling, as well as audio and video content.

Third, to complement these design-based and literary narratological approaches to storytelling, I used Hein's classification of exhibition strategies (Sitzia, 2018). In his book *Learning in the Museum* (1998), museum educator and theorist Hein presents a theoretical framework that helps us understand the position of museums when it comes to knowledge and learning. He posits that museums' views on these issues lead to different exhibition strategies. If a museum adheres to a realist view on knowledge, thus considering knowledge as existing independently of the learner, and learning as rather passive and incremental, the exhibition strategy is didactic expository. If the museum approaches knowledge in a realist vein but as actively reconstructed by the learner, the accompanying exhibition strategy is the discovery model. If the museum starts out from a constructivist view on knowledge, assuming that all knowledge is constructed individually or socially, as well as considers learning to be incremental, the corresponding exhibition strategy is the stimulus-response model. Finally, if the museum has a constructivist view on knowledge and assumes that learning is an active process, then the exhibition model will be constructivist. Each model implies a specific strategy of communication and engagement with the visitors, including the choice for and prominence of specific exhibition tools, tone of voice, etc. I used this framework to complement the analysis and identify the museum staff's beliefs and intentions when it comes to knowledge creation and learning.

Reinforcing Critical Content Analysis with Expert Visits/Interviews

In order to gain critical insight into the exhibition's content—the narrative conveyed—I combined discourse analysis with expert visits and interviews. Discourse analysis enabled me to unveil the meaning implicit in the narrative choices made by the institution. The idea behind the expert visits and interviews is that by visiting the same exhibition with various experts, and by talking about the exhibition with them

extensively and critically, the analyst become more aware of the limitations of their own fields of expertise.

In order to protect the experts and ensure that they would feel free to talk, the interviews were anonymous. I selected the following three experts: a curator, with an eye on curatorial expertise of storytelling and the conceptual use of space; an exhibition designer, to assess visitor experience, multimodality, and the use of space; and a historian, to comment on content and clarity. The visits were spread over two months—between June 2, 2020, and October 19, 2020—due to intermittent closure caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The visits took between 1.5 and 2 hours and were recorded either digitally or in writing, according to the experts' preferences. The material from these visits allowed for reflexive insight in terms of the exhibition's content, in particular in terms of explaining or questioning narrative choices, and what was (or wasn't) in the exhibition. It allowed for a more refined exploration of the choices made by the institutions in terms of what story to tell and, to some extent at least, the reception of these narratives.

Narrative Reception: Ethnographic Observation and Interviews

The third kind of method employed involved investigating the reception of the narrative by audiences using ethnographic observations of museum visitors as well as exit interviews with visitors. This gave me insights into how people were behaving in the exhibition space, to establish how the narrative was being read by the audience, and to evaluate the impact of the institutional storytelling choices through various forms of visitor engagement. Visitor research is often hailed as the only way to truly evaluate the impact of an exhibition. Indeed, an exhibition can work “in theory” and yet be completely misinterpreted by the audience.

Ethnographic observation of visitors allowed me to look at how people were moving around the space, to establish their paths, to investigate what visitors were reading (or not), and what they were looking at (for how long and in what way); it also allowed me to listen to them while they exchanged views on the content of the exhibition (Walsh, 2012;

MacDonald, 2010). I did the ethnographic observations between June and November 2020, with visits of varying duration, observing a variety of visitors in terms of age and socio-cultural background. I focused on aspects that were suggested by the primary space analysis: I studied visitor flow, their orientation and movement in space, their reading of and engagement with the written material, their engagement with multi-modal forms of discourse, and the relationship they created with the objects.

I purposefully opted for “quick-fire,” short-form exit interviews, undertaking 45 of them in total, and asking just one single question: “What is the main message/idea you take from the exhibition?” The interviews were conducted in each visitor’s mother tongue (i.e., mostly in French, except for three interviews in English and one in Dutch). Next, I coded the interviews and analyzed them thematically.

Finally, to complete my data, I conducted interviews with the two exhibition curators (other than the curator selected for the expert visit) to gain insight into institutional decision processes and help the institution rethink its narrative creation and exhibition process. The semi-structured interviews, which lasted about an hour for each curator, were also essential in building a constructive relationship with the institution.

Overall, the interdisciplinary approach outlined here allowed me to gather the necessary data about various facets of exhibition storytelling, about institutions as active makers of social narratives, and about the impact of such narratives on visitors. I will now outline the main findings of my case study, with a particular emphasis on the intersectionality of the methods used.

Main Findings: At the Crossroads of Disciplines

My research identified multiple issues within this exhibition, including Eurocentrism and the disappearance of contested history, as well as the issue of sensory overload (Sitzia, 2022). While these are both fruitful and important areas for future study, for the purposes of this chapter I would like to focus on one finding in particular: the disjunction between the roles the museum assigned itself and the discourses it conveyed in its

space. In doing so, I will also demonstrate the various ways in which the mixed method approach enabled a more nuanced and elaborate reading of the exhibition's narratives.

Tensions Between Exhibition Models

A first symptom of the disjunction of roles and discourses was revealed through the use of storytelling analysis tools and frameworks. Specifically, this could be seen in the tension within the exhibition between two of Hein's exhibition models: the didactic/expository model and the constructivist model. Didactic/expository models are usually connected to a perception of the museum as a traditional educator, as a transmitter of information and a holder of knowledge and authority. Constructivist models are connected to the perception of the institution as a place of reflection and debate—a vision of the museum as a public forum.

By combining Hein's educational models with Roppola's exhibition design framework, we can see that *Connectivities* is framed as a "spectacular" exhibition. Exhibition design choices—such as the lighting (especially in the contemporary part of the exhibition), the way objects are presented in an aestheticizing manner, and the sound level—place the exhibition in an expository logic. The topic of the exhibition itself—framed by an established, relatively old-fashioned, and complex academic framework such as Braudel's²—firmly places the institution as a displayer of ideas and the exhibition as a didactic experience.

However, the room organization of *Connectivities*, which is firmly constructivist, actually contradicts this didactic/expository position. The exhibition offers a free path, while the double linear narrative—one following the sixteenth- to seventeenth-century narrative of the Mediterranean and one looking at contemporary Mediterranean urbanism—is interrupted with regular openings between the various spaces.

²Historian Fernand Braudel (1902–1985), an advocate of historical materialism, is well known for his "longue durée" perspective on history that considers social, economic, and cultural dimensions as closely interconnected. His work on and approach to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mediterranean region—as a multitude of exchanges rather than an object of study with strict geographical and chronological boundaries—constituted the starting point for the exhibition.

Here, the storytelling analysis was backed up by my ethnographic observations, which showed the impact of this tension on visitors. Indeed, a majority of visitors were at first looking for information throughout the space; they read the labels and wall-texts carefully (when provided), yet most visitors looked fruitlessly for extra information. Visitors alternated this search for information with contemplative moments in relation to the objects on display.

The critical content analysis of the videos also confirmed this tension. The historian expert noted that the introductory Braudel video is not an introduction to Braudel's work, but rather a presentation of comments on the impact of Braudel's work by experts in various fields. It is a patchwork video, which is the kind of format one would expect in an advanced constructivist context where various points of view are presented to let visitors develop their own position. As an entry point to a didactic/expository exhibition, this video makes it difficult for anyone unfamiliar with Braudel to understand what the exhibition is about. Nor was it clear to visitors, as I established, that this video creates a link between the two paths (according to the exhibition curator).

Interestingly, the storytelling analysis showed that the exhibition has an educational and highly didactic label explaining Braudel's theory, but that this label was located a few meters away from the video introduction. The ethnographic observation showed that this aspect of the tension between didactic/expository and constructivist exhibition codes disoriented audience members as soon as they entered the space. Most visitors stopped briefly in front of the patchwork introductory video, moved on rapidly to the exhibition, returned to the screen again and again, trying to connect the para-discourse on Braudel to the objects on display, looking for a red thread and often missing the description of Braudel's theory label. Furthermore, the exhibition design expert pointed out that there is a wall-text introducing the overall argument of the exhibition but that it is badly placed (close to the entry door on the right when entering) and that this label also has very little visibility (it is under-lit and in a small font). This is confirmed by my ethnographic observations, as I saw only a tiny minority of visitors (3 out of 132 in total) who read it.

Here, then, the interdisciplinarity of my methods did not only allow me to identify an issue but also to explain it in nuanced ways. This

approach, moreover, had a practical implication for Mucem: it gave rise to my recommendation to reorganize the introductory space.

The Use and Presentation of Objects

The tension between exhibition models is also visible in the way objects are presented. Looking again at Roppola's process of framing, the materiality of the exhibition reinforces the impression of spectacle: objects were lit dramatically, contained in glass boxes, and often without labels in proximity. This exhibition design analysis was confirmed by the expert curator who identified an issue with the register of presentation, noting that all objects were presented at the same level (maps, artifacts, models, artworks, etc.). This confused the status of the objects as documents or monuments; that is, it encouraged visitors to read all objects as documents or "clues," while also presenting them as artworks. This contradiction led to the hesitant visitor postures that I identified during the ethnographic observation; that is, their behavior read somewhere between information seeking and contemplative admiration.

The expert scenographer formulated a similar concern, highlighting "the domination of objects" in the space. When probed, the scenographer insisted that the aestheticizing presentation of objects (behind glass, on pedestals, etc.) conveys a sentiment of exclusivity, which is especially problematic as several objects are emptied of their message and mediation tools are excluded or marginalized. For example, a large case of china was presented without reference numbers, making it impossible for viewers to link the content of the labels to the pieces on display. This also explains the visitor uncertainty identified in the ethnographic observation: some visitors had difficulties identifying the objects and placing them in the broader narrative of the exhibition and so they circled around the artifacts and looked for specific information related to them (often without success), while other visitors, when in front of the objects, behaved as if these objects were artworks.

It is here that the importance of the combination of methodologies from different disciplines becomes evident, as Roppola's concept of framing and the expert contributions of the scenographer allow us to better

interpret the results of the visitor exit interviews. In particular, during the quick-fire interviews, three main categories of interpretations of the exhibition narrative by the visitors emerged: (1) their reappropriation of the narration, in particular concerning specific cities, in terms of the familiar, triggering recognition and reassurance; (2) their use of very general concepts such as “the Mediterranean,” “urbanism,” and “diversity”; and (3) their focus on specific objects, such as a boat model, tile, painting, or coat of arms. It is this third category that is well explained by the storytelling and content analysis above and thus by the interdisciplinary mix of methods.

The Tone of the Narration

The disjunction of roles and discourses is also visible in the tension between the various tones of the narration, which we can analyze through Roppola’s framework. Put bluntly, the experiential broadening proved a jumble because it failed to offer a coherent experience to the visitor. The narration of conflicted relationships in the Mediterranean in the contemporary section contrast with the presentation of polished relationships in the historical section, creating an affective disjunction between the two parts. In addition, the conceptual broadening of the narrative gives priority to urbanism without clearly delineating this notion. This plays out in the significant number of visitors who focused on particular cities when asked about the main message of the exhibition. The discursive broadening is all the more an issue because the texts are very directive and didactic in tone and leave little room for individual reflection.

Furthermore, this tension can lead to critical misinterpretation by the audience, as the interviews show. For example, one visitor said to be astonished about how well nations got along in the sixteenth century. Not only did such tensions obviously impact visitors’ historical understanding, they also resonated in examples of the exhibition’s Eurocentrism and omissions in terms of postcolonial perspectives. It is worth briefly noting some of these instances: several North African cities (Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis) were combined in a single label, while each European city was afforded its own label. The expert curator also observed that

while Soliman the Magnificent is the subject of one particular label and its related objects in a specific exhibition section, the portrait of François I dominates the wall. Furthermore, the expert historian noted that the use of terms such as “occidental civilization” in some labels is problematic in a postcolonial reading of Mediterranean history. Finally, the expert scenographer and historian conceded that 200 years of history are missing (without justification) and that there is no explicit mention of colonization, with the expert curator also expressing surprise: “Nothing on slavery?!” In contrast, a strategy clearly distinguishing between multiple voices and intersecting perspectives would have permitted a more balanced discourse.

By further combining our methods of analysis, we can actually gain a better understanding of the ways in which the curators’ aims fail to play out in the exhibition. Returning to Hein, we can see that the exhibition curators intended to follow a constructivist approach, as they say the exhibition is trying to trigger a “personal and social engagement with cities and connections” (interview with curator 1). However, the critical content analysis revealed that the tone in the labels is that of a demonstration. Furthermore, the expert curator noted obscure expressions—as seen in the Istanbul label’s inclusion of “cultural syncretism”—which do not suit a general audience. In fact, not all objects were labeled, even though one of the arguments of the exhibition aimed to promote was the “circulation of objects” (interview with curator 1). The expert curator expressed surprise in this regard, stating the need for more explicit object labeling, as in the curator’s view “they don’t speak by themselves.”

Another example of this issue of tone and register is the timeline on architecture, which is very difficult to read for non-experts. The double discourse design (with parallel top lines for Europe and bottom lines for North Africa), its text heaviness, and the use of expert architectural vocabulary make it difficult to access. This analysis was confirmed by the historian expert, who mentioned that conceptually complexity of this exhibition element, as it tries to outline issues of architectural cross-fertilization without mentioning orientalism or colonialism explicitly. The ethnographic observation confirmed that only a few expert readers were at ease; rather, a large majority abandoned attempts at reading after a couple of minutes. The problem is, however, that the timeline presents

the conceptual grid through which to read the rest of the contemporary path. This leads to the visitors' "city" focus devoid of the "connection" argument, as testified by the quick-fire interviews.

The different methods of analysis were also in line with each other in terms of the findings concerning the exhibition's entrance. The expert curator, for instance, highlighted that there is no buffer space at the exhibition entry, which instead opens with the patchwork video presenting the comments on the impact of Braudel's work. Traditionally, this entrance space would be used to clarify the intention of the curators. Ethnographic observation confirmed that the disorientation at the beginning was carried on through the exhibition, and even amplified by the fact that the map at the entry does not match the actual space but rather creates a symbolic image of the Mediterranean—something mentioned by one of the curators but identified by none of the experts or visitors. This created hesitation and disorientation in almost all visitors.

This disorientation was aggravated by the exhibition's use of two paths: a historical and a contemporary route through the exhibition. As established through ethnographic observation, some visitors tried to follow one of these paths but ended up stuck at the end and had to go back to the entry to start with the other path. Alternatively, they followed the other path in backward order, losing its narrative structure. My observations also revealed that some visitors switched between the historical and the contemporary paths, using the open spaces to move from one path to the other. These openings were meant as "windows between the spaces" (interview with curator 1), but at times this completely disoriented visitors. Furthermore, most people had trouble finding the exit—hidden as it was behind a large screen. The display of the exhibition sponsor's video close to the exit contributed to this confusion, as it gives one the impression of being a conclusion, a summary of both paths.

Conclusion

From this layered interdisciplinary analysis, we can conclude that the institutions and the curators need to make clearer choices for their exhibition: that is, as either a didactic/expository or as a constructivist space,

and in terms of their use of objects as well as their narrative tone. Not making such choices creates confusion among visitors and can lead to misunderstanding of the exhibition's argument. Ensuring that both the entry and advanced levels of the information are consistent, and making the signaling clearer would go a long way in solving these issues. Collaborating with focus groups and linking the exhibition more closely to today's world might help to counter the issue of Eurocentrism.

The combination of methods from various fields allowed me to generate a sharper and more detailed analysis of storytelling processes in exhibition spaces as well as of the reception of such narratives by the public. My mix of methods proved efficient in particular for analyzing complicated multimodal environments. It also offered a more layered explanation of the results and provided a better understanding of causality, especially when it came to certain visitor's interpretations. It thus helped the research to go beyond the traditional conclusion that "it doesn't work."

Indeed, it is the integration of methods that allows for a rich analysis adaptive to the dynamic landscape and inherent complexity of museum narratives with multiple enunciators, receptors, and modes of communication. This also helps to unpack the institution's assumptions and, in turn, to contribute to transforming the field. Museums should be able to present complex, rich, and multivocal narratives. They should invite visitors to wander and wonder, but without causing them to get lost in the exhibition space.

References

- Antos, Z., Fromm, A. B., & Golding, V. (Eds.). (2017). *Museums and innovations*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bal, M. (1997). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*. University of Toronto Press.
- Bennett, T. (1996). The exhibitionary complex. In R. Greenberg, B. Ferguson, & S. Nairne (Eds.), *Thinking about exhibitions* (pp. 81–112). Routledge.
- Borg, C., & Mayo, P. (2010). Museums: Adult education as cultural politics. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 127, 35–44. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ACE.379>
- Chynoweth, A., Lynch, B., Petersen, K., & Smed, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Museums and social change: Challenging the unhelpful museum*. Routledge.

- Clover, D. E. (2015). Adult education for social and environmental change in contemporary public art galleries and museums in Canada, Scotland and England. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 34(3), 300–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2014.993731>
- Davallon, J. (1999). *L'exposition à l'œuvre: Strategies de communication et médiation symbolique* [The exhibition at work: strategies of communication and of symbolic mediation]. L'Harmattan.
- Dewey, J. (2008). *Democracy and education*. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/852/852-h/852-h.htm#link2HCH0008> (Original work published 1916)
- Ferguson, B. (1996). Exhibition rhetorics: Material speech and utter sense. In R. Greenberg, B. Ferguson, & S. Nairne (Eds.), *Thinking about exhibitions* (pp. 126–136). Routledge.
- Hein, G. (1998). *Learning in the museum*. Routledge.
- Janes, R. R., & Sandell, R. (Eds.). (2019). *Museum activism*. Routledge.
- MacDonald, S. (Ed.). (2010). *A companion to museum studies*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Mairesse, F., & Desvallées, A. (2007). *Vers une redéfinition du musée* [Towards a new definition of museums]. L'Harmattan.
- Marstine, J. (2006). *New museum theory and practice*. Blackwell.
- McSweeney, K., & Kavanagh, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Museum participation: New directions for audience participation*. MuseumsEtc.
- Mouffe, C. (2016). An agonistic conception of the museum. In *Proyectomuseu*, n.p. <http://proyectomuseu.org/an-agonistic-conception-of-the-museum/>
- Roppola, T. (2012). *Designing for the museum visitor experience*. Routledge.
- Sandell, R. (1998). Museums as agents of social inclusion. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 17(4), 401–418. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647779800401704>
- Simon, N. (2010). *The participatory museum*. Museum 2.0.
- Sitzia, E. (2017). The ignorant art museum: Beyond meaning-making. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 37(1), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2017.1373710>
- Sitzia, E. (2018). The many faces of knowledge production in art museums: An exploration of exhibition strategies. *Muséologie: Les cahiers d'études Supérieures*, 8(2), 141–157. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050765ar>
- Sitzia, E. (2022). Senses and sensibility: Finding the balance in sensory museum education. In A. Sinner (Ed.), *Artful xchanges: Propositions in museum education* (n.p.). Intellect Books. (forthcoming).
- Vergo, P. (1989). *The new museology*. Reaktion Books.
- Walsh, D. (2012). Doing ethnography. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Researching society and culture* (pp. 245–262). SAGE.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if you modified the licensed material. You do not have permission under this license to share adapted material derived from this chapter or parts of it.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

